

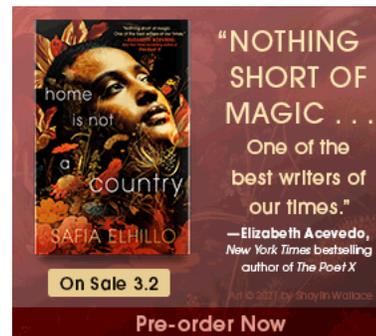


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CREATIVE NONFICTION / ESSAY

WOVEN: MY PRECIOUS: ON LEAVING MY ABUSIVE EX-HUSBAND AND BEING LEFT WITH THE RING

written by Guest Contributor January 13, 2021



"Inside these portraits of daug Blackness, illness, allegiance, we find storyteller."
-Shira



WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN here.

Reread the archives, always.

It was a classic princess cut. A perfect flat square on top, beveled edges, leading down to an inverted pyramid point. Just less than a quarter carat, set in a raised platinum mount, all the better to make it sparkle.

When I first wore it to work, I couldn't stop looking at my ring finger. The clink on a door handle would make me stop to raise my left hand in front of my face and admire the brilliance of a hundred tiny rainbows.

The diamond was the smallest the store sold in an engagement ring, but its cut, clarity, and color were good. These characteristics are important, we learned.



“Of course, you know about the four ‘Cs’?” The salesman said, the fourth being carat. He recognized the inexperience of his quarry, but not the size of our small bank accounts.

I paid for the ring with my cash back credit card (it would practically pay for itself, right?) My fiancé said he didn’t have the funds to pay for it. He did. I knew he did. He knew I knew he did. But this way, he could stay the tough guy who didn’t want to get a “waste of money” ring, and I got a ring.

I got a ring! I was getting married! Finally. After nearly becoming an old maid at 26! I learned from *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* that to be 30 and unmarried meant you would be pitied and destined to have a string of sad relationships that all led to the shameful destination of forever alone. So how lucky I was to have met a handsome young man in Australia while we were both backpacking. He was a little shorter than the man of my dreams and a couple of years younger than me, but he seemed confident, athletic, and he was from America. Being from England myself, that made him instantly exotic with an accent smooth as honey. And he liked me, I mean really liked me—even without makeup. We travelled together for nine months, thinking that spending all that time with each other was a certain harbinger of success. It was relatively easy to ignore the signs, the alarms, the red flags waving in front of my face while we were on a permanent vacation.

In fact, about three months after we met he told me that pretty much everything I knew about him up to that point was a lie. He had lied about the number of siblings he had, having a swimming pool, having lots of friends, even going to prom. He said he did it because I was so amazing and he didn’t think I would have looked at him twice otherwise. I was devastated of course, but stayed with him because... he flattered me, and I pitied him, I wanted to help him see himself for the wonderful man I was sure he was, the man who might be my only chance at love. I really had that little value for myself.

When our trip came to an end and we’d exhausted all the visa options, we had to break up or get married. We didn’t want to break up. And now spinsterhood was no longer going to be my fate. I was going to be treasured forever and I had the ring to prove it. Light in carat and clarity, but heavy with the promise of a wedding, of escaping the single life, of being worthy of love.

*

To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” My Mum asked the morning of our wedding before she left for the church.

“Of course, Mum!” I responded incredulously. She had asked, “this” and I wanted “this.” “This” was the wedding, the not being single. She didn’t ask, “Are you sure you want to marry *him*?” Of course, I probably still would have answered yes. For so long, my own self-love had been tied up in whether a man would or could love me. When someone asks you to marry them, and you love them, you are grateful. This is when the music plays, you know you have worth, and you live happily ever after.

