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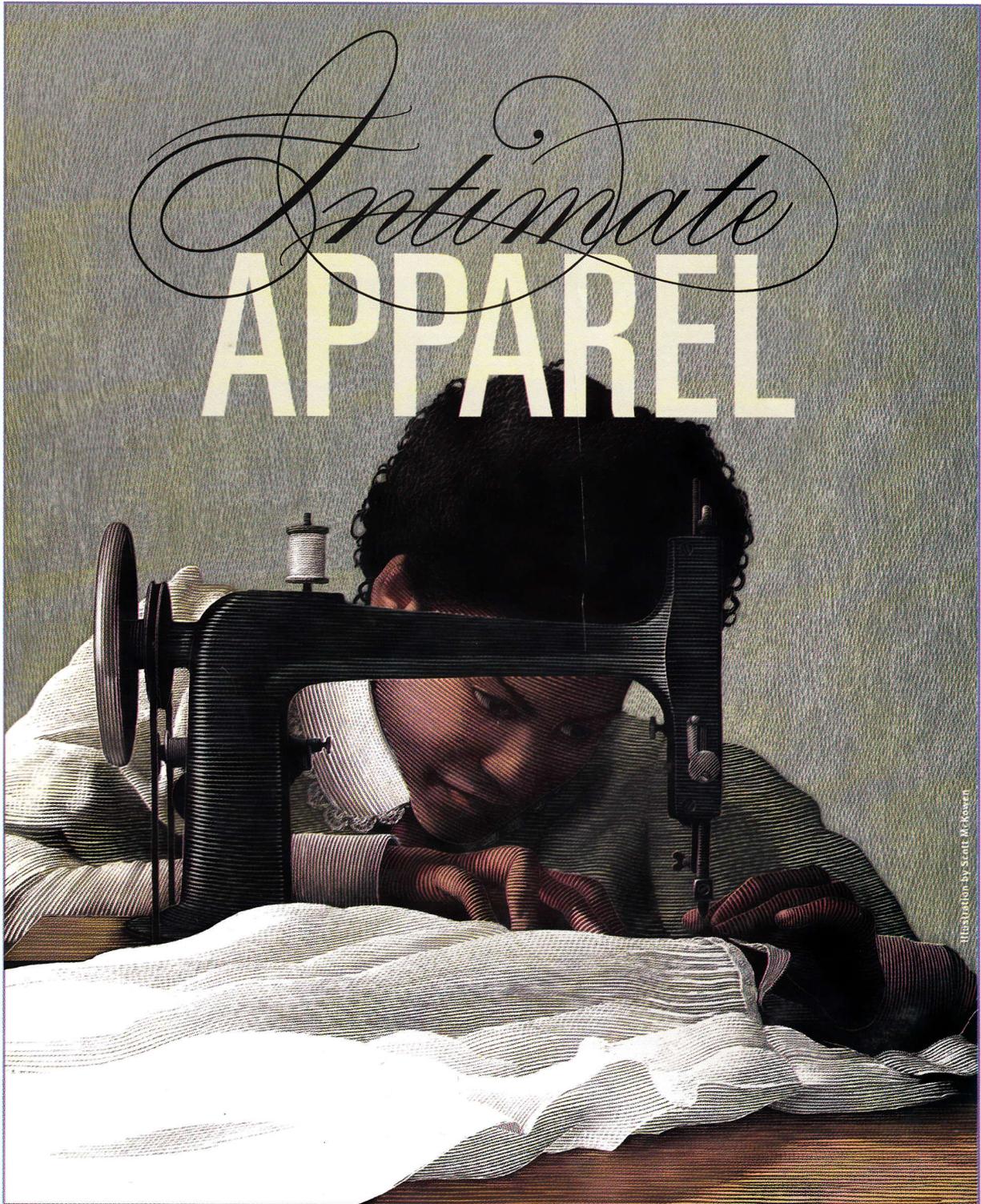


Illustration by Scott McKaven

THE MUSIC CENTER / AUGUST 2004

Happily Ever After

BY MERI NANA-AMA DANQUAH

WHEN I HEARD THE WORD *SPINSTER*

for the first time, this was the image that came to mind: a beautiful young lady, sitting at a spinning wheel, taking something ordinary and transforming it into something exquisite and unique. This woman was the farthest thing from an old maid. She was as determined and able as she was desirable, a survivor. She was straight out of a fairy tale. Literally. The woman conjured by my imagination was none other than the miller's daughter, the one whose task it had been to spin straw into gold. Never mind that it was not she — but Rumpelstiltskin — who had actually produced the gold. It was she who had spun herself, and her future, free from the greed of three men — the miller, the king and the little man whose name she had to guess.

It never occurred to me to associate the word *spinster* with age and marital status. The miller's daughter did, after all, end up marrying the king. But that was beside the point. In my mind, being married had nothing at all to do with being strong and self-possessed, with being fierce enough to face life's harshest circumstances and skillfully shape your own reality. I believed that it was possible for a woman to be all that. I believed that having it all was not only possible, it was absolutely imperative.

