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NORTH AMERICA

One

HAPPINESS CAN HAPPEN

Agoura Hills, California

I'm not quite sure when the shift began. Maybe with the *Stepford Wives* or sitcoms like *Married with Children*. Like a tsunami of epic proportions is the only way I can describe the recent onslaught of negativity surrounding marriage.

Wives are miserable. Husbands cheat. Marriages don't last. That's the message that seems to be on full display in every form of media. If I ever have the misfortune of my TV remote landing on shows like *Desperate Housewives*, *Basketball Wives*, or the mother of all "wives shows," *The Real Housewives of (Fill in Your Town)*, I only watch enough to confirm that they still make me sad. Sad because of what they say about culture and what they regularize in it. Too many times have I seen marriages with people I know and love falling like flies. I've seen love wither before it takes root. But

only once have I seen a reality show following two happy people in a love gone right. Not good for ratings, I suppose.

On a cool February night, my husband, Keith, and I strolled along the boardwalk of the Commons, a local shopping center in Calabasas, California. With his left hand wrapped around my right, he soothed me as I expressed my disappointment. I'd had a difficult day at work. I had learned that one of my employees had been carrying on a relationship with a subordinate and had lied about it to my face. I was hurt and disappointed. I may have even been a bit angry. Keith and I were walking and eating frozen yogurt when I began to vent.

Maybe that's what set me off. I'm not sure. But I remember walking past a store display of a prominent bookstore chain, and there in the window popped out this book about marriage. It had an awful title, something that reveled in and exploited the decay of marriage in order to get possible buyers to connect with their own dysfunction and buy this book that would help fix it. My frustration was already heightened, and my rant got raised to a fever pitch. I found myself going off in public about the sad state of marriage in our culture. People probably thought I was upset with Keith, poor guy, who was empathetically listening and letting me get it out of my system.

"I love being married," I vented. "I love being a wife. Why won't someone say something positive about marriage?"

Keith just held my hand as we continued to walk. A few silent moments passed.

"You know what? I'm going to start a club for wives like me. Women who love being married and love being a wife. I'm going to call it"—I paused to think of some genius name—"the Happy Wives Club!"

Keith has always been my greatest supporter, but we also have a very honest relationship, and we express the truth to each other.

And in that moment, his truth involved an instant burst of laughter. Loud, doubling-over laughter. Since you don't know Keith, you might think he was being insensitive or rude. But he wasn't. He's got an impeccable track record of supporting me at all times, no matter how harebrained my plans have gotten.

"That is the corniest name I've ever heard!" he said while continuing to laugh. "And with what spare time are you going to start it?"

He made a fair point. When you include preparing for work in the morning and checking e-mails throughout the night, I was already working fourteen to sixteen hours each day. He was right. The name was a bit silly, and I didn't have the time to add anything more to my plate.

And yet, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

By the time we arrived home, it was well into the evening. Tired and exhausted by work, yet energized and renewed by the thought of this club with the overly simple name, I lit a flame in our gas-burning fireplace and sat in an oversized chair nearby. I flipped open my laptop and began to type. As if my fingers were on fire, I rapidly wrote our mission statement, purpose, and an invitation to join the club. Shortly after 2:00 a.m., with my eyelids begging to close, I stared at the page one last time. At the top were three simple words: *Happy Wives Club*.

You know that moment when you *know* something significant has happened? You meet a new person and *know* you've just met a lifelong friend? You have a flash of a business idea and *know*, somehow, it will be the long journey of your life's work? *Happy Wives Club*. When I saw those three little words, I instantly *knew* they would be central for me. It gives me no greater joy that you're reading this if it only confirms that moment.

Built into that bright morning that followed as I read and reread "Happy Wives Club" was a flood of the future. But like any good story, it wouldn't come without a fight, without a journey.

Since writing those three initial words, I have traveled all over the world and engaged with thousands of women from dozens of cultures. I've been on a sleepless search to know and prove that happy marriages do exist and that they can be created. What I've discovered on this journey has astounded me. The profundity and simplicity of love gone right is just within our reach. Women everywhere are experiencing it *right now*. Wherever you might be in your relationship—whether you're married or want to be, whether you're planning your wedding or wrestling with ever getting married again, whether your family includes children or just the two of you—I'm excited to take you where I've been, to show you what I've seen.

After the night *Happy Wives Club* landed on my computer screen, I knew I would be unfaithful to Someone (God) and lots of someones (you) if I didn't take the next step, even if I didn't know where it might lead. Most beginnings feel uncertain, with that gnawing anxiety and excitement of the unknown. To take the next step, I just sort of followed my instincts and decided to start an online club, HappyWivesClub.com. Simple enough. The three words I had written, followed by *.com*. Now we were getting somewhere!

It's what happened shortly thereafter that still amazes me. I invited my mother, one of my sisters, and three of my closest girlfriends to join the club. The purpose was simple. Since Hollywood and the media seemed fixated on divorce and everything that could possibly go wrong in marriage, our club would be squarely focused on everything that could possibly go right. There would only be one requirement to join: you need to be (or aspire to be) a happily married woman.

Because I don't know the meaning of small goals, I scribbled "One million members in six months" on a sticky note and stuck it on the frame of my computer screen. In my excitement, I hadn't

taken the time to do the math. To reach that large a membership in just six months, 5,682 happily married women would need to hook arms *each day*. Spoiler alert: I fell shorter than short of my goal six months in. But what happened was nonetheless extraordinary.

