

THE OPPOSITE OF COMFORTABLE

The Unlikely Choices of an Immigrant Career Woman

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Excerpt – Chapter 2

From childhood, I was taught to remain calm and composed in potentially hostile situations. My mom hoped that by the time I reached adulthood, her teaching would sink in and I would demonstrate an ability to recover quickly from most of the unfortunate situations that life threw at me. She always said that when someone was calm, they could think and respond rationally to a challenging situation. But I assume she never considered a situation in which my whole life was about to change. In that case, would she think it is possible to stay calm? And what would she consider a rational response?

A month earlier, my husband had been selected for a two-year, multi-organ transplantation fellowship at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. In medicine, specialties are a significant part of diagnosis and treatment, and surgeons tend to choose a specialty according to their interest, financial objectives, or market demand. The transplant fellowship was aligned with my husband's interest as a few years before we met, he spent one year of his residency at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York as part of the traditional student exchange program employed by the hospital where he worked. During that year, he was exposed to transplantation surgery and was captivated by the challenging, technical, and astonishing nature of this field.

On a Saturday morning, we were sitting on the couch, having coffee; he sat with his laptop open on his lap, while I read the newspaper, and our son was playing on the carpet next to us.

Suddenly, my husband pushed his computer to the side and bounced to his feet, spilling coffee onto the carpet. Covering his mouth with his hand, he called out, "Wow," while my son and I stared at him in bewilderment.

"Wow what?" I asked when I came back from the kitchen with a paper towel in hand. During the minute I was gone, his facial expression had shifted from ecstatic to gloomy.

"I was accepted to the fellowship program in New York," he said without looking at me.

That statement was my cue to congratulate him on his great achievement, but I couldn't.

When he had applied for a transplantation fellowship at one of the most active transplantation centers in the world, I knew that if he were selected, it would be a lifetime

opportunity, one that was not open to every surgeon and one that would yield both professional growth and competitive advantage. I realized that it would have been foolish to forego this opportunity.

What's more, as his wife and someone who cared for him deeply, I didn't want him to reject an option that would affect his entire future. I could identify with the situation, because we had a lot in common. We were both ambitious, target-oriented, motivated individuals that were unwilling to settle for less than what we believed was possible for us to achieve. People with those characteristics cannot peacefully walk away from a chance to reach their dreams. Yet, I believed that although we were married, we were two individuals with different needs, aspirations, and hopes for the future.

To be honest, I thought the likelihood that he would be accepted to the fellowship was slim due to the program's competitive nature, so I had promised myself not to bring up my point of view until we knew the answer. When he was accepted, it was my time to speak up.

To work in the United States, my husband had to receive a visa. It was widely known that not all visas are created equal, and they certainly did not promise liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Some of them could lead to years of genuine misery. My husband was expected to receive a J-1 visa, which was an exchange visitor, non-immigrant visa. It allowed an individual to participate in a work-and-study-based exchange visitor program. Unlike other visas, such as the H or the O visa, the individual had to leave the United States immediately after the program ended and return to the country of last residence for two years before applying for any other visa or for a non-immigrant status.

The implications of the fellowship were well-defined. I would have to leave my career, my home, my family and friends, and my country, with the hope I could get everything back upon my return. If I wished to keep our family together, I would have to freeze my life for two years and thaw it out two years later. "I'm so proud of you! This is terrific!" I finally said after a few moments of silence.

I did not tell him then that I was also proud of my accomplishments, and that I felt my work on my project wasn't done yet. I might be able to find a job in my field in New York, but there was a good chance companies would not hire a project manager with an expiration date.

"You only have two years in New York, and it'll take time for me to find a job," I said solemnly.

My husband looked back at me and met the displeased expression that was flashing across my face. He inhaled deeply and rationally explained, "There are two options available; both are far from perfect for you. The first option is that you'll join me in New York and try to find a job for the two years or maybe decide to take some time off. The

second is that you'll stay here, follow your career path, and become a single mother for two years. It's your decision to make. I cannot imagine what it would be like if you both stayed behind. There's time to think about it."

He had a way of stripping away any illusions I might have, and serving me the truth on a clear platter so I could see it from each and every angle. Sometimes this approach helped me make the right decision. Other times I really hated it, especially when I wanted to daydream or fantasize about a future in which things fell into place and life was comfortable and secure. I knew then if I said what I wanted to say, we would end up trapped in a huge fight, because I was angry, frustrated, and terribly annoyed. I wasn't upset with him as much as I was upset about the situation.

It's a professional takeover. In business, a takeover is usually a hostile situation when a person or a company ousts a firm's management and takes control of the company. In my case, my career was about to be ousted by my husband's career, not to mention our family. I remembered in hostile situations I had been advised to remain calm and composed, but at that moment, my primitive instincts came to the fore, and my lessons of restraint were unequal to the challenge, and I started freaking-out.

My son had gotten bored playing with his bricks and took a few wobbly steps towards me, pointing outside with his finger. It was great timing: I needed to leave the house and walk. Every time I had to process information or think about a solution, I would take a walk.