*

To have and to hold: He loved to hold me. Hold me close to him when he was angry with me and I was trying to get away. Once he held me by strangling me, but more often it was a sort of a bear hug. His brute strength over my feeble struggling. Like the day in the Lake District while on vacation in England during the last year of our marriage. The day was nearly ruined because I forgot my rain coat and it was raining. We didn’t discover this till we were parked at the trailhead it had taken us 30 minutes to drive to. Now we either had to miss our walk or go back and get the coat and waste an hour of precious hiking. “How could you be so



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stupid?” he wanted to know. We would go back and get the raincoat, but I would pay for my forgetfulness with fists thumped on the steering wheel and a fuming silence. As he reversed out of the parking spot, the inside of the car was a bubble set to burst with his anger and resentment. I opened the car door to escape, to breathe, but he caught me, his arms around my torso, pinning me, pulling me back towards him as he slammed on the brakes. “You can’t get away from me,” he said.

“Let me go!” I shouted, and managed to get my right arm free to hit him in the chest with my fist. The car door was open and the cold air filled the small space, a whiff of freedom. My cries escaped into the car park where the turned heads of other hikers finally made him release his grip.

He made me regret that punch to his chest. Every time he raised a threatening fist to me, our dog, or a wall of our house afterwards, he reminded me that I was no better, because I punched him that one time in the parking lot.

*

For better for worse: This was my promise to love him no matter what he said or did. It was the one wheeled out to keep me in my place. It normally came along with: “Accept, don’t expect,” or “All men are like this,” or a warning with clenched fists: “I’m about to get angry and you’ll be sorry.”

*

For richer, for poorer: Everything I spent was scrutinized. A trip to the grocery store meant criticism for my brand name choices. A trip to the drugstore meant a shameful five minutes on return as he pulled out the bottle of lotion, the lip balm, and the tampons said “waste, waste, waste,” as he dropped each one back in the bag. It was my wasteful spending on feminine products that meant he was entitled to buy a \$7K BMW motorbike without consulting me. After all, if you added it all up, he said, I had easily spent more than that on female purchases over the years, so his male purchase of the bike was really only fair.

*

In sickness and in health: Getting sick, he said, “was for sissies.” He hated getting sick. He didn’t want me to nurse him. No hot tea, no cold compresses. I learned it was best to leave him be.

One weeknight a couple of years into our marriage, I had food poisoning. Around 10 PM my stomach started gurgling with nausea and I told him I didn’t feel well.

“Try not to wake me up,” he said. “I have to get up early for work tomorrow.”

We both had to get up early every week day, but okay, I’d try to keep it down.

Around 4 AM while sitting on the toilet, I blacked out. My head and body swung to the left, and I hit my head on the sink counter.

“John,” I said. No answer. It was hard to shout.

“John, I think I’m going to faint, please help.”

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When he appeared in the doorway, he didn't ask me what was wrong, or if I was alright. Instead he said:

"You are so fucking selfish."

"What?" I said, wondering if I was delirious.

"You heard me. I told you. I have to get up for work in the morning so don't wake me up. And you woke me up because you're a fucking selfish bitch and you think everything revolves around you."

I saw myself then as if suspended from the ceiling, looking down. I sat on the toilet, underpants around my ankles, pajama bottoms discarded on the floor because I no longer had the energy to pull them up and down. Tears streaming down my face despite my dehydration. Dressing gown draping the toilet, with a bucket on my lap, so I could shit and vomit at the same time.

The wedding ring on my finger.

The next day when he got home from work he came into the den where I was sitting, still in my pajamas, and handed me a stuffed elephant. He smirked as he handed it over. It was meant to be an apology, to close the topic. To mention what happened again now, would make me ungrateful and even more selfish.

I took it and said thank you.

*

To love and to cherish. I did love him and I didn't stay because I was afraid he would hurt me if I left. I stayed because I thought if I could find the right combination of behaviors, then I would be able to make him happy.

And he loved me, in his way. As our marriage began to end, he first tried to shout and threaten and bully me into staying. When that didn't work, he tried to beg and cry and threaten harm to himself or me. And when that didn't work, he tried his love.

"Are you really going to leave the person who loves you the most in this world?" He called to ask me one day, when we were already separated.

