

Survivor Honeymoon

Amanda Eyre Ward

I have no memories of a happy marriage: my parents were badly matched from the start, but it took them sixteen years to bitterly divorce. “I didn’t know what I was doing,” my mother told me. “I chose the wrong one.”

I headed into marriage with a list of what didn’t work: being naïve, having lots of expensive things, quitting your job to stay home with kids, being bored in the suburbs, hoping for the best. From this knowledge, I constructed a weird group of goals: be aware of every possible thing that could go wrong, live cheaply, always have a job and a way to walk out on your own, settle as far as possible from suburban New York, be ready for the worst.

My husband and I met at a keg party in Missoula, Montana. We were both graduate students—Tip was studying Geology, and I was moving toward an MFA in Fiction Writing. I had dated every creep in my graduate program, so was branching out.

The party was thrown by three Geology students who called their home The Fun House. The geologists drank beer instead of wine, had beards instead of sideburns, and none of them quoted Raymond Carver. After two years of *New Yorker* cartoon analysis and deep pronouncements about trout streams, The Fun House was refreshing.

I was telling someone about my dream of having children and traveling with them around Africa. Tip barged right in and said he thought dragging children around Africa was unfair. We talked about this for some time.

Later, I told Tip that there were tunnels underneath my apartment building, tunnels that had once, I'd heard, been used to smuggle opium. Also, I mentioned beer in my fridge. That was that: beer and tunnels. Tip was mine.

On our first official date, we drank whiskey and talked about what had brought us to Montana. Both of us had felt out of place in our previous lives, and wanted to make a new sort of life, one filled with adventure, travel, and books.

Our courtship progressed. We argued when Tip went fishing for days without calling me, we made up and went to a Philip Glass concert. Tip had a bathtub and a bottle of very good Scotch. I spent evenings soaking in his tub and gazing at the picture he had of himself skiing naked in the Colorado mountains. In the mornings, he made breakfast with actual ingredients that he kept in his refrigerator. While I ate Spaghetti-O's and popsicles, Tip had a spice rack. I bought an eggplant to impress him, but I had no idea what to do with it. When Tip pointed out that it was growing moldy, I threw it away.

I worked as a librarian, and could order obscure nature films like *Migration of the Wildebeest*. We watched them on his bed, inside his sleeping bag. (Tip had a spice rack, yes, but no sheets.) We fought when Tip made me dinner for my birthday but didn't buy me an actual present. The dinner was the present, he explained. I'm from suburban New York, I told him: a present is supposed to be wrapped.

We broke up for about twelve hours and then met again in a bar called The Rhino. A long night of shouted threats and whispered promises followed. We moved in together. After all the confusion, all the nights I hoped I would meet my love, all the years I had spent trying to make Mr. Right Now into Mr. Right, it was so easy. Tip, there he was, that tall blonde boy with the goofy smile and bright eyes. The one made just for me.

Our engagement was complicated. Tip wanted to ask me to marry him in a canoe, rafting the Gooseneck section of the San Jan River in Utah. We packed a canoe with steaks, wine, books, and vegetables. We arranged with a man named Ralph to drive our car to the end of the float in five days. "River's running high," warned Joe. We ignored him. As we put in, a ranger ambled down to the river to tell us that he'd just rescued a family whose canoe had been wrapped around a rock "like a taco." The water was way too high, and he advised us not to head out.

But we were adventurers. Like John Wesley Powell before us, we wanted to see what was around the bend. We launched our canoe triumphantly, and the water swept us under a bridge, past onlookers who cheered. About ten minutes later, the waves almost swamped the canoe. Tip pulled the canoe over, looked at what was ahead, and said, dejectedly, "We can't do it."

It took about three hours to haul our canoe full of foodstuffs back upriver. When we passed the onlookers, they did not cheer. Ralph gave us our money back.

"Oh well," I said.

"Oh well nothing," said Tip. "Tomorrow, we're going to climb a mountain!"

