

NATIONAL BESTSELLING SERIES

A ^SCUP OF
COMFORT[®]
for
Couples



.....
STORIES THAT CELEBRATE
WHAT IT MEANS
TO BE IN *Love*
.....

EDITED BY COLLEEN SELL

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 **adams**media
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For Geronimo: the love of my midlife . . . and the rest of my life

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Acknowledgments

All books are collaborative creations, but none so much as an anthology. As the anthologist of this superb collection of true stories of true love, then, I have many people to thank:

Most gratefully, the authors of the forty-eight terrific stories that grace these pages,

As well as authors of the other 2,000-plus stories submitted for this book;

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And with all my heart, my lover, best friend, favorite dance partner, life partner, and husband — Nik



Introduction

“And what do all the great words come to in the end, but that? — I love you — I am at rest with you — I have come home.”

— Dorothy L. Sayers

What is the secret to a successful marriage or romantic partnership? How do you find true love — and stay in love? Is love enough to weather life’s storms, petty grievances, and foolish mistakes? Can you give your all to love without giving up your self? Does a relationship that “works” take work, or does it come naturally, easily? Do couples who live happily ever after know something or have something or do something that couples whose relationships falter or fail don’t?

Those are the questions most of us ask at one time in our lives — and that some of us ask repeatedly throughout our lives. Because deep in our hearts that’s what most of us want: to love and to be loved by that one special someone.

So those are the questions we posed when we cast the net for true stories about couples who were truly, madly, deeply in love . . . or perhaps simply comfortable and content with and committed to one another. We asked couples to show us what true love, a good relationship, and a happy marriage look and feel like — to show us what makes them tick, together. So they did. From the more than 2,000 true stories of true love we received, we gathered the best into this book.

A Cup of Comfort® for Couples gives you an inside look into the hearts and lives of forty-eight couples. I hope their stories will delight, inspire, and move you.

— Colleen Sell



Supersized Love

My heart skipped three beats when the phone rang and I saw Ray's name on caller ID. Would it be a concert at Washington Park? A starlit run in Portland's west hills? A bike ride out to the beach at Sauvie Island?

"Samantha?" His deep, warm voice raised goose bumps on my arms.

"I know this is late notice, but are you free tonight?"

It was late notice, but I wanted to see him.

When I met Ray at a summer singles'—club dance, his hazel eyes, crooked smile, and lean but muscular physique immediately caught my attention. He invited me to hike the Eagle Creek Trail in the Columbia Gorge for our first date, and I shivered with excitement. Tickets to a Bruce Springsteen concert prompted a perfect second date. What would he entice me with this time? Every woman knows third dates can often be turning points in relationships.

"How about meeting me at Costco for dinner?" Ray asked with the same lilt in his voice I'd have expected if he were inviting me to dine at the posh Harborside on the Willamette River.

I sank into a chair, unable for a moment to say anything. Was he kidding?

"I need to pick up some things for a catering job. They have a great Polish dog. Pizza or chicken wrap if you'd like that better."

He wasn't kidding. I have a Costco card and appreciate the prices, the quality, and the easy return policy as much as anyone. But a big cement warehouse with everything in supersize for a third date? Where were the candles? The music? Would he reach across a display of Sonicare toothbrushes to take my hand?

"Sure. I'll meet you there," I said, focusing on those hazel eyes and ignoring a fluttering of disappointment in my chest.

"Six-thirty?"

"That works," I agreed.

We met at the cavernous entrance, Ray already with a green flat cart in tow. He looked good, his yellow golf shirt setting off a nice tan. We flashed our cards at the attendant, ID pictures visible, and trailed Ray and the cart as he walked purposefully to the back of the store, the aroma of fresh muffins wafting toward us.

"Wow," I gasped at all the six packs and twelve packs of juices and soft drinks he swung onto the cart.

"Big party," he said, moving to the section of paper products for plates and cups, then the frozen food section for meatballs and shrimp. Fresh fruit next: blueberries, strawberries, cantaloupe, watermelon, bananas.

I touched his shoulder. “Those are going to be beautiful fruit trays.”

“Hope so.”

