

Jones, Daniel. "Destiny: Meant to Be or Not to Be?" *Love Illuminated: Exploring Life's Most Mystifying Subject (with the Help of 50,000 Strangers)*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. 46-51

DESTINY ON DEMAND

THOSE WHO BELIEVE in destiny are often suspicious of the commercialization of love. They don't trust high-volume matchmaking systems, whether they involve online dating or in-person speed-dating sessions. Instead they tend to be throwbacks to an earlier time when dating pools were small and all love was local. So when looking to speed up the hunt, they are more likely to turn to throwback methods as well, such as fortune-telling traditions that have existed for centuries.

They didn't want to be control freaks about their love lives when they had plenty of time, and they don't want to become control freaks now that time is short. What they want is for someone else to be in control, someone who will tell them whom to love, where to look, or in what way to open their heart.

Nearly all of the following options are old-fashioned and de-

cidedly unscientific, yet many deliver on their promises, if not exactly in the way you might expect. Let's start with the least realistic and work our way forward.

Arranged Marriage

There is no better way of putting your relationship in someone else's hands than by agreeing to an arranged marriage—that age-old, patriarchal, dowry-exchanging custom still practiced in many cultures around the world, though not, generally, in this one. Given our lack of an arranged-marriage tradition, I've been surprised to hear so many frustrated love seekers yearn for it. Or maybe that's precisely why it's such an enticing fantasy; it's easy to long for something you know will never happen.

So what's the appeal? For starters, low expectations. After all, it's hard to have high expectations—or any—when you don't even know the person. In contrast, Western marriages tend to begin with stratospheric hopes. We believe we have found true love at last, and now we finally can revel in our bliss. So as soon as dissatisfaction or unhappiness creeps in—and it will—we are surprised, upset, and maybe already contemplating whether we made a "mistake" we need to undo, and fast.

Consider Farahad's story. As a young man in India, Farahad approached his future marriage with a shrug. A software developer who traveled internationally, he knew his mother would pick out his bride for him, and he knew she would pick someone who was appropriate in terms of religion as well as social and economic standing. When she asked him for his input one day, he was surprised even to be consulted in the matter, and after thinking a moment, he requested only that his bride be a col-

lege graduate who spoke English. Otherwise, he blithely replied, "Whomever you choose."

As it turned out, his mother already had a local girl in mind. Her one concern was that he marry a girl from their village, the logic being that his job would likely lead him to live abroad (India's fledgling software industry was too undeveloped then to hold him), and she didn't want his short visits home each year to be divided between their town and wherever his wife's family lived. She wanted him to be able to come to one town for both and not waste time traveling between.

So it was decided: English-speaking, college graduate, and local. The girl Farahad's mother had already chosen, Sameera, fit the bill, and that very afternoon they rushed off for an impromptu meeting at her house, during which they chatted and ate bread. Upon returning home, Farahad nodded his approval to his mother, having appraised Sameera as being cute and confident. Sameera apparently liked him well enough, too.

That was twenty years and two sons ago. Before marrying, Farahad and Sameera had met for a total of forty-five minutes. After they married, their courtship began in earnest: they went out to the movies and the beach, fought and made up, had sex and fell in love. As Farahad explained, "The slow discovery of another person and the unraveling of layers of mystery are part of the fun of arranged marriage." That process of discovery is ostensibly the fun of courtship, too, except that in arranged marriage the goal is to figure out *how* to be married, not *whether* to marry.

Farahad's positive take on his arranged marriage is no outlier. Nearly every arranged-marriage story I've seen has followed a similar arc and was told with a nearly identical tone of humble

appreciation. The couples began their marriages expecting to have to get to know each other, to come to love each other over time, and to somehow make it work. As improbable as it may seem, they very often do. And part of this is surely due to the fact that instead of starting out at a peak of love and then watching in anxious disbelief as the marriage deteriorates over the years into a thankless grind (for some), they begin with a blank slate and, if they are lucky, are able to gaze upon their life in wonder as warmth and affection take hold and flourish in the unlikelyst terrain.

Neither trajectory, of course, is certain or even probable. Plenty of besotted newlyweds soar to even higher highs as their love evolves and grows, just as many arranged couples sink to even lower lows as the magnitude of their mismatch becomes apparent. But those who begin with no feelings at all for each other clearly have a greater potential upside, at least according to the "buy low, sell high" mantra of long-term investing. Not to be so crass as to equate love with the stock market, but what is marriage if not a long-term investment? All love is a leap into the unknown, argue practitioners of arranged marriage. Theirs is, too.

An even bigger leap, though, is offering yourself up to an arranged marriage when you don't come from an arranged-marriage culture. That's what many of the Moonies did in the glory years of the Unification Church when they agreed to wed a total stranger from another country, someone randomly selected (by the now-deceased Reverend Sun Myung Moon) and to whom they were married off in ceremonies of thousands, all to advance the cause of global peace by having children whose creation and existence was meant to symbolize bridged international divisions.

Renee was a Moonie who went this route, but for her it proved to be a leap too far. Married to a complete stranger from Japan in a mass wedding in the grand ballroom of the New Yorker Hotel in the spring of 1987, Renee had decided to commit to their union no matter what. In marrying Renee and her husband, the Reverend Moon had selected them from among hundreds.

After she and her husband were pulled toward one another by their shirtsleeves, the Reverend Moon said, "I put you together not for your own happiness but for the beautiful children your marriages will produce." Which could be interpreted both as a fair warning at the time and as a useful rationalization later, should they need one. The message being: Don't plan to be thrilled with how this goes. And if you aren't, you can tell yourself that this isn't supposed to be about your happiness anyway.

This kind of sublimation worked for Renee, and she and her husband had three children and managed to stay together for eighteen years. Until finally, despite all of her effort and hope, she knew she had to get out. But how could she do such a thing? How could she break her vow? Contemplating the possibility made her feel selfish and guilt-ridden.

Appropriately, though, in a marriage whose purpose had been to create beautiful children who were symbols of peace, it was one of those children, her twelve-year-old daughter, who essentially released Renee from her commitment. Aware of her mother's turmoil and pain, she said, "Maybe God put you and Daddy together to have the three of us. And maybe now it's okay for you not to be married."

With this permission, Renee did eventually divorce, and in time she found real love with a new man, and so began her second life.

Even if you can't imagine yourself marrying some stranger who was selected for you, there are still lessons to be learned from arranged marriage. The most important one I've seen is for us to approach love and marriage more humbly than we often do, with our starry-eyed expectations of lifelong romance and connection and great sex. We believe those things are requirements for love, the foundation of a successful marriage, the spring from which all good things flow. But we can very easily come to marriage with an abundance of connection and affection and then lose it, just as we can come to marriage completely empty-handed and build it.