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The Magical Marriage: Why some people go off sex after 18 months

Written by Juliet Grayson

Once again, the fist came out of nowhere. Ten-year-old John was sitting quietly at the kitchen table, doing his homework, mum in the background, cooking. Then his father had come in. Angry. He'd lashed out before he'd said anything. John had jumped between them. He knew the only way to protect his mother was to take the beating himself.

"Get out of my way, boy." His father turned to his mother, "You slag. I saw you in the café."

John, sweating, felt the pit of his stomach drop. He could smell the scotch on his father's breath. Somehow he had to say something that would catch his father's attention. Turn his anger. Protect his mother.

"You're pissed," John said.

That did it. His father lashed out at him, unsteady he staggered backwards and then came at him again. "You little runt. Just shut up. SHUT UP!"

Hours later, when the row was over, and the house was quiet again, apart from his father's snoring, his mother came to him. "You're my little man. Always there for me."

"I'll protect you mum. Don't worry. Don't be sad."

What we have here, is a 'magical marriage' between John and his mother. Obviously, it's not a literal marriage but they are treating each other like partners. There is no sexual contact or inappropriate physical touch, but the relationship is emotionally incestuous. John's mother Sara is seeking the emotional support from her son that should have come from her husband. John is trying to protect his mother, wanting to 'fill the gap' left by her not-good-enough husband. He wants to care for her, cheer her up and make her feel better. Sara responds to him, letting him know that she trusts him more than her husband and relies on his support. The question is, how will this entanglement impact John as he grows up?



In my clinic as a sex and relationship therapist, I see adults who, as children, had a magical marriage. They 'stepped in' to partner their parent. They often struggle as grown-ups to have lasting healthy intimacy. John could form relationships with women, and be fully sexual for a while. However, once the honeymoon period was over, after six to eighteen months, his sex drive diminished dramatically. Unbeknownst to him, his primary relationship was still with his mother. It seemed there wasn't space for another woman.

A Magical Marriage can be a hard pattern to recognise. We often are not aware that this has happened, and I know of only one way to get a 'divorce' from a Magical Marriage. I used a technique from Pessó Boyden System Psychotherapy (PBSP), a method that is not well known in the UK.

I offered John a tray of stones, buttons, ribbons and small objects. "Pick an object to represent your real-mother-as-a-young-woman." He chose a shiny red bow, and placed it one and a half metres away to his right.

"Now choose an object to represent the husband that your mother needed - an Ideal Husband for your real mother." He chose a large rounded grey stone. I took it, and placed it beside the bow-representing-his-real-mother.

Squatting behind the objects, I pointed to the stone, "This represents an Ideal Husband for

your mother as a young woman." I waited a moment, then asked: "What did your real mother need from him?"

"She needed him to be kind." John said straight away.

I lightly held the stone, moving it to simulate the Ideal Husband talking to his real mother, and looking at the stone-representing-the-Ideal-Husband I said, "He says: '*If I had been your Ideal Husband when you were a young woman, I would always have been kind to you.*' Is that ok?" I checked.

"Yes, and he would never have been violent." John said.

Holding the stone, and moving it slightly I said, "He says to your mother: '*If I had been your Ideal Husband, I would never have been violent.*' " Again, I was making it seem as if the Ideal Husband had been talking.

John and I co-created the perfect husband for his mother. He would have been kind, sensitive, sober, not a drinker, appreciative, loving, friendly, and enjoyed conversation. He would have supported her, and protected her. John cried with relief.

Moving to the next stage, holding the stone - that represents the Ideal-Husband, I turned him to face John. It was as if the Ideal Husband had stepped out of the scene with John's mother, and was looking at John. "He says to you now, '*It*

would have been my job to be there for Sara, for my wife' he says, '*not your job. My job.*'"

"Gosh," John exclaimed. He gave a deep sigh, and sat back, clearly relieved. Quietened, he said: "My whole body feels different. Lighter. It is as if a burden I didn't know I was carrying has been lifted. Wow."

I waited a few minutes as he assimilated this, then moved on. I helped him to imagine an Ideal Father for himself as child, who would have been sober, and gentle, never violent, and who would have loved his mother. We also imagined an Ideal Mother who would have known how to pick a good husband to care for her and their son. John snuggled into the chair, and imagined sitting between the two of them on a sofa, as they laughed and chatted. Tears of joy were streaming down his face. John was having a full sensory experience with these Ideal Figures. I knew from my experience with PBSP, that having helped John to create this new memory, it would have a lasting, profoundly healing effect on him, and change his relationships with women.

For more about Magical Marriages, Pessó Boyden System Psychotherapy and other therapeutic methods, you can read Juliet Grayson's latest book, *Landscapes of the Heart: The working world of a sex and relationship therapist.*

