

Chapter Twenty-One

GOING HOME

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5 The flight from Manila to Tokyo takes four hours. It immediately became
6 apparent that more than a few fellow passengers knew I was aboard. As I was wheeled
7 down the aisle, well-wishers reached out to touch me—some of them smiling, others in
8 tears. The phrase I heard over and over was “I’m so sorry.”

9 A flight attendant came up to give me a pretty bracelet made of crystal. “I
10 prayed for you for a whole year,” she said, “and I’m so glad you’re on this flight. I just
11 want to give you this little gift. It reminds me of hope and love.”

12 A CBS News crew, who knew my sister Mary, introduced themselves and told
13 how they’d been so concerned for me. They offered encouragement and didn’t ask any
14 questions. I was struck by their kindness.

15 Then the steward came by to say, “I see here on my chart that you are on a low-
16 fat diet.”

17 “No, sir, I am not on a low-fat diet!” I shot back. I looked over at the nurse
18 sitting next to Cheryl, my sister-in-law, and said, “You dirty rat!” She just smiled.

19 The steward didn’t know what to do. Anyway, when they brought out the
20 introductory snacks and sodas, I helped myself right away. I couldn’t eat all the nuts,
21 but I didn’t want to throw them away, so I put them in a napkin and stashed them in my
22 carry-on luggage.

23 When the meal came, I began enjoying it. The nurse looked over and said, “You
24 know that you can’t eat all that.”

25 “What?” Something finally clicked in my brain, and I said, “Okay, let’s have a
26 talk about my food. Why are you so concerned about how much I’m eating?”

27 “You haven’t been used to eating properly, and you could have some kind of
28 chemical imbalance and throw your system off and go into shock...” She went on
29 describing all manner of horrible things that could happen.

30 “Well, okay,” I replied. “If you had said, ‘Your stomach is just not used to this,
31 and you’re going to throw this food up,’ I would have said, ‘So what? Just let me eat
32 and be happy. I’ll throw it up, and then I can eat some more!’ But if you really think
33 there’s a danger here—how much of this meal may I eat?”

34 “Try to eat half or less.”

35 So I divided everything in half. I wanted to cry, because I was still so hungry.
36 And I knew from my experience in the jungle that I’d been blessed with a pretty strong
37 stomach that could handle a lot of unusual things.

38 I ate half my meal and, with resolve, made myself stop. “Don’t worry,” the
39 nurse said. “In an hour or so, you can get a snack.”

40 The State Department had been nice to arrange first-class seating for four of us
41 (to accommodate my leg), and the section had a self-serve table of fruit and nuts for the
42 passengers. So about an hour later, I asked a flight attendant for a banana.

43 As I was sitting there finishing it, I glanced over toward the nurse again. She
44 was commenting to Cheryl, “She ate that WHOLE banana!” Apparently, I still didn’t
45 have it right. I was supposed to eat only half the banana. What can I say?

46 Every meal for the rest of the trip all the way to America, I had to settle for half.
47 I began stashing away my dinner rolls in my carry-on in order to have something for
48 later if I got hungry...and then I realized I was doing exactly what I had done for a year
49 in the jungle. I was hoarding food out of fear that starvation was just around the corner.

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52 We landed in Tokyo to change planes. Again, the press was waiting. Gary
53 Percival had warned me, “The press may want you to say how you are mad at
54 somebody—it makes a good story for them. If somebody asks you that kind of question,
55 just ignore it and say, ‘I’m really glad to be going home. I’m glad to be free.’”

56

57 Sure enough, I was still being wheeled out of the airplane when a guy with a
58 camera began walking backward right in front of me saying in broken English, “Can
59 you tell me what you think about the United States of America?”

60 “No, I can’t, but I’m just happy to be going home.”

61 “What do you have to say about the government of the United States?”

62 “Nothing, I’m just glad to be going home.”

63 This particular wheelchair didn’t have extensions to hold your feet out straight.
64 As a substitute, two flight attendants were holding a pillow under my leg, one on either
65 side, to support it as we moved along. The reporter kept badgering me, until finally the

66 airline people decided they needed to take care of him. In unison they let go of the
67 pillow to get him out of my face.

68 My leg dropped, and I screamed, “Aauuugggghhh!” just as the reporter had
69 asked for about the fifth time, “What do you have to say about the United States
70 government?”

