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Extrait

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage and Expectation

A man can be happy with any woman as long as he does not love her.

—Oscar Wilde

A little girl found me that day. Felipe and I had arrived in this particular village after an overnight journey from Hanoi on a loud, dirty, Soviet-era train. I can't rightly remember now why we went to this specific town, but I think some young Danish backpackers had recommended it to us. In any case, after the loud, dirty train journey, there had been a long, loud, dirty bus ride. The bus had finally dropped us off in a staggeringly beautiful place that teetered on the border with China—remote and verdant and wild. We found a hotel and when I stepped out alone to explore the town, to try to shake the stiffness of travel out of my legs, the little girl approached me. She was twelve years old, I would learn later, but tinier than any American twelve-year-old I'd ever met. She was exceptionally beautiful. Her skin was dark and healthy, her hair glossy and braided, her compact body all sturdy and confident in a short woolen tunic. Though it was summertime and the days were sultry, her calves were wrapped in brightly colored wool leggings. Her feet tapped restlessly in plastic Chinese sandals. She had been hanging around our hotel for some time—I had spotted her when we were checking in—and now, when I stepped out of the place alone, she approached me full-on. "What's your name?" she asked. "I'm Liz. What's your name?" "I'm Mai," she said, "and I can write it down for you so you can learn how to spell it properly." "You certainly speak good English," I complimented her. She shrugged. "Of course. I practice often with tourists. Also, I speak Vietnamese, Chinese, and some Japanese." "What?" I joked. "No French?" "Un peu," she replied with a sly glance. Then she demanded, "Where are you from, Liz?" "I'm from America," I said. Then, trying to be funny, since obviously she was from right there, I asked, "And where are you from, Mai?" She immediately saw my funny and raised it. "I am from my mother's belly," she replied, instantly causing me to fall in love with her. Indeed, Mai was from Vietnam, but I realized later she would never have called herself Vietnamese. She was Hmong—a member of a small, proud, isolated ethnic minority (what anthropologists call "an original people") who inhabit the highest mountain peaks of Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and China. Kurdish-like, the Hmong have never really belonged to any of the countries in which they live. They remain some of the world's most spectacularly independent people—nomads, storytellers, warriors, natural-born anticonformists, and a terrible bane to any nation that has ever tried to control them. To understand the unlikelihood of the Hmong's continued existence on this planet you have to imagine what it would be like if, for instance, the Mohawk were still living in upstate New York exactly as they had for centuries, dressing in traditional clothing, speaking their own language, and absolutely refusing to assimilate. Stumbling on a Hmong village like this one, then, in the early years of the twenty-first century is an anachronistic wonder. Their culture provides a vanishingly rare window into an older version of the human experience. All of which is to say, if you want to know what your family was like four thousand years ago, they were probably something like the Hmong. "Hey, Mai," I said. "Would you like to be my translator today?" "Why?" she asked. The Hmong are a famously direct people, so I laid it out directly: "I need to talk to some of the women in your village about their marriages." "Why?" she demanded again. "Because I'm getting married soon, and I would like some advice." "You're too old to be getting married," Mai observed, kindly. "Well, my boyfriend is old, too," I replied. "He's fifty-five years old." She looked at me closely, let out a low whistle, and said, "Well. Lucky him." I'm not sure why Mai decided to help me that day. Curiosity? Boredom? The hope that I would pass her some cash? (Which, of course, I did.) But regardless of her motive, she did agree. Soon enough, after a steep march over a nearby hillside, we arrived at Mai's stone house, which was tiny, soot-darkened, lit only by a few small windows, and nestled in one of the prettiest river valleys you could ever imagine. Mai led me inside and introduced me around to a group of women, all