Five friends and family members sent the link to their friends and posted it on their Facebook pages. Then their friends and their friends and their friends did the same, until 1,200 women in more than twenty countries around the world were surprised to find they weren't the only ones who had and believed in a happy marriage. This happened in four weeks and started with five women who all lived within thirty miles of my home.

The media caught wind of the story, and I was featured in a local newspaper article. Then an award-winning columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed me, followed by a segment on ABC *Channel 7 News*. The club continued to grow. But as it grew, so did my already-jam-packed workload. The Happy Wives Club multiplied what vied for my attention and energy.

At the time, I was the general manager of a busy hotel, and anyone who has worked in the hospitality industry will tell you GMs work around the clock. We're in a business that's open 24/7, with customers who expect to be tended to every minute of every day. The job is demanding, the hours are long, and the work is never done. There was no way I could stay on top of my job and juggle a growing club. It was overwhelming. So I made a choice. I stopped posting articles on the club website. I stopped encouraging the women who'd joined. I stopped interacting.

For more than a year and a half, the Happy Wives Club lay dormant while I made sure bedsheets got folded correctly. Despite my online absence, the club continued to grow by ones and twos. Sometimes I'd go on the site and post an article about marriage, a once-in-a-while poker to make sure the embers didn't die. It wasn't a glorious phase, to be sure.

But toward the end of 2011, a year after leaving my post as general manager, I again longed to be a voice championing marriage. Not an overly political or religious voice, but a simple voice willing to go against the common negative perception of marriage seen in the media. I returned to the online pages of the Happy Wives Club and again began inviting happily married women to join me, to celebrate happy marriages, and to fight against the tsunami of negativity telling so many it didn't exist. I asked all the members to invite every happily married woman they knew. We quickly began growing again, this time by more than 150 women per day.

At the time of this writing, the Happy Wives Club has brought together more than 100,000 women in more than a hundred countries who are official members, and an infinite amount of hope to impact our spouses, our families, and the world for good. The club started on a small laptop balanced on my knees, but it's connected so many women from so many places because we're all longing for the same thing. We are sisters in arms.

After meeting and talking with so many women who have joined, what started to emerge were some universal elements of a great marriage and being a happy wife. This book is my attempt to gather it all completely and show you what I've seen from happy wives from all over the world.

When I say "all over the world," I mean it. This book is the result of traveling to twelve countries on six continents in every hemisphere. (I didn't go to Antarctica because I didn't think penguins had much to say on the topic.) I wanted to travel because there are things you can only learn by being on someone else's turf, by hearing her words directly and soaking in the environment around her. Plus, I love to travel! I mean, who wouldn't become a jet-setter for a few months to learn marriage secrets, see some of the world's greatest sights, eat foods that are hard to pronounce, and create a true connection with wonderful people?

What I learned on the journey that became this book delighted me and surprised me beyond measure. It delighted me because I'm now convinced that a happy marriage is within reach for anyone who would grasp it. It surprised me because the truths at the core of a great marriage are so stunningly simple—we can live by them every day without getting caught up in the little things that rear their ugly heads.

Join me on this journey, and if you're not already a member of the club, I look forward to you joining us by the time you reach the end.

Two

A WAY TO THE WATER

San Diego, California

The drive from Los Angeles to San Diego follows one of the most beautiful coastlines in California. It is among the few places where you can see the ocean from the highway. I was traveling that road to meet with a woman I'd met through the club. Even though I was fighting some traffic (it is California, you know), it dawned on me that I'd driven this stretch so many times that at some point I had stopped really *looking* at it. But on this day, it was rapture. The search I was undertaking had lifted a veil from the familiar and injected the everyday world once again with a revived wonder.

I passed Camp Pendleton on the right, with a few marines running along the path inside the numerous square miles of cross-wired fencing. Men on jet skis sped across the nearby lagoon and kicked water into the air like a fountain in the cold Pacific waters.

Palm tree clusters and couples walking hand in hand along the beaches of San Clemente beckoned on the other side of the freeway.

Along the coast, the ocean is ever present. Even if you're not actively thinking about it, swimming in it, or looking at it, your mind and heart always know it's there, a living thing of mystery and beauty. You can feel the briny ocean breeze anywhere within twenty miles of the shore.

I took all this in on my way to Sandy.

When Sandy first came to HappyWivesClub.com, she somewhat sheepishly posted a question: Can a widow join the club? I answered her as I do everyone else who asks that question. *If you're here, it's for you.* Though Sandy is a widow, that she had created and sustained a great marriage throughout her fifty-three years with Jim made her more than qualified to hang out with us. I wasn't the only one with that perspective. She immediately received such a warm welcome from other women. That welcoming first impression on her has been returned in kind—since joining, she has never stopped pouring out words of wisdom to us all.

Sandy was the woman who immediately reached out to others, hearing about their lives and offering her unique wisdom. The breadth of her empathy rang through. Beyond her wisdom, our community could feel the love Sandy had for Jim. It ran so deep you probably couldn't distinguish between it and her lifeblood. Something else rang through too. You could tell that as deep as her love ran, so did her sadness. Sandy's sorrow was born out of an absence and a longing.

That's where I was headed—to Sandy's quaint palace of wisdom.

