

One

Our Marriage Day

I had rolled over in bed earlier that morning and given Hannah a kiss, as I do every morning before getting up. But this day was going to be different. “Happy Marriage Day,” Hannah said from out of her sleep, returning my kiss softly, lingering with it more than usual. “Happy Marriage Day,” I said, feeling an awkwardness about how the day would go, the high expectations, fearing what might be different after the big event. What would it do to us? I wondered. We had been okay as a couple so far. We had come a long way. We’d learned how to get on lovingly with each other, sometimes with pain and effort, but we were doing all right. Now, after thirty-two years together, we were going to change things. Why mess with it? I thought. I had visions of couples who build a new house so they can live happily ever after, and then when it is done, they break up. I did not want that to happen to Hannah and me.

“Do you think we’ll be okay?” I asked my love as she lay beside me in the warm bed.

“Of course. Don’t worry. It’s just City Hall. I’m going back to sleep,” she said.

Leaving her comfortably under the covers and stepping out of the room to get dressed, I thought about the first time I had been married, back when I was in graduate school in the 1970s. The man I married would later choose to be gay, and I would choose lesbianism, but we did not know that then. At the time, I think we did what was conventionally expected of us—fulfilling dreams for how we ought to be, for the next step we should each take in life. I did not, even then, believe in the necessity of marriage. It seemed to me too full of expectations about how two people ought to behave together, and it seemed to confer a higher status than that which would befall me as an individual unmarried woman. But only after we got married did the momentousness of it hit me. I looked down at my gold wedding band and suddenly thought, “This should not be.” I should not be getting extra privileges because I am now married. People should not be looking at me differently—as a more desirable woman, perhaps, because I am married to a man, because someone wants me. But most of all, it was the extra rights and privileges that bothered me—the legal and financial advantages, the sense that it was viewed as better to be in a couple than alone. I thought that all the same advantages should be given to persons as individuals. The couple should not be the more valued unit. Thus, as I looked at the ring on my finger, although I liked it—a classic thin, gold band like my mother had—I did not like what it stood for, even as I wore it proudly, basking in the social acceptance it offered.

Joel and I were married in my parents’ backyard. I wore a white dress with a short skirt and a lacy top with a high neck, and purple shoes. Joel wore a boldly colored flowered tie and a pin-striped blue suit. After we had said our vows beneath a chupah under tall trees, standing across from the rabbi, Joel smashed the traditional glass and the family and friends made sounds of approval, calling out “Mazel Tov” and clapping for us as we walked back toward the house while a string quartet played. We had stepped just out of earshot when Joel turned to me. “We can

break up at any time,” he said. “This doesn’t have to be forever.” I felt relieved. Those were my sentiments exactly, knowing what often happened with couples. I then went back to mingling with the guests.

It was going to be quite different now, I thought—no white dress or flowered tie, no man, no audience, no reception in the yard. Thank goodness. But it still was a ceremony, a charade in some sense of that word—a performance that might have little relation to my inner reality. Hannah and I would have to go to City Hall. We would have to sign papers. I was not looking forward to that—though I was looking forward to going to the beach afterward with our dogs.

I deeply loved Hannah and I wanted to keep being with her. But there was something about the romanticization surrounding marriage, the sentimentality, the sense of forever—as if a statement of vows could make that happen. There was something about the unconventionality of everything Hannah and I had experienced together. Not only were we lesbians, but I was me—not quite fitting in, not like everyone else, uncomfortable often in my own skin. Would marriage make me more comfortable, more secure? Would it make us happier? I wondered.