of them weaving, cooking, or cleaning. Of all the women, it was Mai's grandmother whom I found most immediately intriguing. She was the laughingest, happiest, four-foot-tall toothless granny I'd ever seen in my life. What's more, she thought me hilarious. Every single thing about me seemed to crack her up beyond measure. She put a tall Hmong hat on my head, pointed at me, and laughed. She stuck a tiny Hmong baby into my arms, pointed at me, and laughed. She draped me in a gorgeous Hmong textile, pointed at me, and laughed. I had no problem with any of this, by the way. I had long ago learned that when you are the giant, alien visitor to a remote and foreign culture it is sort of your job to become an object of ridicule. It's the least you can do, really, as a polite guest. Soon more women—neighbors and relations—poured into the house. They also showed me their weavings, stuck their hats on my head, crammed my arms full of their babies, pointed at me, and laughed. As Mai explained, her whole family—almost a dozen of them in total—lived in this one-room home. Everyone slept on the floor together. The kitchen was on one side and the wood stove for winter was on the other side. Rice and corn were stored in a loft above the kitchen, while pigs, chickens, and water buffalo were kept close by at all times. There was only one private space in the whole house and it wasn't much bigger than a broom closet. This, as I learned later in my reading, was where the newest bride and groom in any family were allowed to sleep alone together for the first few months of their marriage in order to get their sexual explorations out of the way in private. After that initial experience of privacy, though, the young couple joins the rest of the family again, sleeping with everyone else on the floor for the rest of their lives. "Did I tell you that my father is dead?" Mai asked as she was showing me around. "I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "When did it happen?" "Four years ago." "How did he die, Mai?" "He died," she said coolly, and that settled it. Her father had died of death. The way people used to die, I suppose, before we knew very much about why or how. "When he died, we ate the water buffalo at his funeral." At this memory, her face flashed a complicated array of emotions: sadness at the loss of her father, pleasure at the remembrance of how good the water buffalo had tasted. "Is your mother lonely?" Mai shrugged. It was hard to imagine loneliness here. Just as it was impossible to imagine where in this crowded domestic arrangement you might find the happier twin sister of loneliness: *privacy*. Mai and her mother lived in constant closeness with so many people. I was struck—not for the first time in my years of travel—by how isolating contemporary American society can seem by comparison. Where I come from, we have shriveled down the notion of what constitutes "a family unit" to such a tiny scale that it would probably be unrecognizable as a family to anybody in one of these big, loose, enveloping Hmong clans. You almost need an electron microscope to study the modern Western family these days. What you've got are two, possibly three, or maybe sometimes four people rattling around together in a giant space, each person with her own private physical and psychological domain, each person spending large amounts of the day completely separated from the others. I don't want to suggest here that everything about the shrunken modern family unit is necessarily bad. Certainly women's lives and women's health improve whenever they reduce the number of babies they have, which is a resounding strike against the lure of bustling clan culture. Also, sociologists have long known that incidences of incest and child molestation increase whenever so many relatives of different ages live together in such close proximity. In a crowd so big, it can become difficult to keep track of or defend individuals—not to mention individuality. But surely something has been lost, as well, in our modern and intensely private, closed-off homes. Watching the Hmong women interact with each other, I got to wondering whether the evolution of the ever smaller and ever more nuclear Western family has put a particular strain on modern marriages. In Hmong society, for instance, men and women don't spend all that much time together. Yes, you have a spouse. Yes, you have sex with that spouse. Yes, your fortunes are tied together. Yes, there might very well be love. But aside from that, men's and women's lives are quite firmly separated into the divided realms of their gender-specific tasks. Men work and socialize with other men; women work and socialize with other women. Case in point: there was not a single man to be found anywhere that day around Mai's house. Whatever the men were off doing (farming, drinking, talking, gambling) they were doing it somewhere else, alone together, separated from the universe of the women. If you are a Hmong woman, then, you don't necessarily expect your husband to be your best friend, your most intimate confidant, your emotional advisor, your intellectual equal, your comfort in times of sorrow. Hmong

