

Committed

A Sceptic Makes Peace with Marriage

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Marriage and Surprises



MARRIAGE IS A FRIENDSHIP RECOGNIZED BY THE POLICE.

—*Robert Louis Stevenson*

Late one afternoon in the summer of 2006, I found myself in a small village in northern Vietnam, sitting around a sooty kitchen fire with a number of local women whose language I did not speak, trying to ask them questions about marriage.

For several months already, I had been traveling across Southeast Asia with a man who was soon to become my husband. I suppose the conventional term for such an individual would be “fiancé,” but neither one of us was very comfortable with that word, so we weren’t using it. In fact, neither one of us was very comfortable with this whole idea of matrimony at all. Marriage was not something we had ever planned with each other, nor was it something either of us wanted. Yet providence had interfered with our plans, which was why we were now wandering haphazardly across Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia, all the while making urgent—even desperate—efforts to return to America and wed.

The man in question had been my lover, my sweetheart, for over two years by then, and in these pages I shall call him Felipe. Felipe is a kind, affectionate Brazilian gentleman, seventeen years my senior,



whom I'd met on another journey (an actual planned journey) that I'd taken around the world a few years earlier in an effort to mend a severely broken heart. Near the end of those travels, I'd encountered Felipe, who had been living quietly and alone in Bali for years, nursing his own broken heart. What had followed was attraction, then a slow courtship, and then, much to our mutual wonderment, love.

Our resistance to marriage, then, had nothing to do with an absence of love. On the contrary, Felipe and I loved each other unreservedly. We were happy to make all sorts of promises to stay together faithfully forever. We had even sworn lifelong fidelity to each other already, although quite privately. The problem was that the two of us were both survivors of bad divorces, and we'd been so badly gutted by our experiences that the very idea of legal marriage—with *anyone*, even with such nice people as each other—filled us with a heavy sense of dread.

As a rule, of course, most divorces are pretty bad (Rebecca West observed that “getting a divorce is nearly always as cheerful and useful an occupation as breaking very valuable china”), and our divorces had been no exception. On the mighty cosmic one-to-ten Scale of Divorce Badness (where one equals an amicably executed separation, and ten equals . . . well, an actual execution), I would probably rate my own divorce as something like a 7.5. No suicides or homicides had resulted, but aside from that, the rupture had been about as ugly a proceeding as two otherwise well-mannered people could have possibly manifested. And it had dragged on for more than two years.

As for Felipe, his first marriage (to an intelligent, professional Australian woman) had ended almost a decade before we'd met in Bali. His divorce had unfolded graciously enough at the time, but losing his wife (and access to the house and kids and almost two decades of history that came along with her) had inflicted on this good man a lingering legacy of sadness, with special emphases on regret, isolation, and economic anxiety.



Our experiences, then, had left the two of us taxed, troubled, and decidedly suspicious of the joys of holy wedded matrimony. Like anyone who has ever walked through the valley of the shadow of divorce, Felipe and I had each learned firsthand this distressing truth: that every intimacy carries, secreted somewhere below its initial lovely surfaces, the ever-coiled makings of complete catastrophe. We had also learned that marriage is an estate that is very much easier to enter than it is to exit. Unfenced by law, the unmarried lover can quit a bad relationship at any time. But you—the legally married person who wants to escape doomed love—may soon discover that a significant portion of your marriage contract belongs to the State, and that it sometimes takes a very long while for the State to grant you your leave. Thus, you can feasibly find yourself trapped for months or even years in a loveless legal bond that has come to feel rather like a burning building. A burning building in which you, my friend, are handcuffed to a radiator somewhere down in the basement, unable to wrench yourself free, while the smoke billows forth and the rafters are collapsing . . .

I'm sorry—does all this sound unenthusiastic?


