

# *Prologue*



It was an October day in 1998, and my husband Andrei and I had traded in the mild autumn of Washington, DC for the relentless heat of Kuala Lumpur. While Washington's trees and plants were shedding their leaves for the winter, Malaysia's vegetation was in a state of full and constant bloom. Around five in the afternoon, the humidity had given way to a relentless downpour, leaving us no choice but to climb into the taxi which had appeared next to us.

"Where would you like to go?" the Indian cab driver asked.

"The Hilton Hotel," Andrei said.

"The Chinese temple on the hill is unlike anything you've ever seen," the driver replied.

He was right. The temple was magnificent. Imposing red pillars led to an ornate interior full of both loud designs and some which evoked serenity. The cab driver followed us in and offered himself as tour guide, providing us with information about the temple, the Chinese people, and Buddhism.

He next suggested viewing a Hindu temple, about which he proved to be equally knowledgeable, explaining to us that Jesus Christ is “just another reincarnation of a Hindu deity”. There was some sort of ceremony in progress at the temple and we weren’t allowed in, but Andrei did his usual surreptitious videotaping while I did my usual best to hold him back. Then we returned to the taxi and asked the driver to take us to the hotel. As we careened past open-air markets and shanty towns, Andrei noticed a picture of feet hanging next to the driver’s rear-view mirror. “Why do you have a picture of feet hanging next to your rear-view mirror?”

The Indian cleared his throat and was silent for a moment. We’ve probably offended him, I thought.

“Those are the feet of my spiritual master,” he finally said.

“But why do you have a picture of his feet?” Andrei persisted.

“Because the feet are the most sacred part of the body.”

“How did you meet your spiritual master?” Andrei asked.

“I’ve never met him, but my wife has,” the cab driver said then took a deep breath. As it turned out, he needed it. During the twenty-minute drive back to our hotel, he told us the following story: He and his wife had tried to conceive a child for seven years without success. One night, the spiritual master, whom she’d never met before, came to the cabbie’s wife in a dream and told her that she would soon have a child. The next morning, a distant female relative knocked on their door asking if they could care for her baby. The cabbie and his wife were thrilled to become parents. Still, his wife wanted her own baby. They tried and

tried, but to no avail. On the day she turned forty, she packed her bags and set out for a remote village in India where the spiritual master was rumored to reside. After weeks of strenuous travel, she finally arrived in the village, only to learn that people had to wait for months to see the man. Exhausted, she fell asleep under a tree, only to be awakened by loud chanting. It turned out that, for the first time in days, the spiritual master had come out of his dwelling and was walking in her direction surrounded by a huge throng of followers. Though he had never seen her before, he walked right up to her and asked her how the baby was doing. He also told her she was going to have another baby. Ecstatic, the cab driver's wife returned to Malaysia. Shortly thereafter, the unimaginable happened: After twenty-one years of marriage and at an age where no one thought she could possibly conceive a child, she became pregnant.

Andrei clasped my hand and we smiled at each other. Something akin to an electric current surged through both of us. The cab driver couldn't possibly have known this, but Andrei and I had been trying to conceive for years. A recent fertility work-up had revealed that there were no problems with either one of us, but I had just turned thirty-seven and we were beginning to wonder if we might not need some assistance after all. We couldn't help but think that the Malaysian cab driver's story was some kind of a sign. Was this a message from God? Or were these just the ramblings of an insane man? Would the following month bring us our own baby-on-a-doorstep?

In the end, the three-hour taxi ride only cost us \$7.00, to which we added a sizeable tip. The cab driver smiled and told us he would be

happy to take us around again tomorrow. All we needed to do was call. He scribbled his name and number on a scrap of paper then handed it to Andrei. As we reached the hotel, Andrei showed me the piece of paper. The man's name was Hari Krishna, like the Hindu chant. We never got to call him, because that was our last night in Malaysia. The next morning we boarded Malaysian Airlines and embarked on the long journey back home.

On the way back, we had a stopover in Tokyo and decided to make the most of it. We had never seen Japan before, and Andrei still had a couple days of vacation left. We checked ourselves into a hotel in Ginza and whipped out our "Lonely Planet" guidebook.

"There's a fertility shrine not too far from here." Andrei pointed to a picture of the Suitengu Shrine.

I smiled back. Ever since the afternoon in Hari's cab, I had been in a good mood. And it wasn't just because of the man's amazing story; my period was several days late, my breasts were tender, and whenever I caught a whiff of soy sauce or fried chicken, I was overcome by a wave of nausea. There was no doubt about it, I was pregnant. "We may not need a fertility shrine," I said.

"The shrine isn't just for infertile people. It's also a place for pregnant women to ask for an easy delivery and for new parents to have their babies blessed."

"Sounds like we'd have all our bases covered."

"Exactly," Andrei said, taking my hand.

It was a hot day, the sun glaring down upon us. I had put on my best

travel dress, figuring a well-groomed supplicant would find more favor with the gods than someone with faded jeans and a T-shirt. On the way to the shrine, we stopped at a kiosk. Next to a rack of garish paper fans and postcards hung an array of blue kimonos on a makeshift clothesline. They ranged in size from tiny to tinier. For the first time in a long time, I allowed myself to look at items which were clearly meant for babies. Gingerly, I detached the tiniest kimono from the line and examined it. White jack-o-lanterns and zigzags were interwoven with navy blue. The fabric was soft and light, like terry cloth. Inside the kimono was a matching pair of shorts. I couldn't imagine that any human would be small enough to fit in them. I started to put the kimono back when Andrei put a hand on my arm.

“Let's get it,” he said.

“Really? But what if...?”

“No what-ifs. Let's just get it.”

A wizened old woman appeared from behind the counter. She smiled at us and said something in Japanese. When she saw our blank looks, she said in heavily accented English, “For your baby?”

Andrei and I exchanged glances. Another sign.

“Yes, for our baby,” I said, clutching the kimono.

With my future baby's first outfit in hand, I approached the shrine. Andrei, ever the documentarian, stayed behind to videotape. The shrine loomed over the crowds of fertility seekers; its massive red pillars framed bell ropes and a carved wooden trunk. A cacophony of baby shrieks greeted me as I walked up the steps. Now I felt awkward and out of

place, unsure of my mission. For one thing, I knew nothing at all about fertility shrine protocol. For another, I wasn't so sure anymore that I was pregnant. I felt crampy and depressed, the way I always did before the onslaught of my period. To alleviate the first problem, I watched what other people did as they stood before the shrine. There was a definite order to their motions: First they tossed coins into the wooden trunk, then clapped a time or two, then pulled on the ropes and rang the bells. I pulled a coin out of my pocket and made my wish. Please grant us a child. I know I'd make a good ... well, pretty good ... mother. I wondered if that sounded a little weak. I tossed the coin into the trunk, clapped, and pulled on the rope. Please. We really want a baby. The bell let out a dull clunk in response. Pretty please? I tried again and got another clunk. I started feeling less hopeful. Standing in front of this shrine in Japan surrounded by people with babies just made me realize that, after two-and-a-half years of trying to conceive, all I had to show for it was a little blue kimono. When we got back to the hotel, my period came.