

# Country Comforts

She wanted to see the world. He wanted to put down roots

BY JANET PAIGE SMITH, Sparta, Georgia

**“W**ANT TO WALK IN THE PARK?” I asked my husband, Mark. I was tying my shoes in the foyer of our home in Japan, where Mark and I worked as schoolteachers at an American naval base near Tokyo.

As I expected, Mark didn’t even look up from his desk, where he sat staring at his computer. “No,” he mumbled and went right on reading.

That’s how it had been for the past several weeks. I had no idea why. When we first arrived in Japan four months earlier—as civilian teachers on a two-year contract with the military’s overseas school system—Mark and I had walked together in the park every day near our tiny off-base house.

I relished every step of those walks. Not only was the bustle of the city around us so different from our one-stoplight farm town back in Geor-



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gia—but Mark and I were actually doing something together! And he even seemed to like it.

Our marriage had been on thin ice for years. Sparta, our town in Georgia, was where Mark had grown up. As far as he was concerned, Sparta was paradise and I was stubborn for wanting to live—or even visit—anyplace else. Mark’s idea of a perfect day was driving his tractor up and down the corn rows at the farm that had been in his family for three generations, followed by an evening shelling peas on the porch and maybe a little TV before bed.

That was my idea of nowhere. I’d grown up in a military family and been a soldier myself. I loved exploring new places, meeting new people, traveling the world. I loved cities, museums, plays. I needed to be on the move!

Mark wanted to stay home and farm.

So why were we in Japan? It was a last-ditch effort to save our marriage. During a family trip to Washington, D.C. (which Mark agreed to only because our marriage counselor said we should), I found out about a program that places schoolteachers in Department of Defense schools all over the world.

“I really, really want to do that,” I said to Mark when we got home. Mark and I were both teachers at schools near Sparta, though Mark would have farmed full-time if we could afford it.

He must have heard the desperation in my voice. He must have sensed just

**BACK ON THE FARM** Janet and her husband, Mark, happy at home in Sparta today

how close I was to applying for that job, with or without him. I told him as much when we prayed together and I said, "God, please make this an opportunity to heal our marriage." Mark put up some resistance. But at last he agreed.

So here we were.

And for those first three golden months, I thought coming to Japan was the best decision we'd ever made. Mark seemed pleasantly surprised by Japan. Like me, he'd served in the military when he was younger, and that adventurous side of him seemed to reawaken as we hunted for a house, explored our neighborhood and even took the train into Tokyo to sightsee.

We made friends with our neighbors, good-naturedly bridging our language differences. The park where we walked was gorgeous, with cherry trees in blossom and meticulously manicured gardens. I even loved our tiny house, less than half the size of our place in Sparta. You had to get creative to make everything fit.

Mark and I taught separate fourth-grade classes and joined each other for lunch. We worked together on lesson plans. Traded ideas for decorating the house. Went to restaurants. It was like the early days of our marriage, when we lived on a military base in Germany. The world—and our life together—felt full of possibility.

Then, one day, shoeing up for our daily walk, I called to Mark to join me and heard no response. I found him on the computer. What could he be reading so intently? I peered over his shoulder.

It was the Facebook page for the *Sparta Ishmaelite*, our hometown newspaper. All of a sudden, postings about farmers' markets and city council meetings thousands of miles away were more urgent to Mark than spending time with me.

"Come on, honey. Let's walk," I said.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said, without looking up.

But tomorrow brought the same thing. And every day after that.

Not only did Mark stop walking with me, but he became depressed and withdrawn. He barely spoke as we crawled through Tokyo-area traffic to work each morning. Our two younger boys, Ryyan and Laughlin, had come to Japan with us—our oldest, David, was serving in Iraq. Mark wasn't even lively around them. His face, usually in a perpetual dimpled smile, was cloudy all the time.

"What's wrong?" I asked him, more than once.

"Nothing," he always said.

But obviously something was wrong. And to be honest, it made me mad. For eight years I'd let Mark do his thing back home in Sparta. Why couldn't he at least make an effort here in Japan? It wasn't as if we'd moved here permanently. It was just two years. And we even planned to spend summers in Sparta, so Mark could tend the farm!

Had I been fooling myself? Maybe the curious, well-traveled former soldier I'd married was really just a country boy who wanted his wife to tend house while he tilled the soil.



**A NEW WORLD** The couple when they were teaching at a military base in Japan

I reeled off all the things I had put up with in Sparta. Neighbors wanting to know what I was up to, which felt like prying to me. Being known as "Mark's wife," the woman who married a hometown son. Reading about plays and museum exhibits in Atlanta—and never getting to see them. Asking Mark to go on a weekend getaway and hearing him say, "Jan, we live in the kind of place people travel to. Come sit with me on the porch and help shell these peas."

I never in a million years thought I'd be someone who'd contemplate divorce. But I had shelled my last pea. And I was determined not to let Mark ruin this Japanese adventure.

"I don't understand why he's being so selfish," I said to Tony, another teacher at school, who'd been assigned as my mentor.

"Selfish?" said Tony.

"Yes!" I said. "He knows how much

this means to me, and he won't even try to like it."

