

HUMOR BY IAN FRAZIER / WHY ECO-EFFICIENCY ISN'T ENOUGH

The **Atlantic Monthly**

OCTOBER

1998

What constitutes "consent"?  
What constitutes "force"?  
The law's answers remain murky.

# Unwanted Sex

by Stephen Schulhofer

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by David Schiff

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*John McPhee*



# My Weddings

by ERIKA KROUSE

*I'm single because  
I was born that way.* —Mae West

**M**Y first wedding was Aunt Marcia's second. I wore a straw hat with a baby-blue ribbon. The church was like an old schoolroom. Before the "I do," before the kiss, I fainted away in the pew, and my mother carried me out the back door, rolling her eyes.

Queasy, I sat on the cement steps. "You'd better not do that at *your* wedding," my mother told me, and spat on a handkerchief to wash my face. I started to cry, because I was confused, and because I had lost my hat. My mother touched my tears with the corner of the handkerchief. "There," she said, "that's a little more appropriate." When I got home, even before I unbuckled my patent-leather shoes, I opened the big blue dictionary and looked up "appropriate."

**M**Y friend Pamela liked to play Bride. She was usually the bride, since we played at her house. I was usually the minister.

We had wrapped her head in a bed sheet with lace doilies stapled to it. Her bouquet was green and red tissue paper. She wore her best dress-up clothes—orange beads, and a pink evening gown that trailed behind her. The only trouble was, she kept stepping on it in front. "This stupid thing," she said as she walked down the hallway, while I sang "Here comes the bride" in my loudest, most celebratory voice.

"Hey," I said as she approached the cardboard-box altar. "Your dress isn't white."

"So?"

I tried a different approach. "When can I be the bride?"

"After I'm the bride," Pamela said, adjusting her veil.

I knew that this offer meant nothing. A second bride was no kind of bride.

"Do you take this man to be your awfully wedded husband?" I said in a bored voice.

"I do." Pamela was demure, holding her bouquet lightly in her fingers.

"Kiss the bride."

Pamela kissed the air passionately.

After the kiss I stood at the altar, and Pamela looked at me. The bouquet dangled from her hand.

I suddenly remembered. "Oh—throw the bouquet."

She threw it, and I ran from the altar to pick it up. It withered in my clutch. Pamela's ankle suddenly lopped sideways, and her foot fell out of the large shoe.

"What happens next?" I asked.

**S**AM visited me in September, and I drove him to Rocky Mountain National Park. Sam wanted pictures of elk, bighorn sheep; he wanted a mountain lion. I pulled the car over for every herd of animals. Sam jumped out with his point-and-shoot every time. He paused. The elk stared right at him. The bighorn sheep tossed its big head in Sam's face. One after another, the animals stood still and then finally leaped away, disgusted, as Sam lowered his camera. "Missed it."

We walked down the street in Estes Park with ice-cream cones. "My wife," Sam said, "will be intelligent, educated, and ambitious—yet," with a finger raised, "will want to have approximately five to seven children."

"Bullshit, Sam," I said, and hit his hand as if it were a tennis ball. A penny fell from the change in his grip, and he bent to pick it up.

"Does it work the same when it's your penny?" I asked. "Do you get good luck when you pick it up?"



She had the whole wedding planned in advance. All she had to add was the name on the cake

"No, but I'll drop it again if you like. You can pick it up and get lucky." He dropped it, and it made a cheap sound on the pavement.

I bent down to pick it up. It was shiny and new. When I straightened up, Sam held out his hand. I put my hand there, and he pulled his away. Then he held it out again. I dropped the penny into the center of his palm. He put it in his pocket.

Two months later he called and said, "I'm getting married. I'm in love. We took a compatibility test and scored way high."

She had the whole wedding planned in advance. Before she even met him. In a laminated pink notebook, with sketches and prices. All the songs, all the special readings by Kahlil Gibran. All she had to add was the initials on the napkins, the name on the cake.

So easy, so few decisions for him to make. He lucked out on a girl like that, I told him.

**M**Y mother called me at my soon-to-be-old apartment the day that Johnny and I were moving in together across town. "The phone'll be disconnected any minute," I told her, kicking a wad of crumpled-up newspaper against the cabinet door. It bounced back to my toe, and I did it again.

"Don't do it, don't do it," she said. She was crying. "Don't do it."

"We already signed the lease. There's a big orange moving truck outside. Johnny sprained his groin trying to lift the couch with the Hide-A-Bed."

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## THE ODDS

We watch TV from bed, on satin sheets.  
The hockey game is a dead heat;  
our team will not relinquish hope despite  
the dismal odds. By midnight  
the score gets worse, cramped muscles fail,  
the lines get slack, the coaches rail  
against the referees, and time is running out.  
But champions are made without  
the normal fear of loss, and ours slog  
on with bloodied shins and pockets clogged  
with ice. Desperate, we run the clock ourselves:  
we scallop, fillip, sweep then delve,  
we burrow, borrow, bellow, bless,  
rend, render, root without rest.

