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The Best-Kept Secret

Men and Women's Stories of Lasting Love

Janet Reibstein

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Extract

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To Stephen Monsell

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Introduction:
What Is This Thing Called Love?

When my brothers and I were little, at six thirty every weekday evening our father would return from his daily commute between Manhattan and our house in Great Neck, a half hour away. His key would turn in the lock and its very sound would still the cacophony of our squeaky, irritable squabbling and our mother's low grumbles. Like we were ending one musical movement and beginning another, my brothers and I would erupt into a chorus of delighted shouts: "Clear the runway!" we'd yell, and jump, one by one, into his arms. Meanwhile, our mother would stand, gently silenced, at the end of the runway (the hallway to the front door) at the entry to our kitchen. She'd watch. A moment earlier her features would have been duller, masked by the scowl of the daily routine of suburban motherhood. But then, her look would sweeten and body uncurl like a cat's under her smudged slacks and billowing cotton blouse blotted by spaghetti sauce. Over our small heads our father, breezing in from the world beyond Great Neck in his camel hair coat and leather briefcase, would grin back with relief, glimpsing her across the long entrance hall. He would put the last of us down and march past—on a mission that ended in their embrace, framed in the kitchen doorway, we children left, on the runway, behind.

We knew our parents were "in love." We knew what the movies meant.

This scene was part of our life, a backdrop and beginning to our evening routines, our wind-down to each weekday evening for fourteen years—until their marriage got sidetracked, overwhelmed above all by illness, drained by the dangling threat of death. My parents' marriage was never easy; my mother was moody, my father easily frustrated. Frayed tempers flared often, especially on rainy weekends. But though they bickered, though my mother lunged publicly at holes in my father's logic, though he rolled his eyes and snapped with hot impatience at her disorganization, they always managed to quickly restore their rhythm of easy enjoyment.

They left me with a yen to know their secret, a quest to discover why some marriages resist the forces that sidetrack others why some act as barricades against the siege of unhappiness, retaining happiness and fortitude between the two partners at their core. The yen has turned into a career as a psychologist with a research and clinical specialty in couples. As a child I thought about my parents' secret and tried to decode it. It wasn't there between the parents of my next-door neighbor and then best friend: they were separate, elusive to each other; fear hung in her mother's eyes and contempt in her father's when around each other. Later, when I was older, another friend tried to live at my house. "I just want to be around your parents," she said. "Mine hate each other." The secret was seductive.

Most of my professional life has been devoted to witnessing, managing, and trying to stem the pain that grows up within partnerships. A decade ago I was researching a study of affairs in marriages.[1] In the midst of both my clinical work and this study—an often painful one to research and write—I came across an obituary I'd saved from the *New York Times* in the 1970s. I'm not a pack rat, but this had survived the various moves across country and then across the ocean since then. It was the obituary of an American actress and wife of a well-known playwright. They had been married a long time, and had had, apparently, a legendarily happy union. Her husband had predeceased her. The obituary noted their marriage as one of her achievements and told of his dying words to her: "Well, darling, it's been a wonderful ride together." I had kept the piece (no longer, sadly, in my files) as a talisman. I'd been struck viscerally by those words. I wanted to know why. Why they'd had it. Why my parents had had but lost it. How I could

have it. How others could try. They were both gone now. And their stories—their secret stories—had died with them.

As a commentator on relationships, I periodically am asked the question, usually by journalists hot to write a quick and pithy piece spurred by a new statistic on the rising brittleness of relationships, the decline in number of marriages, or the breakdown of a famous one, "Is there a future for marriage? For committed relationships?" A variant on this has been, "Have we moved into a new norm: that of serial monogamy?" Or, "Should we all expect relationships to be temporary, and also unfaithful?" I find myself shocked—not to mention irritated—that there is such ignorance about the insatiable, ongoing, time-honored, and even animal need to be in a happy, secure, erotic, and deepening union with one other person. We may not be skilled at getting there: we obviously increasingly lack the secret to having them. But the evidence of mounting partnership breakdown does not convince that we do not strive for or want desperately to have lasting and wonderful relationships. We just don't know how. We have lost our way. And, crucially, we even seem to have lost our faith in their reality. But they are still the stuff of most everyone's dreams, and they still drive people to try again, and again, and again, after each disappointment, each relationship failure. *This* time we'll make it. *This* time I'll get it right.

