



Special Blend

SHE LIKED PLAYING IT SAFE. HE WANTED TO RISK IT ALL MAKING ORGANIC YOGURT. COULD IT LAST? **BY MEG CADOUX HIRSHBERG**

Have you ever noticed that the driver of a car rarely gets nauseous, his body always anticipating the next curve, and it's usually the passenger who suffers? I found myself agreeing to ride shotgun on a certain treacherous stretch of road – the tortured path of my husband's fledgling business. It's a wonder our marriage survived the ride.

Gary makes organic yogurt. Twenty-some years ago, we met at an organic farming conference, where Gary gave the keynote address. I was in the audience, thinking he was cute. The stars were bright that night, the bonfire lit, and a romance was kindled. (Years later, Gary confessed that by the next morning he had forgotten my name and had had to conduct a surreptitious

search among my scattered clothes for my conference nametag.) At the time, Gary and his business partner were losing tons of money, but Gary had big dreams and a twinkle in his eye. I liked the twinkle but wasn't so sure about the big dreams.

When I married Gary, I left a job I loved managing an organic vegetable farm. I moved my things into a dilapidated 18th-century New Hampshire farmhouse that was partitioned into our apartment, that of our partner (along with his wife and five daughters), the offices for the yogurt business, and the tiny yogurt factory. Donning factory whites and a hairnet, I assumed the role of helper. Spoiled product, broken old filling machines – there was an endless parade of catastrophes. Our woodstove

could not compete with the farmhouse's leaky windows; my hair would ruffle in the winter wind, *indoors*. Some unidentified furry creature always skittered over my feet as I did laundry in our dirt-floor basement. We faced looming bankruptcy and scowling creditors. My mother repeatedly loaned us money, though I begged her not to. The more yogurt we make, the more money we lose, I'd say, sensibly.

I shared my husband's devotion to organic agriculture, but we found ourselves working all the time, even after we had children. We had no friends. At times, it seemed Gary was working as hard as he possibly could in order to lose as much money as he possibly could. I was no stranger to hard work and had moved from a farm where I regularly show-

eled manure. I didn't expect the white picket fence, but still I had to wonder: Wasn't there a less harrowing way to save the world?

Years later, when our company was on more stable footing, Gary led a business seminar in New York. He told some stories from what I refer to, not fondly, as the bad old days, and instantly the entrepreneurs in the room redirected their attention to me. Many had tears in their eyes. They asked, how did you survive as a couple? Their tales of woe began to emerge: My husband left me, my wife divorced me, my mother's not speaking to me, she's risk-averse, I'm a gambler.

In getting to know scores of entrepreneurs over the years, I find it's rare that both partners are equally comfortable with high-wire levels of financial risk. The level of risk we had assumed was way beyond what I was comfortable with. We had come perilously close to losing the business dozens of times.

Sometimes people ask me why I didn't leave my husband back then. For one thing, it never occurred to me. He was, after all, still that cute guy I'd met at a conference. And then there were the kids. And the cause, which we shared. Mostly we just woke up every day and did what was necessary to survive. There wasn't much romance to it then, but there is now, in retrospect.

Today the business is thriving. Our three kids are teenagers. We have a vacation house. What would have become of our marriage if we had lost it all? I honestly don't know. But I'd like to think Gary and I would still be cruising together, just down some other road. Maybe we'd be taking turns at the wheel.

Meg Cadoux Hirshberg lives in New Hampshire and is collecting stories about couples and entrepreneurship. Her husband, Gary Hirshberg, is the president and CE-Yo of Stonyfield Farm. Send comments to coupling@globe.com.

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