

The Triumph of Love Over Experience: A Memoir of Remarriage

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From Chapter Five

We try to keep our engagement a secret, but the very fact that Charlie and I have agreed to marry changes everything. The planning machine starts rolling – will I sell my house, should we renovate Charlie's, what about schools – and within a few weeks I sink into irritability. Everything Charlie suggests makes me angry, and then I realize I am blaming him for upsetting our lives. Months later Jess will ask, "He's a nice guy. Why did he ask you to marry him?" What he means, when I tease this apart, is that no nice person would do this to us – ask us to give up our home, our neighborhood, our life.

I try to explain this to Charlie: "I'm mad at you for wanting to marry me." He looks at me, his worry lines deepening: "I'm trying to make you happy." "I know," I say. "And it makes me mad as hell."

The first time I moved in with someone, it was easy. I broke my lease, rented a truck, and poof – three hours later I was living with my boyfriend. This time I feel like I'm launching a major military campaign. There's the question of housing, not just whether to live in his place or mine but in which jurisdiction, which school system, near which jobs and which ex-spouses. Will the children change schools, and if so, will the schools be good? If not, do we need to get them into private schools? Would it be better to keep one set of siblings stable in their home and neighborhood, or would it be better to disrupt everybody and put us all in a new space, as all the remarriage guides advise? And what about our finances? How will we sort out pensions, inheritance, property, and responsibilities? Will we write a prenuptial agreement, and if so, what will it say? All of these issues are simultaneously practical, financial, and emotional. We weigh dollars and feelings.

Aside from these practical problems, there are the pesky identity issues: If we default to living in Charlie's house, will I be strong enough after ten years of separation to live two blocks from my ex-husband? What name will I use – the one from my first marriage, which I kept so people would know I was the mother of my children – or Charlie's name, which might make my kids feel I was divorcing them? Maybe, I think, I will just retreat to my maiden name and vow eternal allegiance to myself. Underneath all this lurks the question of who I will be, and not just in name. For years I've reveled in the

identity of scrappy single mom, with independence as my strong suit. I've fixed flat tires in the snow, argued with unpleasant landlords, battled large insects and lived to tell the tale. Now, instead, I'm going to be a wife again. Someone cared for. Someone who could call her husband when she locks her keys in the car, instead of the locksmith. Someone who might get breakfast in bed on Mother's Day. Not scrappy but indulged. The thought is both unsettling and very attractive.

Charlie, who enjoys handling money, offers to take over the bills and medical claims when we marry. The thought of not having to file my own medical forms makes me fall in love with him all over again, but then I panic.

"What if I forget how to write a check?"

"I think it's like riding a bike. You won't forget how to write a check."

"What if I don't know where any of the files are when you die in a car crash?"

"You will know where the files are. And I'm not going to die in a car crash."

But I do worry. All my life I've sniffed at dependent women. My mother – the Navy wife who had babies and moved the household by herself when my father was at sea – raised independent daughters who could change the oil in their cars and manage their checkbooks. Being scrappy and inventive kept me afloat during the long years after my divorce, and it feels like letting go of the life raft to give it up.

And beyond all this looms the wedding and the honeymoon. We have to figure out what kind of service to have, in a church or a garden; whether to invite just family or open it up to friends; whether to have a fancy reception or a picnic where the boys can wear their beloved Hawaiian shirts. The complexity of my life has taken off in an exponential arc. I stack files by the phone in the kitchen: Selling My House; Renovation at Charlie's; Private School Applications; Wedding; Move; Honeymoon.

Eloping never looked so good. If it weren't for the kids, who need to watch us get married publicly to fully understand it, we might just slip away...