Finally, in the mid-1990s Channel 4 (in the U.K.) commissioned a series based on a small piece of research I was conducting on the happy relationships that I suspected were alive and somewhere out there. It confirmed they were: seventy couples volunteered to be part of a documentary series, in which they'd be filmed at home, showing them "happy." Only five were chosen for the program, but a subset of twenty were filmed briefly and interviewed, while six were interviewed in great depth. For most of these couples—and the myriad of others out there in the world whom they represent—being in a marriage-like partnership (not all were married) is the central, transformational, and ever-replenishing relationship of their lives, as revelatory and prized to them as parenthood or being a child has been (more so, for some). These interviews and tapes confirmed for me that despite the grim statistics, the urge that people have to couple, and couple and re-couple again, no matter the failures of their last relationship, does make sense: some

people do manage it. Why shouldn't it be me, or you, or the next person, this time?

"We can finish each other's sentences!" cry Tim and Lorna, one of the couples I interviewed for this book, a working-class couple from Blackpool, now in their early fifties. Indeed, when I talked with them, Tim frequently jumped in to end Lorna's. Sometimes Lorna smiled indulgently, sometimes her smile froze. "He's like a big baby" was her reaction as she tousled his hair, a resigned affection helping her rise above the small annoyance.

Tim and Lorna married with stars in their eyes. They beam from their wedding photos, Tim in his frilled tux, Lorna in her frothy white gown. But when they were young, they did not rise above the small annoyances; resentments flared; violence erupted. Tim was held overnight by the police for domestic violence, then released, a sobering experience. They broke up briefly, not knowing how to save a marriage both ached for. This was their particular marital trial by fire—each partnership will have its own. He and Lorna are now back together. Having faced the knowledge they can't bear to be apart (and also he, in his words, "hurting, for her, for what I did"), they have learned to let things go. Instead of perfect contentment, they strive for pragmatic, imperfect solutions, such as when Lorna gardens—her private passion, her dahlias as prized as children. He feels abandoned when Lorna spends hours digging and cutting without him, so now he trots behind her, "helping," he says; "ruining things," she confides. "He pulls something up and goes, 'Is this a weed?' 'No,' I go, 'Tim, that's not a weed. That's a plant I recently put in,'" she says, laughing. She lets it go, a detail that doesn't fit into the story she is at pains to tell me, that their relationship is wonderful. It is a detail she willingly relegates to the rubbish bin. "It's just a garden. I can put in another plant."

Tim and Lorna obviously enjoy each other, though they also manifestly get on each other's nerves. Their story is what happens after the Cinderella wedding. Just as, finally, after feminism's exposé, the vaunted joys of motherhood are now known to be alloyed—by broken sleep and rage at incessant crying (especially late at night), by disrupted sex lives and smelly diapers—stories like Tim's and Lorna's expose the same about sturdy love.

There are bad tempers, hurt feelings, intermittent ambivalence, irritation, murderous rage, and periods of loss of faith in each other. These coexist with joy, and happiness and contentment are the themes stressed. Just as in motherhood.

Anna is a former graphic artist turned computer analyst. She and Doug have both been in therapy and use its techniques of dream deconstruction to understand themselves better. They have been together for twenty-one years. Every morning Doug comes down and tells her his dreams. This morning it's one about him building a tower that never gets finished, no matter what he tries to do. Anna quietly pours coffee for them, listening, nodding. "Well, obviously you're a megalomaniac who wants to take over the world. Pretty frustrating, isn't it, because, tragically, you can't," she says deadpan, coolly plunking the mug in front of him. Doug runs a major corporation. There is a grain of truth in what Anna says. No one dares to say things like that to him at work. He looks up at her with worry in his eyes. "Do you think so? Really?" Then Anna laughs and says, "Of course it's true. But don't worry, I'm very turned on by megalomania." He responds, "You know, I only love you for your body, not your mind, anyway." And they begin a play food fight, ending in a kiss.

Anna can't put exactly what she loves about Doug into a few words. But I've observed them over the years. I've witnessed the private scenes such as the dream analysis and the food fights. And I've watched them recover as Anna chastised Doug in front of me for criticizing their son. "Enough, Doug," she said, sharply, while Doug bit his tongue and suffered in silence, Anna avoiding his gaze. It was clear the argument was old. Within minutes, though, it was gone; they let it go. Because I saw their private world, I got a privileged glimpse.

