

MODERN LOVE

Why My Daughter Got (Temporarily) Married at 13

Having been shamed about my sexuality when I was young, I was determined, as a mother, to celebrate my child's romantic wishes.

By **Stephanie Grant**

Aug. 27, 2021

Five years ago, when my daughter was in the 8th grade, she fell for a boy with strict, religious parents. Tall and slender with luxurious hair that swooped stylishly across his delicate face, he resembled a shy, well-mannered Justin Bieber. They both played soccer for their middle-school teams.

My daughter — tall for her age — had been recruited by the school's soccer coach, who had attended a girls' basketball game in which she had fouled out. The coach told her that the girls' team needed an enforcer. (She had never played soccer.) During their courtship, this shy Justin Bieber look-alike promised to teach her how to score if she taught him how to knock people down. I was delighted by the match.

The eldest by a minute, she is the only heterosexual in our family; her twin is a lesbian and so are her two moms. Her exuberant sexuality was evident at a young age — her delight in her own body was almost always channeled toward boys. In grade school, on the playground, she often picked up the ones she favored and carried them about like trophies, which necessitated early and ongoing conversations about consent.

Although she was eager for emotional connection with both girls and boys, her flirtatiousness seemed aimed only at persons of the masculine persuasion. For years we had a shrine in our house to the deceased "Glee" star Cory Monteith; we still mark his death day on the family calendar. Because I grew up in an Irish-Catholic household where sexual feelings were at best contained, at worst annulled, I took particular pleasure in allowing hers to flourish.

The boyfriend's parents were not as delighted by the middle-school romance as I was. From what I understood, they each had been raised in other faiths and had converted to Islam. They insisted on strict compliance with religious laws. Meaning: Their boy with the luxurious hair was not allowed to date, not allowed even incidental physical contact with girls who were not related to him.

I did what no parent should: I became complicit in their circumventing his parents' prohibitions by driving my daughter to ice cream parlor dates and rendezvous at local parks. More than once, she hid a blanket in the bag she took with her.

One does not need a psychology degree to surmise that my own family's disapproval of my lesbian desire fueled this indecorous behavior on my part. When, in my 20s, I finally mustered the courage to come out to my parents, they expressed their disgust at my sexuality with great clarity, my mother applying everything she thought she knew about lesbians — lonely, perverse, a danger to children — to me, her third and once favored child.

She began what would become a never-ending, lifelong campaign to change me. When my parents visited Europe for the first time, she prayed for my transformation, lighting candles in every cathedral they visited.

At 13, my daughter was thrilled to have a boyfriend, but also, I suspect, thrilled by the clandestine nature of their love. At home, we began to joke that she was the only person in the family in a closeted relationship. I told her to be careful: If she and the boyfriend were to get caught by his parents, he would likely get in terrible trouble, and she would likely never see him again.

Of course, they got caught. Instead of forbidding the liaison, the parents did something I did not expect: They proposed a temporary marriage between my 13-year-old and theirs, although I would not know about this until moments before the ceremony.

A type of Muslim marriage, a mut'ah contract joins a couple for a fixed time period. Historically it was used so that a traveling man could have a temporary wife when away from his family for many months or even years. Today, some young Muslims engage in mut'ah marriage to date without breaking Islamic law.

The ceremony took place in a local Mexican coffee house, just a short walk from the middle school. Both of the boy's parents were in attendance, but I was my daughter's sole family representative because she had failed to mention the exact nature of the meeting when she asked me to join. I thought I was simply coming along to meet the mother.

My eldest whispered the relevant details in my ear as they walked through the door. We all smiled awkwardly during introductions, the father bringing a hand to his heart when I thoughtlessly went to shake hands. The boy's mother was strikingly beautiful and at least a decade younger than me.

After we had all gotten our hot chocolates, she took out her Quran and explained that temporary marriage was a way for our children to have some limited physical contact without jeopardizing her son's soul. If temporarily married, they could hold hands and possibly even kiss without the boy being consigned to a state of sin. I saw immediately that, like my own mother, she was the moral center around which the family coalesced.

As his mother spoke, she held my gaze, her large brown eyes lit with intensity and seriousness of purpose. I was fully aware of the irony of our situation: a Muslim mother negotiating her son's marriage with a lesbian mother; I thought that she was aware of it, too. Like me, she was trying to live in a country where not everyone shared her values. Without speaking, she was asking all of us to hold the contradictions inherent to our distinctly American venture with great care.

And so, I assented. I assented without calling home to consult my partner of 20-something years, a lapse in judgment that would become a sore point between us. In the crowded cafe, I was, perhaps

not surprisingly, overcome with thoughts of my own mother, who was preoccupied until her death with the state of my soul. I thought of what it would have meant to her, to us, if she had been granted a religious ceremony that legitimized my desire, a ceremony that, even if temporary, would have made my touching another woman into something other than sin.

I didn't want the boy or his mother to suffer in the way my own mother had. I could see that her beliefs, however different from my own, were passionately held. At the same time, I didn't want my daughter to be prevented from touching the boy she loved. I didn't want what had been done to me to be done to her.

So I assented, and the boy's parents read the ritual phrases in Arabic, and the children nodded along and, without my understanding a word, they were married. When the ceremony was finished, my daughter and the boy reached across the table to hold hands.

Their temporary marriage lasted until they broke up a year later. By then, they were in high school, 9th grade, and had become an object of great fascination to their peers from whom they had not thought to keep the temporary marriage secret. My daughter had had to withstand a barrage of public questioning about how and whether they had sex, a level of curiosity she found disturbingly invasive and, indeed, exoticizing, although she wouldn't have used that word at the time or understood how it applied in her new context.

When first love faded, there was no subsequent ceremony to end the marriage, only the familiar teen rituals of recrimination and tears.

Although my partner likes to tease that she would have negotiated a better dowry for our daughter than the symbolic gift bag proffered — an anthropologist, she was the only person in the family familiar with mut'ah contract before it was proposed — she was genuinely disappointed, on the day of the impromptu wedding, that I hadn't insisted on her presence. She felt I had let the boy's parents off the hook — my solitary participation allowing them to suppress their knowledge of our lesbian coupledness.

By not calling home, I had made it easy for their family to ignore the full reality of ours, to pretend that the families being joined were more alike, more aligned, than they were. I had eased into sameness the very differences and contradictions that sacred ritual is meant to contain.

I don't think my partner is wrong but, at the same time, I don't regret my decision. I knew then, as I do now, that my immediate assent to the temporary marriage was a gift I was giving my exuberant daughter, an explicit acknowledgment that her romantic and sexual feelings were worth honoring. Indeed, worth celebrating.

By participating in the ritual, I was signaling that I didn't see her body and soul as separate entities. I was signaling that I understood her desire to be sacred, rather than profane, and as important to who she is, and who she will become, as my own desire has been to me.

Stephanie Grant directs the graduate program in creative writing at American University in Washington. Her third book, "Disgust: A Memoir," is due out in October 2021.

Modern Love can be reached at modernlove@nytimes.com.