—TERESA CADER

"But what will he think of you? What will he think of me?"

"Mom, he doesn't even know you."

"Put him on the phone."

I argued, but she was silent until I handed the phone to Johnny, who was sweating, holding an empty canary cage.

"Yes, I understand. Yes. . . . No. . . . No. . . . Yes."

He handed the phone back, and I asked my mother, "Okay, what did you say?"

"None of your beeswax."

After we hung up, I asked Johnny what she had said, and he said, "I couldn't begin to tell you." But he put his sweaty arm around my shoulders and told me that he would pack the rest of the truck himself. That I should sit alone for a while and contemplate. That if I had any doubts, to tell him today.

**A**LCOHOL was served, champagne wreathed with cool white cloth napkins, although this bride was a Seventh-Day Adventist. We knew her through Johnny's job. The day was cold and misty, but heat blowers had been installed in the tents. As I walked too close past one of them, it mangled my stockings in one hot blow. I looked down at the strings of mesh, fused together in thin snakes. Johnny laughed and offered me his pants.

A young couple stood at the cake table, drinking nonalcoholic champagne. The woman, who had glasses and a frumpy haircut, smiled a lot. She wore a long angora sweater dress with a matching cardigan draped over her shoulders. Hey, I thought, you're my age. You can't do that.

She said, "I don't know. This champagne doesn't taste nonalcoholic. It's just a little too convincing."

"I don't care," her husband said. "It is what it says it is."

I concentrated on standing upright on the wet earth. But my spike heels sank into the mud, and my shoes kept getting stuck.

"Our wedding had no champagne," the wife said. "So you couldn't get them mixed up, nonalcoholic and alcoholic champagne. We just didn't serve any. Just coffee, tea, like that."

"Are you an alcoholic?" I asked.

"Certainly not," she said.

I was thinking about the word "certainly" and how I rarely heard it in conversation anymore. Then I realized that they probably couldn't drink because of their religion, and I slapped my forehead with my palm, while my heels dove into the ground again.

"Mosquito?" the husband asked politely.

She was a marketing manager, and he was an accountant. They worked for the same company, and had been married since they were both nineteen.

"And you?" they asked.

"Oh, not much. Part-time sometimes, temporary other times."



"Who are you here with?"

I pointed to Johnny with the bottom of my champagne glass. At that moment he was showing a woman how he could click his heels together in the air. The woman laughed and applauded. Some mud splattered on her shin from the heels of his shoes.

I said, "Johnny there. I live with him."

"Ah," the husband said. "You're married to Johnny."

"No. I live with him."

They nodded. The wife said, "Well, then," and brushed her husband's shoulder. Her long nails made scraping noises on the tightly woven cloth. They moved together toward a couple under a dripping tree. "Oh, Seth, Marie," the wife said.

I stood alone again, holding my glass in my hand. After all, I was what I said I was.

**J**OHNNY and I were underdressed for Sam's wedding. Johnny wore a big white shirt and no tie, and I wore a kimono. Nobody talked to us, but a big band was playing, so we drank a lot of wine and headed toward the floor. First we tried a polka, then a jitterbug, then a tango. Johnny pushed me into a bridesmaid's bare back, and I stepped backward, detaching her foot from its satin pump. "I'm sorry," I told her, and whispered to Johnny, "Why can't you lead worth a damn?"

I walked outside. Standing in front of me was a statue of Hiawatha, with Minnehaha in his arms. Her dress hung in strips, and his biceps barely bulged under her weight.

I heard Johnny walk up behind me. "See that?" I pointed to the statue. "Is that how it's supposed to be?" I turned around, but it wasn't Johnny, it was Sam, the groom.

"Yeah," he said, "but you take what you can get." We looked through the window at the wedding guests, and at Johnny dancing with the bride. They were beautiful, the whites blurring together, the bride ringing on his arm like a giant bell. They could have been any two people that you had seen once and forgotten.

**B**UT it wouldn't feel like a wedding if we drove to Vegas and got married by an Elvis impersonator," I said, holding a spatula. "We could act like it didn't mean anything." In the pan the eggs chugged like a motor.

"Do you really want to get married in Las Vegas?" Johnny asked, next to the stove.

"No," I said, confused. "No, I don't really want to get married."

"Good. Me neither. After Sally, I promised myself never again."

"What if you think about wanting to marry me and I think about wanting to marry you? And we'll both know that we won't do it—that we'll promise not to do it."

"But I don't want to."

"Even with me?"

"What are you talking about? You hate all this. What is it that you want? The wedding part?"

