

CHOOSE WISELY

By Sarah Thomas-Oxtoby

Of all the many regrets in life, none resonates more than picking the wrong partner.

I am 40 and so could only wonder what it felt like to see — with the clarity that comes decades later — where things went wrong. I wanted to know what events, choices, or missed opportunities people reflect on most, later on down the road. What would they have changed? What advice would they give their younger selves?

I went to senior citizens centers and hoped that by asking those questions to the men and women who frequented them, I might learn something about choices and regrets. I knew something about both. But then again, I was 40, not quite old enough to take the long, and perhaps wiser view.

I heard stories from long ago that lingered and haunted these aging men and women: a choice that ended an entertainment career too soon; regretting never going to college; passing up a scholarship that would have changed the trajectory of a life; an immigrant's sadness at never learning to speak English well. But time and time again, there was one regret that surfaced more than any other: marrying the wrong person.



Maria and Alejandra are neighbors and best friends. They have known each other for over 50 years. Maria was born in Puerto Rico but was brought to New York when she was nine months old and has been there ever since. She was married to her husband for 51 years. Alejandra is 88 years old and has been widowed since 1974. I met them during lunch time at “their” table. “We *always* sit here,” Maria told me.

Maria spoke about the deep love she and her husband shared for each other. “We had four kids, 19 grandchildren, and 11 great grandkids,” she said. He died of colon cancer. She lives alone now. “I really miss him, at night especially, I miss him.” Maria doesn't celebrate holidays with her children the same way they used to, because without her husband it hurts. “Sometimes I feel very lonely. I cry. Then I dry my tears. And I say life goes on. I'm not gonna bring him back. But it hurts.”

She and her husband, she says, were very jealous when they were first together. “He couldn't even look at an actress on TV because I would take the plug from the TV,” she told me. “And he was jealous, too. Don't get me wrong. He was *very* jealous. He wouldn't let me see a show that

this guy was on, he said that I liked him.”

Maria, Alejandra and I all laughed. “Now I sit down and I think about it. And I laugh, and I say that was so silly.”

It was different for Alejandra. She lives with her daughter and grandson. Her husband died 48 years ago.

She married him when she was 24. “He didn’t hit me,” she said. “But he hurt me with words.” She held her recollection close, allowing little more than “I don’t have good memories of that marriage.” He died about seven years after they wed. His liver was damaged, she says, from excessive drinking. She did not want to say more about him. She does say that, if she could live her life over again she would not marry him.

Alejandra did remarry. Her second husband was good to her. But they were together only a short time before he died in 1974, right around the time she was turning 40, my age. Even though she has been widowed for 48 years, she said she still doesn’t sleep well. “I am alone,” she said.

Alejandra did not marry again and has no desire to do so. If she did, she and Maria joked that Alejandra should marry a man she has a crush on, who also goes to their senior center. “They’re *seeing* each other,” Maria said. The women laughed.

“*Es un secreto de amor*,” she told me — “It’s a secret love.”



Margarita, Gloria, Dora, and Maritza were sitting together in the knitting room, but none of them were knitting. They were deep in conversation the way good friends are when they hang out. Margarita — originally from the Dominican Republic, Gloria — from Peru, Dora — from El Salvador, and Maritza — from Puerto Rico — were talking about how much it meant to live in America and how important it was to choose a spouse wisely.

Margarita had two children with her ex-husband. He was abusive. “I had to hide it from my brothers,” she said, holding back tears as she recalled those years of her life. Margarita finally got the courage to leave him, and was able to escape one day while he was at work. A family friend helped her. “I got the godfather of our children to drive us to the airport,” she said. She booked a one-way ticket from the Dominican Republic and joined relatives in New York. “I called and told him I wasn’t coming back.”

Dora said that one of her motivations for coming to the United

States from El Salvador was to get away from the man she thought she would build a life with. She discovered he was lying to her — he was married with three children. “I went to his house and met his wife,” she said, “and confirmed he was married with children.” Dora said she didn’t want to upend his marriage, so she told his wife that she knew him through work. “I never spoke to him again,” she said. “I had an aunt in New York. I left my job working at a family court, made arrangements, and just left.”



Maritza has two children with her former husband. She left him, she said, because he was too controlling. “He didn’t even allow me to wear pants,” she said. He tried to reconcile with her after she left the Dominican Republic, and even followed her to the United States. But she refused him.

There were other stories of other regrets — Gloria wished she had become a nurse, but says she is at peace with that now. But the stories that resonated, the ones I carried with me were stories of marriages that should not have been. This I understood only too well.

I am newly married and feel very lucky to have met my husband, a kind, loving, and patient man.

As these women told me their stories I understood only too well the steep price of bad choices. When I was 23 years old I was engaged to a man who was living a double life. He stole money from me to fund his secret online gambling and drug addictions. By the time I realized I was planning a life with a functional drug user, who had an art of hiding things from me in plain sight, I was already financially devastated by all the money he took, and the credit cards he ran up in my name. My life fell apart. I lost trust in most people. I was 27 years old when I pressed

charges against him and he went to prison. It took a long time to recover. It took almost a decade to rebuild my credit and get my life back on track.

I had sought these women in the hope of gaining wisdom. I did. I also discovered something else: regret does not vanish over time. It lessens. This made me see in a way I had not anticipated that while I had come searching for teachers, I had instead discovered a sisterhood. *

WRITE A LETTER
TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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