

FROM INSIDE CHINA

中国报告系列

Real Marriage

裸婚

The Truth of Intimacy,
Friendship and Life Together

介末 著

Nicholas Manthey 译

中国出版集团
中译出版社

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Part One

— Six Years of Marriage

Premonition

THEY TALK ABOUT the seven-year itch. I've always thought, "So what about the sixth year?"

Now I know: in the sixth year, we were both wondering if we'd itch by the seventh.

If the itch was light, we could just scratch. If it was strong, we could rub each other. If it was unbearable, we'd just slip off our shoes. Who was it that said spouses are like shoes?

I never thought that six years would go by this quickly. I ought to write something as a record of our ordinary married life.

It's because of its ordinariness that it deserves to be recorded.

Neither of us like *sturm und drang*. Neither of us like crucibles, or gauntlets.

Time makes us grow into each other like tumors. Separation means mutilation. Halves of lives are lost.

And so we've chosen to stay together; we both love life.

If we stay together till our hair goes white, this writing will become a milestone. If not, it will become the epitaph for our graves.

On a wet and clammy night, there was not a sound other than

the music from inside the car.

"What if we don't make it to the seventh year?" I asked my pig of a husband.

"I can definitely make it," Pig said, glancing over at me.

"Whatever it takes?" I shot back.

"Whatever it takes!" replied Pig.

I'm apt to neither overlook nor spare. "What if we are both weak and fatigued, and just could not make it?" I asked.

Pig responded in the same way every time I became unreasonable. He would turn the highly praised profile of his face toward me, lightly tug on my ears and say, "You're so cute, thinking up silly things all day. Why don't you think up some ways to make money?"

This is my husband. I call him "Pig."

Everything on earth, once it entered his brain, became simplified into a single, plain reason: money.

He firmly believed that the base determined the superstructure.

I really admired him for this. When it comes to money, I spend it like it's water. As for earning money, I cherish each cent as if it's gold.

I think Pig admired me, too. He would often wonder how strange it was that the total of my bank account would go unchanged for a whole year, unable to accumulate a single, additional penny.

I said to him, "Pig, sometimes I am really thankful to you, sometimes I really adore you, sometimes I really despise you, sometimes I really hate you, sometimes I really trust you, sometimes I really want to know how my life would be different if I hadn't met you. Sometimes I am really panic-stricken, thinking of enduring a life without you."

"That's a lot of 'really' in a row," he said. "You're going to be this

bipolar till you get old.”

I sighed. I have no choice. If I can't change my husband, and my husband won't change himself, then I have to change.

This is how disagreeable of a woman I am — a fortune telling website once gave me the prediction, “Your body is at rest, but your mind is unsettled.” To put it more academically, “Life fills you with dissatisfaction and the future fills you with dread.” What's more, I am so emotional and sentimental that I am on the brink of a mental schism.

I often assisted Pig in lamenting his bad luck. He married me like a chivalrous knight in a moment of blind devotion, and from that moment he has had to face my tortuous inquisitions, full of extreme questions regarding life, death, love and hate.

Men I've known have often asked, sympathetically, “Is your husband getting along all right?”

Every time I stood up for him like a revolutionary, “What suffering he bears makes all men happier. At least this way, I don't have to engage some other random man in painful dialogue.”

Recently I've felt anxious. Life has become too tranquil.

There is no more quarrelling like a violent storm.

I'm a woman who fears peace on earth. Still water fills me with a deeper dread than does a raging tempest.

I'm afraid of affection going out like a receding tide, like color slowly fading from an old painting that becomes more diluted until one day, all that remains is not its original whiteness, but a permanent yellow stain. If life was really like this, I wouldn't bother waiting until that day. I'd just take the painting and rip it to shreds. Even in pieces, it will still be a painting.

One Saturday, we went to a restaurant nearby to get a bite to

eat. We were wearing black T-shirts, eating porridge to our heart's content. The potatoes there were like huge, fragrant stones.

"I don't like irregularly shaped swimming pools," I said. "Whenever I do backstroke, I'm afraid of hitting my head."

"Yeah, me too," said Pig.

"I don't like long, narrow pools either," I continued. "They make me feel like I'm going to drown in an ocean tunnel."

"Yeah, me too," said Pig.

"I like big, square, open-air pools under the sun. The kind with a slanted bottom that goes from 1.5 meters to 2 meters at each end."

"Yeah, me too," said Pig.

