

# THE INDEPENDENT

## **There is a lot to be said for marrying young**

**It was always the right man at the wrong time, or the wrong man at the right time. Then we started over again. By Christina Patterson**

Saturday, 16 August 2008

My parents met on a hill in Heidelberg. It was, they always told us, love at first sight. My mother was 18. My father was 21. When they went home, three weeks later (she to Sweden, he to England), they continued their romance, in German, by letter. Four months later, my father sent my mother a telegram. "Will you marry me?" it said, in English. My mother's reply was one word: "Yes." By the time my father died, six years ago, they had been married for 47 years.

Peaches Geldof is, clearly, not my mother. Her surprise wedding on Tuesday to a 23-year-old rock musician may have been a publicity stunt, a drunken whim or a joke. Or it may have been the entirely logical act (one sanctioned by our culture for centuries) of two young people swept away by passion. In a few weeks, or months, or days, the tabloids might announce (with sorrow and full-colour pics) the breakdown of the marriage. But it's possible – it's always possible – that they won't.

At my father's 70th birthday dinner, the table was lined with men and women whose hair was greying, and whose chins were sagging, but whose eyes were sparkling. Some of them had been married for 50 years. I've known most of these couples all my life. No one knows the secrets of a marriage, of course, but in public, at least, they treat each other with respect. They treat each other, in fact, with love. They met when they were young, fell in love, got married and had children, because that's what you do, that's what you did.

My own 70th birthday celebrations (God, global warming and work allowing) will, I hope, be festive, but they're unlikely to be very conjugal. If my parents' guests could, between them, summon up almost a millennium of married life, then mine will, I imagine, struggle to muster a couple of centuries. It was always the right man at the

wrong time, or the wrong one at the right one. Or it was the right one, and then it was wrong. And then we started all over again.

For we were the generation that chose freedom. We're the generation that, as film-maker Jennifer Fox said in a documentary on BBC4 on Wednesday, "chose passion over security". "I knew I didn't fit with common roles," she said in *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*, "but I didn't care. It was more important to be free." And here she is in the film: 42, gorgeous, travelling all over the world and hosting Woody Allenesque dinner parties in her massive Tribeca loft. She has a poetry-writing, former freedom-fighting lover in South Africa and a Swiss boyfriend, with an unfortunate accent, who visits her in New York. The man she adores is unavailable. The man she doesn't isn't. "In the midst of our freedom," she confesses, "it seemed that all of us were struggling to find our way." So she sets out to "investigate" the "modern female life". And what she finds is a cauldron of confusion.

Among the most memorable scenes in this strangely gripping film (kind of real-life *Sex and the City*, but with a global edge) is one in India, where Fox explains, to a group of baffled widows – for whom sex, like beatings from their husbands, was a thing to be tolerated – the concept of masturbation. Later, when she tells Paromitha, a human rights lawyer who is also single, the poetic words in a text message from her South African lover, Paromitha says quietly: "What you are talking about is attraction. Love is beyond attraction. There is a level of commitment. Love is something you have to work on."

Attraction, as we all know, is an animal thing. (So animal, according to a new study, that being on the contraceptive pill can skew our sense of smell, and make us fancy "genetically inappropriate" men.) And we are animals. It is, surely, entirely appropriate that our animal instincts should operate in the deeply peculiar sphere of sexual relationships. Attraction, as Paromitha says, is not love, but it's a damn good start for it. If you call it love, and treat it as something that will go on for ever, particularly at a time when you're adaptable and can grow up together, and have children when nature intended, and not when it will get you into the *British Medical Journal*, then maybe, as models for mating and reproduction go, it's not a bad one.

I would hate to live in a society constructed entirely of smug little nuclear units – or "hard-working families" to use the language of our politicians. I would hate people to be locked in miserable marriages, and I would hate to think that the Seventies feminists' struggle for freedom (or the first stirrings of it) had to begin all over again. But

sometimes pendulums swing too far, and sometimes freedom is lonely.  
Better to have loved and lost and better, surely, to have tried and failed.