You would think, after that glowing review of Sandy that I just gave, I'd have raced to open my car door, skipped up her driveway, and banged on the front door like an impatient kid when the candy store is a few minutes late in opening. But I had a reservation in my gut as I pulled into her drive. Even though Sandy had proven her authenticity online, I admitted to myself that I had no idea what

to really expect. I questioned the wisdom of going to the home of someone who was basically a stranger. *She* could really be a he, and *he* could be an ax murderer. (Sorry, Sandy!) But seeing as I was halfway to the front door with my cautious steps, it was too late to chicken out.

I stepped onto the concrete porch covered by a small awning. The main entry was guarded by a screen door with a cast iron frame, and a humble porch light was guarded by an intricate cobweb. A No Solicitors sign faded by long years of warning hung just underneath. I was getting the distinct impression that Sandy didn't like having unexpected visitors at her door.

But I wasn't discouraged. Sandy and I had arranged this visit, and I was exactly on time. I rapped on the screen door, and it gave a distinct metallic sound that rattled against the doorjamb. A few moments passed, and I didn't hear any stirring in the house. I knocked again. *Did she forget our appointment?* I wondered.

A minute or two later, I pressed my ear to the outer door. That's when I heard a muffled yelping and shuffling steps making their way to greet me. I heard the click of a deadbolt, saw the knob slowly turn, and the inner door cracked ajar. Sandy showed half her face and gave a curt "Yes?"

Sandy's dog, Bonnie, a well-groomed golden retriever, began bouncing up and down and barking a stream of threats at me. I admired her loyalty while Sandy was only slightly trying to calm her down. I sensed that Sandy wanted me, the unsolicited stranger, to feel the tiny threat through the screen door.

"Well, I guess you don't need a doorbell with that dog," I joked nervously.

Sandy just shot me a glance. *Don't try and charm me*, it said.

"Yes?" she repeated, more firmly, as if to say no small talk was going to get her to open that door.

"Sandy, it's me, Fawn."

The hardness in Sandy's eyes melted into the warmth I had expected and experienced online. Faster than I can describe, the inner door swung open wide and Sandy started to unlock the screen door. She apologized all over herself as she ushered me in. Bonnie would take more convincing, however. Sandy was holding her back on a leash while trying to hug me. The whole episode had that distinct feeling I would have over and over again—strangers who are friends becoming real friends sloppily.

Sandy's house felt lived in. Pictures spanning the decades were scattered across the walls. Decorations from the years—symbols of memories and loves and places—were strewn over end tables and the fireplace hearth. I looked down the short hallway into the kitchen, with its linoleum floor graced by a small breakfast table. To the left of me was Sandy's living room, the place where her beautiful life with Jim was lovingly enshrined with knickknacks and gifts he had given her. As the initial hubbub died down, Sandy led me to the couch across from her chair, the high-tech kind that can move up and down with a little control panel. I noticed the one just a couple of feet to the right of it. She invited me to take a seat in that chair.

But I stopped just as I was sitting down.

The burgundy upholstery was worn on the arms. There was a slight indentation on the puffy headrest. The seat was weathered from nights of sitting and talking, sitting and watching TV, sitting and holding hands.

There was no doubt about it. This was Jim's chair. Heart failure a few years back had left it empty. But the sense of love between this chair and Sandy's was palpable. What I had witnessed online only became more real as I looked at Sandy and the empty chair in one glance, with nothing but a maple end table separating them.

Thankfully, this little internal calculation took a split second, and Sandy didn't find it odd that I decided to move back toward

the couch. Once I'd fumbled with attaching a small microphone to the center of her blouse (something that undoubtedly made me look like an amateur) and turned on the digital recorder I'd recently purchased, Sandy was free to talk.

"Jim was six feet tall," she announced. I loved how she dove right in. "He'd always rest his head on my head when we danced. That drove me crazy!

"When we first got married, I was only eight inches shorter. But as I got older, my back gave me problems and I had several surgeries. I lost a couple of inches here and there. I'm five feet even now. I used to be five two."

Her small frame could not hide her level of feistiness, independence, or her deep commitment to the man she's now loved for more than fifty-six years.

"None of this stopped me from sitting on Jim's lap like I always did," she said. She had a fifty-three-year tenure of cuddling with him despite her surgeries.

As I sat across from Sandy, there was something so familiar about her. I couldn't put my finger on it.

Sandy: strong willed, feisty, a fire piston, hardheaded but willing to yield. She told me how, early in her marriage, she'd had a tough time admitting when she was wrong. That she was less patient than her husband but had learned how to be more patient over the years. That she was not as kind as her husband—the No Solicitors sign was her idea—but had also learned kindness because of him.

Sandy was a travel writer with a successful career, a career she'd begun when their two children were in grade school. Jim had fully supported her desire to be a writer and had saved up all his "personal" money, his monthly fun allowance to do whatever he wanted, to ensure she had all the tools she needed. He had backed her every dream, loved her every flaw, and seen their marriage as

a story unfolding. Hearing Sandy talk about Jim reminded me of how much I love my husband. Like Jim, Keith is my greatest champion, encourager, and supporter. He, too, makes personal sacrifices so I can take risks.

Sandy was like a wizened tree in the forest, beckoning me upward. The more she talked about Jim—his calm and steady nature, patience, love for family, willingness to sacrifice, and obedience to God in loving her as God loved him—the more I felt as though she was talking about Keith.

When she launched into her family tree, how her father was full German, and that's where her strong will came from, the similarities were becoming uncanny. To see my caramel skin, you wouldn't be able to guess I'm part German. My hazel eyes might get you a warmer guess. My grandmother had flowing blond hair and summer-sky blue eyes. She had a strong will too. It must be in the water over there. My grandmother was born and raised in Germany during Hitler's horrid reign and married a black man, my grandfather, while he was in Germany as a US serviceman during World War II.

