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SLOVENOLOGY

Living and Traveling
in the World's Best Country

Za mojo taščo. Te imam ornk rad.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is part memoir, part essay collection, part travel writing, and part guidebook. It is meant to act as a guide-in-hand while visiting Slovenia, but it can be read just as well from the comfort of your own home. It is a gathering of essays, shorts, and recommendations that are intentionally highly subjective and personal. Most guidebooks offer too little about too many things, and strive for objectivity, which is all well and good, but tends to be dry and is not always helpful. When I travel, and when I read, I want big, juicy, ballsy opinions. I want the writer to be a three-dimensional character. So this book is not meant to replace your *Lonely Planet* or what have you, but offer an additional option, one that is deeper, more colorful, and that gives a sense of what it's like to live in this remarkable, little-known country that I've chosen to call home. I know it inside-out, quite literally: as an outsider who has chosen to live here, and sees everything inside its borders with fresh, wide, wondering eyes.

If you are reading this while abroad, either planning a trip to Slovenia or one of the millions of people the world over who stay up at night, just dying to know what it's like to live there, I'd recommend reading cover to cover, though you can certainly dip in and bounce around. If you are on "the sunny side of the Alps" already and are using this as a guidebook, then consider following the recommended itineraries, which are dotted with essays linked to specific locations on the tourist trail, which you can read either in advance or while on-site. This last section of the book is designed as a point of reference in-hand when planning your visit to Slovenia, or while already here and setting out for adventures. Think of it as an appendix that you can flip to as needed, or read all the way through. This section also includes a menu guide and suggestions on what to read, listen to, and buy, to get as much as possible out of your

visit. I hope you dig it here, whether your visit is virtual (reclining on your couch or, if my reading habits are any indication, perched upon your toilet) or actual. Slovenia is an amazing jewel of a country, one that I love, and love to share with other enlightened souls who come here. For all who come inevitably fall in love.

A SHORT PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

At first I thought I might transliterate every Slovene word I've included in this book. You know: *čevapčiči* ("che-vap-chee-chee") and Ljubljana ("Loo-blee-yah-nah"). But I quickly realized this would drive you and me both crazy, as there are just too many Slovene words included. So instead, here's a short pronunciation guide, for those of you who are truly hardcore. For most people (let's call you softcore), you can skim over the Slovene words and just note their meanings.

The oddest-looking letters for foreigners are the ones with a *strešica*, which translates as "little roof," above them. But don't panic, or as the locals say: "Ni panike" (Okay, I'll give you one more transliteration, "nee pah-nee-kay," because not panicking is extremely useful.).

Č is pronounced like "ch" as in "cheese"
Š is pronounced like "sh" as in "sheep"
Ž is pronounced like "ge" as in "rouge"
C is pronounced "tz" as in "tzatziki" (which is a delicious Greek cucumber and yogurt sauce).
J is pronounced "y" as in "yum"
A is pronounced "ah" as in "Harvard"
E is pronounced "eh" as in "enema"
U is pronounced "oo" as in "ululation"
H is pronounced with a throat clearing sound

So that's it. Just remember "cheese sheep rouge tzatziki yum Harvard enema ululation," then clear your throat, and you'll be all set.

But don't worry. There won't be a quiz.

Part One

An American in Slovenia

WAIT, WHO ARE YOU, AGAIN?

Riding shotgun on this "safari" of mine, through life and travels in the wilds of Slovenia, you're likely curious about your guide. You'll learn more about me along the way, but here are some of the basics.

I'm an American who has always felt more at home in Europe. Growing up, my family spent any holiday it could in Europe (especially France, as my mother is a professor of French) and enjoyed what might be considered European traditions over in America: farmer's markets, museums, theater, classical music, art films, French and Italian restaurants. It was pretty inevitable that I'd feel comfortable in Europe, since I come from the sort of family that, if anything, over-idealizes it. And I still do. But I really fell for life over on this side of the pond at age 16.