We lived in Kfar Sirkin, a scenic village located in the center of Israel east of Tel Aviv. It was surrounded by lush Eucalyptus trees, old quaking Aspens, and orchards with the sweetest oranges you can find. We had moved there a few months before our son was born, because it was between Jerusalem, where my husband worked, and Tel Aviv/Petach-Tikva, where I worked. I loved how quiet and peaceful the small village was. After a frantic day of work, I enjoyed coming back to this little piece of heaven.

I dressed my son in warm clothes, took his water bottle, placed him in his stroller, and started walking. *Years ago, an offer to live for two years in New York City would have been a dream come true.* I remembered the first time I had traveled to the United States in 1994. My boyfriend and I had spent a month traveling up and down the east coast. The city was the port between every trip, whether we went north or south, and each time I couldn't wait to get back to Manhattan. It was love at first sight, and after returning home to Israel from that trip, I felt a constant longing, and I knew one day I would return. I didn't know how, or what might happen that would allow me to live there, but I knew I would return.

Six years after that visit, the boyfriend and travels had been replaced by a husband, a baby, and a demanding career. I didn't think as often about living in New York. But now my husband had accepted a fellowship, and my desire to live in the city became possible. However, my early twenties' romantic plan to live abroad seemed daunting, when I realized what I would have to leave behind.

I was the project manager and analyst of a new Knowledge Management system at the largest telecommunication firm in Israel. I was responsible for every single aspect of the product, from the analysis stage to the design, quality assurance, final production, and implementation throughout the organization.

Knowledge Management was a relatively new concept, and the organization had to go through a transformation, which included knowledge sharing between departments in a way that had never been done before. Not only was I needed to manage the technical aspects of the system, I also had to find my inner psychologist to handle the human factor embedded in the project. Dealing with people was much more challenging than dealing with the actual project at hand, and my job was to make the system essential to the employees, as much as it was to the organization. I understood collaboration among the organizational departments was vital, and I had worked hard to make colleagues understand the concept and engage in the process.

The resistance to the idea of the system had initiated immediately after I was employed and introduced to the different departments. The call center director had understood the importance of having a system that would replace the thick binders representatives were using, eliminating the need to print thousands of pages each time there was a price change or a sale update, significantly reducing call times, and enabling the company to provide a higher service quality to customers. Everyone else thought they were about to get fired.

After a few hopeless attempts to assure employees layoffs were not planned any time soon, I stopped telling them what I planned to do and started showing them what I had in mind. I arranged a tour bus, selected twenty-five key employees from various departments, and took them on a field trip to the company I had worked for previously, where I was the content development manager of the first Knowledge Management system in Israel.

It was a pivotal trip, after which things had started to change quickly. Soon enough, they were urging me to finish the design of the system. I initiated a weekly meeting that included executives from every department, as well as representatives from the call center. In the meeting, I presented the system's progress and shared the new screens and features, which were based on surveys and hours of interviews about the call center's needs and wants. Those meetings had led to the establishment of a new organizational culture. One that was built on trust, mutual goals, collaboration, and understanding that success was the result of a true partnership. I had managed to make the employees from different departments feel responsible for and personally care about the system's success.

Every day, I went to work feeling a sense of accomplishment. I knew I had commenced an organizational change and had opened the door to a new era of knowledge sharing and future data mining. The implementation of the system throughout the organization was only the first step. For the last nine months, my team and I had been working hard to

enforce data sharing, finding better ways of data sorting, fixing bugs in the system, and making lists of present and future demands.

My life was active. I was always busy. My schedule was full, and every little movement on the field needed to be carefully monitored, because it influenced other aspects of my life. In the few minutes I had to myself, usually while commuting to work, I thought my life was going according to my plan. I was married, a mom, and a career woman—the holy trinity of women in the twenty-first century. The three expressions were truly distinct, but the unity of them created the essence. I must confess I felt in control, much more than I felt blessed. It was a unique feeling of power, like living with a small but steady stream of adrenaline in my body, and it was addictive.

Yet now, I had a decision to make. I had to choose between leaving my career and living without my husband for two years. But there was another variant in the equation, and that was my son.

I had arrived at the playground and let my baby boy out of the stroller. I gently held up his soft little hands and helped him walk towards the slides set. We were the only people at the playground. Although it was overcast, a few rays of sunlight had sneaked through the clouds and made the sand sparkle. It was quiet, and I watched my son playing in the sandbox. Suddenly, he gazed up and murmured, “Dada.”

I turned around and saw my husband walking towards us. “Did you hear him? He just called you Dada,” I yelled with excitement.

My husband kneeled on the glittering sand, hugged our son, and nuzzled his neck.

“Yes, Dada. I’m your dad.” My husband, who is rarely emotional, nodded, with tears in his eyes.

I watched them walk hand in hand out of the playground. I saw a man and a little boy who were sharing a newfound relationship. My husband was new to fatherhood, my son was new to the world, and together, they were discovering what it meant to be connected to each other. I took a deep breath of chilled wintry air and stepped behind them. I reckoned the fellowship was scheduled to start at the beginning of July. I had five months to think things through before making up my mind, but I had a crunching gut feeling that any decision I would make would utterly change my life.