Ray took good care of his customers. I sensed he would take good care of me as well. Shopping with him, I felt a surprising intimacy as I watched him do his thing as the owner of a small restaurant.

We continued to date, mixing Costco runs with movies, theater, fall hikes, and winter sports. I met his adult children; he met my teenagers. Then one day at Costco, when we’d been dating five months, he grabbed a regular, redhandled shopping cart, not a green flat cart. “I need to get a few things for my apartment,” he said and proceeded to load a box of bottled water, a two-loaf pack of whole-grain bread, eggs, and a jar of peanut butter.

When we reached the frozen food section, he held up a bag of chicken burritos. “Your kids like these?” he asked.

“How nice. They’d love them.”

He tossed them in the cart.

We stopped next at the tables of fruit. “Like cantaloupe?” he asked, holding up a net with three melons. “I could keep one at my place and you could take two home.”

My stomach flip-flopped. What was going on? He was shopping for *us*.

He pushed the cart to the center of the store where a dozen tables were piled high with clothes, rummaged through a stack of golf shirts, and came up with a green one and a white one. “Which do you think?” he asked, holding them up.

“Either one,” I assured him. He’d look terrific in both.

He tossed them in the cart and then moved to a table of women’s sweaters. “Like any of these?” he asked.

I went weak-kneed, now certain of the shift in our relationship. This was no business run. He was loading a cart with his and her things.

The red turtleneck I picked up felt as soft as a kitten’s fur against my cheek.

“I like you in red. You want it?” Ray nodded toward the cart.

I’d never considered Costco a place to buy clothes. I was learning so much this trip I could hardly breathe. With Christmas approaching, the red sweater would be fun, especially if I were wearing it to holiday celebrations with Ray. We were definitely an item.

Christmas came, then New Year’s, then Valentine’s. Ray and I spent as much time together as possible. My kids adored him and so did I.

“You think you’ll get married?” a girlfriend at the school where I taught asked.

I shrugged. My first marriage had been a dismal, gut-wrenching experience, and I wasn’t eager to try that again. Nor had Ray dropped to one knee and proposed. I was fine with the status quo.

At least I thought I was. Recently, though, everywhere I went I noticed diamond earrings, diamond necklaces, diamond rings. I wasn’t ready to pick up a copy of *Modern Bride*, but something was going on.

Ray did not appear to share my obsession. When I shopped with him for his mom's birthday gift, he didn't even slow down as we passed the Zales, not to mention Tiffany.

That night we headed off to Costco for some laundry detergent, bathroom supplies, and a Polish dog. We flashed our cards as usual, but for once Ray didn't grab a cart. Assuming he'd forgotten, I turned back to get one. Gently but firmly he took my arm. In seconds he'd propelled me to the jewelry case. "See anything you like?" he asked.

A necklace for my June birthday? No, too early. I suddenly felt dizzy.

"I kind of like that one." He pointed to a perfect solitaire diamond set in a platinum band.

My mouth went dry.

"Do you want to look at it?"

I nodded.

He strode off and returned within seconds with a red-vested clerk who unlocked the case for us.

"That one." Ray pointed to the solitaire.

The clerk handed it to him.

"Want to try it on?" Ray threw me his fabulous crooked smile.

"Rings never fit me. I have huge knuckles like my dad." My voice trembled as I gazed at the ring he held out to me.

Ray steadied my left hand and slipped it on.

I stared at it. How could it fit so perfectly? And be so beautiful? Even in the fluorescent lighting of Costco, it sparkled like a meteor shower.

"What do you think?" Ray asked.

I answered with a kiss. Yes, right there in Costco. I could easily imagine our future. The wedding wouldn't be there, of course, but perhaps for our first anniversary Ray would say, "Want to go to Costco?"

And I wouldn't be able to think of anything more romantic than sitting across from him at a long, stainless steel table, eating a Polish dog and celebrating our supersized love.

— *Samantha Ducloux Waltz*



The Secret of Rugged Terrain

My baby's newborn squall pulled me from a deep sleep. I rubbed my eyes, pushed the covers back, and rolled from the comfort of our bed. Wake-up calls were so much easier a few years and several babies ago. We had five boys, and there were fifteen years between the oldest and youngest.