For intimacy is not public: real love stories are, perforce, private and secret. Moreover, the rhetoric around intimacy is that it *ought* to be private—unless you're in trouble, and then the troubles ought to be "talked about." So happiness, told in tales that could persuade that relationships are, indeed, happy, gets lived out behind closed doors, while the troubled ones become part of the discourse we, the public, hear.

When my parents' marriage went through a particularly bad patch after

my mother was diagnosed with cancer, their sex life suffered. How do I know this? Because out of her pain and the loneliness she felt during the breach from my father, my mother confided her anger, disappointment, and sense of rejection to me. In doing so she broke their implicit pact of privacy and respect for what had been *only* theirs. And as she did so, she began to weave a tale of *un*happiness, laying aside the one she'd lived with my father for years before, of *happiness*. Telling it to me, on her own, without him, was significant in many ways. For in so doing, perhaps, she was beginning to reinforce the tale's growing credibility to herself—through another's listening to it, through telling it aloud. The very act of telling her story apart from him underlined their estrangement at that point, and itself increased and verified it. Indeed, in part, this describes the process of estrangement in couples in general: separate stories growing and told apart from the other, which have as their themes the very estrangement itself.

But when my father became ill a few years later—more ill than she—and she found herself back in the circle of his tenderness, nursing him, she clammed up again. Then, as she watched him become thin, white, and helpless, I'm sure her broken confidence to me was something she wished gone. Their story—now melded together again by their shared commitment to each other, pleasure in their mutual support, their resumed daily conversations and satisfying routines—went underground, bounded off from detailed conversation with the rest of us once again. They were once again a couple bonded together, once again their private world sealed up. The essential secrecy of such a strong bond is why my friend wanted to live inside my parents' private house: she peeked in and spotted it, behind closed doors. The best-kept secret.

Recently, reading Studs Terkel's *The Good War*, an oral history of the Second World War, I found myself resonating with the same pique that impelled him to go out and grab the testimony, the stories of those who'd been in World War II, in order for him to combat, before it was too late, the evident loss of connection among people who hadn't been alive during that war to what was probably the seminal shaping event of the last century. Like Terkel, I didn't want to lose an important record, a record of what is still shaping the dreams and motivations of most people in the Western world at

the beginning of this new century, though they may hardly be aware of it: the record of the Great Marriage, the Great Partnership. If questions of the "does it have a future?" sort are so persistently asked, the stories of the Great Partnerships are obviously not being heard above the din of reports of the failed ones. The stories garnered for this book, then, form a record, proof that enduring, real-life love in the second half of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first century, in the Western world is alive and well.

"All happy families are alike," wrote Tolstoy, but he was wrong. Each story is different; my parents' is different from Tim and Lorna's, which, in turn, is different from Anna and Doug's. Yet most love stories do share themes: redemption through another's love or learning how one can be good to another, renewal through another's dependence or belief in you, wisdom through your own experience of your loved one and his or hers of you, and peaks and troughs of shared experience. Each individual love story today also pivots around the same conundrums: the tension between individual freedom and commitment, the task of regenerating mutual interest and desire in the teeth of predictability and routine, the need for security and stability against the push for novelty, and the sheer difficulty of the economics of time and energy for each other within two complex lives. All these over increasingly long lives.

All happy relationship stories—which are mostly internal, private, and not fully articulated unless called upon to be told (as in this book)—will also share key points as they are being shared. They will *(a)* emphasize the positive, leaving out or minimizing the negative; *(b)* be able to draw on past successes and pleasures during times of difficulty or distress so that the story shows an "expansive" time perspective—i.e., remembering the past, despite the distressing present; and, related to this, *(c)* project to the future as a time in which their past and present strengths will shine, again drawing on the positives in their relationship stories; and *(d)* be more or less similar "stories," if divergent in small ways, across the couple. These relationship stories are built up over a lifetime together, each day adding data into the bank about what makes the relationship work and gives them pleasure, and what the couple do that gets them through times of stress or crisis. A pleasant day at

the beach? A sentence added to the "we do enjoyable things together" strand of the story. A tense time getting ready to get there? A sentence added to the coping one: "we get overwrought preparing, but we know to let it go."

What is unique to each story is *how* each loving couple can live within the tensions of long-term coupledom and still feel satisfied together. Some couples will master the distribution of loyalties between children and partners judiciously, balance work and home equably and equally, sustain the troughs of boredom and restart desire—by any outsider's measure. In contrast, others won't manage anything like such balanced lives—outside observers might spot all sorts of deficits—but still describe themselves as happy. The result, however, is the same: a sense of contentment with their relationship, for it is what the couple tell themselves that is the key, rather than an objective truth.