As Sandy continued, it dawned on me: She was me, just older. Her marriage could be mine if I tend to it over time.

"I don't want you to think I'm speaking of him so highly because he's dead," Sandy asserted.

"Of course not."

"I would speak of him the same way if he were sitting right here next to me," she said, pointing to Jim's chair.

I had no doubt she was telling the truth, she being the type who doesn't mince words or care what you think of her. It turned out that Sandy'd had the immense good fortune and providential blessing of having a husband who was, to sum it up simply, a good guy.

"But Jim wasn't perfect either," she said. "He was just the husband I needed. I was fortunate enough to have and to hold him until death."

“How were you two able to hold on to such a loving relationship through the very end? How did you manage to keep your love so strong?”

Sandy dove into those loaded, open-ended questions with an instant specificity, as if I had inquired about her phone number or street address. The kind of details you rattle off mindlessly.

“Divorce was never a thought.” Her answer was completely unadorned and matter-of-fact. “A life together *forever* was our only plan.” They had executed that plan throughout Jim’s lifetime. Marriage was their “plan A,” and that was the only plan they’d had.

The reason Sandy and Jim very rarely argued, but instead listened to each other’s sides intently and calmly agreed to disagree when they didn’t see eye to eye, is that they’d never put pressure on themselves to resolve an issue immediately. As far as they were concerned, they would be together forever, so an agreement could be reached over time. Neither was ever so invested in his or her individual position that they weren’t willing to consider the other’s opinion.

“But it wasn’t just that,” Sandy continued. “It was a lot of little things. We treated each other with respect. We loved as unconditionally as we could, which grew over the years. We compromised a lot; both of us did. We put each other above every other relationship we had.”

Like most complicated things where it’s easy to get derailed, their marriage was successful because they mastered the basics. From that mastery they could weather anything.

“We stayed connected physically, held hands, kissed, danced. We didn’t allow the outside world, even tough things happening at work or with other family, to impact what went on between us.”

At this point, Sandy dabbed her tears.

“Do you have any regrets?”

“Yes, hun, two of them that are with me every day.”

“One night, six years ago, Jim had a terrible dream that seemed

so real he woke up and thought I was dying. He shook me awake—I was barely with it—and said, ‘I have loved every moment of our fifty years together. I have loved having you as my wife. I have loved being married to you.’

“I never got a chance to say the same to him one last time.” Sandy was looking at her hands shaking nervously on her lap. When Jim died, he went in a matter of moments, sitting in their bed. She was just in the other room.

“The second thing I regret is that we didn’t go together. I’d always prayed God would take us together,” she said as her somberness settled on the room. I could hardly believe what she’d just said. I, too, have prayed that prayer in earnest about Keith and me.

To some, it may seem like a weird request. It’s definitely presumptuous to hand God your time card and tell him when it’s time to clock you out. What I could see in Sandy helped me understand why I have prayed the same thing. When your marriage is the nucleus of your life, it gets harder and harder to consider the things orbiting around it without your spouse. If you’ve been married for a long time, imagine yourself making coffee for one or laughing at the TV and looking over to share the fun with nobody. Praying to die at the same time is, at its heart, a plea to forgo suffering. This is perfectly normal.

“I was mad at God for two years because He didn’t answer that prayer. I’m still grieving Jim. It’ll be three years soon.”

She told me that every time she asked God why she was left, what her purpose is on earth, God’s response never changed: “Finish grieving. Then let’s talk.” Every person is different, which means God has different things to say to different people. So please don’t take this as an universal conclusion, just one that applies to Sandy. God is giving her the space to grieve her loss before moving her on to what’s next. God knows her grief, knows that she now has a sort of ghost limb and has to relearn some things.

“Jim and I always put our marriage first. Do you think I’m a terrible person for saying that?” she said as our interview came to a close. There was a solemn air in the room, but there was also a sense of peace.

“Why would I think that?” I said.

“Early in our marriage, we knew that once the kids were gone, we would still be married and have to work on it. So, we decided to pay it forward. We worked in the first year like we wanted things to be in the fiftieth year. I’m so glad we did,” she breathed. “I really do miss him.”

There was a pause of recognition from both us, and then we put our hands on the armrests of our seats to hoist ourselves to our feet. Bonnie, who had been dozing next to Jim’s chair, took her cue and bounced up. No barking this time.

Sandy and I hugged and exchanged our parting words. Part of me wanted to keep talking, but a deeper part knew that it was time, that the right conversation had happened between us. She shuffled me toward the door, which had been locked and dead bolted the moment I cleared the threshold. She got the main door, and I unlocked the latch on the screen door.

I squinted my eyes in the California midday sun.

“Do you know the way out?” she asked.

I knew the way out, and after talking with her, I knew a bit more about the way forward toward a great marriage. Despite Sandy’s loss, there was still possibility in her life. Possibility for beauty and connection. Possibility for sweet remembrance. Possibility for connecting with God and moving forward into the next phase of her purpose. Like the ocean, He had been ever present with her just like the rich story of her life with Jim. Those two things had shaped her and couldn’t be taken away.

I looked at her with earnest, empathetic eyes and said, “Yeah, I can get back to the ocean.”