I bent over the bassinette and lifted my tiny son. Isaiah stopped crying; must've found the off switch.

"Is it morning already?" my husband, Lonny, asked from under our covers.

"It is now," I said.

Lonny sat up in bed, fluffed my pillow, and patted the mattress next to him. "Come here, you two," he said.

I handed him the swaddled newborn and curled in beside them. Isaiah settled into Lonny's chest. Lonny pulled the baby close, then tipped his own head and closed his eyes.

I admired their faces. The contrast was striking. Isaiah with his fresh, pink newborn skin. Unblemished. Dewey. Smooth. Lonny's complexion was tanned and rough. Lined. Like rugged terrain.

I kissed Lonny on the forehead and closed my eyes, too. As I huddled into the sweet warmth of my husband and son, I remembered back, long ago, when our marriage had been new and fresh — like the flesh of a newborn babe.

"Do you think this will last, Shawnelle? Being so happy?" Lonny asked.

We'd been married two weeks and were wrapped together in a deep, round futon chair. Our first apartment didn't have air conditioning, but we sat close anyway.

I took a bite of Lonny's cheese pizza. "Sure," I said. "Why shouldn't it?"

"Just seems too good to be true," he said.

I tousled his too-long hair. "Of course it will last."

But life came at us hard and fast. Lonny worked to finish college. I went to work for an elementary school near campus while he finished his degree. Then Lonny graduated, and we moved to mid-Michigan. New jobs. New community. I went back to school. A barrage of changes rushed at us, and we didn't know how to manage the stress together. We handled our own stuff in our own ways, and by the time we pulled that top-tier wedding cake from the freezer to celebrate our first anniversary, our marriage had grown chilly, too. We'd started to pick at one another, noticing the shortcomings and looking past the good things.

One day Lonny came home from work. Late. He'd missed dinner and been too busy to call. He kicked off his shoes, tossed his briefcase to the floor, padded to the dining room, and pecked me on the cheek.

"Sorry," he said. "Tough day. How was yours?"

“Long,” I said. “Will you please put your shoes in the closet? I’ve picked them up a dozen times this week.”

“Sure, after I grab something to eat,” he said.

First he was late. Then the shoes. “How about now?” I said.

“How about later?” he said.

“How about I toss them on the lawn?”

“How about you finish the trim in the living room? Geesh, Shawnelle, I can’t believe you painted the room and left the trim undone. Can’t you finish what you start?”

He plunked down his plate on the table, and we ate in silence. I wished we could talk, but I couldn’t guarantee that my words would be kind. I wanted them to be, but all I could think about were those darned shoes.

Such was our life. We weren’t unhappy. But we weren’t happy, either. We moved through life and time. Bought a house. Had a baby. There were good times, too, and neither of us wanted to bail. But we bickered constantly, and we were keenly aware of and quick to point out one another’s shortcomings. We went on like this for a while — drawing out the flaws and glossing over the good stuff.

We’d been married a couple of years when I woke one morning, plodded to the bathroom, and perched on the side of the tub. It had been a long, sleepless night. The baby had a marathon earache and hadn’t rested. I was still taking classes and had a test that afternoon. Lonny had worked late . . . again. I hadn’t studied. The cupboards rivaled Mother Hubbard’s. And the laundry was piled high.

I twisted the hot-water knob and rested my head in my lap while the water charged into the tub. When I lifted my head, I saw them. The socks. The dirty, grungy, left-on-the-floor athletic socks. And they weren’t alone. There were also jeans, a T-shirt, and underwear. My pulse quickened.

“Lonny,” I called. I hoped my agitation would stretch to the bedroom. “You left a pile of dirty laundry on the bathroom floor for me to pick up! How many times do I have to ask you?” My tone was sharp as glass as I poked at the lump of clothes with my bare toe. “I have so much to do today.”

There was no response from the bedroom.

I grabbed the clothes and stalked down the hall. I pulled open the closet door and flipped the lid on the hamper that stood inside. As I pushed the clothes deep into the hamper, a white slip of paper wafted from the wicker and settled at my feet. I bent to pick it up.