Moreover, each relationship story contains its own individual twists, which can arise in surprising areas. For example, a theme of contemporary relationship lore is that good sex, done frequently, underlies happy partnerships. It's a risky theme, which has come to dominate current cultural beliefs about sex and how it should operate in relationships. It's risky because couples who find themselves having it infrequently, or who feel lust slipping out of their lives, might start to question their relationship adequacy and begin to weave a relationship story of failure instead. Research shows it's normal for long-lived relationships to have sexual troughs. Relationship happiness can, indeed, coexist within a range of sexual behaviors, satisfaction, and, most definitely, frequency within many years of a partnership. This book adds its own evidence to such research.

The twists in the sexual strands of the stories are varied. Normally, long-lived couples do accept a decline in the frequency of sex, although often the severity of this decline is temporary; some happy relationships (a minority) can even encompass infidelities; while some (again, few) couples dispense with sexual intercourse altogether, often later in life because of physical incapacity, as we will see more fully in chapter 6. One woman interviewed for this study, for instance, claimed she thinks that "sex is when you can't think of other entertainments." Her story is about the relative unimportance of sex and the relative importance of other shared pleasures. Though she and her

husband (married eighteen years) have satisfying sex, they do so infrequently, sex being only one among many mutual rewards. They described themselves as "happy, attracted, in love, and vitally interested in each other." In contrast, a couple I spoke with who are in their eighties talk about how their happiness pivots around the importance of their constantly stoked eroticism. Their tale about their happy relationship overlooks elements of their relationship that others—such as their estranged son, bitter at being neglected, feeling always outside their circle of mutual passion—might describe negatively. "I find you embarrassing," he told them, and they are still hurt. Retired to North Carolina, they golf, take walks, ride bikes, and swim, all the while joking and still flirting as if they had recently met. An ideal couple? Yes, they would say, remaining bewildered by their son's remarks.

Tolstoy was wrong. Telling each story reveals something new.

But it turns out Tolstoy was onto something. Happy relationships share something important: they're likely to lie behind most people's happiness with life. People in happy partnerships seem to be healthier, have better incomes, have more sex, greater social networks, higher self-esteem, and report greater enjoyment of life in general—largely because being part of a stable and happy couple is more likely to give you access to any and all of these good things in life.[2] For instance, affluence is more likely: couples usually have more than one income (or at least do at various points of their lives together). Being part of a couple means you have two sources of social networks. And being part of a couple means that someone who sees you daily and who cares about you is likely to notice if you seem unfit or under the weather and to prod you into doing something about it. The other side of this is that you may be more motivated to keep yourself healthy for him or her. After all, if you break down, her life becomes more difficult. Steady access to a sexual partner means more frequent sex, even if that frequency fluctuates over time. And no matter how much excitement you get from new sexual encounters, comfort and intimacy, and the likelihood of working out what most satisfies you, increases over time in relationships. A comfortable and happy relationship is likely to mean "good" sex within a number of important parameters: feeling confirmed you are loved, being physically

gratified, and being shown you're attractive. One's self-esteem can't help but rise. Being part of a couple also bestows on you membership in a prized club—the "couples" club. The Western world values that membership highly.

To get the record I wanted, I asked couples to tell me their stories. But how do you get people to do the thing that I'm arguing is unlikely: that is, to make the private public? Fortunately, set against the implicit need for privacy within intimate happiness is something else: the need to tell a story to oneself, to make sense of one's life.

We all have stories—big and small—that accompany our lives. Relationship stories are more or less conscious, and usually only fully articulated when specifically solicited—something that rarely happens, indeed, perhaps only for books such as this one (or when telling a lawyer or marital therapist why you want a divorce or why your relationship doesn't work). One interviewee, a seventy-two-year-old retired businessman, married for over fifty years, said after our session together: "You know, I don't usually talk this way. I don't stop to ask myself questions about 'why does it work?' or consciously, 'what's it been like?' But this was great. *I didn't know I had it all there*, and I've learned something about myself. I think it's great to be forced to look back and think about your relationship. I think everyone should be made to do this!"

