

## A Diamond is for Suckers

By Sarah Hoeynck

“Oh my God! Congratulations! Can I see the ring?” my friend Shannon squealed as she grabbed my hand.

We were perched on two green vinyl barstools at McGurk’s Irish Pub, and the force of her grasp nearly knocked me onto the sticky floor. When she saw my bare fingers, her forehead scrunched up. Even though Kevin had proposed to me while we were in Europe a few weeks earlier, I was diamondless.

“Where is it? Is it getting sized?” she asked.

That’s when I revealed the ugly, horrific truth. “There is no ring. I didn’t want one.”

Suddenly, the ceiling lights shattered. The toilets overflowed. The liquor caught fire. The glasses melted. Patrons ran screaming into the streets. The apocalypse had come to Soulard! An American woman didn’t want an engagement ring!

Of course, none of that happened, but Shannon certainly looked like I’d just punched her. “I don’t understand. What do you mean you don’t want one?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Did Kevin, like, not get you one? Is he having some kind of financial trouble?”

I laughed. “No, of course not.”

“Well then what?” Scenarios flashed across her face. “Is he just a careless bastard?”

“No, not at all.” To get it across, I took her hands. I swear, she stared at my naked left ring finger in horror. “I really, *really* just didn’t want one. I never have and never will. And that’s all there is to it. Does that make sense?”

She shook her head in disbelief. “No. If I ever get married, I need my rock.”

When I play that conversation back in my head, I sound totally rational while Shannon is the crazy person. But in reality, Shannon is the norm and I am the wacko. In America today, roughly three-quarters of brides wear a something sparkly on their fingers to commemorate their engagement. It might be a flashy behemoth the side of a pistachio, an understated gem passed down from grandma, or a conflict-free diamond in a platinum setting. No matter the look, they usually cost *major money*—the average amount spent in America these days is about \$4000. And potential mates are more than willing to shell out the cash. The concept of the engagement ring has become so engrained in the American mindset that no one thinks twice about why they're blowing multiple paychecks on a piece of jewelry rather than a down payment on a house. It's simply something that people do.

But, contrary to popular belief, the diamond is *not* a long-standing tradition. The basic practice of a bride-to-be wearing some kind of ring to signify a marriage contract dates back to the Romans, but those were ivory, flint, or iron. Gold versions became more popular when Pope Nicholas I decided in 850 AD that the ring was meant to symbolize a man's intent to marry. But with the majority of people in the Dark Ages of Europe being peasants, most husbands could barely manage to give their bride a goat for the wedding, much less a gold ring. And the first recorded version of a rock on top of that gold wasn't until 1477 when Archduke Maximilian of Austria proposed to Mary of Burgundy. Keep in mind, a bunch of nobles are hardly the norm. Regular people couldn't worry about rings when they had to account for practical things like furniture, livestock, and plates. You can't eat off a tiny diamond.

When it comes to believing that the diamond ring is an age-old custom, Americans were and basically still are a bunch of suckers. The original hustlers that started this long con are the De Beers Diamond Corporation, N.W. Ayers Advertising Agency, and a copywriter named

Frances Gerety. During the Great Depression, diamond sales were at an all-time low, and engagement rings were a privilege of the rich. But the De Beers Corporation sought to change that in 1938 by hiring Ayers to help them sell not just their stones, but also the *idea* of these diamonds. And it all came together when Frances coined the line “A diamond is forever” in 1947. Since then, this slogan has appeared in almost every De Beers advertisement, and it was even named the “slogan of the century” by *Advertising Age* magazine. Most people credit this campaign with changing the cultural consciousness of Americans as it relates to the diamond engagement ring. After Frances, Ayers, and De Beers were done, eight out of ten suitors were not only buying the physical rings, but also the idea of them as ancient and everlasting. Without the diamond, your love would shrivel up and die like an unwatered houseplant.

I never bought into this belief, and my husband didn't either. When he proposed in the Jardins del Mirador del Alcalde, it was perfect—specifically because he did *not* offer me an engagement ring. We were wrapping up the Spanish leg of an overseas adventure that happened to be my first trip to Europe. The journey had included late nights in Madrid eating jamon, manchego, and pig's ears, praising Gaudi's genius architecture of organic shapes, and biking along the beach in Valencia. On our last day in Spain, we hiked up a series of winding steps so that we could say good-bye to Barcelona from a soaring height. The garden was almost empty because it was a Tuesday afternoon, so we had the whole place to ourselves. After we'd walked among the wildflowers and visited the old Montjuic castle, Kevin sat down on a massive tree root that formed a natural seat. I wasn't done drinking in the view of the roof top gardens and church spires, so he lounged by himself for a while. When I urged him to join me, he stayed put and called me over. I complied reluctantly, feeling a bit annoyed that he was being so lazy. But

all my annoyance melted away when he took my hand, pulled me next to him, and simply asked, “Sarah, will you marry me?”