We drove our truck with the canoe strapped on top over rutted roads, and camped in the rain. In the morning, we climbed a damn mountain. At the top, Tip said, "I really, really love you."

"Thanks," I said, and then lightning struck a nearby peak. We ran down the trail to safety.

"Okay then," I said, "time to head on back home."

"Head on back nothing," said Tip, who was beginning to act a bit strange. "We're climbing another mountain tomorrow."

"Fabulous," I said. It rained again that night. At dawn, I poked my head out of the tent to see Tip, wild-eyed, frying eggs.

“Come on!” he said. “Coffee’s ready!” he said. He was shaking, muttering about “early start,” and “view from the top.”

Now, we call the mountain Proposal Peak. I don’t know what it’s really called. But we never made it to the top. About halfway, I sat down heavily. “Forget it,” I said. “I’m tired. I’m wet. This is it.”

“Oh please,” said Tip, pushing the sweat from his forehead.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m exhausted.”

“There’s something really great at the top,” said Tip.

“A cheeseburger?”

“No,” said Tip.

“Then I’m staying right here.”

Tip signed, and dropped to one knee. He asked me to marry him halfway up the mountain, and when I accepted, he tied a flower around my finger. We hiked to our campsite, packed up, and headed into town to celebrate. At the True Grit Cafe, a weary waitress asked if I’d like French fries or onion rings with my burger.

“I’ll have both!” I exclaimed. “We just got engaged!”

She shrugged, and wrote our order down. She returned with the best onion rings I’ve ever eaten in my life.

It’s hard for me to remember how I felt on my wedding day. Yes, I had the long dress, my mother’s lace veil, pearl earrings from a Tiffany’s box. Tip and I exchanged vows on the top of another Colorado mountain, and I truly have no recollection about what I was thinking. I certainly look happy in the pictures. (But I stared at my mother’s wedding pictures for years, and she looked happy, too.) I do remember, as we fell asleep next to each other that night, after a midnight picnic

of wedding leftovers, feeling a sense of safety and relief. I had found him, and he was the kind of person who would always take care of me. I cherished Tip—I was amazed by him and awed by him—and I was his wife. It was a simple happiness, and yet I had never known anything like it before. I feel it still, underneath everything I do: my love is next to me.

My parents had honeymooned in Bermuda. They lay in hammocks and played golf. I guess I thought that if my honeymoon were different, my marriage would be, too. We chose to go to Belize, which, like us, was cheap and edgy. We took three-week vacations, and only made reservations for the first night. We stuffed big backpacks with bathing suits, snorkels, and hiking shoes.

We had moved to Texas for Tip's PhD work, and the morning after our wedding, we headed back to Austin, where we planned to catch a flight to Belize City. We spent the night in Amarillo, at the Big Texan Motor Inn. It was the best hotel in Amarillo, our friend told us. Actually, his words were, "Well, if you can eat a 72-ounce steak in an hour, your room is free."

We booked the Honeymoon Suite.

Unhappily, they had stopped serving beef by the time we arrived. We climbed the stairs to our room, me carrying the straw hat full of strawberries, Tip holding the free bottle of Cold Duck champagne.

The headboard of our marital bed was made of brown antlers bound together with rawhide. And the promised "heart-shaped Jacuzzi" was actually a dingy beige bathtub in the normal oval shape, albeit with some moldy jets. There were cigarette burns in the couch, where other honeymooners must have smoked as they ate their strawberries.

We twisted off the top of our champagne, and toasted a new life together under the antler chandelier. My best friend—the only person as strange as me—was now my husband. I remember

feeling a bit scared at the prospect of forever. Maybe making our honeymoon as taxing as possible let us both forget about the real challenge: a lifetime of staying in love.

We made it to Belize by the following day. Belize is an English-speaking country in Central America, located between Mexico and Guatemala. It's known for both its jungles and beaches, and is a mecca for serious scuba divers. In July, it's hot.