Three

BEAUTY AND ASHES

Winnipeg, Canada

There is a fear in the pit of my stomach. One I am ashamed to admit. I'm beginning a journey around the world, interviewing couples happily married for twenty-five-plus years, and still can't completely shake it.

I've spoken with thousands of happy wives through the club and yet can't seem to come to a complete resolve about one challenge.

I look into the eyes of my husband, a man whose nature is so much better than mine, and feel as though I will never compare. I've always known this. What I work so hard to accomplish in my personal life comes with great ease in his.

He loves me far more than I have earned. He believes in my ability to reach the highest mountain without ever questioning how I'll get there.

One of his colleagues recently questioned the wisdom of shifting my attention away from the career I'd spent almost two decades building to pursue my passion for writing. (I was standing right there, by the way.) In response, Keith simply smiled.

When the colleague asked Keith what the plan was, Keith looked him square in the eyes and said with complete confidence, "Top of the *New York Times* Best Seller list. That's it. That's the only plan."

Befuddled, the man's look questioned Keith's lack of realism. But Keith couldn't care less. Instead he grabbed my hand and smiled. "Straight to the top." In Keith's mind, no one is going to assail his wife's ability to succeed in anything she sets out to do. Everything I touch, he's convinced, has the ability to turn to gold.

He believes too much in me. In his eyes, I've never failed. The second company I owned at the age of twenty flopped with such a loud thud I can still hear it reverberating. Keith still has mementos from that business venture. They sit atop a shelf in our garage, and although they are covered with dust, he can't quite bring himself to part with them. They represent a lesson learned and instructions for my career that would follow.

When Keith looks at me, he sees a woman who is still growing. A person who will one day become the woman she most longs to be. One God will look down upon and say, "My daughter, I am so proud of you."

Of course I'm not there yet. But in Keith's eyes, I'm oh-so-close. Does his unending love for me blind him from my many faults? Has he consciously chosen to turn a blind eye when my attempts fall short whether in business, in life, or in marriage?

I'm just Fawn. Otherwise defined as flawed, imperfect, independent to a fault. Quick to say when others are wrong, slow to say when I am not right.

The fear camping down in the pit of my stomach is that one day he'll realize it. He'll find me out.

Canada-bound, nearly thirty-six thousand feet above the ground, with nothing but clouds outside my window, I watched the apex of a small rainbow peek through the clouds momentarily. For a split second I could see the ground far beneath me and wondered if those below were getting a light sprinkling or a torrential shower. But the rainbow was unmistakable, so unexpected.

I was taken by this eclipse of melancholy, knowing excitement for this journey would come again soon. Still, I knew I would be on the lookout for women who could say, "I didn't deserve his love, but he gave it anyway." I wanted to know I wasn't alone, crazy, or overly dramatic feeling the way I felt.

I needed to be reassured that it's silly to think my marriage would plummet into the statistical abyss just because I had some room to grow. I at least knew I hadn't stopped believing in the power of love or the beautiful mystery of a lifelong marriage.

I imagined myself at the end of this journey, returning to my home soil, full of tears. Not tears of sadness, fear, or worry that I should be stripped of this thing I don't deserve from a man who, without strings attached, has freely given his heart to me. No, I imagined streams of joy and happiness that the heart he placed in my hands, to have and to hold, has been well kept.

When we are dancing cheek to cheek at the reception of our fiftieth anniversary, I will sigh a breath of relief. We made it through this cynical and cold world together. And as he twirls me around on the dance floor, I will give the appearance that I never for a single moment doubted our love's life.

I admit to myself that until then I need the wisdom of other women who have already danced that dance and proven true love

may only come once in a lifetime. But it can come once, and once is more than enough.



The pilot announced over the loudspeaker, “We’re now going to begin our descent into the Winnipeg, Manitoba area.” I looked out the window at farmlands neatly arranged against the horizon like large puzzle pieces of earth and grass.

My first stop off the plane, a little postflight routine for me, was getting a bottle of water. I pulled out a few dollars. “Sorry. We don’t accept American cash here,” the young lady advised. *Oh yes, I’m no longer in the US.* I gave her my American Express, collected my water, and proceeded to baggage claim. The hotel where I was staying was the closest one to the airport, so I called and asked for the shuttle to pick me up. Within a couple curious minutes, the shuttle arrived. The driver took my bags and lifted both of them into the shuttle. He jumped in the driver’s seat and proceeded to drive for thirty seconds.

Greeted by a friendly front desk agent and her manager, I gave my passport and credit card and got the keys to my room. It was pleasantly quiet, overlooking the runways but well insulated from the noise. I couldn’t hear the airport traffic at all.

After a long day of flying and airports, I wanted nothing more than to eat and then go to sleep. I decided to take a gamble and order from the hotel restaurant. Hotel food can be hit-or-miss, so I try to avoid it as much as possible, but this time I ordered a Reuben sandwich and sweet potato fries.

“Are you watching your weight, or can I bring you a side of mayonnaise?” the server asked.

“A side of mayonnaise? For what?”

“We dip our sweet potato fries in mayonnaise here,” he told me.

In the US, we eat fries with ketchup, and I’m feeling quite

American right now. And we do not ask women if they're trying to lose weight, I thought to myself. I'd need to work my way up to mayonnaise as a dipping sauce and ignore the unavoidable response that maybe I need to shed a few pounds. I soon learned Canada is known for a french fry dish they make that's similar to our chili cheese fries. Only in the Canadian version, called *poutine*, their fries are covered in gravy and topped with cheese curds. At one point, I'm told, the country wanted to make it their national food.