71 The flight attendants immediately turned back to me and began profusely
72 bowing and apologizing. Meanwhile, my brother-in-law Lance stepped up to give the
73 reporter a not-very-subtle nudge in the ribs.

74 Speaking of the press...I was amazed in the days to come to learn how many
75 mistakes about us appeared in print. I eventually made a list of errors:

- 76 • Janjalani was supposedly killed in the very first firefight as soon as we
77 landed on Basilan. (Hardly.)
- 78 • Sabaya was wounded in the Lamitan hospital battle the end of the first
79 week. (I can assure you he was in fine form the whole next year.)
- 80 • Martin was being carried through the jungle on a stretcher.
- 81 • I had a urinary tract infection!
- 82 • Ediborah Yap was free to leave but chose, as a nurse, to stay with Martin
83 and me and attend to our physical needs.
- 84 • The ransom money went astray.
- 85 • The AFP action that last afternoon was a “chance encounter.” (In fact, they
86 had been tracking us for more than twelve hours.)
- 87 • The action happened in the city of Zamboanga.
- 88 • When they came over the ridge, I was wearing military fatigues and thus
89 harder to identify. (I never had a stitch of fatigues any time during
90 captivity.)
- 91 • I was hit with eight bullets! (Thank goodness that was an exaggeration.)
- 92 • Worst of all: the Associated Press reported, and Time Magazine reprinted,
93 this quote from me regarding Martin’s death: “That is God’s liking. This is
94 probably his destiny.” What??!! I would never say such a thing. It sounds
95 more like an Abu Syyaf comment than anything else. I wrote Time to
96 protest this blatant misquote, and got back a letter only passing the buck to
97 AP. The magazine refused to run a correction.

98 Things here in Tokyo were much friendlier once we reached the transfer lounge.
99 A handsome young man with really short hair came over, got down on one knee by the
100 wheelchair, and said, “We just want you to know that we’ve got five guys on this
101 plane--Navy Seals. We’re here for security. If you need anything, we’re here for you.”
102 I thanked him, and once again I was touched that someone had planned ahead for me.

103 When we boarded the flight, I asked Mary if she knew which guys were the
104 security detail. “Oh, yeah, you can spot them a mile away when you know they’re
105 there.” So I wrote a note thanking them for being on the flight with me. Mary took it
106 back to one of them.

107 The eastbound flight to Minneapolis, Northwest Airlines’ hub, takes a little
108 under eleven hours. You start off in daylight, pass through an abbreviated nighttime,
109 and land in the middle of the day again--the same day you left Tokyo, thanks to crossing
110 the International Date Line.

111 When boarding back in Manila, Bob Meisel had handed me a folder of e-mails
112 he had never been able to get to Martin and me while in captivity. Now I spent a good
113 deal of time on this flight reading those notes from family and friends. I slept as well, of
114 course. I read newspapers and even “stole” two of them that had articles about me.

115 Finally the big jet began descending. From the air, Minneapolis looked so clean
116 and well laid out. The freeway traffic was moving along in such an orderly way--yep, I
117 was back in the U.S. of A.

118

119 My airport transfer this time was smoother, thanks to the use of a motorized
120 cart, the kind that go beep-beep-beep as they roll down the concourse. On the final
121 ninety-minute flight to Kansas City, I got busy writing out another statement for the
122 press, so I’d be prepared. But most of all, of course, I was counting the minutes until I
123 would finally see my dear kids.

124 I thought back to something Martin had written months before in the jungle,
125 anticipating this moment. What wisdom he had voiced!

126

127 *Highest priority when getting home is to reconnect w/ the kids. Need to*
128 *recognize and respect the role that others have had in their lives and not snatch*
129 *them away. Our parents will also need some time. There are going to be a lot of*

130 *demands on us, and setting priorities is going to be difficult. Sometimes we're*
131 *going to do it wrong. Keep going.*

132

133 A mixture of joy and apprehension swept over me. It was going to be so
134 fantastic to see Jeff, Mindy, and Zach again...and yet, there would no doubt be some
135 awkwardness, too. I had never worn the title of Single Mom before. I hadn't even
136 thought about what that would be like. I was bound to "do it wrong" sometimes. I could
137 only ask God for guidance and not be too hard on myself.