It was a grocery receipt, from Lonny’s jean pocket. My eyes roved over the faint purple print. Milk. Eggs. Bread. Lonny had worked late and done the shopping afterward — so I didn’t have to.

Suddenly, the socks didn’t seem like such a big deal.

I pushed the closet door shut and walked to the bedroom. I pulled back the covers on the bed and slid in beside my husband.

“Lonny,” I said. “Wake up. We need to talk.”

“What’s up?” he murmured.

“I need to tell you that I’m sorry. I’m sorry for looking at the socks instead of your heart. Will you forgive me?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. He sat up and squinted.

“I don’t always see the good man you are. I fuss over small things. I’m sorry. And I love you.”

“I love you, too. And you’re right. We do need to focus on the good in each other.” Lonny pulled me close. “We have a lot of work to do. But let’s start in an hour or so.” Then he gave me a gentle push. “Now, go away and let me sleep for a few more minutes. And look in the cupboard. Peanut butter Captain Crunch. Your favorite.”

Lonny was right. We did have a lot of work to do. But we rolled up our sleeves and pushed ahead. We’d found our secret. We’d seen our need to look at one another’s overall character — rather than the flaws.

That day was eighteen years ago. The years have blown by. We’ve learned to pull together. It didn’t come easy. We’ve had some tough times. But the reward has been sweet.

I listened for Isaiah’s soft, even breath. When I knew that he was sleeping, I got up, lifted him, and returned him to the bassinette. Then I snuggled in beside Lonny. He wrapped his arms around me. The way he has for a very long time.

Our marriage isn’t newborn. It’s not unblemished or fresh. It hasn’t always been smooth. But I’m glad. I wouldn’t want a newborn marriage again.

I’m happy for where we are.

I’m happy for where we’ve been.

There’s a lot of love along that rugged terrain.

— *Shawnelle Eliassen*



First Love

“Time for our walk,” he says. “Tide clock shows we’ve two hours before the beach disappears.” The morning sun crawls across our faces as we follow our black Lab through a gate of Inukchuks and across the meadow to a vine-covered shelter. My husband calls this hideaway our “Counting Room,” place to count our blessings. Blue herons, looking up from their breakfast of bass, stretch their necks in curiosity, then ignore two old folks.

Submerged in tranquility, we sit a while before wending our way through the woods and down to the shore. Whitecaps, as if in a hurry, thunder against the rocks and sand below the bluff, reminding me how quickly time has moved the years of our lives.

I look upon the face of the handsome man beside me and remember those years. Still riding around town on my bike and helping out at Ben’s, my dad’s lunchroom, I was just fifteen when I first met Bud. It was at a teen dance in town. He was older — eighteen — and had his girlfriend with him. But we walked home together that night, holding hands like two souls fulfilling a destiny.

Today, on his tired face I see all his eyes have seen. And much more. The wrinkles tell their stories: Stories of a crew-cut teenager who once considered becoming a priest but instead joined the Navy. Stories of a cocky, conceited young Navy pilot who always wore a Miraculous Medal while flying off Canada’s last aircraft carrier.

“Glory days,” he tells anyone who will listen. “Taking off and landing on Bonnie’s seven-hundred-foot runway was pure heaven. After the adrenaline rush, the calmness was incredible.”

We two became letter lovers. For years we shared stories of my studies and his days on the high seas. At first we wrote every Sunday afternoon. Then letters arrived daily. Sometimes his came in blue, tissue air letters posted at sea, other times stuffed into colorful envelopes with foreign postage. Jottings became journals. We helped one another through days of hard work — and nights of loneliness. Love evolved from deep friendship into true caring.

I see, too, on his face the story of a twenty-some-thing lad proposing to a nineteen-year-old student nurse in a tiny chapel of St. Patrick’s church. And the story of a honeymoon in an old 1954 Buick. I see a husband who cradled me in his arms and cried with me when our first-born baby died. And the enraptured awe upon that same face when he held each of our three healthy babies.