Here we need to observe something about "stories" and their construction. Stories silently accompany our lives, elaborating themselves as they do. We all know those voices we hear in our heads (albeit barely registered) that suddenly accuse, "that was stupid," or applaud, "that's great! Well done!" We often find ourselves reliving and savoring pleasurable episodes as if in front of a screen again and again, reminding us how good life and love can be, or the opposite, replaying torturous ones, mistakes or tragedies, until we have some way to tell ourselves what these memories mean, enabling us to go forward and the scenes to recede. Our reveries might even take the form of conscious conversations. How many of us have suddenly found ourselves mouthing words in public, lost in thought, only to realize with alarm that we've been talking to ourselves in front of all those passersby we'd neglected

to notice? These scenes, conversations, and fragments of sentences build on each other. And despite those episodes when we catch ourselves mouthing passionate arguments in our heads out loud in public, these words and sentences are pretty much usually unconscious ones. They rise to awareness only when, and if, something unusual happens. A partner starting to do the dishes after years of nagging, for instance, might mean you become suddenly aware of the conversations you've had internally about his "unwillingness" to do this very chore. Now sentences change, descriptions of your partner evolving to fit this surprising new development. Another sentence, this time consciously, is added to your relationship story.

The story of "how we met" is also a story that couples consciously construct, and usually together. These stories commonly extol the delightful, often magical-seeming, sometimes humorous and surprising circumstances and conditions that bring a couple together. They usually emphasize the connection or pleasure between two people and will often leave out—to the point that these other details are effectively erased from memory (until the story is rewritten, perhaps during a breakup)—anything that was also present but which might not fit the story of happiness: the potentially irritating expressions, the deviations from shared politics, the unsettling flakes of dandruff on a shoulder. Such dispiriting details are present but submerged, either at the moment they're experienced or in the construction of the story afterward. And as the story is told and retold, and joins other stories that also confirm its underlying point—that is, that *this* is the person who "fits" me as a partner, a person with whom I'm "happy"—then it also helps to shape, even create, further happiness together. This is especially true if the story is essentially shared, if the point made (even if some of the details may diverge) is the same: "We have a happy life together; we form (at least mostly) a good partnership." So, telling a story of happiness appeals to an understandable and very functional psychological impulse in people. It is part of why people do want to shout their love from the rooftops.

In this book are stories of couples, from the United States and Great Britain, who have nominated themselves as having been in a loving, long-term (at least nine years) partnership. People either sent in their stories, filled out a long questionnaire, which also invited them to write their stories, and/

or were interviewed. They were located by word of mouth, often in a "snowball effect" (one person nominated another, who volunteered another, etc.), or through advertisements in community newspapers, or through calls for participants in articles interviewing me about relationships in major media. As a result, this is not a statistically representative sample, but instead one specifically garnered to tell stories of happiness, and one of people who were willing to talk about their relationships, or to try to put their experience into words. As a record, it can be a resource for further studies of a more scientifically robust design, drawing on clues from these admittedly skewed and rather articulate respondents. As a privileged glimpse into the textures of lives lived with a love that lasts through years and tribulations, it is, I hope, an invaluable and unique document. In most cases the stories and quotes that form the bulk of this book are direct, but in some they have been modified. This is to ensure confidentiality. Exact details of the participants, such as their names, localities, ages, occupations, and other demographic identifiers, in addition to some specific wording and circumstances, have been changed slightly, but, it is hoped, retain the spirit of the participants' stories. That is, as much as possible within the boundaries of the contract for confidentiality and anonymity, the stories try to stay close to or are in the words of the individuals, either as they have written or spoken them.

Couples span an age range between twenty-eight and eighty-three. Each member of the couple was asked to be interviewed or to provide his or her story separately, and, in most cases, though not all, it was possible to receive accounts from both members of a couple. Some are in their second, or even third marriage—these, however, as one person said, are the "true partnerships" for them, or in the case of the man who had been married for thirty years and, after his first wife's death, now for thirteen, it's his second "great marriage." These are all the ones that have lasted. Some are in same-sex partnerships. Not all are married. The rate of marriage is declining, particularly in modern Britain, while the rate of cohabitation is rising, especially when same-sex partnerships are included. The reasons for this are still being debated, but "committed" cohabitations that last, as far as research thus far can tell, are mostly different to marriage in legal status only. I think the record of this book will add to that apparent truth: i.e., that cohabiting

couples (including same-sex ones) who both last and stay happy together are essentially the same as those who marry.