"The way you've treated me doesn't feel like love," I said as I walked through the park in my new neighborhood. A place I hoped he wouldn't find me.

"But that's just it. It's because I love you so much that I behave that way. No one else will ever love you like I do."

I hoped he was right.

*

Till we are parted by death: Death came up a lot in our relationship. "I'd rather die than..." was a favorite phrase. And I believed him when he said it. Like the time we were cross country skiing in Leavenworth, WA one winter and lost our way.

"Well," I said as the last of the sunset twilight disappeared, "I think we're going to have to call for help."

"No fucking way. I'd rather die than call for help."

"Are you serious?"

“I’m serious as a heart attack. If we can’t find our way out, we deserve to die.”

Death came up many times as our marriage ended too. He’d remind me how I’d broken my vows and offered to help me keep them by killing himself or me. Or my friends. Or any future partner I ever had.

*

The day I stopped wearing the ring I felt both disloyal and relieved. Disloyal to John and my wedding vows, and to my childhood self for giving up on the dream. Relieved that his power over me was waning.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” said my Mum when I told her I was filing for divorce.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well what am I going to tell people? I never thought I’d see the day. My daughter, getting divorced.”

Her embarrassment at my divorce magnified the shame I already felt. I was surprised then, when I replied sharply, “Perhaps you should tell them all how proud you are of me for leaving the husband who abused me for the last eight years?”

I knew in that moment, that this was the truth. It didn’t matter anymore why I had married him. What mattered was what I was going to do now.

*

When we separated, he said he wanted the ring back. He didn’t care that I had paid for it, but the law was on my side. I’d watched enough *People’s Court* to know that I completed the contract of the ring by marrying him. I left him and I was left with the ring.

I could throw it in the trash? Too easy.

Goodwill might get a good price for it? But then someone else might wear it as an engagement ring, and what if the pain of my marriage was carried with it? Would I pass this heavy burden on to another? I didn’t hate the ring, I loved it. And its meaning had wielded far too much power over me. I wanted being rid of the ring to mean something more than the receiving of it did in the first place.

I talked to a friend about my conundrum. “Sell it,” she said. “Sell it to a jewelry broker, like that one in Bellevue and then take yourself away for a spa weekend and think ‘FUCK YOU ASSHOLE’ the whole time.”

This didn’t sound very soothing, but I liked the idea of selling it and doing something with the money that would help to reset the balance.

*

“How much for this?” I asked the dealer behind the counter at Bellevue Rare Coins, a small strip mall pawn broker for jewelry and other precious metals. “And these?”

“Nice pieces,” he said.

I'd also bought in my white gold wedding band, and a white gold eternity ring my now ex-husband bought me on our first anniversary.

"They were my wedding rings," I said. "But as you can see, that didn't work out too well."

"Ah, I'm sorry," said the clerk.

"So, how much?"

"\$350 for the lot."

"Really? The engagement ring alone was worth that much."

"Yeah, but we won't resell these as is. We'll pull out the diamonds and melt down the metals. That means that we'll need to sell the components a bit cheaper, because they'll be made into something new."

Melted down. Purified. *Made into something new.*

The clerk handed over the money. When I got home, I pulled out my checkbook and wrote one for the same amount to the domestic violence nonprofit that helped me leave my marriage safely.

I held up my empty left hand and studied it. A thin lighter-toned band was still visible around my finger, showing where the ring was once. It will fade, I told myself, and I will make a new life, a better life, because finally I understand that I am precious.

Rebecca Houghton (she/her) emigrated to the United States from the UK in 2003 and is now based in Seattle. She has published work on food, feminism, and family with Bitch Media, The Syndrome Mag, and Family Reboot. She frequently speaks and testifies, sharing her story as a domestic violence survivor, to support other survivors and to progress gender equity. She also serves on the Board of LifeWire, the Seattle area domestic violence nonprofit that helped her leave her abuser. www.rebeccahoughtonwrites.com | Instagram, Twitter @BxHoughton

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