Upon his weathered face I see story lines of a lonely husband and father, who, after observing other nationalities with families in tow, wrote home asking his young family to pack up and join him on his “unaccompanied tour of duty” in a faraway land.

In Palestine, we lived a life that some would consider dangerous (a military coup and a plane hijacking), but the United Nations protected us. And as long as it remained reasonably safe, we vowed to keep our family together — moving from a house on a hill in Tiberias, Israel, overlooking the Sea of Galilee to a high-rise apartment in Damascus, Syria, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

At the end of those two years in the Middle East, I see a father driving along the coast of Turkey, telling his children stories of kings and queens and Roman soldiers as we all snuggled in our VW camper. I see us cooking octopus beside the Aegean Sea, swimming off the beaches of Dubrovnik, and camping outside the cities of Athens and Venice. I see him safely maneuvering his family of five through the mountains of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and to ports in France and England before sailing home on the *SS France*.

Under his furrowed brow, I see a protector who scoffed at the parenting trend of the seventies and eighties that recommended tough love for teenagers navigating the emotional minefields of changing hormones. Plunging into parenting with compassion, we tried desperately to figure out how much leeway to give while not overwhelming with rules and regulations. Many mistakes were made. “The fragile years,” we called them, and “the twisted storms of life.” Passion, even our love for one another was tested, relegated to the back burners.

“But no regrets,” he says, carrying the past with dignity. “We’ve lived and loved. Traveled. Dined with the best — even royalty. Time to nest a while,” he laughs.

Like a rural road map, tiny webs of sorrow criss-cross his ruddy cheeks, showing signs of life’s sad sagas: the deaths of his younger brothers, the casualties of carrier flying, and the early demise of close friends who shared his love of aviation. Even the loss of our time together while he was away in Canada’s capital is forever imprinted on his weathered face, a face etched with grief lines from many lonely nights.

But I also see the laugh lines beneath my husband’s heavy brows. Stories of a self-deprecating grandfather enjoying time with grandchildren: kaya-king on the bay, reciting poetry, spinning the same old yarns (over and over again), and spoiling them with pancake breakfasts topped with ice cream and chocolate chips and anything else needed to sweeten their young lives.

As I follow his footsteps down through the woods, I notice his shoulders a bit stooped, his pace a tad slower, his stride a little shorter. Too much time spent felling dead trees and lugging firewood. In Bud’s mind, he’s still twenty. But I can understand the strength that brought him to today, the stubbornness that kept him going. Never faltering, he trusted in small, everyday acts of loving kindness that continue to glue our lives together.

This headstrong, often cantankerous curmudgeon, this one-time member of Parliament, is my confidante. My soul mate. The sensuous person whose simplest touch still tingles my marrow. The man who encouraged me to pursue my university dreams, proudly applauding as I marched to the podium at age fifty. This gray-bearded gentle man is the lover whose arms guide me safely through the gates of life. The same gates through which tears and laughter flow freely.

Somewhere along the way, romantic love evolved into a more mature love and, although different, in many ways a much deeper love. Nowadays, we communicate without talking, disagree without hurting, hug for no reason at all, and dance if we want to.

I lengthen my stride in the sand to step carefully into his large footprints. He takes my hand, and we embrace. Closer now, I see much more than an old man’s face. I see a man who has allowed his heart to get in the way of living. A man who has a story of life, of our life, on his face.

I see my husband of fifty years. I see my first love. My last love. My forever love.

— *Phyllis Jardine*

This story was first published in *Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart* magazine, fall 2010.



Matchmaker

“She needs a mother.” The volunteer inclined her head toward the squirming ball of fur cradled in my arms. “She’s the last of a litter, you know. All the rest have been taken.”

“You’ve lost your family,” I whispered, gazing into the almond-shaped eyes of the white kitten. “You’re all alone. I know how that feels.”

As a familiar pain lanced my heart, I pulled the cat closer and marched to the front desk. “I want to adopt her. Now. I want to give her a home.”