I share these unpleasant thoughts only to explain why Felipe and I had made a rather unusual pact with each other, right from the beginning of our love story. We had sworn with all our hearts to never, ever, under any circumstances, marry. We had even promised never to blend together our finances or our worldly assets, in order to avoid the potential nightmare of ever again having to divvy up an explosive personal munitions dump of shared mortgages, deeds, property, bank accounts, kitchen appliances, and favorite books. These promises having been duly pledged, the two of us proceeded forth into our carefully partitioned companionship with a real sense of calmness. For just as a sworn engagement can bring to so many other couples a sensation of encircling protection, our vow *never* to marry had cloaked the two of us in all the emotional security we required in order to try once more at love. And this commitment of ours—consciously devoid of official



commitment—felt miraculous in its liberation. It felt as though we had found the Northwest Passage of Perfect Intimacy—something that, as García Márquez wrote, “resembled love, but without the problems of love.”

So that’s what we’d been doing up until the spring of 2006: minding our own business, building a delicately divided life together in unfettered contentment. And that is very well how we might have gone on living happily ever after, except for one terribly inconvenient interference.

The United States Department of Homeland Security got involved.



The trouble was that Felipe and I—while we shared many similarities and blessings—did not happen to share a nationality. He was a Brazilian-born man with Australian citizenship who, when we met, had been living mostly in Indonesia. I was an American woman who, my travels aside, had been living mostly on the East Coast of the United States. We didn’t initially foresee any problems with our countryless love story, although in retrospect perhaps we should have anticipated complications. As the old adage goes: A fish and a bird may indeed fall in love, but where shall they live? The solution to this dilemma, we believed, was that we were both nimble travelers (I was a bird who could dive and Felipe was a fish who could fly), so for our first year together, at least, we basically lived in midair—diving and flying across oceans and continents in order to be together.

Our work lives, fortunately enough, facilitated such footloose arrangements. As a writer, I could carry my job with me anywhere. As a jewelry and gemstone importer who sold his goods in the United States, Felipe always needed to be traveling anyhow. All we had to do was coordinate our locomotion. So I would fly to Bali; he would come to



America; we would both go to Brazil; we would meet up again in Sydney. I took a temporary job teaching writing at the University of Tennessee, and for a few curious months we lived together in a decaying old hotel room in Knoxville. (I can recommend *that* living arrangement, by the way, to anyone who wants to test out the actual compatibility levels of a new relationship.)

We lived at a staccato rhythm, on the hoof, mostly together but ever on the move, like witnesses in some odd international protection program. Our relationship—though steadying and calm at the personal level—was a constant logistical challenge, and what with all that international air travel, it was bloody expensive. It was also psychologically jarring. With each reunion, Felipe and I had to learn each other all over again. There was always that nervous moment at the airport when I would stand there waiting for him to arrive, wondering, *Will I still know him? Will he still know me?* After the first year, then, we both began to long for something more stable, and Felipe was the one who made the big move. Giving up his modest but lovely cottage in Bali, he moved with me to a tiny house I had recently rented on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

While trading Bali for the suburbs of Philly may seem a peculiar choice, Felipe swore that he had long ago grown tired of life in the tropics. Living in Bali was too easy, he complained, with each day a pleasant, boring replica of the day before. He had been longing to leave for some time already, he insisted, even before he'd met me. Now, growing bored with paradise might be impossible to understand for someone who has never actually lived in paradise (I certainly found the notion a bit crazy), yet Bali's dreamland setting honestly had come to feel oppressively dull to Felipe over the years. I will never forget one of the last enchanting evenings that he and I spent together at his cottage there—sitting outside, barefoot and dewy-skinned from the warm November air, drinking wine and watching a sea of constellations flicker above the



rice fields. As the perfumed winds rustled the palm trees and as faint music from a distant temple ceremony floated on the breeze, Felipe looked at me, sighed, and said flatly, “I’m so sick of this shit. I can’t wait to go back to Philly.”

So—to Philadelphia (city of brotherly potholes) we duly decamped! The fact is we both liked the area a lot. Our little rental was near my sister and her family, whose proximity had become vital to my happiness over the years, so that brought familiarity. Moreover, after all our collective years of travel to far-flung places, it felt good and even revitalizing to be living in America, a country which, for all its flaws, was still *interesting* to both of us: a fast-moving, multicultural, ever-evolving, maddeningly contradictory, creatively challenging, and fundamentally alive sort of place.

