

## **Amy And Ali Get Married**

*Our marriage is not just a piece of paper*

*Our marriage is many pieces of paper*

First, a letter via the US Embassy in Bayan,  
by appointment. First, a letter with signatures  
and stamps vouching Amy is presently  
unmarried so able to marry Ali who is allowed  
(but will not take) three more wives  
after this first marriage, his to Amy

This letter in hand, Amy takes a number

251

waits under fluorescent light in a big room  
before she is redirected to a small room  
off to one side, the ladies' waiting room  
which provides women privacy from stares  
and which is also mostly ignored. She sits  
alone, watching through the doorframe  
all the men go to the counters. She calls Ali  
to say she doesn't think anyone will  
remember her here. She returns to the big  
fluorescent room and the electricity flickers,  
the red number counter goes black, the lights  
hum back on but no one is counting whose  
turn it is

She waits with letter in hand so she can  
marry the Lebanese man she didn't imagine  
when she left Illinois five years ago. She waits  
among men who shuffle around her to make  
their way to a counter where papers are  
thumbed. She waits until the red number  
counter blinks on and now

1083

she has missed her  
turn! She weaves, nudges her way forward,  
shows her number

251

smiles winningly  
and waits for the man to look at her letter,  
reach for a stamp, sign it so she can chase  
the next piece of paper. But the man doesn't

reach for a stamp or pen. He looks up at Amy who is still smiling and he says, Go to America, get this stamped, come back

*No*

and I will stamp

*No*

Amy leaves the big fluorescent room, walks into midday winter, calls Ali who arrives in his car, leaves it running while they sit in the front seat thinking how to get married now

Ali says, Let's pretend we are ready. Let's make an appointment. The sky seems right for a wedding day. The court is twenty minutes away. They have a manila envelope of papers and photocopies of papers. It must be enough to get married so he calls with a list of their papers. While he is listening he looks at Amy, thinks how blessed *this* is his life, thinks how tomorrow he wakes up next to his wife

The woman on the phone finishes her list (of the documents they have ready in the manila envelope on the dashboard) and promises, You make appointment bring documents, then you marry, *inshallah*

At the courthouse  
an Egyptian woman\*

\*she was not Egyptian

looks at the papers  
looks at Amy  
looks at Ali  
and says it is  
impossible

(This may be the  
woman Ali spoke to  
who said it is possible,  
*inshallah*)

The Egyptian woman wears a sheer black headscarf that flutters when she pushes her rolling chair away from the desk to see about this American woman,

what she needs to marry an Arab man, why she needs  
to marry an Arab man. She thinks this question  
hard enough to make the American woman feel  
the question. She thinks this hard enough to make  
the Arab man hear but he is deaf. He is also, she sees,  
Shi'a. He is Shi'a in a land of Sunni. It is too bad for him  
she thinks and her cheeks warm

She must convert, the Egyptian woman says to Ali  
who looks at Amy who looks at him. Amy has left  
conventional bounds of religion. The Egyptian woman  
says, If you were Sunni she would not convert, it is not  
for Sunni marriage to other but you are Shi'a, she must  
convert to marry. Briefly, Amy thinks of how quickly  
men and women, men and men, women and women  
marry at courthouses in places far away

do we choose whom we love  
when we meet  
do we choose whom we love  
when we know  
our religion sex culture  
language gender will  
sadden challenge offend  
(some or many) but we love  
and say so, do we choose

Later, Amy will remember the cleaning man  
wearing a sage uniform with brown trim,  
who stood at the doorway holding a push broom,  
and it will seem he was sent from Bangladesh  
for just this day. Cleaning men can know many  
things like how to expedite a prescription or  
which elevator clunks at the eighth floor or  
that there is a way for an American woman  
to convert across the road. The man follows  
Amy and Ali to the shadowed hall and speaks  
Arabic to Ali, to say there is an imam he knows  
who will help

Ali will not lose reverence for his wife  
Not in the paperwork or conversion or up the  
stairs or down or across the road or back or  
while waiting alongside the divorces or

when the voice was firm or when the voice  
cajoled, he will not lose reverence for Amy