Nestled in her cardboard pet carrier, Snowball serenaded me with plaintive meows as I drove through what passed for rush hour traffic in Camden, Maine. For my part, I kept up a steady stream of chatter, gentling my voice until she grew quiet. “There’s a nice screened porch. You’ll like that. Oh, and we get all sorts of birds, at least in the summer months. I don’t know about the winters. I’m from New York, you see. I only just moved here.” I hesitated, unwilling to admit, even to a cat, that coming to Maine had been a spur-of-the-moment decision made in desperation. And in grief.

When I turned onto Bay View Road, the calming blue expanse of the harbor came into view and I began to relax. “We’re home,” I said, pulling to a stop beside the hydrangea bushes that flanked the entrance of my shingled cottage.

Once inside, I opened the carrier. Although Snowball poked her head out the opening, she didn’t venture further.

“Better the devil you know, right?” I asked with a nod. “Trouble is, you can’t see you’re in a cage until you leave it behind.”

I scooped the kitten into my arms and held her trembling body close. “Come on, I want to show you something.” I made my way slowly across the room toward a wall dominated by floor to ceiling windows. “See?” I asked, holding her up to the glass. “That’s the ocean, honey. It’s where fish come from. Tuna and salmon and cod. You’ll try them all, don’t worry. And you’ll see seagulls, too.”

She looked around, her eyes scanning the sky as her tail flicked against my arm. Then she jumped down to sit before the window, tail curled around her body and pink nose pressed to the glass.

“It didn’t take you long to feel at home, did it?” My eyes skimmed the living room’s rich wood tones and creamy white furniture. “I don’t yet.” But then, I had more than a new home to get used to.

I’d been in Maine six months, and it had taken me two weeks before that to clean out the house in New York. One-hundred-ninety-five days in all. Marking the time since I’d lost my daughter had become sort of ritual, as though by counting the hours I hadn’t shared with her, I was keeping faith with the past.

Purring loudly, Snowball rubbed her head on my leg. “Thank you, honey,” I said through tears.

We made our way to the kitchen, where I opened a can of tuna. The cat attacked her dinner with gusto.

A little later, she made use of the litter box I'd devised out of a disposable lasagna pan and some shredded newspaper. Then she hopped back into her carrier and curled up for the night.

The next morning as dawn pearled the sky I came to a decision. When I phoned the shelter hours later the woman who answered was brusque.

"That information is confidential."

"I can't see why it would be," I shot back. "Look, I just want to find out who adopted the other cats in the litter."

"But why?" Her voice was spiced with annoyance.

"To make sure they're happy in their new homes. If not, I'm willing to take them."

"Why?" she pressed.

I drew a steadying breath. "To keep the litter together, to reunite the family."

I heard the sound of shuffling papers. "Well, one of the cats went to someone who's moved out of state. The other was adopted by Michael Quinn, the veterinarian who's restoring that white Federal across from the library. Michael serves on our board. I don't think he'd mind speaking with you."

"Come on, honey," I said, scooting Snowball into her carrier. "Let's go find your family."

The town of Camden hugs the mid-coast of Maine, much as it has for two centuries. The protected harbor that birthed a shipbuilding industry is now dotted with schooners, yachts, and kayaks. It's a civilized place where the tourists are well-mannered and the shops quaint. Picturesque houses line quiet streets that separate the sea from the mountains beyond.

I pulled into Michael Quinn's circular drive with some trepidation, regretting my impulse to bring Snowball.

Making my way toward a columned side porch, I saw a middle-aged man sitting at a wrought iron table. His thick black hair was flecked with gray and he wore wire-rimmed glasses, a white T-shirt, and worn jeans. "Good morning," I called out. After introducing myself, I explained why I'd come.

Fixing me with striking blue eyes, Michael cocked his head and asked, "You want my cat?"

"Well, no. Er, yes. I mean, I want to make sure you're happy with him."

"Are you from the shelter?"

"No," I said. "I adopted the last of the litter and —" I stopped, feeling like an idiot.

"And you want to reunite the family, if possible. If not, you just want to make sure the other cats are being cared for — right?"

"Yes, exactly," I said, relieved to be so easily understood.