women, instead, get a lot of that emotional nourishment and support from other women—from sisters, aunties, mothers, grandmothers. A Hmong woman has many voices in her life, many opinions and emotional buttresses surrounding her at all times. Kinship is to be found within arm's reach in any direction, and many female hands make light work, or at least lighter work, of the serious burdens of living. At last, all the greetings having been exchanged and all the babies having been dandled and all the laughter having died down into politeness, we all sat. With Mai as our translator, I began by asking the grandmother if she would please tell me about Hmong wedding ceremonies. It's all quite simple, the grandmother explained patiently. Before a traditional Hmong wedding, it is required that the groom's family come and visit the bride's house, so the families work out a deal, a date, a plan. A chicken is always killed at this time in order to make the families' ghosts happy. Once the wedding date arrives, a good many pigs are killed. A feast is prepared and relatives come from every village to celebrate. Both the families chip in to cover expenses. There is a procession to the wedding table, and a relative of the groom will always carry an umbrella. At this point, I interrupted to ask what the umbrella signified, but the question brought some confusion. Confusion, perhaps, over what the word "signifies" signifies. The umbrella is the umbrella, I was told, and it is carried because umbrellas are always carried at weddings. That is why, and that is that, and so it has always been. Umbrella-related questions thereby resolved, the grandmother went on to explain the traditional Hmong marital custom of kidnapping. This is an ancient custom, she said, though it is much less in practice these days than it was in the past. Still, it does exist. Brides—who are sometimes consulted beforehand about their kidnapping and sometimes not—are abducted by their potential grooms, who carry them by pony to their own families' homes. This is all strictly organized and is permitted only on certain nights of the year, at celebrations after certain market days. (You can't just kidnap a bride any old time you want. There are *rules*.) The kidnapped girl is given three days to live in the home of her captor, with his family, in order to decide whether or not she would like to marry this fellow. Most of the time, the grandmother reported, the marriage proceeds with the girl's consent. On the rare occasion that the kidnapped potential bride doesn't embrace her captor, she is allowed to return home to her own family at the end of the three days, and the whole business is forgotten. Which sounded reasonable enough to me, as far as kidnappings go. Where our conversation did turn peculiar for me—and for all of us in the room—was when I tried to get the grandmother to tell me the story of her own marriage, hoping to elicit from her any personal or emotional anecdotes about her own experience with matrimony. The confusion started immediately, when I asked the old woman, "What did you think of your husband, the first time you ever met him?" Her entire wrinkled face arranged itself into a look of puzzlement. Assuming that she—or perhaps Mai—had misunderstood the question, I tried again: "When did you realize that your husband might be somebody you wanted to marry?" Again, my question was met with what appeared to be polite bafflement. "Did you know that he was special right away?" I tried once more. "Or did you learn to like him over time?" Now some of the women in the room had started giggling nervously, the way you might giggle around a slightly crazy person—which was, apparently, what I had just become in their eyes. I backed up and tried a different tack: "I mean, when did you first meet your husband?" The grandmother sorted through her memory a bit on that one, but couldn't come up with a definitive answer aside from "long ago." It really didn't seem to be an important question for her. "Okay, *where* did you first meet your husband?" I asked, trying to simplify the matter as much as possible. Again, the very shape of my curiosity seemed a mystery to the grandmother. Politely, though, she gave it a try. She had never particularly *met* her husband before she married him, she tried to explain. She'd seen him around, of course. There are always a lot of people around, you know. She couldn't really remember. Anyway, she said, it is not an important question as to whether or not she knew him when she was a young girl. After all, as she concluded to the delight of the other women in the room, she certainly knows him now. "But when did you fall in love with him?" I finally asked, point-blank. The instant Mai translated this question, all the women in the room, except the grandmother, who was too polite, laughed aloud—a spontaneous outburst of mirth, which they then all tried to stifle politely behind their hands. You might think this would have daunted me. Perhaps it should have daunted me. But I persisted, following up their peals of laughter with a question that struck them as even more ridiculous: "And what do you believe is the secret to a happy marriage?" I asked earnestly.