The cleaning man delivers Amy and Ali to  
the imam who asks is Amy willing, who leads  
the couple to his office where two other men  
witness words Amy repeats but does not  
understand. She stands with one finger pointing  
at the ceiling, wonders what counts if you  
mispronounce a syllable at the back of your  
throat and then it is done, she is converted  
Ali has tears in his eyes and nods when the  
imam says, You may teach her about Allah later

The Egyptian woman is not happy at the paper  
conversion. *Haram!* She speaks Arabic to Ali  
who shakes his head and says, in English, Now we  
are ready. The Egyptian woman purses her lips,  
picks through their papers like she knows what  
is still missing because she knows what is still  
missing. She looks at Amy and says, Now you  
are Shi'a, your father must give permission!

Amy and Ali are a play in the courthouse,  
each scene shaped by the same motivation,  
each scene building tension, comic frustration  
Their audience is small but loyal. The cleaning man  
meets them again in the hall where Amy tilts her  
head back to not cry. The cleaning man also knows  
a judge who will sign as her father

This must be the last part but it isn't

The judge's chamber is painted white, the ceiling  
tiles stained yellow from smoke. He sits at a  
giant wood veneer desk that is nearly empty  
Against the walls are cheap black leather  
couches that make noises when the men who are  
sunk there shift weight or reach for tea  
set on a low table. The judge waves his hand at  
the cleaning man who gestures to Amy and Ali  
who stand in the doorway. Amy cannot move  
one more step, is glad she is not asked any  
questions, is glad the men only glance at her

before returning to tea or cigarettes. She absolutely cannot move one more step, she feels this in her toes and tries to make her face bright and open like she wants only a marriage, but she feels in her toes she wants more than that now. She wants a good marriage that lives as long as she

The judge listens to the cleaning man, calls for a piece of paper, asks Ali a question, looks away from Amy, agrees to be her father for this

But the Egyptian woman has one last triumph, her cheeks again warm when she says, This judge who signs as your father is not cannot marry you, how would that be. You must come back

So

One week later they return. The sky looks like as much like a wedding day sky as any other sky and the Egyptian woman's sheer black headscarf flutters as before but she will not look at Amy or Ali when she pushes her roller chair away from the desk, clacks across tile, disappears for ten minutes, returns with a paper cup of Nescafe, scooches the roller chair so her belly touches the desk. The Egyptian woman does not remember Amy and Ali, looks up with blank eyes, shakes her head

Amy refuses  
to play. She says loudly, You know who I am  
Do not pretend. You know who we are  
We are here for our appointment. We are  
getting  
married  
today.

The audience knows the Egyptian woman will mark other victories as the day goes  
The audience knows the Egyptian woman will think of Amy and Ali again when another American woman comes to marry another Arab man and the audience knows the

Egyptian woman will hold her tongue between  
her teeth until its beast nature calms

Today Amy and Ali marry. Yes they marry, but  
first the divorces because judges don't keep  
divorces waiting. Amy and Ali are in love in a  
room of husbands and wives who are not or  
are close to not anymore. Surrounding a husband  
are mothers and aunts. Surrounding a wife are  
mothers and aunts. Ali laughs, corrects his  
face, tells Amy he wishes she understood the  
terrible things the families are saying

Today Amy and Ali marry. The ceremony is  
quick, stumbling. Ali must pay Amy, to marry  
her, but he has no money so Amy gives him  
eight dinars from her wallet to give to her and  
that detail is recorded. At the end, Amy must say  
what she wants, a condition of the marriage,  
but she does not expect this question and does  
not know what to say except

I demand camels!

I am marrying an Arab,  
shouldn't I have camels?

They laugh but Amy thinks. She isn't asking  
for an apartment or a Porsche or jewelry, she  
isn't asking what she knows comes, fidelity  
friendship love, she isn't asking what she hopes  
but cannot count, the years or children or joy,  
but there is one thing

Remove your neck tattoo, she  
says and Ali touches English cursive at his  
throat and before judge, Allah and witnesses,  
agrees. His eyes fill with tears. They are  
married now they are married

*Sarah Marslender*  
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