The rationale for requiring a relationship to have lasted nine years is that if it has survived these years, in which there are likely to have been transitions or periods that test a relationship's durability, it is likely to be hardy. The nine-year mark is also a watershed when there has been, over the past decade, a peak in divorce petitions. For most couples, children would normally have entered the equation by then as well. This in itself would indicate a strong likelihood that a couple will have weathered an early and major test of a partnership: managing to become a family rather than a couple, while still retaining a couple's strength and lively interest in each other. Even for couples without children, nine years of living together will have produced tests of energy and time for, interest in, and loyalty to one another.

Each chapter includes a discussion of a critical, shared aspect of enduring happy partnerships, followed by either one or two couples' stories, told separately by each partner, illustrating that aspect. Throughout the discussion sections relevant voices of other participants also appear. The interviews and questionnaires specifically focused on what was associated with both happiness and difficulties over people's lives together, as well as the strategies they have developed both to manage the problems and strengthen the assets. But the scope—especially in the very long and wide-ranging interviews—was broad enough to draw out larger life stories, and to meander down paths leading to stories within stories. The aim was to build a uniquely detailed picture of how these couples live and have lived together and to get them to describe what they think has contributed to their statement "we remain in love and are happy together"; what have they changed in their ways of interacting or thinking about their relationship, and what have they retained, and how have both helped to keep such feelings alive?

But what do we mean when we talk about love?

It's a fair question. "Love" is a portmanteau, carrying multiple meanings, suggesting a slew of emotions. Pop songs croon about "caring," "desire," "delight," "longing," "exclusivity" ("you are the only one for me"). Poetry, agreeing, digs deeper, finding "sustenance," and "nurturance," within.

Surveys say people mean "support," "commitment," "intimacy," "good communication," "respect," "being best friends," "sharing," "security," and "satisfying sex"[3] when they talk about love. Theorists talk of "merging" shared well-being, or deepening reciprocal feeling and commitment.[4] Meanwhile, researchers have found that feelings of trust, respect, friendship, and liking; feelings of fairness, mutuality, and reciprocity; and feelings of physical and psychological intimacy distinguish such couples from others—the ones who either don't last or who last but are unhappy.[5]

All these feelings entwined in one word, "love."

So what happens to these feelings in couples who've been together for years? To the exquisite, torturous, dizzy feelings—what one woman interviewee calls "charisma"? Do gray-haired partners still feel ripples of thrills over the breakfast table? What happens to "being one with another," to "finding your soul mate," to "passion"? To feeling you may die if you're too long away from each other, to electric pleasure, to relief at discovering someone who "understands"? What happens to such intensity? Does the conviction that no one else in the room—perhaps the world—really matters decay?

To fall in love, to live in such a state, may be the most intensely pleasurable period of life, so there's a lot at stake in believing it will last. Discord scarcely darkens it. Not because discordant notes don't exist, but because such intense pleasure overrides it. When you're in love like this, you overlook inharmonious details—the slightly irritable word, the white socks with black shoes, the preference for Frank Sinatra records over Bach, or vice versa—that touch off a warning bell. The bell rings, but dimly; at this stage you choose to answer later, and maybe, if you're lucky, you never will. Perhaps Bach takes a backseat to Sinatra during certain moods; maybe with gentle coaching the white socks will be recycled as dust cloths—or, indeed, you'll decide to admire his disregard for style. For, out of the existential island, "across a crowded room," you have found a partner, found your "soul mate."

That discovery ends a quest that began at birth. Psychologists who study emotional processes from infancy, attachment theorists, claim that much of what we call "love" is instinctual. Humans seek a secure attachment, a

glomming on to one reliable, central "other." We require it, at the start, for dear life, and afterward, as an only slightly less urgent basic need. The adult caregiver of the infant (usually, in the first instance, the mother) responds to him also as if for dear life: the baby's life is as dear as her own, urgently, she must respond to his cries or coos. The need to attend to the baby overwhelms the mother (or whoever becomes the main caregiver)—it's a period called "maternal preoccupation." In this early period she is preoccupied with the baby above all else—much like new lovers are preoccupied with each other above all else.

Research is accumulating to support this idea, that our desire for such a singular relationship is innate and lifelong.[6] We eventually leave our parents, or whoever has been that urgent attachment figure, feeling, hopefully, secure, special, and ardently cared for (those who haven't had at least one adequate "primary caregiver" as children remain stuck with the original craving for it—perhaps defending against it, but nevertheless having it). Now "unattached," we leave home with a figurative hunger, an empty space ready to be filled by a new special "other." Interestingly, as we grow up, we also develop a capacity to respond as both caregiver and receiver. Grown-up love means flipping in and out of these roles as situations demand. So the magical discovery of the lover, each partner stuck like glue, as Elvis sang—as the mother was to the infant and the infant to the mother—is not really "magical" at all. It's natural.