"No. I couldn't stand to be around my family for a whole day."

"Do you want to be married?"

"No. Everyone would expect me to take your last name. Get fat."

"Everyone who?"

"Just everyone."

I had meanwhile flipped the eggs for the second time, so the yolks were face up and coated with a doughy white film. Johnny turned the burner knob to OFF.

I looked around the yellow kitchen, with yellow linoleum peeling at the edges.

"I hate yellow," I said.

"Well, that's what you get when you rent," Johnny said.

"Listen, honey. I love you. I don't know what you're asking me for."

"I want to be that important."

"To whom?"

I started crying, sliding the eggs from the pan onto a plate. They had sat too long in the hot pan and were now rigid, even the yolks.

"I want you to want me like that. I want you to love me that much. As much as you loved Sally."

Johnny ran his fingers through his short hair and looked at





me blearily. "It wasn't about love with Sally. It was about marriage. It was never about love."

"I still want you to love me that much."

He looked at the plate and then at my face. His voice was scorched and halting. "Do you love me that much?" he asked.

**I** INTRODUCED Nancy and Gary at an informal wedding reception. Nancy was Johnny's co-worker, one of those embarrassing guests who laugh too loudly at everything everyone says. Gary had wispy hair and permanently flared nostrils. He had once followed me home telling me about his pet lizards.

They talked at the buffet table for two hours, after the reception had moved outdoors, after the keg had burped its last. Nancy flushed red. Her voice became even louder, her shoulders even wider. She's in love, I thought, and turning into a man.

Nancy finally left after saying good-bye for thirty minutes. Gary stayed, holding an empty plastic cup. "Go after her," I whispered, and he hesitated until he saw her brake lights ignite in the parking lot. Then he ran toward her, waving with both arms.

Gary called me the next day. I had been up all night, and had a purple crescent under each of my eyes. Johnny was still in the bathroom, crying. "I was thinking of asking Nancy to coffee," Gary said.

No, not coffee. A date. Say the word "date." "Say 'date,'" I said. "Bring flowers. Kiss her good-night, with tongue."

He repeated everything. Date. Flowers. A kiss.

In the next room Johnny had emerged from the bathroom and was dividing our books into stacks. He got *The Great Gatsby*. I got *Anna Karenina*. *Romeo and Juliet* we gave away, since in that one both of them died.

**G**ARY told me about his engagement over a hot cup of coffee. The windows were steaming in the coffee shop, and I drew little animals in the mist on the windowpane while he talked.

When Gary proposed to Nancy, it was raining, but he had planned a picnic, so they spread a blanket and sat on a curb. The chicken had gotten soggy, but the potato salad could be saved. He handed her a small white box. Nancy started crying. When she saw that the box contained a pendant, not a ring, she cried harder.

That night they called their parents. His hooted so loudly that Nancy could hear their voices through the receiver from across the room. Her parents were quiet. They said, "Oh."

When she got off the phone, Gary asked, "How did they feel?"

Nancy said, "They said, 'Oh.'"

Gary slept all night, but Nancy walked back and forth in the moonlight. When the sun came up, he said, she was still waiting by the window. He woke up, and she looked at him with her red-rimmed eyes and said, "Okay, I'm ready for it."

"Ready for it?" I asked, suddenly looking away from the window.

"Yeah, I guess she meant that she was okay with the idea," Gary said.

"Is that what she meant?"

"I didn't ask," he said. "Who knows what anyone thinks anyway?"

**I** PLAYED piano at a Presbyterian wedding, for a friend of a friend. The piano was good, the flowers were fragrant, the dress was misty white. The stained glass was blue.

They looked at each other and cried through the service. They choked on their vows. They said, "Yes, I will." I cried too as they clutched each other and kissed and kissed and kissed.

**A**T Nancy and Gary's wedding reception Johnny and I did the wave-salute at each other from our respective tables. He had brought a date; she was blonde, drunk, and kissing him. I had no date, but my stomach was the flattest it had ever been.

Johnny asked me to dance. I pulled close to him and smiled at his date.

"I think she's the one," he said.

"The one what?" I asked.

"You know," he said. But I didn't—not really.

I left him alone in the middle of the dance floor and asked someone else to dance. He said no, so I asked someone else. He also said no, looking at his curly-haired date.

Gary, the groom, waited for me at my abandoned table. "Do you want to dance?"

"No," I said. "I want nothing."

"Look at her," he said, and pointed to his bride. So I did. Her dress was enormous—she was packed in like a lace sausage. She thumped someone on the back so hard that his hors d'oeuvre flew out of his hand and dropped to the floor.

"I love her," Gary said. "I love her completely. My love for her is complete."

And it was. Complete. And I wasn't. Completely. Relief and fear tangled together, like the hands of women clutching in the air for a falling bouquet of something. ☁