There in Philadelphia, then, Felipe and I set up headquarters and practiced, with encouraging success, our first real sessions of shared domesticity. He sold his jewelry; I worked on writing projects that required me to stay in one place and conduct research. He cooked; I took care of the lawn; every once in a while one of us would fire up the vacuum cleaner. We worked well together in a home, dividing our daily chores without strife. We felt ambitious and productive and optimistic. Life was nice.


But such intervals of stability could never last long. Because of Felipe’s visa restrictions, three months was the maximum amount of time that he could legally stay in America before he would have to excuse himself to another country for a spell. So off he would fly, and I would be alone with my books and my neighbors while he was gone. Then, after a few weeks, he’d return to the United States on another ninety-day visa and we’d recommence our domestic life together. It is a testament to how warily we both regarded long-term commitment that these ninety-day chunks of togetherness felt just about perfect for us: the exact amount of future planning that two tremulous divorce survivors could manage without feeling too threatened. And some-



times, when my schedule allowed, I would join him on his visa runs out of the country.

This explains why one day we were returning to the States together from a business trip overseas and we landed—due to the peculiarity of our cheap tickets and our connecting flight—at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. I passed through Immigration first, moving easily through the line of my fellow repatriating American citizens. Once on the other side, I waited for Felipe, who was in the middle of a long line of foreigners. I watched as he approached the immigration official, who carefully studied Felipe’s bible-thick Australian passport, scrutinizing every page, every mark, every hologram. Normally they were not so vigilant, and I grew nervous at how long this was taking. I watched and waited, listening for the all-important sound of any successful border crossing: that thick, solid, librarian-like *thunk* of a welcoming visa-entry stamp. But it never came.

Instead, the immigration official picked up his phone and made a quiet call. Moments later, an officer wearing the uniform of the United States Department of Homeland Security came and took my baby away.



The uniformed men at the Dallas airport held Felipe in interrogation for six hours. For six hours, forbidden to see him or ask questions, I sat there in a Homeland Security waiting room—a bland, fluorescent-lit space filled with apprehensive people from all over the world, all of us equally rigid with fear. I had no idea what they were doing to Felipe back there or what they were asking from him. I knew that he had not broken any laws, but this was not as comforting a thought as you might imagine. These were the late years of George W. Bush’s presidential administration: not a relaxing moment in history to have your foreign-born sweetheart held in government custody. I kept trying to calm myself with the famous prayer of the fourteenth-century mystic Juliana of



Norwich (“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well”), but I didn’t believe a word of it. Nothing was well. Not one single manner of thing whatsoever was well.

Every once in a while I would stand up from my plastic chair and try to elicit more information from the immigration officer behind the bulletproof glass. But he ignored my pleas, each time reciting the same response: “When we have something to tell you about your boyfriend, miss, we’ll let you know.”

In a situation like this, may I just say, there is perhaps no more feeble-sounding word in the English language than *boyfriend*. The dismissive manner in which the officer uttered that word indicated how unimpressed he was with my relationship. Why on earth should a government employee ever release information about a mere *boyfriend*? I longed to explain myself to the immigration officer, to say, “Listen, the man you are detaining back there is far more important to me than you could ever begin to imagine.” But even in my anxious state, I doubted this would do any good. If anything, I feared that pushing things too far might bring unpleasant repercussions on Felipe’s end, so I backed off, helpless. It occurs to me only now that I probably should have made an effort to call a lawyer. But I didn’t have a telephone with me, and I didn’t want to abandon my post in the waiting room, and I didn’t know any lawyers in Dallas, and it was a Sunday afternoon, anyhow, so who could I have reached?