In the morning, feeling fully rested and ready to get my worldwide search underway, I went to the front desk to get directions to the city's most popular sights.

"Good morning. How can I help you?" came the standard-issue greeting from an overly chipper hotel attendant named Ron.

"I'd like to see some sights in the city. What should I do?" Granted, I could have easily looked this up on the Internet. But I prefer to engage with locals—what they say about their hometown can give you a better sense of what natives do, not just what some out-of-towner thought was fun. I like having that insider perspective, and know I'll need it as I travel the world.

"The Forks. You should go to the Forks," Ron said.

"Great!" I said enthusiastically, without asking for anything else. "Can you give me the walking directions?"

Ron's bright face clouded over somewhat.

"The Forks is at the river, and that's more than ten kilometers away," he said. For those of us not on the metric system, that's a wee bit over six miles. Ron's tone had that sound of *Oh, you really shouldn't do that*.

While I appreciated his gentle, implied warning, I also love walking, especially when traveling.

“No, it’s all right,” I insisted. “I love to walk. I’ll be there in no time. Could you just point me in the right direction?” Ron did more than just point. He whipped out a map of the area and carefully explained every turn and step I would take. “It’s not the fastest route,” he said as he traced my route with a pen on the city grid. “But it avoids some of the seedier places. You definitely don’t want to walk here.” He was drawing an imaginary circle with his finger around an area that covered the most direct route to the Forks. I love good customer service, and I could tell Ron had a heart to truly serve. I appreciated his local expertise.

I thanked Ron for his help and marched outside the front entrance.

The way to the Forks started along the road leading away from the airport and then merged onto the highway. There was a small path on the right of the road, more of a shoulder for stalled vehicles, really. I could see why Ron wanted to dissuade me from walking because within a few minutes of leaving the hotel, I was basically a cheery hitchhiker.

I chose to believe I would be covered by angels and kept walking. I walked and walked and walked. Straight down Wellington Avenue to King Edward Street to Route 90 South and a left on Portage heading east.

I kept my eyes on the road and remained alert at all times. I didn’t want to look like a tourist, so I walked with purpose and never slowed down. I walked for a little more than two hours (only one missed turn and a slight detour) and then arrived at the Forks, a popular historic site downtown at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red rivers.

Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve always had a bit of wanderlust. Wanting to see new things and new people is just a part of who I am. But like most people, I fall prey to the temptation of days full of routines and normalcy. We need that, I guess, because you can’t

live each day at full throttle, reinventing everything. Being in a new place helps break the stiffness of the daily grind. What was mundane becomes wonderfully magical—local currencies have unfamiliar faces, cars and street names are slightly different, food comes with mayonnaise, and you have to mentally convert kilometers into miles. For me, the combined effect is life-giving, a reminder that we can choose to see life as something new regardless.

By the time I arrived at the Forks, I was famished and needed to eat something, anything. After a quick, casual meal of beef bourguignon, I walked a couple of blocks and found a store with bottled water. With water in one hand and my camera in the other, I crossed the bridge and paused to take it all in. I was in awe of the beautifully architected Esplanade Riel, a bridge with large strands of thick steel cords pulled together in a cone shape twisted at the top.

On either side of the Esplanade Riel, one can easily see the river that runs beneath. To the southwest corner of the bridge is an expanse of manicured grass, trees, and flowers with pathways trafficked by bikers and pedestrians. Directly ahead by two hundred feet (sixty-one meters) and across from the backside of Union Station is a skate and bike park. Local teenagers hung out and practiced stunts on their skateboards and bikes.

I was watching kids in hoodies and baggy jeans wipe out as I walked toward Union Station and then to a historic hotel, Fort Garry. This hotel was a stunning display of how the wealthy must have lived one hundred years ago. Built by the Canadian railroad companies in 1913, this elegant chateau stands alone in the middle of the city. Only one well-groomed doorman stood between me and the hotel's elegant lobby. I assumed my best "I belong here" look and breezed through the doors unaccosted.

I spun a quick twirl around and found one lone couch sitting in an open space near a large window. I'm not sure what this area was supposed to be, but since there was no other piece of furniture

in sight, it was the one place to sit and collect my thoughts. I'd been carrying my laptop in a backpack all day, so I was happy to pull it out and begin writing. It was a perfectly quiet location with no one around, and served as a great muse for allowing thoughts to flow freely.

After staying a short while and recharging with a sandwich and bottle of water, I continued the walk back to my hotel. Along Broadway, the traffic was not too dissimilar from the driving experience one might have in Los Angeles: bumper-to-bumper, with a bunch of drivers honking and in a rush to get nowhere.

Throughout my walk, I couldn't help but notice all the desolate buildings in the city. The countless number of doors boarded up and windows covered with newspaper would seem to indicate the country was hit as hard as the United States by the Great Recession. But I'm told by locals that the downturn of the US economy didn't impact Canada much. I just happened to be walking through one of the worst parts of town.

Still, I was keenly aware of the beauty interspersed with unsightliness. Art next to graffiti. Stunning parks next to abandoned buildings boarded up long ago. These Canadians, it seemed to me, had a heightened fascination with memorializing the dead. Large memorials were scattered throughout the city and the most beautiful parks had monuments as their centerpieces.

The dead next to the living. Beauty surrounded by ashes. Yet, somehow it all went together and felt as though it belonged. It gave a raw and authentic feeling, as if no matter how broken you were, you could be a natural and needed part of the city. Shades of gray lining the concrete streets were banked by breathtaking parks and gardens, colorful flowers, and bountiful trees.