We looked in each other's eyes, seeing ourselves reflected, laughing like a pair of pigs, holding our round bellies as we giggled.

Like all prosperous marriages, ours is like a ragged piece of old clothing. It breathes, fits well, and is soft. Most of the time, you can't even tell you're wearing it.

But if you ever change and put on a brand new one, you will feel stiff, like you're wearing a shelf. I have no patience to spend the time to make it feel old.

In the evening, Pig was stuffing his lunchbox with rations for the next day's lunch at work. He was packing it like it was the last food he would ever see.

I yelled at him, "You Pig! You've stolen all of my beautiful potatoes!"

Two dimples appeared on his face as he spoke, "I've also stolen your heart."

Unable to escape his grasp, I was trapped in a happy gloom.

Anniversary

“WHEN DID YOU get married?” asked my friend May. I could not remember. I need to go check my marriage certificate, which is as undoubted as Mao’s doctrine.

May said today was her eight year anniversary.

I asked her how she felt.

“I felt reminded that I’ve been a wife for eight, full years. Other than moving into a new house, I feel nothing.”

Later on, I heard that she was busy at home putting together a romantic dinner.

Crystal suggested that she go nude under the apron. I suggested she should draw on the apron a pair of massive tits.

When I was in the south of France in what seemed like the region of Provence, I came across a road-side stall that had an apron for sale. The front of the apron had a picture of a full-bodied woman with a large chest and strong legs, wearing lace underwear and garters. The price was thirteen euros. But in a moment of weakness, I let the apron go. When I got to Paris, I searched stall after stall to no avail. There was not a single apron like it in sight.

My regret ran deep—I wanted to give it to Pig as an anniversary gift, so that one day while wearing it in the kitchen, I could run in and take a picture of him.

In a way, marriage produces more special occasions. Each one is like a Christmas tree, and you feel compelled to decorate it.

Before getting married, I was a smooth killer. Whenever a special occasion came around, I felt like a shark smelling blood in the water for the first time. I was terribly vain. My favorite kinds of gifts were of the superficially flashy variety, ones that I could show off while walking down the street. But at heart, I'm still a simple village girl. I've never expected anyone to give me something lavish like a convertible I could race through red lights with. I'd rather have someone send me a bouquet of flowers to my office while I'm at work. Thinking about it now though, I feel disgraced. Everyone knows that if you show off flowers to the world, you've never seen a diamond or a mansion.

For our first Valentine's Day together, Pig brought home a bunch of red and pink roses. As he walked in the door, he received my greeting thusly, "Why did you waste so much money on roses? Are you insane? You've been ripped off."

Pig, on the contrary, was very pleased with himself. "Don't worry, they were only thirty *yuan*! I told the shopkeeper, 'It's already eleven. In one hour, you won't have anyone looking to buy. You might as well sell them to me.'"

Even so, I still think a bottle of shampoo is more worthy of thirty *yuan*.

Look, getting married is like a journey. A journey where you start in heaven and fall down to earth. As we progressed, our gifts tacitly changed from elegant flower vases to kitchenware. You don't

need roses to survive, but you do need food. We were never so poor that we went hungry, but we did get incredibly lazy. Love is like climbing a mountain, and marriage is when you get to the top. After that, you can stroll about as slowly as you please.

After already gifting wallets, belts, T-shirts, shirts, razors, leather shoes, slippers — even socks and gloves — I started to wonder, “Is it appropriate to give long underwear for an anniversary gift?”

Pig was even worse than me. After gifting chocolate, flowers and perfume, he proceeded to repeat these same gifts in the same order. He did this several times. He was like a long-distance runner doing endless laps in his lane, determined to wear down my will.

I’d really like to know who invented anniversaries. Every kind of commemorative occasion puts human memory and imagination to the ultimate test.

Fortunately, humans naturally strive for simplicity.

After only one year of marriage, our celebrations were limited to both of our birthdays, Valentine’s Day and our wedding anniversary — only four special days out of the whole year. Yet still, we both deeply regret the fact that we weren’t born on the same day in the same year. If we were, we could drop one of the days and only have to celebrate three times per year.

Going on like this left us no room to be lazy. We racked our brains trying to think of ways to surprise each other, creating small joys to break up the monotony of life like how small flowers dot the great grassy plains.

This is what Pig the money worshiper did.

“Happy birthday! I got a car you!” he said, handing me a key.

He did the same thing on our wedding anniversary. But when he gave me the key that time, he told me that he bought a house.