Finally, after six hours, an officer came and led me through some hallways, through a rabbit warren of bureaucratic mysteries, to a small, dimly lit room where Felipe was sitting with the Homeland Security officer who had been interrogating him. Both men looked equally tired, but only one of those men was *mine*—my beloved, the most familiar face in the world to me. Seeing him in such a state made my chest hurt with longing. I wanted to touch him, but I sensed this was not allowed, so I remained standing.



Felipe smiled at me wearily and said, “Darling, our lives are about to get a lot more interesting.”

Before I could respond, the interrogating officer quickly took charge of the situation and all its explanations.

“Ma’am,” he said, “we’ve brought you back here to explain that we will not be allowing your boyfriend to enter the United States anymore. We’ll be detaining him in jail until we can get him on a flight out of the country, back to Australia, since he does have an Australian passport. After that, he won’t be able to come back to America again.”

My first reaction was physical. I felt as if all the blood in my body had instantly evaporated, and my eyes refused to focus for a moment. Then, in the next instant, my mind kicked into action. I revved through a fast summation of this sudden, grave crisis. Starting long before we had met, Felipe had made his living in the United States, visiting several times a year for short stays, legally importing gemstones and jewelry from Brazil and Indonesia for sale in American markets. America has always welcomed international businessmen like him; they bring merchandise and money and commerce into the country. In return, Felipe had prospered in America. He’d put his kids (who were now adults) through the finest private schools in Australia with income that he’d made in America over the decades. America was the center of his professional life, even though he’d never lived here until very recently. But his inventory was here and all his contacts were here. If he could never come back to America again, his livelihood was effectively destroyed. Not to mention the fact that I lived here in the United States, and that Felipe wanted to be with me, and that—because of my family and my work—I would always want to remain based in America. And Felipe had become part of my family, too. He’d been fully embraced by my parents, my sister, my friends, my world. So how would we continue our life together if he were forever banned? What would we do? (*Where will you and I sleep?*)” go the lyrics to a mournful Wintu



love song. “*At the down-turned jagged rim of the sky? Where will you and I sleep?*”))

“On what grounds are you deporting him?” I asked the Homeland Security officer, trying to sound authoritative.

“Strictly speaking, ma’am, it’s not a deportation.” Unlike me, the officer didn’t have to try sounding authoritative; it came naturally. “We’re just refusing him entrance to the United States on the grounds that he’s been visiting America too frequently in the last year. He’s never overstayed his visa limits, but it does appear from all his comings and goings that he’s been living with you in Philadelphia for three-month periods and then leaving the country, only to return to the United States again immediately after.”

This was difficult to argue, since that was precisely what Felipe had been doing.

“Is that a crime?” I asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly, or no?”

“No, ma’am, it’s not a crime. That’s why we won’t be arresting him. But the three-month visa waiver that the United States government offers to citizens of friendly countries is not intended for indefinite consecutive visits.”

“But we didn’t know that,” I said.

Felipe stepped in now. “In fact, sir, we were once told by an immigration officer in New York that I could visit the United States as often as I liked, as long as I never overstayed my ninety-day visa.”

“I don’t know who told you that, but it isn’t true.”

Hearing the officer say this reminded me of a warning Felipe had given me once about international border crossings: “Never take it lightly, darling. Always remember that on any given day, for any given reason whatsoever, any given border guard in the world can decide that he does not want to let you in.”

“What would you do now, if you were in our situation?” I asked.




This is a technique I've learned to use over the years whenever I find myself at an impasse with a dispassionate customer service operator or an apathetic bureaucrat. Phrasing the sentence in such a manner invites the person who has all the power to pause for a moment and put himself in the shoes of the person who is powerless. It's a subtle appeal to empathy. Sometimes it helps. Most of the time, to be honest, it doesn't help at all. But I was willing to try anything here.

"Well, if your boyfriend ever wants to come back into the United States again, he's going to need to secure himself a better, more permanent visa. If I were you, I would go about securing him one."

"Okay, then," I said. "What's the fastest way for us to secure him a better, more permanent visa?"