It reminded me of my gray thoughts on the flight in. Like anyone, when I'm honest, I admit I'm full of beauty and ashes too—as was Faye, my first international interview on this journey.

Four

WHEN WINDOWS BECOME WALLS

Winnipeg, Canada

*F*aye was a bit shorter than I expected. A bit heavier than her online photo, with a new nose ring. She was not in the least bit what I anticipated when I arrived downstairs in the hotel lobby where I was staying. I'd invited her to join me for lunch, as I'd heard so much about her from other people I know and respect. She was completely unpretentious, authentic, honest, and I appreciated her openness from the start. I didn't come to Winnipeg to interview her, but what I learned from her over lunch was too good to keep to myself.

"You're so cute," she said.

"I should have told you I look about half my age. I always forget to tell people that when they're meeting me for the first time," I responded. (By the way, I didn't say this as a brag. I really look like I could be in college, which can make it hard to get the respect I

need to get things done.) In my online pictures, I'm usually wearing makeup and my hair is styled. But in real life, I prefer going sans makeup and pulling my hair back into a tight bun, similar to the ones ballet dancers wear. Although I'm thirty-six, I can easily pass for a high school student. "Good genes," I tell her. "I got some good genes."

We walked a few steps to the hotel restaurant I'd grown fond of. "Let's take a picture together," she said before asking the waitress to snap a couple of shots. I moved over to her side of the table, and we took a few pictures.

She'd always done great with her weight, but in recent times had picked up quite a bit, she informed me. I could tell she was getting back to the person she once was, but wasn't wholly comfortable with where she was at that moment. Once she shared her story with me, I understood why.

"It was my husband's birthday, and I was preparing the house for his arrival from work," she began. "The presents were bought, and I'd made reservations at a great restaurant."

When her husband arrived home, he asked her to come into the living room. He had a question for her.

"Are you having an affair?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Of course not!" she quickly shot back.

"Please don't lie to me."

She knew he'd somehow found out. After her face turned red and her eyes swelled with tears, she admitted she had indeed been carrying on an affair.

Many years into their marriage, her brief affair had been discovered. It began innocently with one of her husband's closest friends who was married to one of her closest friends. They'd text each other jokes and innocently get together with the kids. Then one day, something changed.

In Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Committed*, she quotes the work of

a psychologist named Shirley P. Glass, who spent most of her career studying marital infidelity, how it begins and how it inevitably causes so many things to end. Gilbert wrote:

How many times have we heard someone say, “I wasn’t looking for love outside my marriage, but it *just happened*”? Put in such terms, adultery starts to sound like a car accident, like a patch of black ice hidden on a treacherous curve, waiting for an unsuspecting motorist.

But Glass, in her research, discovered that if you dig a little deeper into people’s infidelities, you can almost always see how the affair started long before the first stolen kiss. Most affairs begin, Glass wrote, when a husband or wife makes a new friend, and an apparently harmless intimacy is born. You don’t sense the danger as it’s happening, because what’s wrong with friendship?¹

I understood exactly what Dr. Glass was saying. Before I got married, I learned from speaking with marriage advocates and counselors that keeping friendships with the opposite sex can be dangerous for this exact reason. Prior to meeting Keith, I’d remained friends with every ex-boyfriend I’d had during my adult life. However, I’d always told them—as well as any male friends I had whom I hadn’t dated—that when I met the man I was going to marry, our friendship would effectively end. It wasn’t personal; I just didn’t want to ever have that temptation.

I never felt bad about that, and as a matter of fact, a few have even come back to tell me how much they respected that decision and how I’ve remained faithful to it. This was not something Keith requested, nor did I make this request of him regarding his former flames and friendships. But once I told him what I planned to do, he decided to do the same. After seeing the number of marriages

ending because one or both spouses decided to keep in touch with an old flame or friend via Facebook, I am so happy I made that commitment.

I've spoken to many who have ventured down the dangerous path of "friendship" to affair. Here's Gilbert again talking about Glass:

It was Glass's theory that every healthy marriage is composed of walls and windows. The windows are the aspects of your relationship that are open to the world—that is, the necessary gaps through which you interact with family and friends; the walls are the barriers of trust behind which you guard the most intimate secrets of your marriage.

What often happens, though, during so-called harmless friendships, is that you begin sharing intimacies with your new friend that belong hidden within your marriage. You reveal secrets about yourself—your deepest yearnings and frustrations—and it feels good to be so exposed. You throw open a window where there really ought to be a solid, weight-bearing wall, and soon you find yourself spilling your secret heart with this new person. Not wanting your spouse to feel jealous, you keep the details of your new friendship hidden. In so doing, you have now created a problem: You have just built a wall between you and your spouse where there really ought to be free circulation of air and light. The entire architecture of your matrimonial intimacy has therefore been changed. Every old wall is now a giant picture window, every old window is now boarded up like a crack house. You have just established the perfect blueprint for infidelity without even noticing.²

What Gilbert and Glass have described is exactly what happened with Faye. She and her husband's friend began exchanging

text messages. Their kids played together, so the exchanges didn't seem odd to them. Then one day, he sent a text in which he accidentally transposed a standard word into a sexually explicit one. Faye's mind began to swirl. Her husband had always worked long hours. Very long. She began to resent that. Throughout their course of marriage, she'd had five miscarriages, one of which occurred when she was already five months along.