Now they all really did lose it. Even the grandmother was openly howling with laughter. Which was fine, right? As has already been established, I am always perfectly willing to be mocked in a foreign country for somebody else's entertainment. But in this case, I must confess, all the hilarity was a bit unsettling on account of the fact that I really did not get the joke. All I could understand was that these Hmong ladies and I were clearly speaking an entirely different language here (I mean, above and beyond the fact that we were *literally* speaking an entirely different language here). But what was so specifically absurd to them about my questions? In the weeks to come, as I replayed this conversation over in my mind, I was forced to hatch my own theory about what had made me and my hosts so foreign and incomprehensible to each other on the subject of marriage. And here's my theory: Neither the grandmother nor any other woman in that room was placing her marriage at the center of her emotional biography in any way that was remotely familiar to me. In the modern industrialized Western world, where I come from, the person whom you choose to marry is perhaps the single most vivid representation of your own personality. Your spouse becomes the most gleaming possible mirror through which your emotional individualism is re?ected back to the world. There is no choice more intensely personal, after all, than whom you choose to marry; that choice tells us, to a large extent, who you are. So if you ask any typical modern Western woman how she met her husband, when she met her husband, and why she fell in love with her husband, you can be plenty sure that you will be told a complete, complex, and deeply personal narrative which that woman has not only spun carefully around the entire experience, but which she has memorized, internalized, and scrutinized for clues as to her own selfhood. Moreover, she will more than likely share this story with you quite openly—even if you are a perfect stranger. In fact, I have found over the years that the question "How did you meet your husband?" is one of the best conversational icebreakers ever invented. In my experience, it doesn't even matter whether that woman's marriage has been happy or a disaster: It will still be relayed to you as a vitally important story about her emotional being—perhaps even *the* most vitally important story about her emotional being. Whoever that modern Western woman is, I can promise you that her story will concern two people—herself and her spouse—who, like characters in a novel or movie, are presumed to have been on some kind of personal life's journeys before meeting each other, and whose journeys then intersected at a fateful moment. (For instance: "I was living in San Francisco that summer, and I had no intention of staying much longer—until I met Jim at that party.") The story will probably have drama and suspense ("He thought I was dating the guy I was there with, but that was just my gay friend Larry!"). The story will have doubts ("He wasn't really my type; I normally go for guys who are more intellectual"). Critically, the story will end either with salvation ("Now I can't imagine my life without him!"), or—if things have turned sour—with recriminating second-guesses ("Why didn't I admit to myself right away that he was an alcoholic and a liar?"). Whatever the details, you can be certain that the modern Western woman's love story will have been examined by her from every possible angle, and that, over the years, her narrative will have been either hammered into a golden epic myth or embalmed into a bitter cautionary tale. I'm going to go way out on a limb here and state: Hmong women don't seem to do that. Or at least not *these* Hmong women. Please understand, I am not an anthropologist and I acknowledge that I am operating far above my pay grade when I make any conjectures whatsoever about Hmong culture. My personal experience with these women was limited to a single afternoon's conversation, with a twelve-year-old child acting as a translator, so I think it's safe to assume that I probably missed a smidge of nuance about this ancient and intricate society. I also concede that these women may have found my questions intrusive, if not outright offensive. Why should they have told their most intimate stories to me, a nosy interloper? And even if they were somehow trying to impart information to me about their relationships, it's likely that certain subtle messages fell by the wayside through mistranslation or a simple lack of cross-cultural understanding. All that said, though, I am somebody who has spent a large chunk of her professional life interviewing people, and I trust my ability to watch and listen closely. Moreover, like all of us, whenever I enter the family homes of strangers, I am quick to notice the ways in which they may look at or do things differently than my family looks at or does things. Let us say, then, that my role that day in that Hmong household was that of a more-than-averagely observant visitor who was paying a more-than-average amount of attention to her more-than-averagely expressive hosts. In