Under the weight of our enormous backpacks, we trudged to find a bus, which would take us to a ferry, where we could ride a slow boat under the blazing sun to an island called Caye Caulker, where we would keep on slogging until we found our hotel. We had a clean room with a mini-fridge, which we decided was way too luxurious. By morning, we'd checked into Ignacio's Cabins, where twelve dollars bought us a night in a rickety cabin overlooking the water.

That night, I sidled up to a beachside bar and told the bartender I was on my honeymoon. "Ah," he said lasciviously, "then I will make you a *special* drink."

From one sip I was hooked. Made of coconut rum, pineapple juice, and fresh lime, the cocktail tasted wild and sexy. A drink that tasted the way I wanted to feel. "Order me another," I requested.

Tip went to the bar, and I heard the bartender laugh and say loudly, "Another PANTY RIPPER for the new wife!"

Oh, dear. I had fallen for a cocktail named the "Panty Ripper." We were so embarrassed to order them that by our second day, we bought the ingredients and mixed them ourselves. We had cocktails, went for a steak dinner, and sat in hammocks under the moon. In bed, I read *Memoirs of a Geisha* with a headlamp strapped to my head.

Ignacio went crazy the next morning. At least, we think it was Ignacio. A man yelled, roosters crowed, and we realized that our rustic cabin lacked not only electricity, but peace and

quiet. Also, drawn no doubt by the fragrance of Panty Rippers, fire ants had arrived in full force. After a day of scuba diving, we ate grilled lobster and discussed the future of our honeymoon. We wanted to do more scuba diving, and we wanted to see a monkey. I knew my parents had not seen a monkey on their honeymoon. In fact, my mother had told me that my father had mostly watched TV in their air-conditioned room.

We headed to San Ignacio, a town near jungle preserves. In a coffee shop, we met a young man named Louis who claimed he could take us into an underground cave system. “Show up here in the morning,” he said. “Wear your bathing suit and be brave.” The cave was called Actun Tunichil Muknal, “Cave of the Stone Sepulchre.”

We couldn't resist. After my morning eggs and Pepto Bismol, we climbed aboard a van and drove toward the rainforest with Louis. We parked and hiked along a jungle pathway to the mouth of a cave. “Go on and swim then,” said Louis, when we hit a river. We put on our head lamps, and dove in. When we surfaced, we were inside an amazing cavern. Columns of crystal glimmered from the walls, and Louis led us for three hours, pointing out shards of Mayan pottery. At times, we inched along slick rock walls, and at times we had to swim again, holding our breath. I am scared of heights, and almost couldn't climb a rickety ladder to a second-story grotto.

Finally, he told us to stop and close our eyes. We held hands, and when he said, “Now!” we spun around. Illuminated by our headlamps, the skeleton of a young girl shone, partially settled into the dusty ground. She had been killed, Louis explained, as part of a Mayan sacrificial ritual. She had been left in the cave for the Gods, and later for adventurous tourists. “This was in a time that women had little value,” said Louis.

At the end of the day I was exhausted, but not exhausted enough to sleep through the music pounding through the walls of our ratty hostel. My husband and I held each other as the theme song

from “Friends” played with a thumping techno beat. This was nothing like my parents’ honeymoon, I told myself happily.

The next day, I saw an index card, tacked to the wall of the hostel:

GLOVERS REEF

ISLAND GETAWAY

\$100 A WEEK

BRING YOUR OWN FOOD

MEET AT MINERVA’S GUEST HOUSE SAT A.M., WAIT FOR BOAT

We had heard that Glover’s Reef, a marine reserve in the Carribean, had some of the best scuba diving in the world. The only resorts we had ever read about on Glover’s Reef charged thousands a week. After dinner, we packed our bags and counted our travelers checks.

