

United artists

The story of Matt and Dana starts on a summer evening next to an airfield outside of Lincoln, Neb., during a game of Spud. Eight-year-old Matt has the ball. He throws it up in the air. He calls his own number, just to be rebellious. He runs onto the airfield, laughing, and wakes up in a hospital missing most of his left arm.

They tell him what happened. A biplane had cut its engine, landed silently and struck Matt, its propeller snagging his arm. They said the crack of blade hitting bone was so loud that one neighbor heard it inside her house, in the shower.

Dana was not present for this. It was 1975 and she was 4 and in New York. Matt would not meet her for another 26 years, after he stopped having nightmares about getting hit by something in the dark, after she fell in love with D.C. and majored in art at George Washington University, after he moved to Gaithersburg to work for IBM as a program tester, after she got married to a nice Jewish guy and had a nice Jewish wedding and bought a nice house in Rockville, after he met a crazy-cool chick named Carol who lived in a group house in Mount Pleasant, after Dana became a graphic artist at a big law firm, after Matt and Carol eloped to the Solomon Islands with the Peace Corps, after Dana said "I want a divorce," after Carol said "I want a divorce" -- only then did they meet.

It was at his art show in Cleveland Park in 2001. She saw a man who was living her dream, who left his salaried job and flourished as a full-time painter. He saw a lovely woman who was smart and funny and normal and chill and, therefore, dangerous to his art.

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There are 2,116 visual arts professionals in the District, but no way to tell how many are full-time painters who make their living by selling their artwork. The city's arterati suspect that number is small. Dana Ellyn <http://www.danaellyn.com/>, 38, and Matt Sesow <http://www.sesow.com/>, 43, are two of them. The occupation field on their tax returns says "artist."

They are not, however, starving. Unless it's for attention. (They both admit to that. To live comfortably as an artist, you have to promote yourself.) He bought his Adams Morgan apartment with saved money and IBM stock in the '90s. She has already paid off the mortgage on a downtown condo that was subsidized for artists. They sell paintings

through their Web sites and Facebook pages and are well known among collectors of local art.

They are Washington painters through and through. He watches al-Jazeera and "Democracy Now." She exults in living next to the Portrait Gallery. They rendezvous and shop at Whole Foods because it's halfway between their places. Every July they make a painting a day based on the news. She studied art. He's self-taught. They get drunk in Adams Morgan, or in their studios as they paint. They're vegetarians.

Everyone says they're perfect for each other, but no one thought they'd get married. They decided to do it when they realized they could craft a show called "Till Death Do Us Part <http://wedding.sesow.com/>." They'd paint about their impending nuptials, hang the art in a gallery, have a ceremony at the opening, invite the public, maybe cast themselves as a power couple in the D.C. art world -- hopefully modeled on the harmonious De Koonings rather than tempestuous Frida and Diego. Hopefully.

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In Matt's sixth-floor corner studio on Columbia Road, everything is streaked with paint (his iPod, the furniture, the bathtub). The room smells of clear-coat shellac. Two hundred paintings are stacked, shelved or hung within the 600 square feet, which is eerily lit by spider-bulbed floor lamps.

He doesn't look like a former Homecoming King or football star. He's tall and clings to his punk-rockiness, blaring hardcore music and drinking iced coffee out of a pickle jar as he paints. Tucked into the corners of his pieces are teacup-like symbols he calls "trauma cups," touchstones for the accident, a reminder of pain and disability, of what could have been.

His latest wedding painting is "Mutual Support," an 11 1/2 -by-16 1/2 -inch acrylic piece depicting two heads stacked on top of each other. His head - - with blacked-out, soulless eyes -- is on top. The bottom head with the demon eyes, alligator teeth and pointy pigtails is Dana's. In his art, her face is broken into a grotesque jigsaw of shapes. Sometimes she is the one who's missing a limb. He wonders how this will change after they get married. After he met Dana, his art became less disturbed, more joyful. So did he. To his relief, the art still sells.

On a Sunday last month, he buzzes up collector Dave Tannous, who drove in from Virginia to pick up a painting. Tannous browses his latest works, points to a dazed figure in one of the wedding-show paintings.

"He looks like he's been hit on the back of the head, like he's thinking, 'Do I really want to do this?' " Tannous says.

Matt chuckles.

* * *

They're several drinks in at the Black Squirrel in Adams Morgan on half-price burger night. Right now they're playfully chiding the Phillips Collection's Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit, which opens the same weekend as their wedding show.