that role, and only in that role, I feel fairly confident reporting what I did *not* see happening that day in Mai's grandmother's house. I did *not* see a group of women sitting around weaving overexamined myths and cautionary tales about their marriages. The reason I found this so notable was that I have watched women all over the world weave overexamined myths and cautionary tales about their marriages, in all sorts of mixed company, and at the slightest provocation. But the Hmong ladies did not seem remotely interested in doing that. Nor did I see these Hmong women crafting the character of "the husband" into either the hero or the villain in some vast, complex, and epic Story of the Emotional Self. I'm not saying that these women don't love their husbands, or that they never had loved them, or that they never *could*. That would be a ridiculous thing to infer, because people everywhere love each other and always have. Romantic love is a universal human experience. Evidence of passion exists in all corners of this world. All human cultures have love songs and love charms and love prayers. People's hearts get broken across every possible social, religious, gender, age, and cultural boundary. (In India, just so you know, May 3 is National Broken Hearts Day. And in Papua New Guinea, there exists a tribe whose men write mournful love songs called *namai*, which tell the tragic stories of marriages which never came to pass but should have.) My friend Kate once went to a concert of Mongolian throat singers who were traveling through New York City on a rare world tour. Although she couldn't understand the words to their songs, she found the music almost unbearably sad. After the concert, Kate approached the lead Mongolian singer and asked, "What are your songs about?" He replied, "Our songs are about the same things that everyone else's songs are about: lost love, and somebody stole your fastest horse." So of course the Hmong fall in love. Of course they feel preference for one person over another person, or miss a beloved one who has died, or find that they inexplicably adore somebody's particular smell, or laugh. But perhaps they don't believe that any of that romantic love business has very much to do with the *actual reasons for marriage*. Perhaps they do not assume that those two distinct entities (love and marriage) must necessarily intersect—either at the beginning of the relationship or maybe ever at all. Perhaps they believe that marriage is about something else altogether. If this sounds like a foreign or crazy notion, remember that it wasn't so long ago that people in Western culture held these same sorts of unromantic views about matrimony. Arranged marriage has never been a prominent feature of American life, of course—much less bridal kidnapping—but certainly pragmatic marriages were routine at certain levels of our society until fairly recently. By "pragmatic marriage," I mean any union where the interests of the larger community are considered above the interests of the two individuals involved; such marriages were a feature of American agricultural society, for instance, for many, many generations. I personally know of one such pragmatic marriage, as it turns out. When I was growing up in my small town in Connecticut, my favorite neighbors were a white-haired husband and wife named Arthur and Lillian Webster. The Websters were local dairy farmers who lived by an inviolable set of classic Yankee values. They were modest, frugal, generous, hardworking, unobtrusively religious, and socially discreet members of the community who raised their three children to be good citizens. They were also enormously kind. Mr. Webster called me "Curly" and let me ride my bike for hours on their nicely paved parking lot. Mrs. Webster—if I was very good—would sometimes let me play with her collection of antique medicine bottles. Just a few years ago, Mrs. Webster passed away. A few months after her death, I went out to dinner with Mr. Webster, and we got to talking about his wife. I wanted to know how they had met, how they had fallen in love—all the romantic beginnings of their life together. I asked him all the same questions, in other words, that I would eventually ask the Hmong ladies in Vietnam, and I got the same sorts of replies—or lack of replies. I couldn't dredge up a single romantic memory from Mr. Webster about the origins of his marriage. He couldn't even remember the precise moment when he had first met Lillian, he confessed. She had always been around town, as he recalled. It was certainly not love at first sight. There was no moment of electricity, no spark of instant attraction. He had never become infatuated with her in any way. "So why did you marry her?" I asked. As Mr. Webster explained in his typically open and matter-of-fact Yankee manner, he had gotten married because his brother had instructed him to get married. Arthur was soon going to be taking over the family farm and therefore he needed a wife. You cannot run a proper farm without a wife, any more than you can run a proper farm without a tractor. It was an unsentimental message, but dairy farming in New England was

an unsentimental business, and Arthur knew his brother's edict was on target. So, the diligent and obedient young Mr. Webster went out there into the world and dutifully secured him self a wife. You got the feeling, listening to his narrative, that any number of young ladies might have gotten the job of being "Mrs. Webster," instead of Lillian herself, and it wouldn't have made a huge difference to anyone at the time. Arthur just happened to settle on the blonde one, the one who worked over at the Extension Service in town. She was the right age for it. She was nice. She was healthy. She was good. She would do. The Websters' marriage, therefore, clearly did not launch from a place of passionate, personal, and fevered love—no more than the Hmong grandmother's marriage had. We might therefore assume, then, that such a union is "a loveless marriage." But we have to be careful about drawing such assumptions. I know better, at least when it comes to the case of the Websters. In her waning years, Mrs. Webster was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. For almost a decade, this once-powerful woman wasted away in a manner that was agonizing to watch for everyone in the community. Her husband—that pragmatic old Yankee farmer—took care of his wife at home the entire time she was dying. He bathed her, fed her, gave up freedoms in order to keep watch over her, and learned to endure the dreadful consequences of her decay. He tended to this woman long after she knew who he was anymore—even long after she knew who she herself was anymore. Every Sunday, Mr. Webster dressed his wife in nice clothing, put her in a wheelchair, and brought her to services at the same church where they had been married almost sixty years earlier. He did this because Lillian had always loved that church, and he knew she would've appreciated the gesture if only she had been conscious of it. Arthur would sit there in the pew beside his wife, Sunday after Sunday, holding her hand while she slowly ebbed away from him into oblivion. And if that isn't love, then somebody is going to have to sit me down and explain to me very carefully what love actually is. That said, we have to be careful, too, not to assume that all arranged marriages across history, or all pragmatic marriages, or all marriages that begin with an act of kidnapping, necessarily resulted in years of contentment. The Websters were lucky, to an extent. (Though they also put a good deal of work into their marriage, one suspects.) But what Mr. Webster and the Hmong people perhaps have in common is a notion that the emotional place where a marriage begins is not nearly as important as the emotional place where a marriage finds itself toward the end, after many years of partnership. Moreover, they would likely agree that there is not one special person waiting for you somewhere in this world who will make your life magically complete, but that there are any number of people (right in your own community, probably) with whom you could seal a respectful bond. Then you could live and work alongside that person for years, with the hope that tenderness and affection would be the gradual outcome of your union. At the end of my afternoon's visit at Mai's family's house, I was granted the clearest possible insight into this notion when I asked the tiny old Hmong grandmother one final question, which again, she thought bizarre and foreign. "Is your man a good husband?" I asked. The old woman had to ask her granddaughter to repeat the question several times, just to make sure she'd heard it correctly: Is *he* a good *husband*? Then she gave me a bemused look, as though I'd asked, "These stones which compose the mountains in which you live—are they *good* stones?" The best answer she could come up with was this: Her husband was neither a good husband nor a bad husband. He was just a husband. He was the way that husbands *are*. As she spoke about him, it was as though the word "husband" connoted a job description, or even a species, far more than it represented any particularly cherished or frustrating individual. The role of "husband" was simple enough, involving as it did a set of tasks that her man had obviously fulfilled to a satisfactory degree throughout their life together—as did most other women's husbands, she suggested, unless you were unlucky and got yourself a realdud. The grandmother even went so far as to say that it is not so important, in the end, which man a woman marries. With rare exceptions, one man is pretty much the same as another. "What do you mean by that?" I asked. "All men and all women are mostly the same, most of the time," she clarified. "Everybody knows that this is true." The other Hmong ladies all nodded in agreement.