Bring your own food. We did: chocolate, rum, various fruit drinks and Coke for mixers. Bread, peanut butter, nasty cheese triangles, fruit. We shouldered our backpacks and hopped a bus that led away, far away from all the lovely beach resorts and vacationers who wanted, well, a vacation. We shared the bus with some Belizean people and some Belizean farm animals. When I smiled wide and told a rotund man in a straw that that we were headed to Minerva’s Guest House, he guffawed and said, “Minerva’s! Oh, ho ho!”

I decided to believe that all the people on the bus were laughing with us.

My husband squinted out the bus window, calculating our location. I loved that he read the landscape like a novel, and always knew where we were in the world. Before Tip, I had never really used maps. With him, the whole world made more sense.

The bus driver pulled to the side of a dirt road, pointed to the bushes, and said, “Walk a while that way.”

Gamely, we shouldered our packs and bushwhacked. Finally, we came upon a dilapidated dwelling barely held aloft by splintered logs. A hand-painted sign proclaimed, “BUNK HOUSE.” Dirty tapestries waved from the windows, and a fan hummed hello. The shack had been painted a cheery green and white. “Okay!” I said. We ducked inside.

Lying on bunks were the four other couples who would share our week-long adventure: Randy, a German man who had married Marisa, a Spanish woman; the Brinkleys, from Columbus, who wouldn’t make it the whole week; Sunshine and David, San Franciscans peroxidized to platinum blonde; and a couple from New Zealand who were biking their way around the world (somehow). We chatted for a while and determined that we had all seen the same index card at the same hostel and none of us had the slightest idea what lay ahead, but for a hundred bucks a week, what the hell.

Minerva arrived, a slight woman in a porkpie hat. She took us down the street to buy eggs and butter, advising that “The Frenchman” would arrive in the morning to pick us up on his sailboat. When pressed, she explained that he would bring us back in seven days or so.

Mushed into a bunk together, my husband and I slept fitfully.

The Frenchman arrived, as promised, with a young woman who appeared to be either Minerva’s daughter, the Frenchman’s lover, or both. The Frenchman collected our cash dollars and stood aside as we loaded our gear into the sailboat. Hands on either side of his pot belly, he did not respond to our myriad questions about where we were going and when we would be back. My husband—and I was proud of this, that the handsome Geologist in aqua swim shorts was mine—loaded our rum and supplies, donned his DAMN GULLS hat (complete with fake bird dung), and climbed aboard happily. As per my recent vows, I followed him.

We set sail on water as clear and blue as mouthwash. In English and halting English, we talked about scuba and sunscreen. The Frenchman and the young woman stared stonily ahead, steering the boat toward a tiny island. As we neared, thatched-roof homes became visible. The Frenchman muttered something about *choose a hut* and *pit latrines*. We docked, and were met by three more French-speaking people and handed a price-list.

The hut and pit latrine, it seemed, were included in our hundred dollars. Everything else—from canoes to water to scuba gear—was priced at a premium. One of the French-speaking people was a dark man with no shirt and mirrored sunglasses. He told me I could call him “The Breeze,” and asked if I wanted to scuba.

“Yes,” I said. “We want to scuba.” I pointed to my husband and said proudly, “I’m married.”

The Breeze was undeterred. “Night dive?” he asked. “How about a night dive tonight?”

We weren’t experienced divers, but this was irresistible. We made plans to meet The Breeze on the north beach at sundown. Then we picked our way carefully over the exposed roots of palm trees toward the thatched-roof huts lined up on the beach. We chose one, and climbed inside. The view from the hut was amazing, and the structure only swayed a little when the wind blew. We had been given an array of buckets for washing and cooking. We heated up some Spaghetti-O’s and gulped warm Sprite.

The Breeze was ready to roll when we arrived on the north beach. He piled gear into a boat and we headed into the waves as the sun set. We perched on the edge of the boat, and I tested my oxygen line. “I don’t think…” I said, but The Breeze put a palm in the center of my chest and pushed me into the water. As the weight belt pulled me down, I breathed deeply. Luckily, the oxygen worked.