A cool breeze ruffled the blond curls I'd never succeeded in taming, and as I pushed at them impatiently, I caught a flicker of interest on his face. When he stood up, the muscles beneath his shirt rippled and a voice in my mind reminded me that I was still a young woman.

"Well, come inside," he offered, gesturing toward the door. "But I warn you: I'm not giving up Louie."

“Louie?” I repeated, taking an awkward step forward. “You named him Louie?”

“For Louis Armstrong,” he explained. “The cat loves jazz.”

We stood together in the dimly lit foyer for a moment before a tuxedo black-and-white cat bounded down the stairs and came to rest at his owner’s feet.

Bending down to scratch Louie’s belly, Michael suggested, “Why don’t you get yours?”

“Mine?”

He cocked his head. “I assume you brought him with you?”

“Her, actually,” I corrected. “Snowball.”

While the cats chased each other through the house, paws skidding on the polished wood floors and flying as they batted each other playfully, Michael and I shared a pot of coffee, then a bottle of wine, and finally a casual dinner. He told me of his divorce, and I found the words to describe the night I’d lost Lucy.

“We were on our way to the animal shelter. My husband had died a year before, and I’d been working all the hours God sent to make ends meet. And to forget. But I’d promised Lucy a white kitten for her seventh birthday, so I left work early that day to take her. She’d even picked out a name: Snowball.”

My voice caught, but I made myself go on. “The truck came out of nowhere, plowed right into us. I was thrown clear and knocked out. When I woke up, flames were everywhere. I tried to get up but kept falling. So I crawled toward the car, screaming for Lucy. I managed to pull her free before it exploded. I felt her body shudder and held my breath, as though by refusing to live I could force her to.”

My voice fell to a whisper. “I remember her first breath. The clear scream of greeting all mothers waiting for. But her last breath, her last breath was as quiet as a sigh.”

Michael listened until the words and the tears slowed to a trickle. “And afterward, you decided to move here?”

I nodded. “We’d always talked about living by the water. Lucy loved Maine.”

“And you adopted the cat your daughter would have.”

“I didn’t intend to. Oh, I knew about the shelter here, but I’d avoided the place for months. I just couldn’t . . .”

He nodded in understanding, and I swallowed hard.

“Yesterday, I found the courage to go there,” I said. “Just to drop off some food.”

My eyes strayed to where Snowball had fallen asleep on the edge of the couch, her head hanging over the side and her tail tucked between her front paws. “She was just so cute,” I smiled at the memory. “I had to pet her. Then hold her. Well, one thing led to another . . .”

He nodded. “It was the same with me and Louie. I had no intention of getting a cat. Of course, he had other ideas. Fixed me with those big eyes of his, and I was lost.”

I shifted my gaze from the sleeping cats to his concerned face. It was a good face, I decided.

“You know,” he continued in a matter-of-fact voice, “we should get them together for play dates. That way, they won’t forget each other, and we can get to know one another.”

When I stiffened in response, he added hastily, “As friends. I mean, you’re new to town, and I’ve lived here forever. I could show you around.”

At the expectant look on his face, I nodded and the knot around my heart began to loosen.

Michael and I began spending time together, and our relationship grew so gradually, it’s difficult to know when we crossed the line from friendship to love. We had a simple wedding ceremony on the summit of a mountain overlooking the harbor town I’d come to think of as home. Michael moved into my house, and the comforting routine of our marriage helped wear smooth the jagged memories of my life before. When we were blessed with a child, I searched the solemn eyes of our infant girl and found nothing of Lucy. A part of me died that day, but another part began to heal.

Our daughter, Sara, is now fifteen and has grand plans: she wants to be a veterinarian like her father. Michael is thrilled at the thought of sharing with Sara his practice and stewardship of the shelter we now run.

Our cat, Louie, still makes an effort to run around the house, but most evenings he lounges before the fire waiting for us to rub his belly. The years have been less kind to Snowball. Arthritic and nearly blind, she rarely ventures beyond the quilts I scatter about the floor in a pattern meant to catch the sun as it moves throughout the day. Although my heart aches at the thought of losing her, I know that when she passes, Lucy will be waiting for her.