"Georgia O'Keeffe," Matt grumbles. "She's dead."

"And I'm so much more than a vagina," Dana says.

They each have a healthy ego. Neither takes criticism from the other very well. Matt aggravates Dana by dispensing advice she learned years ago as an art major. Dana's great pleasure is producing work that shocks Matt. The conversation goes something like this:

Matt: "I always thought you and I were on different planes of art."

Dana: "You thought I was going to ruin you. Ruin you."

And:

Matt: "It sounds a little drunk, but I don't think anyone in D.C. can touch me, in terms of life experience and showing around the world."

Dana: "You're a worldwide superstar."

And:

Matt: "If I was never hit by an airplane, I might be here on a business trip. I'd be that guy over there with those blonde girls."

Dana: "And you'd leave alone."

They talk about being a dying breed of artists who mix colors, who reek of linseed oil and turpentine (Dana's cuticles are black and Matt hasn't scrubbed the day's paint from his hand). They rant about Shepard Fairey, art funded by corporations, local artists who make a splash and leave for other cities, the Washington Color School
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/06/AR2010010604913.html>. They argue about the duality of religion and painting until their dialogue is tied in knots. Dana objects to defining art as inherently religious, and Matt undercuts her with "sweetie" this and "sweetie" that. During a tangent about his past shows in Spain and Slovenia he says, "The wedding show is nothing," and Dana displays her poker face.

Matt: "I'm just trying to be profound."

Dana: "And I'm just trying to be analytical."

* * *

She has this fantasy: Some calamity occurs and she must stay inside for weeks, drifting from her lofted bed to her easel, passing the days by painting, alone.

Her third-floor hideaway in a Ninth and G condo building is an 860-square-foot paradise: a constellation of bulbous Ikea lamps hanging from 14-foot ceilings, a stately view of the brick backsides of Penn Quarter buildings, biographies of Albrecht Dürer and van Gogh, boxes of Kashi and cans of espresso grounds, a tube of Hairball Eliminator for the cats.

Dana is compact, with a small voice and a capacity for demure subterfuge. Her work is more literal than Matt's, and tells stories. He draws power from the trauma of his accident; she plumbs her discomfort with religion and her unhappy detour through suburban married life. For the wedding show, she has taken an X-Acto knife to her 1993 wedding album. She sliced apart photos of smiling people in formal wear. She painted groomsmen's faces, tarting them up like drag queens. She superimposed a solemn portrait of herself, looking down at her bouquet, on a cemetery. She got married the first time, she says, because it seemed functional, like her parents' first marriage. Nice guy, nice life. A trap.

"I decided there was more to life than functionality," Dana says. "And when I met Matt, I thought, 'Oh, that's the "more to life" I've been expecting.' "

Over eight years, she got him to open up, reconnect with romance. He pushed her to find her style, her artistic confidence. After they get married, they will continue to live apart. She needs half the week to herself, and he's happy to work at his own studio, where he can turn up the music and "go to a place."

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Two guests stand, arms around each other, in front of one of Dana's paintings Friday evening at Long View Gallery <http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/museums/Long-View-Gallery,1126476.html> on Ninth Street NW. In it, she and Matt are in straitjackets in a cell, unable to enjoy the champagne and cake before them. It's called "Institution of Marriage."

"If I was ever going to marry someone that painted that . . .," the guy says warily to his companion.

Matt and Dana mingle with the several hundred people who've arrived for the opening of "Till Death Do Us Part," which runs through March 1. Their paintings are on opposite walls of the gallery. His and Hers psyches, for all to see. The biggest piece is his: the 56-by-67 1/2 -inch "Domestic," in which black humanoid shapes recoil against abstract scenes of modern domesticity. This will not be them, they vow. They've put the doubt and

the fear and the pain of the past on canvas. Depending on the eye of the beholder, it's either an exorcism of what was or anxiety over what could be.

Around 7:45 they position themselves near the gallery entrance. Matt draws two hearts in the fogged-up window. Beyond it, the weekend snowstorm is getting stronger. A humanist celebrant presides and the artists make brief, improvised remarks. Maybe it's the cocktails, but they seem deliriously happy. Matt says that after learning so much from Dana, he can no longer call himself a self-taught artist. Dana says she felt nothing before feeling for him.

"No matter what, we're D.C. artists," Matt announces, and the crowd applauds. After the vows, the couple sell 30 paintings, large and small, from \$100 to \$1,000 apiece, with titles such as "The American Dream" and "Letting Go of the Fairy Tale."

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