Like most of my girlhood friends, I often daydreamed of getting married. Or, more accurately, I daydreamed about the evening of my engagement and the afternoon of my wedding. I would spend hours working out the details of both events, from the major to the mundane. The proposal that I had envisioned would be romantic, full of violins, conspiratorial waiters, soft moonlight, a bottle of champagne on ice, and a body of water nearby. It would be the sort of suspense-

ful, tear-jerking anecdote that I could tell again and again. Some man on bended knee would ask for my hand, then slide a diamond solitaire onto my finger. And it wouldn't just be any ole rock, either. It had to be big, so big that when the light bounced off its surface, it would momentarily blind anyone who happened to be looking at it.

Ah, I remember those fantasies well. They carried me through my teen years and young adulthood. Each diary I had was filled with drawings and notes about weddings. Ever the practical pedant, I researched all the traditional rituals and symbols that went along with saying nuptials: the something old and the something new, the something borrowed and the something blue. There was so much time, effort and thought invested on my part, you'd think I was obsessed with it all. But the truth of the matter was that I really hated weddings.

There was something about the whole business of brides and grooms, of standing at the altar and exchanging vows in front of an audience, which made me incredibly uncomfortable. As soon as I stepped into a church to witness an "I do," I would get a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. The same thing happened when I attended funerals. And it was usually followed by a slight dizziness, and nausea, as if I were about to vomit, then faint. I didn't understand — at least, not then — why that always happened. But it was enough to make me stop going to weddings.

What I was obsessed with, what all of those daydreams and notes and drawings were really about, was love. I was taken with the whole idea of falling in love, of meeting a kindred spirit, a soul mate. What I didn't know was that finding love is not the same as getting married. And you don't necessarily have to have a wedding to fulfill the desire for either one. I assumed, as did my peers, that weddings — with their white dresses, fresh-cut bouquets — were not simply a part, but the ultimate goal, of the fairytale of true love.

Now, I know better.

During the decade of my 20s, and the early part of my 30s, most of my girlfriends got married. One by one, they walked down the aisle and became Mrs. So-and-So. I would receive the invitations — perfect script on expensive white paper, requesting the honor of my presence — and post them on the cork-board above my writing desk. There they would stay — the reminders of a road I chose not to take — until the dates had passed, and then I would remove the invitations and place them in the trash.

"What do you have against weddings?" my girlfriend, Carol, once asked. She'd wanted me to be her bridesmaid, and I'd told her, with all due respect, that I'd rather not.

"They make me physically ill," I said. That sounded silly, even to my ears, so I tried a more heartfelt admission. I explained to Carol that I resented the way weddings disappeared women, turned them into nameless, faceless tokens to be given away by their fathers to their grooms. It didn't matter to me that some people were now contemporizing their ceremonies, wearing white regardless of whether or not they were virgins, removing offensive words like "obey" from their vows, and wearing headpieces that didn't hide their faces behind veils. The remaining matrimonial customs were still rife with the message that an unmarried woman was one who had not been chosen, it suggested that she was undesirable, or indecent. Even conventional wisdom holds that there are two types of women — the kind you marry, and the kind you just fool around with. Nobody wants to think of herself as being disposable, a thing to be used.

"Weddings," I said, "turn marriage into a public validation of a woman's worth. If it were only about love, then why the need for a big show? Why not just spend 10 minutes at the downtown courthouse? Or at a drive-thru chapel in Vegas?"

"Let me get this straight. You're saying that you don't want to get married?" Carol asked. "You don't want to have a wedding? Ever?"