We’d been living together for a year and dating for three, so the question wasn’t really a surprise. Nevertheless, my mouth hung open like a goldfish. But once it all registered, I giggled, kissed him, and said yes.

And that was it. No preamble, no fireworks, and, most importantly, NO RING. His hands were bare, which meant mine would be, too. Thank God. I can honestly say that if he had proposed to me with a diamond, I would have said no. Because it would have meant that he didn’t know me at all.

Above all else, I’m a practical person, and diamond engagement rings seem so impractical. First, the cost. Why would I insist that my husband pay \$3000 on something just for me when we could go on a fabulous vacation or pay for our wedding? Perish the thought that a couple would put all that money toward their life together rather than a useless piece of jewelry whose resale value is shit. For real: it is impossible to sell a diamond because they are *not* actually precious or scarce. There are so many diamonds out there, but the mining companies don’t want the public to know that.

However, just because the market is glutted with stones and you can’t sell one for its original value to save your life, that doesn’t stop others from pawning them for way less. Which brings me to the next reason diamond engagement rings are so impractical. They are tiny and expensive, and therefore easily stolen. My sister sometimes used to leave hers in the center console of her car when she went to the gym. But she stopped doing that after someone broke into her car and took her ring. Luckily, it was insured, but losing the original was traumatic. I can’t imagine walking around with several thousand dollars on my finger, insured or not.

And apparently, lots of women agree with me because they often choose not to wear their engagement rings after they are married. Their husbands or wives spent all that money for something that sits in a jewelry box and only gets touted out for anniversaries. Ridiculous! After the theft, Rachel stopped wearing hers, and my mom hasn't put hers on for decades. My sister-in-law Susie barely wore hers during her engagement to my brother-in-law Martin, and now it languishes on a ring holder in their bedroom. Susie happens to be the least romantic person I know, and yet Martin bought her an engagement ring because it was expected. He didn't want to look cheap in front of Susie's judgmental mother.

I even know practical people who buck most bridal traditions *but still have engagement rings!* My cousin Theresa and her (now) husband Chris did not want a typical wedding and instead opted for a simple ceremony in a backyard. They preferred to use the money on a down payment for a house. Super practical, right? And yet, Chris still bought Theresa an engagement ring! She never wears it. But the diamond industry's influence runs so deep that even sensible people are powerless against the brainwashing.

Even though the impracticality irks me, it's not the main reason I'm so anti-diamond. While most think it is a symbol of enduring love, I see it as a representation of warped values. Why does the woman have to wear something when the man doesn't? I'll tell you why: ownership. That rock lets all the potential suitors out there know this woman is claimed. In modern America, women are encouraged to do whatever and be whoever they want, and God help anyone who stands in their way. And yet, that boss lady in a sharp suit, crunchy granola hippie doused in patchouli, or dorky teacher in glasses who attends Renaissance Fairs in her spare time all accept and welcome the notion of wearing their mate's brand on their hand. Basically, the diamond engagement ring is the equivalent of a dog pissing on a lamppost.

Like my dog Ryder's smelly pee, these rings can literally become toxic. The most disturbing aspect of the rock is that its size and beauty are supposed to be a measure of a spouse's love. After Kevin and I got engaged, most of my encounters with female friends and relatives went like the one with Shannon. First they'd scream "Congratulations!" followed by, "Let me see the ring!" When I shared my desire to remain ringless, the responses varied. Some people got it, like my mom applauding me for being practical. But others were rude or full of pity. "Good for you! Being different!" was actually code for *This girl is crazy*. And when my co-worker Katie said, "Well, sometimes a ring isn't right for everyone," I knew she was thinking, *Poor girl. Her fiancée clearly doesn't love her very much. Or he's poor*. It's only a fucking piece of jewelry! It has nothing to do with the love I give to my husband or the devotion he gives to me. And yet, most of America would disagree. I can't support something that would belittle genuine feeling for the sake of material possessions.

Despite all my hating on the engagement diamond, I am *not* a downer on all traditions and symbols. My wedding ring, a rose gold band, happens to be one of my prized possessions. That's because my husband wears a similar version. When we picked out the style and color, we did it *together*. Added bonus: they didn't cost as much as my first car. When our hands are intertwined, so are our rings, creating a true symbol of everlasting love: two simple bands tied together and holding fast. A diamond may be beautiful, but it's also solitary and cold. Who wants to spend forever with that?