The Homeland Security officer looked at Felipe, then at me, then back at Felipe. "Honestly?" he said. "The two of you need to get married."



*M*y heart sank, almost audibly. Across the tiny room, I could sense Felipe's heart sinking along with mine, in complete hollow tandem.

In retrospect, it does seem unbelievable that this proposition could possibly have taken me by surprise. Had I never heard of a green card marriage before, for heaven's sake? Maybe it also seems unbelievable that—given the urgent nature of our circumstances—the suggestion of matrimony brought me distress instead of relief. I mean, at least we'd been given an option, right? Yet the proposition did take me by surprise. And it did hurt. So thoroughly had I barred the very notion of marriage from my psyche that hearing the idea spoken aloud now felt shocking. I felt mournful and sucker punched and heavy and banished from some fundamental aspect of my being, but most of all I felt *caught*. I felt we had both been caught. The flying fish and the diving bird had been netted. And my naïveté, not for the first time in my life, I'm afraid, struck me across the face like a wet slap: *Why had I been so foolish as to*



imagine that we could get away with living our lives as we pleased forever?

Nobody spoke for a while, until the Homeland Security interrogation officer, regarding our silent faces of doom, asked, “Sorry, folks. What seems to be the problem with this idea?”

Felipe took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes—a sign, I knew from long experience, of utter exhaustion. He sighed, and said, “Oh, Tom, Tom, Tom . . .”

I had not yet realized that these two were on a first-name basis, though I suppose that’s bound to happen during a six-hour interrogation session. Especially when the interrogatee is Felipe.

“No, seriously—what’s the problem?” asked Officer Tom. “You two have obviously been cohabiting already. You obviously care about each other, you’re not married to anyone else . . .”

“What you have to understand, Tom,” explained Felipe, leaning forward and speaking with an intimacy which belied our institutional surroundings, “is that Liz and I have both been through really, really bad divorces in the past.”

Officer Tom made a small noise—a sort of soft, sympathetic “*Oh . . .*” Then he took off his own glasses and rubbed his own eyes. Instinctively, I glanced at the third finger of his left hand. No wedding ring. From that bare left hand and from his reflexive reaction of tired commiseration I made a quick diagnosis: divorced.

It was here that our interview turned surreal.

“Well, you could always sign a prenuptial agreement,” Officer Tom suggested. “I mean, if you’re worried about going through all the financial mess of a divorce again. Or if it’s the relationship issues that scare you, maybe some counseling would be a good idea.”

I listened in wonder. *Was a deputy of the United States Department of Homeland Security giving us marital advice? In an interrogation room? In the bowels of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport?*

Finding my voice, I offered this brilliant solution: “Officer Tom,



what if I just found a way to somehow *hire* Felipe, instead of marrying him? Couldn't I bring him to America as my employee, instead of my husband?"

Felipe sat up straight and exclaimed, "Darling! What a terrific idea!"

Officer Tom gave us each an odd look. He asked Felipe, "You would honestly rather have this woman as your boss than your wife?"

"Dear God, yes!"

I could sense Officer Tom almost physically restraining himself from asking, "What the hell kind of people *are* you?" But he was far too professional for anything like that. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, "Unfortunately, what you have just proposed here is not legal in this country."

Felipe and I both slumped again, once more in complete tandem, into a depressed silence.

After a long spell of this, I spoke again. "All right," I said, defeated. "Let's get this over with. If I marry Felipe right now, right here in your office, will you let him into the country today? Maybe you have a chaplain here at the airport who could do that?"

There are moments in life when the face of an ordinary man can take on a quality of near-divinity, and this is just what happened now. Tom—a weary, badge-wearing, Texan Homeland Security officer with a paunch—smiled at me with a sadness, a kindness, a luminous compassion that was utterly out of place in this stale, dehumanizing room. Suddenly, he looked like a chaplain himself.

"Oh no-o-o . . . ," he said gently. "I'm afraid things don't work that way."