When Snowball hears my voice, she purrs in greeting and waits to be picked up. I hold her close and whisper her name, one that anchors me to the life I had before and reminds me of how blessed I am to have found Michael. Snowball, my little matchmaker.

— *Ariella Golani*



My Other Husband

I have been happily married for twenty-nine years . . . to two men. Fortunately, they both occupy the same body, so I'm not in danger of being carted off to prison anytime soon.

Husband number one's name is Fred — a hard-working mechanical engineer, quiet, reserved, an honorable man. Intelligent and analytical, he's a no-nonsense kind of guy on whom I can depend no matter what kind of crisis comes along. I am a free spirit, usually led by emotions, not logic; my response to most serious problems is to laugh and let God worry about them. Fred's is to weigh out the circumstances and calculate an appropriate course of action.

We are two very different personalities. So when people I know meet Fred for the first time, they are usually surprised. "He's so . . . serious," they say.

I just smile because they don't know my "other" husband, Freddie.

I'll give you a for instance. You know how boring grocery shopping is? Not with Freddie. When he comes with me, this is usually how it goes:

We walk into the market and Freddie says, "I wanna push the cart!"

"Why?"

"I'm the man; I push the cart."

"Okay. Whatever."

And the adventure begins. I'm standing there trying to figure out which soup is the best buy, and when I go to put the chosen one into the cart, Freddie runs about six steps ahead. So I run to catch up, and he sprints about eight to ten steps farther on. Before long, I'm chasing him up and down the aisles, and we're laughing like fools, and people are beginning to stare.

Finally, stifling a giggle, I grab the vehicle away from him. "Okay, mister, you've lost your cart-pushing privileges! I'm pushing the cart from now on."

"*Hmmph.*"

The minute I set my purse in the basket, Freddie jumps on the front — effectively stalling it where it stands.

"Get off the cart, Freddie."

"I wanna ride!"

"You're heavy. Get off!"

"You don't love me."

"Oh, for crying out loud. All right, but behave yourself."

I'm checking out the prices on the paper towels, and when I turn around, Freddie, now off the cart and

about fifteen feet away, is in his Michael Jordan mode — making basket after basket with assorted brands of toilet paper. There are now approximately twenty packages of tissue in my basket.

Trying not to laugh, and thus to encourage him, I yell, “*Stop that!*”

People are gathering to watch.

Freddie, all innocence, asks, “What?”

I put all the toilet tissue back on the shelf and continue down the aisle. Freddie has disappeared, thank goodness. For the next five minutes, I finish my shopping in peace.

At the checkout counter, the clerk is ringing up my groceries when I stop her. “Hey, those aren’t my ice cream bars.”

“Uh, they were in your basket, ma’am.”

“How did those four packages of Cheetos get in there?”

“Hmmm,” she says with a lifted eyebrow. “You might want to ask him.” She points at Freddie, who has suddenly appeared from out of nowhere, grinning like a hyperactive four-year-old.

I look at him suspiciously. “Where have you been?”

“Just messin’ around.”

The clerk waves for my attention. “So will you be wanting this package of chicken feet?”

“*Freddie!*”

At this point, Freddie gives me his most lovable grin and in his best Bart Simpson voice says, “Ha ha You love me!”

“No, I don’t. You’re a pain in the butt.”

“Yes, you do!”

I sigh. “Okay. I do. But I don’t have to like it.”

By now, the clerk and the three people behind us in line are laughing out loud.

In the car as we drive home, Freddie goes into his bet-I-can-drive-you-crazy mode, grabbing my knee, tickling the back of my neck, rolling my window up and down.

“Quit it, Freddie!”

The response is, of course, an escalation of the behavior — until I give him The Look, and he settles down.

All is quiet for the next quarter mile, then suddenly he says, “Ha ha!”

I groan. “Ha ha, what?”

“Ha ha!” he repeats, tickled with himself. “You’re married to me!”

So, you see, I have the best of what marriage can be. I have a husband who is a rock in every storm and a steadfast partner in a serious marriage. A husband who shows me he loves me with his hard work around the house and in his job, by handling our finances brilliantly, and displaying his affection frequently with a warm hug and a light kiss.

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