

## COMMUNITIES

## Wedding in the shadowed valley

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*Credit: Istock, photo illustration by Shaun C. Gibson*  
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When I got married, my husband was in the midst of a slide into bipolar disorder that would last for years, nearly kill us both, and ultimately end our marriage. I hadn't told many people about what was going on. Nor had I thought to reconsider my decision to get married. We had already been together for five years, after all. The wedding felt like an acknowledgment of something that had already happened rather than a fundamental change.

That morning, we carved out enough time to hike up our south hill and sit quietly. We were building a house together in a New Mexico river valley whose lushness amid the desert had seduced me the first time I'd hiked through it, long before I'd met the man I was now marrying. Together, we'd returned, bought the land, built a bridge to reach it, and now, for our wedding reception, we were about to raise the walls of our house. We had been pushing, pushing, pushing all summer to get the frame ready so we could stack the straw bales to form the walls. Increasingly, that had meant that I was pushing, pushing, pushing — along with taking care of my husband-to-be. My body felt taut and empty as a drum as we walked up the hill, with only the resilience and ignorance of youth to power me.

We planned to say a few things about each other as part of the ceremony, but I hadn't yet pulled my thoughts together amid the frantic preparations. That half-hour on the hilltop was my only time to do it. We sat there together as the sky brightened behind us, looking out across the Rio Grande Valley, my beautiful, wounded beloved and I.

It was the first time I'd sat still in weeks. The early morning chill seeped beneath my shell of determination, bringing a sudden, unwelcome awareness: I was terrified.

What was I doing, marrying a crazy person? We were supposed to be a happy couple, joyfully joining our lives together, but as I looked ahead, all I could feel was fear and exhaustion. I had no idea what I was going to say about him during the ceremony. I glanced over and his face looked vague, lost, its edges blurred with insecurity. I no longer knew what was illness and what was him — or even if the question made sense. I crouched on a little rock, my arms wrapped around my goosebump-covered knees.

I tried to blink my eyes clear. Our little village snaked along the river below, and the ribbon of green stretched out across the barrancas toward the Rio Grande. Cerro

Pederal's pig snout poked up through the Jemez Mountains way across the great valley where 35 million years before, the continent had been ripped open and wrenched apart, the wound slowly healing, slowly becoming this place where I was now staking my tiny claim.

I shifted slightly and waggled my feet, making wing marks in the pinkish-brown dirt. All the moments of our relationship suddenly seemed to exist at once, history engraved upon us just as it was on the landscape: The day we first met, running through the hall together after realizing we'd been waiting in the wrong classroom. His voice, slicing through the testosterone-driven clamor of our study group, saying, "Wait, guys, I think Julie's idea might work." His arms wrapping around me for the first time, the smell of his sweat, and the sudden knowledge that my life was about to change. My sobbing so intensely I wondered if I might suffocate, while he massaged my sinuses and stroked my hair. His recent wide-eyed innocence when I discovered his many-thousand-dollar credit card bill, filled with purchases he would never use. Even, it seemed, the unknown pain to come, pain that would one day rip me apart as surely as the rift had split the continent.

I pulled the piñon-spiked air deep into my lungs, and the immensity of the world filled me, the forces so far beyond the hubbub of individual wanting and avoiding and trying to bring about, beyond my desire for a happy marriage, a healthy partner, children playing in the stream. Clarity seemed to flow from deep in the earth, up through the rock I was sitting on, searing my spine as it reached beyond me into the sky. It etched into my bones the knowledge of the beauty and wholeness of the world, even though — as I would eventually come to accept — I had no more power to heal my beloved than I had to close that great gash in the earth. I looked at him again, his familiar strong brow, his fluid body that could pick me up as if I were made of air: I loved him.

We would join our lives together. And together we would let the wind and the rain and the ice shape us, as it had the rock.

I took his hand, and we walked back down the hill. We carried straw bales over to the big ponderosa that had been struck by lightning in its youth and lost its main trunk, its branches now bowing to the ground to form a pine-softened shelter. We put the bales in a circle underneath its boughs, and we waited for our guests.

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