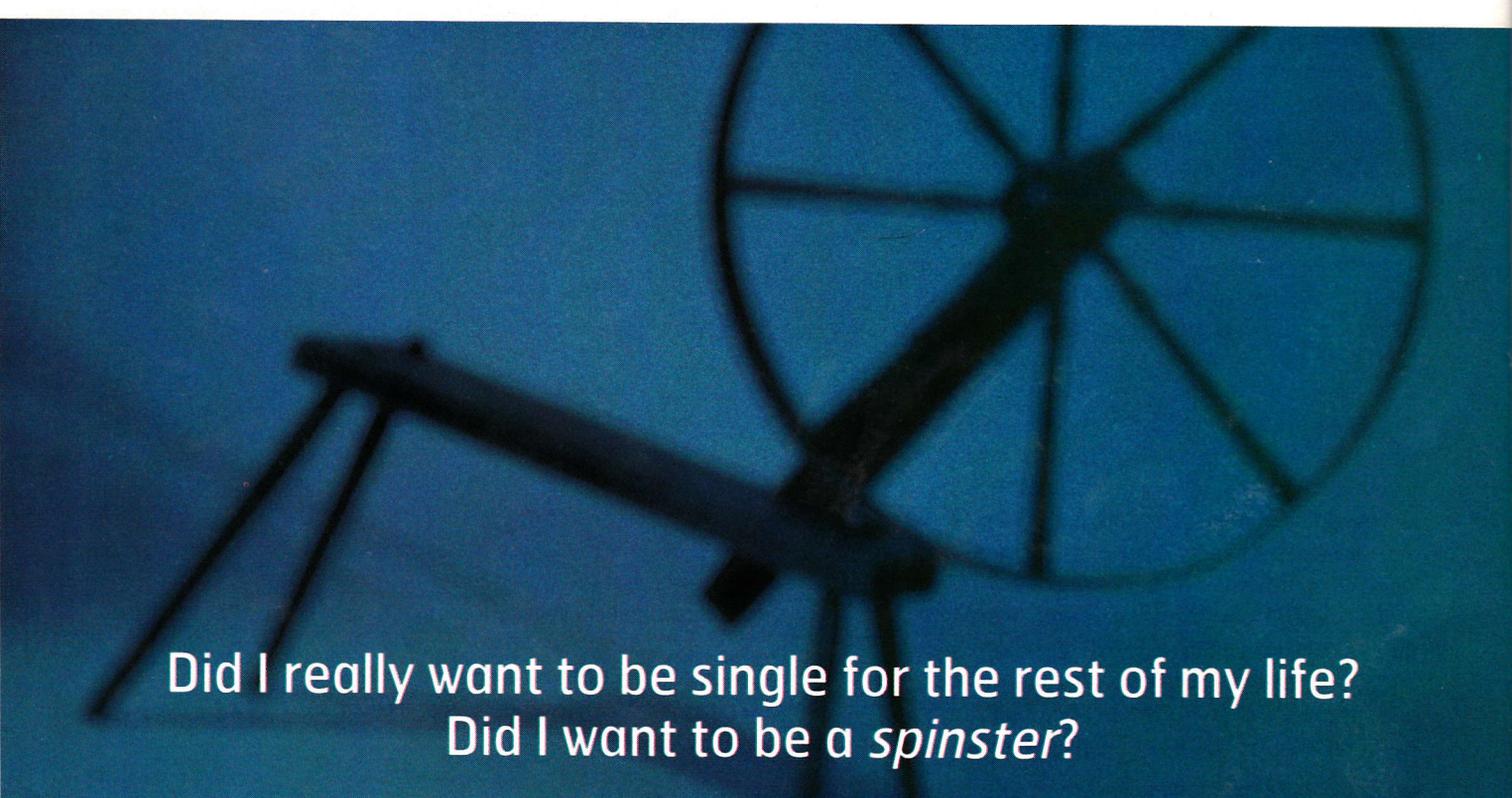
"I'm saying that I don't want to feel like I'm nobody, like my entire life means nothing unless I become Mrs. Somebody."

"Okay, I get the whole feminist angle, but you still didn't answer my question," she insisted. "You can honestly look at me and tell me that you don't have a problem with being single for the rest of your life? You really want to be a *spinster*?" It was such an awkward word, *spinster*, and it sounded so ridiculous coming out her mouth, so old-fashioned and out of place. We both started laughing and before long, we'd switched the topic of conversation to something a bit safer.

Carol's was the first wedding that I'd attended in over 15 years. It took place in June, the summer before my 35th birthday. All throughout my adulthood, I'd been in and out of love, seriously involved, completely abstaining, or just being casual about things. One of those relationships, from my 20s, had even produced a child, so there was no pressure to beat the ticking of a biological clock. I had an enviable career, one that allowed me to spend my days doing what I most loved, writing and reading. There had been a couple of proposals, one from the right man at the wrong time, and another at the right time but from the wrong man. I was still single, happily. Or so I'd thought before going to the wedding.

I kept thinking about the questions that Carol had asked. Did I really want to be single for the rest of my life? Did I want to be a *spinster*? The years were passing quickly. That much was true. Before I knew it, I'd be in my 40s, and then my 50s. Already, my hair was turning white. Not just one or two gray strands, either. Whenever I looked at Carol, standing there in her gown, gazing into the eyes of the man who would soon be her husband, that word ran through my mind — *spinster, spinster, spinster*. It was like an accusation, an indictment. And the image that came to mind was not that of a beautiful young lady, but an old maid, haggard and hollow-eyed and alone.

It was so hot in there. I started to feel sick, dizzy, like I would pass out if I didn't get some fresh air. I got up and left. As soon as I stepped outside, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. After I had regained my composure, I noticed that I was not alone. There were a handful of other women out there on the steps of the church, also taking in measured breaths, fanning themselves with their hands. I considered going back inside to catch the rest of the ceremony, but ultimately decided against it. I already knew how that fairytale would end. So I started walking, as I have always done, away from convention and toward my own happily ever after. ●



Did I really want to be single for the rest of my life?
Did I want to be a *spinster*?