"What if Mark's just homesick?" Tony said.

I paused. That certainly was a nicer way of putting it. And it did explain Mark's sudden fascination with the *Sparta Ishmaelite*.

"Well, we've got more than a year and a half to go," I said. "What am I going to do about that?"

"You could try moving on base," said Tony. "Your husband could make friends more easily and have more home comforts."

"No!" I cried. I didn't want to live in Little America on a military base. On-base housing had been full when we arrived, which was just fine with me. I wanted a real Japanese adventure. Exactly what we had in our Japanese neighborhood.

Tony looked thoughtful. "Sometimes you have to give up something in order to get what you want," he said. "At least that's what I've found."

I was about to say, "I've been giving up my entire life for eight years!" But then, for the first time since we arrived in Japan, I looked at our life here through Mark's eyes.

He was an outdoorsy guy who spent every free moment in wide open spaces. Now he lived in a cramped house without even a lawn to mow. The park where we walked would fit inside a single one of our corn fields. Once we'd moved in, there was nothing left for Mark to tinker with, certainly no tractor or farm equipment. He had no one to talk to

COURTESY JANET P. SMITH

## MAKING MARRIAGE WORK

except me, the boys and his students.

For Mark, living in that tiny house in the middle of a crowded Japanese city was as hard as life in Sparta had been for me. It's not that he was unadventurous. He was just homesick.

Why had I come here? When Mark and I prayed about it, I hadn't asked God for an adventure. I'd asked for healing for our marriage. That didn't mean forcing Mark to do things my way, no matter how unhappy I'd been before. Healing meant healing for *both* of us.

"On-base housing was full when we got here," I said to Tony. "Do you think maybe there'd be space now?"

"You can always ask," Tony said.

That very afternoon, I went to the base housing office. "There are no three-bedrooms available," the housing officer said. "But if your boys are willing to share a room, we have a garden apartment."

"Did you say *garden* apartment?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll take it."

I hurried back to school and found Mark in his classroom. "Come with me," I said. "I have something to show you."

Mystified, Mark got in the car and drove across the base to the garden apartment's complex. We walked through a gate into a wide grassy area with trees and playground equipment, surrounded by tidy two-story apartment buildings. Children rode their bikes. Couples strolled. It was quiet.

I led Mark into an empty two-bedroom apartment, overlooking a lush green forest.

"Who lives here?" said Mark, now thoroughly puzzled.

"You, if you want to," I said, smiling.

It dawned on Mark what was going on. A dimpled smile spread across his face, like sunshine breaking through clouds. He wrapped his arms around me.

The on-base apartment did the trick. With a little open space and a new batch of friends, Mark settled into

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life in Japan. When I asked if we could extend our stay for an additional year when our two-year commitment ended, he said yes—provided I let him buy a Harley, which I did.

When we moved back to Sparta, life was different. We traveled. Went to Atlanta. Saw movies.

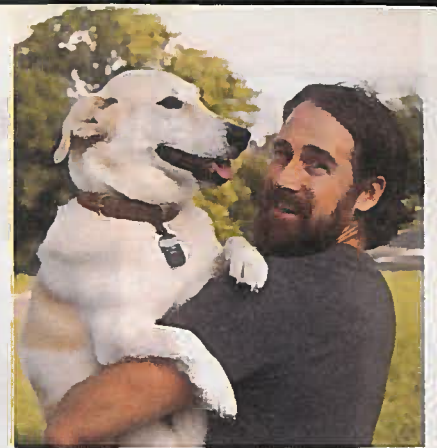
We're empty nesters now. Not long ago, thinking about the future, Mark smiled—those dimples!—and said, "You know, Jan, I've been thinking. What if we signed up for another stint in Japan someday?"

Give something, get something. It was a simple marriage lesson we traveled around the world to learn. ©

For more on this story, see FAMILY ROOM

## FAMILY ROOM

surrounding area come to Bangor International Airport to spend time with the troops. Some have never missed a flight," Craig says. He and his dog, Fred, spent last winter up there. "Fred was like a puppy again, and we were both the happiest we've ever been." Craig posts photos and videos of their adventures on Instagram, using the handle @fredtheafghan. "The more I shared our story with people I meet—like the lady in the store—the more I could see that it was important to everyone." Craig's love of storytell-



**GROSSI** Craig and Fred love the outdoors.

ing led to his writing of *Craig & Fred*. Get a copy at [fredtheafghan.com](http://fredtheafghan.com).

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**Janet Paige Smith** (*Country Comforts*, page 50), a 2012 Guideposts Writers Workshop winner, credits **GUIDEPOSTS** with launching her son's career. Her May 2013 story, *Separation Anxiety*, described her son David's readjustment to school and life after serving in Iraq. "A reader offered him his first job!" David is now an accountant in New York. Jan and her husband, Mark, continue to teach. Mark still loves to work the land, now with Jan by his side. "Before Japan, I disliked the heat, the bugs, the hard work," Jan says. "But Mark gives away most of the produce to the sick and elderly in our community. Seeing their appreciation and



**SMITH** Mark and Janet, happy again