May I pause here for a moment to make a blunt and perhaps perfectly obvious point? *It is too late for me to be Hmong.* For heaven's sake, it's probably even too late for me to be a Webster. I was born into a late-twentieth-century American middle-class family. Like untold millions of other people in the contemporary

world born into similar circumstances, I was raised to believe that I was special. My parents (who were neither hippies nor radicals; who in fact voted for Ronald Reagan twice) simply believed that their children had particular gifts and dreams that set them apart from other people's children. My "me-ness" was always prized, and was moreover recognized as being different from my sister's "her-ness," my friends' "themness," and everyone else's "everyone-else-ness." Though I was certainly not spoiled, my parents believed that my personal happiness was of some importance, and that I should learn to shape my life's journey in such a way that would support and reflect my individual search for contentment. I must add here that all my friends and relatives were raised with varying degrees of this same belief. With the possible exception of the very most conservative families among us, or the very most recently immigrated families among us, everyone I knew—at some basic level—shared this assumed cultural respect for the individual. Whatever our religion, whatever our economic class, we all at least somewhat embraced the same dogma, which I would describe as being very historically recent and very definitely Western and which can effectively be summed up as: "You matter." I don't mean to imply that the Hmong don't believe their children matter; on the contrary, they are famous in anthropological circles for building some of the world's most exceptionally loving families. But this was clearly not a society that worshiped at the Altar of Individual Choice. As in most traditional societies, Hmong family dogma might effectively be summed up not as "You matter" but as "Your *role* matters." For, as everyone in this village seemed to know, there are tasks at hand in life—some tasks that men must do and some tasks that women must do—and everyone must contribute to the best of his or her abilities. If you perform your tasks reasonably well, you can go to sleep at night knowing that you are a good man or a good woman, and you need not expect much more out of life or out of relationships than that.

Meeting the Hmong women that day in Vietnam reminded me of an old adage: "Plant an expectation; reap a disappointment." My friend the Hmong grandmother had never been taught to expect that her husband's job was to make her abundantly happy. She had never been taught to expect that her task on earth was to become abundantly happy in the first place. Never having tasted such expectations to begin with, she had reaped no particular disenchantment from her marriage. Her marriage fulfilled its role, performed its necessary social task, became merely what it was, and that was fine. By contrast, I had always been taught that the pursuit of happiness was my natural (even *national*) birthright. It is the emotional trademark of my culture to seek happiness. Not just any kind of happiness, either, but profound happiness, even soaring happiness. And what could possibly bring a person more soaring happiness than romantic love? I, for one, had always been taught by my culture that marriage ought to be a greenhouse in which romantic love can abundantly flourish.