Looking back on it all now, of course I realize that Officer Tom already knew what was facing Felipe and me, far better than we ourselves could have known. He well knew that securing an official United States fiancé visa, particularly after a "border incident" such as this one, would be no small feat. Officer Tom could foresee all the trouble that



was now coming to us: from the lawyers in three countries—on three continents, no less—who would have to secure all the necessary legal documents; to the federal police reports that would be required from every country in which Felipe had ever lived; to the stacks of personal letters, photos, and other intimate ephemera which we would now have to compile to prove that our relationship was real (including, with maddening irony, such evidence as shared bank accounts—details we’d specifically gone through an awful lot of trouble in our lives to keep *separated*); to the fingerprinting; to the inoculations; to the requisite tuberculosis-screening chest X-rays; to the interviews at the American embassies abroad; to the military records that we would somehow have to recover of Felipe’s Brazilian army service thirty-five years earlier; to the sheer expanse and expense of time that Felipe now would have to spend out of the country while this process played itself out; to—worst of all—the horrible uncertainty of not knowing whether any of this effort would be enough, which is to say, not knowing whether the United States government (behaving, in this regard, rather much like a stern, old-fashioned father) would ever even accept this man as a husband for me, its jealously guarded natural-born daughter.

So Officer Tom already knew all that, and the fact that he expressed sympathy toward us for what we were about to undergo was an unexpected turn of kindness in an otherwise devastating situation. That I never, prior to this moment, imagined myself praising a member of the Department of Homeland Security in print for his personal tenderness only highlights how bizarre this whole situation had become. But I should say here that Officer Tom did us one other kind deed, as well. (That is, before he handcuffed Felipe and led him off to the Dallas county jail, depositing him for the night in a cell filled with actual criminals.) The gesture that Officer Tom made was this: He left me and Felipe alone together in the interrogation room for two whole minutes, so that we could say our good-byes to each other in privacy.

When you have only two minutes to say good-bye to the person you



love most in the world, and you don't know when you'll see each other again, you can become logjammed with the effort to say and do and settle everything at once. In our two minutes alone in the interrogation room, then, we made a hasty, breathless plan. I would go home to Philadelphia, move out of our rented house, put everything into storage, secure an immigration lawyer and start this legal process moving. Felipe, of course, would go to jail. Then he would be deported back to Australia—even if, strictly speaking, he wasn't being legally “deported.” (Please forgive me for using the word “deported” throughout the pages of this book, but I'm still not sure what else to call it when a person gets thrown out of a country.) Since Felipe had no life in Australia anymore, no home or financial prospects, he would make arrangements as quickly as possible to go somewhere cheaper to live—Southeast Asia, probably—and I would join him on that side of the world once I got things rolling on my end. There, we would wait out this indefinite period of uncertainty together.

While Felipe jotted down the phone numbers of his lawyer, his grown children, and his business partners so that I could alert everyone to his situation, I emptied out my handbag, frantically looking for things I could give him to keep him more comfortable in jail: chewing gum, all my cash, a bottle of water, a photograph of us together, and a novel I had been reading on the airplane titled, aptly enough, *The People's Act of Love*.

Then Felipe's eyes filled with tears and he said, “Thank you for coming into my life. No matter what happens now, no matter what you decide to do next, just know that you've given me the two most joyful years I've ever known and I will never forget you.”

I realized in a flash: *Dear God, the man thinks I might leave him now*. His reaction surprised me and touched me, but more than anything it shamed me. It had not crossed my mind, since Officer Tom had laid out the option, that I would *not* now marry Felipe and save him from exile—but apparently it had crossed *his* mind that he might now



be ditched. He genuinely feared that I might abandon him, leaving him high and dry, broke and busted. Had I earned such a reputation? Was I really known, even within the boundaries of our small love story, as somebody who jumps ship at the first obstacle? But were Felipe's fears entirely unjustified, given my history? If our situations had been reversed, I would never have doubted for a moment the solidity of his loyalties, or his willingness to sacrifice virtually anything on my account. Could he be certain of the same steadfastness from me?