Being underwater is amazing, but being underwater at night is magical. My flashlight attracted glowing bugs, and moonlight filtered over the fish and plants. The Breeze looked bored as Tip and I swam, hand in hand, through the coral reefs. When I met my husband's eyes, they were also filled with wonder.

We spent a week scuba diving and reading and drinking rum mixed with various juices. We became friends with the other couples, and when Mrs. Brinkley went crackers and insisted she had to "get off this teeny tiny fucking island," we all sympathized. My husband was the only one who knew how to fillet and cook a fish, so evenings were punctuated by visitors bearing gifts of cigarettes or food in exchange for his expertise.

We went a little nuts. Tip began recording the actions of various lizards around our hut. I had lengthy daydreams about chlorinated pools and room service. Bugs, as always, were an issue. Walking to a pit latrine became less edgy and more annoying, especially in the middle of the night. But each evening, we watched the sun set over the water. We even threw a party the last day, cooking all our extra food and serving it mixed together. The party was BYOB...bring your own bowl.

When we finally sailed back to Minerva's, seven days that felt like seven months later, we decided to take the bus to Guatemala. We had heard that the border crossing was dangerous, but the ruins of Tikal seemed worth the risk.

On the bus, a Belizean woman told me about her honeymoon. "We had a big meal, some dancing, and a nap," she said, patting her pregnant belly. "It was a wonderful nap," she said.

For just a moment, I felt tired. Did I really think that I could ensure a happy marriage by never relaxing? I thought about how wonderful it would feel to slow down. To check into a clean

hotel somewhere safe and ease into my new husband's arms. To hope for the best. But I was too afraid of what might happen if I stopped filling my mind with logistics and plans.

We reached the place between of Belize and Guatemala, and it felt scary. Shifty-eyed teenagers sidled up to us and offered unbelievable exchange rates. No one could agree on what we needed to pay to get over the border. We were told that Guatemala was filled with armed men who would drive us into countryside, shoot us for our shoes, and leave us to rot.

We pressed on. Over the border, a man approached us and offered to drive us to Tikal. Nervously, we accepted, and climbed into his dented pickup truck. We knew this was dangerous. But somehow being in real danger felt good to me. At least when I got into a truck with a shifty-eyed man, a backpack full of expensive items, a passport, and travelers checks at my side, I knew what to be afraid of.

The man drove us away from the border crossing, into Guatemala. The road was narrow and deserted. "I want to show you something," said the man. My husband stared straight ahead. I saw that his jaw was clenched. His eyes scanned the road frantically, and I could tell that he was trying to understand where we were.

"What is it?" I said.

"It's a lake," said the man. His voice was hard. My husband swallowed.

But there was a lake, and we stood by it, and the man took our picture. We got back in the car, and the man drove us to Tikal. We saw monkeys and ruins, we flew home and made a life together. We had a son, and my love for him is so fierce I can hardly leave the room much less travel the world without him.

I realize now that our honeymoon was made up of self-imposed dangers: no one made us go scuba diving at night or cross the Guatemalan border. Life—and this was before September 11 and

Iraq, and before my son showed me what real fear meant—was safe and simple. Courting thrills in foreign countries seemed more important, somehow, than just taking a nap.

I feel differently now. I want to keep my son safe but not sheltered, I want to write about the world with clarity. I want to sleep heavily at night. These have proved harder tasks than braving ratty guest houses or scuba dives.

I look at the picture of my husband and I, taken by a Guatemalan lake almost six years ago. My husband told me later that he thought this was the end: the man would take our picture and then pull out a knife or gun. In the picture, he looks tanned and nervous, wearing the aqua shorts that are now hanging on a chair, drying out from yesterday's trip to a local pool to teach our son to swim.

My husband looks straight at the camera. He thought this was the end, and he is holding my hand.