Inside the somewhat rickety greenhouse of my first marriage, then, I had planted row after row of grand expectations. I was a veritable Johnny Appleseed of grand expectations, and all I reaped for my trouble was a harvest of bitter fruit. One gets the feeling that if I'd tried to explain all that to the Hmong grandmother, she would have had no idea what the hell I was talking about. She probably would have responded exactly the way an old woman I once met in southern Italy responded, when I confessed to her that I'd left my husband because the marriage made me unhappy. "Who's *happy*?" the Italian widow asked casually, and shrugged away the conversation forever.

Look, I don't want to risk romanticizing the oh-so-simple life of the picturesque rural peasant here. Let me make it clear that I had no desire to trade lives with any of the women that I met in that Hmong village in Vietnam. For the dental implications alone, I do not want their lives. It would be farcical and insulting, besides, for me to try adopting their worldview. In fact, the inexorable march of industrial progress suggests that the Hmong will be more likely to start adopting my worldview in the years to come. As a matter of fact, it's already happening. Now that young girls like my twelve-year-old friend Mai are being exposed to modern Western women like me through crowds of tourists, they're experiencing those first critical moments of cultural hesitation. I call this the "Wait-a-Minute Moment"—that pivotal instant when girls from traditional cultures start pondering what's in it for them, exactly, to be getting married at the age of thirteen and starting to have babies not long after. They start wondering if they might prefer to make different choices for themselves, or any choices, for that matter. Once girls from closed societies start thinking such thoughts, all hell breaks loose. Mai—trilingual, bright, and observant—had already glimpsed another set of options for

life. It wouldn't be long before she was making demands of her own. In other words: It might be too late for even the Hmong to be Hmong anymore. So, no, I'm not willing—or probably even able—to relinquish my life of individualistic yearnings, all of which are the birthright of my modernity. Like most human beings, once I've been shown the options, I will always opt for more choices for my life: expressive choices, individualistic choices, inscrutable and indefensible and sometimes risky choices, perhaps . . . but they will all be mine. In fact, the sheer number of choices that I'd already been offered in my life—an almost embarrassing cavalcade of options—would have made the eyes pop out of the head of my friend the Hmong grandmother. As a result of such personal freedoms, my life belongs to me and resembles me to an extent that would be unthinkable in the hills of northern Vietnam, even today. It's almost as if I'm from an entirely new strain of woman (*Homo limitlessness*, you might call us). And while we of this brave new species do have possibilities that are vast and magnificent and almost infinite in scope, it's important to remember that our choice-rich lives have the potential to breed their own brand of trouble. We are susceptible to emotional uncertainties and neuroses that are probably not very common among the Hmong, but that run rampant these days among my contemporaries in, say, Baltimore. The problem, simply put, is that *we cannot choose everything simultaneously*. So we live in danger of becoming paralyzed by indecision, terrified that every choice might be the wrong choice. (I have a friend who second-guesses herself so compulsively that her husband jokes her autobiography will someday be titled *I Should've Had the Scampi*.) Equally disquieting are the times when we do make a choice, only to later feel as though we have murdered some other aspect of our being by settling on one single concrete decision. By choosing Door Number Three, we fear we have killed off a different—but equally critical—Piece of our soul that could only have been made manifest by walking through Door Number One or Door Number Two. The philosopher Odo Marquard has noted a correlation in the German language between the word *zwei*, which means “two,” and the word *zweifel*, which means “doubt”—suggesting that two of *anything* brings the automatic possibility of uncertainty to our lives. Now imagine a life in which every day a person is presented with not two or even three but dozens of choices, and you can begin to grasp why the modern world has become, even with all its advantages, a neurosis-generating machine of the highest order. In a world of such abundant possibility, many of us simply go limp from indecision. Or we derail our life's journey again and again, backing up to try the doors we neglected on the first round, desperate to get it right this time. Or we become compulsive comparers—always measuring our lives against some other person's life, secretly wondering if we should have taken her path instead. Compulsive comparing, of course, only leads to debilitating cases of what Nietzsche called *Lebensneid*, or “life envy”: the certainty that somebody else is much luckier than you, and that if only you had *her* body, *her* husband, *her* children, *her* job, everything would be easy and wonderful and happy. (A therapist friend of mine defines this problem simply as “the condition by which all of my single patients secretly long to be married, and all of my married patients secretly long to be single.”) With certainty so difficult to achieve, everyone's decisions become an indictment of everyone else's decisions, and because there is no universal model anymore for what makes “a good man” or “a good woman,” one must almost earn a personal merit badge in emotional orientation and navigation in order to find one's way through life anymore. All these choices and all this longing can create a weird kind of haunting in our lives—as though the ghosts of all our other, unchosen, possibilities linger forever in a shadow world around us, continuously asking, “Are you certain this is what you *really* wanted?” And nowhere does that question risk haunting us more than in our marriages, precisely because the emotional stakes of that most intensely personal choice have become so huge. Believe me, modern Western marriage has much to recommend it over traditional Hmong marriage (starting with its kidnapping-free spirit), and I will say it again: I would not trade lives with those women. They will never know my range of freedom; they will never have my education; they will never have my health and prosperity; they will never be allowed to explore so many aspects of their own natures. But there is one critical gift that a traditional Hmong bride almost always receives on her wedding day which all too often eludes the modern Western bride, and that is the gift of certainty. When you have only one path set before you, you can generally feel confident that it was the correct path to have taken. And a bride whose expectations for happiness are kept necessarily low to begin