I had to admit that if this state of affairs had taken place ten or fifteen years earlier, I almost certainly would have bailed out on my endangered partner. I am sorry to confess that I possessed a scant amount of honor in my youth, if any, and behaving in a flighty and thoughtless manner was a bit of a specialty of mine. But being a person of character matters to me now, and matters only more as I grow older. At that moment, then—and I had only one moment left alone with Felipe—I did the only right thing by this man whom I adored. I vowed to him—drilling the words into his ear so he would grasp my earnestness—that I would not leave him, that I would do whatever it took to fix things, and that even if things could not somehow be fixed in America, we would always stay together anyhow, somewhere, wherever in the world that had to be.

Officer Tom came back into the room.

At the last instant, Felipe whispered to me, "I love you so much, I will even marry you."

"And I love *you* so much," I promised, "that I will even marry you."

Then the nice Homeland Security people separated us and handcuffed Felipe and led him away—first to jail and then off to exile.

As I flew home alone that night to our now-obsolete little existence in Philadelphia, I considered more soberly what I had just promised. I was surprised to find that I was not feeling weepy or panicky; somehow



the situation seemed too grave for any of that. What I felt, instead, was a ferocious sense of focus—a sense that this situation must be addressed with the utmost seriousness. In the space of only a few hours, my life with Felipe had been neatly flipped upside down, as though by some great cosmic spatula. And now, it seemed, we were engaged to be married. This had certainly been a strange and rushed engagement ceremony. It felt more like something out of Kafka than out of Austen. Yet the engagement was nonetheless official because it needed to be.

Fine, then. So be it. I would certainly not be the first woman in my family's history who ever had to get married because of a serious situation—although my situation, at least, did not involve accidental pregnancy. Still, the prescription was the same: Tie the knot, and do it quickly. So that's what we would do. But here was the real problem, which I identified that night all alone on the plane back home to Philadelphia: I had no idea what marriage *was*.

I had already made this mistake—entering into marriage without understanding anything whatsoever about the institution—once before in my life. In fact, I had jumped into my first marriage, at the totally unfinished age of twenty-five, much the same way that a Labrador jumps into a swimming pool—with exactly that much preparation and foresight. Back when I was twenty-five, I was so irresponsible that I probably should not have been allowed to choose my own toothpaste, much less my own future, and so this carelessness, as you can imagine, came at a dear cost. I reaped the consequences in spades, six years later, in the grim setting of a divorce court.


Looking back on the occasion of my first wedding day, I'm reminded of Richard Aldington's novel *Death of a Hero*, in which he ponders his two young lovers on *their* ill-fated wedding day: "Can one tabulate the ignorances, the relevant ignorances, of George Augustus and Isabel when they pledged themselves together until death do us part?" I, too, was once a giddy young bride very much like Aldington's Isabel, about whom he wrote: "What she *didn't* know included



almost the whole range of human knowledge. The puzzle is to find out what she *did* know.”

Now, though—at the considerably less giddy age of thirty-seven—I was not convinced that I knew very much more than ever about the realities of institutionalized companionship. I had failed at marriage and thus I was terrified of marriage, but I’m not sure this made me an expert on marriage; this only made me an expert on failure and terror, and those particular fields are already crowded with experts. Yet destiny had intervened and was demanding marriage from me, and I’d learned enough from life’s experiences to understand that destiny’s interventions can sometimes be read as invitations for us to address and even surmount our biggest fears. It doesn’t take a great genius to recognize that when you are pushed by circumstance to do the one thing you have always most specifically loathed and feared, this can be, at the very least, *an interesting growth opportunity*.

So it slowly dawned on me on the airplane out of Dallas—my world now turned back-to-front, my lover exiled, the two of us having effectively been sentenced to marry—that perhaps I should use this time to somehow make peace with the idea of matrimony before I jumped into it once again. Perhaps it would be wise to put a little effort into unraveling the mystery of what in the name of God and human history this befuddling, vexing, contradictory, and yet stubbornly enduring institution of marriage actually is.