The intense pleasure of new love, just as in postnatal intensity, is functional to relationship development. Pleasure glues two into one, with a common purpose: to be together. The very nature of pleasure is that you wish it to continue, impelling a couple toward a future together. Intensity, of necessity, wanes. (Literature and films—for example, *Endless Love*—often describe the impossibility of a continued state of such intense preoccupation: something explodes, or implodes, and destruction follows.) When early love's intensity fades, two lives blending now into each other's reality, bells of discord chime more clearly (perhaps this is why shipboard and summer romances are so brief: encapsulated so fully from reality, the plunge into "love" is extreme, marking the contrast back into "drabness" too starkly). At this juncture the happy relationship story, its introduction so perfect, takes off into a different narrative, no longer about intensity.

Many love stories begin to end around this time. Glue is no longer sufficient, to continue the analogy: bricks and mortar become better metaphors. Real-time demands (projects at work with customary drinks afterward, which send you home late four nights running); real differences (one person tidying the other's underwear strewn on the bedroom floor, the other fuming when pants can't be found); and real other loyalties (the weekly squash game conflicting with the joint yoga class proposed by your lover, the parents' invitation to a dinner on the night of your six-month anniversary) begin to press.

Accommodations, compromises, and negotiations, all while maintaining interest, desire, energy, and time for each other, move into prime position. Processes of living, the bricks and mortar, replace the glue of intense pleasure. But what happens to those wonderful original feelings? Do they wash away? Are they transformed? Or do they crop up intermittently, girding the bricks and mortar?

What these stories often report is that such feelings can, indeed, be restimulated: the description could be from a couple newly in love. You glimpse the boy or girl you met in the middle-age person across the table from you, you touch the skin you know so well but find it suddenly electric again, or you see the familiar profile lit up in a new light, against a different sky, and it looks newly beautiful.

But most often these original electric feelings are transformed, and, it seems, deepened. The original feelings underpin others, cascading layers of pleasures past informing present and future ones. This is similar to how looking at photos of holidays can resurrect the pleasure of the holiday, support the sense of well-being one has as one shuffles through them in the moment, and reenforce the intention to go on another one, sometime in the future, all at once. Or, perhaps a better analogy is that the banking of the original feelings into present ones, over time, is much like the bodies these couples inhabit over the years. To touch your partner's body is to touch the body of now as well as the one you remember from before: literally a body of history. Your partner sees your sags but also holds a sense of the moment you met when the sags hadn't yet formed. The feelings of love that started you off coexist with the feelings of familiarity

and deep knowledge of the present, part of the acknowledgment of your shared life, over your joint history.

Couples in this book talk about their early passion with flowery and sensual words, shifting to concrete language when they move into later parts of their tales. This is when they begin to describe how much they talk as a couple, what they actually do day to day (who does what chores and why and how that makes life flow, for example), what qualities each brings to the running of the family and also to their friendship (being an attentive listener, or being very sensible, for example). The early "glomming" on to each other still underlies their present emotional connection: they don't forget it. Instead, they cite a sense of luck and good fortune at having met each other and going on to have had happy lives; some people almost pinch themselves in disbelief at such "luck."

This is more than the tingling feelings or fizz of the beginning.

So there is good news: love can be better, and more intense, over time.

We are about to peer behind the curtains into the best-kept secrets of successful relationships. Each story reveals explicitly, through the wise conclusions of their narrators, or implicitly, through their showing by example, tips, or clues, how to sustain happiness together. They may provide the insight that accompanies recognition: by reading about situations similar to your own, new ways to behave or think about them may emerge. So might assurances that you are on the right track. No single story will provide a map, but each may offer discrete hints for constructing your own. For each path to happiness, as with these couples' and including your own, will be unique.

We love to be told secrets, to enter closed-off worlds, especially if what we're witnessing is entertaining, wise, or novel, which these stories are. People love to talk about things they love, and I wanted to hear them and to tell them in return. The best-kept secrets are being told so the story of how to be happy like these couples can go down in history. With it, the questions "Is there a future for the Great Partnership? Can a partnership of love really endure?" might become history too.