with is more protected, perhaps, from the risk of devastating disappointments down the road. To this day, I admit, I'm not entirely sure how to use this information. I cannot quite bring myself to make an official motto out of "Ask for less!" Nor can I imagine advising a young woman on the eve of her marriage to lower her expectations in life in order to be happy. Such thinking runs contrary to every modern teaching I've ever absorbed. Also, I've seen this tactic backfire. I had a friend from college who deliberately narrowed down her life's options, as though to vaccinate herself against overly ambitious expectations. She skipped a career and ignored the lure of travel to instead move back home and marry her high school sweetheart. With unwavering confidence, she announced that she would become "only" a wife and mother. The simplicity of this arrangement felt utterly safe to her—certainly compared to the convulsions of indecision that so many of her more ambitious peers (myself included) were suffering. But when her husband left her twelve years later for a younger woman, my friend's rage and sense of betrayal were as ferocious as anything I've ever seen. She virtually imploded with resentment—not so much against her husband, but against the universe, which she perceived to have broken a sacred contract with her. "I asked for so *little!*" she kept saying, as though her diminished demands alone should have protected her against any disappointments. But I think she was mistaken; she had actually asked for a lot. She had dared to ask for happiness, and she had dared to expect that happiness out of her marriage. You can't possibly ask for more than that. But maybe it would be useful for me to at least acknowledge to myself now, on the eve of my second marriage, that I, too, ask for an awful lot. Of course I do. It's the emblem of our times. I have been allowed to expect great things in life. I have been permitted to expect far more out of the experience of love and living than most other women in history were ever permitted to ask. When it comes to questions of intimacy, I want many things from my man, and I want them all simultaneously. It reminds me of a story my sister once told me, about an Englishwoman who visited the United States in the winter of 1919 and who, scandalized, reported back home in a letter that there were people in this curious country of America who actually lived with the expectation that every part of their bodies should be warm at the same time! My afternoon spent discussing marriage with the Hmong made me wonder if I, in matters of the heart, had also become such a person—a woman who believed that my lover should magically be able to keep every part of my emotional being warm at the same time. We Americans often say that marriage is "hard work." I'm not sure the Hmong would understand this notion. Life is hard work, of course, and work is very hard work—I'm quite certain they would agree with those statements—but how does marriage become hard work? Here's how: Marriage becomes hard work once you have poured the entirety of your life's expectations for happiness into the hands of one mere person. Keeping that going is hard work. A recent survey of young American women found that what women are seeking these days in a husband—more than anything else—is a man who will "inspire" them, which is, by any measure, a tall order. As a point of comparison, young women of the same age, surveyed back in the 1920s, were more likely to choose a partner based on qualities such as "decency," or "honesty," or his ability to provide for a family. But that's not enough anymore. Now we want to be *inspired* by our spouses! Daily! Step to it, honey! But this is exactly what I myself have expected in the past from love (inspiration, soaring bliss) and this is what I was now preparing to expect all over again with Felipe—that we should somehow be answerable for every aspect of each other's joy and happiness. That our very job description as spouses was to be each other's everything. So I had always assumed, anyhow. And so I might have gone on blithely assuming, except that my encounter with the Hmong had knocked me off course in one critical regard: For the first time in my life, it occurred to me that perhaps I was asking too much of love. Or, at least, perhaps I was asking too much of marriage. Perhaps I was loading a far heavier cargo of expectation onto the creaky old boat of matrimony than that strange vessel had ever been built to accommodate in the first place.

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