So that is what I did. For the next ten months—while traveling with Felipe in a state of rootless exile and while working like a dog to get him back into America so we could safely wed (getting married in Australia or anywhere else in the world, Officer Tom had warned us, would merely irritate the Homeland Security Department and slow down our immigration process even more)—the only thing I thought about, the



only thing I read about, and pretty much the only thing I talked about with anybody was the perplexing subject of matrimony.

I enlisted my sister back home in Philadelphia (who, conveniently, is an actual historian) to send me boxes of books about marriage. Wherever Felipe and I happened to be staying, I would lock myself up in our hotel room to study the books, passing untold hours in the company of such eminent matrimonial scholars as Stephanie Coontz and Nancy Cott—writers whose names I had never heard before but who now became my heroes and teachers. To be honest, all this studying made me a lousy tourist. During those months of travel, Felipe and I fetched up in many beautiful and fascinating places, but I'm afraid I didn't always pay close attention to our surroundings. This stretch of traveling never had the feeling of a carefree adventure anyhow. It felt more like an expulsion, a *hegira*. Traveling because you cannot go back home again, because one of you is not legally allowed to go home again, can never be an enjoyable endeavor.

Moreover, our financial situation was worrisome. *Eat, Pray, Love* was less than a year away from becoming a lucrative best seller, but that welcome development had not yet occurred, nor did we anticipate its ever occurring. Felipe was now completely cut off from his income source, so we were both living off the fumes of my last book contract, and I wasn't sure how long that would hold out. A while, yes—but not forever. I had recently begun working on a new novel, but my research and writing had now been interrupted by Felipe's deportation. So this is how we ended up going to Southeast Asia, where two frugal people can feasibly live on about thirty dollars a day. While I won't say that we exactly suffered during this period of exile (we were hardly starving political refugees, for heaven's sake), I will say that it was an extremely odd and tense way to live, with the oddness and tension only heightened by the uncertainty of the outcome.

We wandered for close to a year, waiting for the day when Felipe



would be called to his interview at the American Consulate in Sydney, Australia. Flopping in the meantime from country to country, we came to resemble nothing more than an insomniac couple trying to find a restful sleeping position in a strange and uncomfortable bed. For many anxious nights, in many strange and uncomfortable beds indeed, I would lie there in the dark, working through my conflicts and prejudices about marriage, filtering through all the information I was reading, mining history for comforting conclusions.

I should clarify right away here that I limited my studies largely to an examination of marriage in Western history, and that this book will therefore reflect that cultural limitation. Any proper matrimonial historian or anthropologist will find huge gaps in my narrative, as I have left unexplored entire continents and centuries of human history, not to mention skipping over some pretty vital nuptial concepts (polygamy, as just one example). It would have been pleasurable for me, and certainly educational, to have delved more deeply into an examination of every possible marital custom on earth, but I didn't have that kind of time. Trying to get a handle on the complex nature of matrimony in Islamic societies alone, for instance, would have taken me years of study, and my urgency had a deadline that precluded such extended contemplation. A very real clock was ticking in my life: Within one year—like it or not, ready or not—I had to get married. That being the case, it seemed imperative that I focus my attention on unraveling the history of monogamous Western marriage in order to better understand my inherited assumptions, the shape of my family's narrative, and my culturally specific catalogue of anxieties.

I hoped that all this studying might somehow mitigate my deep aversion to marriage. I wasn't sure how that would happen, but it had always been my experience in the past, anyhow, that the more I learned about something, the less it frightened me. (Some fears can be vanquished, Rumpelstiltskin-like, only by uncovering their hidden, secret names.) What I really wanted, more than anything, was to find a way to



somehow embrace marriage to Felipe when the big day came rather than merely swallowing my fate like a hard and awful pill. Call me old-fashioned, but I thought it might be a nice touch to be happy on my wedding day. Happy *and* conscious, that is.

This book is the story of how I got there.

And it all begins—because every story must begin somewhere—in the mountains of northern Vietnam.