The baby wouldn't come out naturally, so she was forced to carry the dead child in her womb for a week before the doctors could remove it. "He didn't even come with me to the appointment," she said sadly. She became bitter. And over the years, that bitterness grew until it took over her heart and nothing he did was good enough and everything he did was all wrong.

The thoughts just kept flowing through her head. They never stopped. "Negative thoughts," she continued. "I never should have allowed those negative thoughts to grow. They run through our mind all day. Weird thoughts. Uncharacteristic thoughts. Thoughts I'm ashamed of repeating," she said. "The key is never allowing them to stay. You can't control them running through your mind, but you can control how much you feed them."

I remember a husband I once interviewed who said something similar: "You can either feed negative thoughts or you can starve the suckers." Faye realized she'd never starved them. She had continued to feed them, and eventually they got fat and took over her life. After admitting to her affair with another man, Faye ran out of the house and went for a drive, during which she decided she was going to leave her marriage.

As soon as she returned home, she began packing her bags. Her husband, Edward, who Faye now talks about as the very essence of grace, did something I don't think I could ever do.

"Faye, are you leaving because you want to, or because you think you have to?" he asked.

“I have to leave,” she responded. And what he said next seems to still astonish her to this day.

“If you want to stay, I will forgive you,” he said, as tears continued to pour down Faye’s face. “If you had an affair, that’s because our marriage was broken. And if our marriage was broken, that means I had something to do with it. So if you want to stay, stay.”

When Faye shared this story with me, it pulled at every heart-string in me. How could someone be so forgiving? How could a betrayed spouse give so much grace? Could I do that? Would I do that? These are questions that challenge me. And ones I hope I never need to answer because an affair, in my mind, is forgivable but rarely reconcilable. Thank goodness, for Faye, her husband is a much better person than most. He did what few men would be able to do. He forgave her and looked for a pathway forward, addressing what was lacking in their relationship.

Faye went to counseling by herself to get to the root of what caused her to become so miserable in the first place. They both worked hard to find their way back.

“Are you happy now?” I asked.

“Yes, oh yes. I’m very happy.” She explained that once Edward forgave her of such a heinous action against him and their marriage, she respected him as she never had before. She saw him in a new light. Everything that had once bothered her about him no longer mattered. Rather than being upset about his working long hours, she began to appreciate that the reason he works such long hours is to provide for her and their four children. As their son got older, he was able to help out in the family business, freeing Edward up a little more in the evenings.

“It comes down to those thoughts,” Faye concluded, in a remorseful tone. “I never should have let them in. I never should have fed them. If I could do it again, I’d shut them down from the offset.”



My time with Faye was powerful, and as I traveled to the hair salon, my mind lingered on the tough and transformative lessons she was learning.

I wasn't going to the salon to get pampered; I desperately needed a hair washing. Since I was going to travel a lot, it meant I had to do a lot of mundane things (like having my hair washed) in transit.

I'm a focused and intense person as it is, and my time with Faye only amplified that. Fortunately, the hairstylist I booked online was in the mood to talk.

"You're from Los Angeles, right?" Apparently, she'd heard the voice message I'd left earlier. "What are you doing in Winnipeg?"

I explained it was my first international stop around the world interviewing women and couples happily married twenty-five years or more to discover the secrets of a happy marriage.

"That's interesting!" She wanted to know more and launched straightaway into a line of questions. *What have you learned? How long have you been married? Where have you been so far?*

I shared a few notes from my previous interview, that I'd be celebrating a decade of marriage next year, and that I'd loved every moment of being married. She leaned me back in the chair and began telling me about her marriage. Where it went wrong. She told me she'd met her husband in Bible college. They'd both come from homes with strict religious beliefs.

She'd wanted to marry a man when she was much younger, but her parents had talked her out of marrying because he was Catholic and she was Protestant. She had trusted them, but now she wasn't so sure. Her husband had lost faith in their beliefs and stopped attending church. He held a grudge against the church, and she wasn't sure why, only that she'd gotten the impression that he wished she didn't take their two children to church with her each week.

I could tell she was questioning her marriage, wondering if it was worth it or if it would ever get better. I just listened. I'd asked God when I began this journey to make me a woman who preferred to listen and share what I'd learned from others rather than attempt to become a teacher. I never want to be so sure about something that I become inflexible or come across as a know-it-all. So I listened. And listened. And listened as she expressed her frustration and disappointment.

Then I shared. I told her about Faye and the affair she had, and how her husband forgave her in spite of how badly she wronged him, and how all of a sudden, she began to see goodness in the things that once drove her crazy. When he worked so much, rather than complaining, she became appreciative of his hard work and dedication. She realized that his purpose for working so much was to provide for his family.

I told her how Faye unknowingly entertained negative thoughts about her husband and their marriage and eventually began thinking about a plan B (if only subconsciously). Then I shared with her one of my favorite quotes, "It's better to spend your time creating the perfect love, rather than looking for the perfect lover."³

"If you think the man you have is not perfect, the next man won't be either. Do you remember the dating scene?" I asked. "Did you like it the first time around?"

You can guess her answer.

Before I left, she asked how she could follow my journey online and learn as I learn. I gave her the club's web address and told her about our Facebook community, in which close to two hundred thousand women around the world interact. Later that day, she posted a wonderful message on our community page, thanking me for our talk, for being an inspiration, and to let me know she'd be following me on my journey as I discovered, along with everyone else, the secret to a happy marriage.