Abroad in Paris

I attended a boarding school called Choate Rosemary Hall. Choate has numerous study abroad programs, and actually my mother, when she taught at Choate, had been the faculty member who accompanied the students on the abroad program to France. My father and I tagged along, so I spent several summers and one winter hanging out with my parents in Paris, the Loire Valley and Pau, while the students stayed with local families and immersed themselves in the language. I was an active participant in the program (or so I'm told—the first time I went, I was four). Once, in my pajamas, I scolded a local boy who was trying to sneak a peek at the girls on our program, who were in their pajamas at a hostel where we were all staying. Another time I was slightly bored at a fancy restaurant, and crawled under the table, using the white tablecloths as a tent. I then

tied the ankles of a family friend with a napkin, producing the cinematic comedy staple of her falling over when she stood up—which did not prove as amusing to others as I'd imagined. Once at a Michelin-starred restaurant a waiter, trying to be helpful to a little American kid, brought out a pasta dish sauced not with the normal exotic toppings I expected, but with ketchup! Outraged, I insisted on getting what I had ordered—what kind of little American kid did he think I was?

When I was 16, it was finally time for me to attend the France abroad program as a proper student. I spent the Fall of 1996 in France, along with 14 other Choate students. Every morning we would have classes in French from 9 to noon (language, literature and history). Then we'd be given cash and sent out into the city to sort out our own lunch from noon until two. This feeling of independence, away from parents, with an amazing city to explore, was wonderful, and I'm incredibly fortunate for having had the opportunity so early (thanks Mom and Dad)! But this period also pointed me in the direction of my career. Each afternoon, from two until four, we went with an art history professor to visit a museum, castle, monument or church. To see the art in person made all the difference—it produces a far more vivid, visceral reaction than is possible sitting in a darkened lecture hall, looking at slides or a Powerpoint. I fell in love with art history, which seemed like a good pretext for me to come back to Europe. The only question was where in Europe I'd end up.

Postgraduate in England

After Choate I attended Colby College, in Maine, and spent a semester abroad in London, studying theater (I thought I wanted to be a playwright, before shifting to writing books). Though I never had particularly good grades, I somehow managed to get into The Courtauld Institute in London (a specialty art history institute that is part of University of London), and University of Cambridge (this may have been a clerical error in my favor, though I think it

has more to do with the fact that the university needs the higher tuition foreigners pay, so it's much easier for non-UK citizens to get in). I attended both, doing two different Master's degrees because, frankly, I loved being a student and wanted to delay "real life" as long as possible. I stayed on at Cambridge and began a PhD in a subject I'd stumbled across and found fascinating, which remains my area of academic expertise: art crime.

While living in London in 2002/2003 and attending The Courtauld Institute, I wrote a novel called *The Art Thief*. At that point I'd still wanted to write plays, and I gave myself a sort of immersion course in theater. At least once a week, after lectures at the Courtauld (which is in a beautiful palace on the Thames called Somerset House), I crossed the river to the National Theatre and got a "student return" ticket to see a play. Back then at least, students could show up about ten minutes before show-time and ask for leftover "return" tickets. Especially if you were alone, you could always find a seat, and the price was fixed for students—I think it was 10 GBP. I saw dozens of plays. I wasn't a bad playwright—I actually got myself an agent. But she wisely told me that plays were all well and good, but if I wanted to make a career as a writer, I should really do it through a novel. Did I have one in mind?

My Big Break

No, was the answer, but I decided to give it a shot. Having enjoyed (but been annoyed with the research inaccuracies in) The Da Vinci Code, and having likewise (but with less annoyance) enjoyed the film The Thomas Crown Affair, I tried writing a novel that I hoped would be a pacey and addictive thriller set behind the scenes in the art world. It worked out well, as the novel, called The Art Thief, was a best-seller in five countries and was translated into fourteen languages. It allowed me to be a writer full-time. I got doubly lucky. At the same time, I was the subject of a New York Times Magazine feature article (December 2006) that described my "founding" of a new interdisciplinary field of

study: art crime. Being written about in a media venue that large was life-changing, and it coincided with heavy promotion from the publisher of my novel which, unrelated to the Times article, came out shortly after. I had been very lucky, a fact I've always appreciated, and have done my best to work very hard to continue the path that good fortune set me upon.

I've since written a number of books (almost all nonfiction), and my days are spent, largely in my pajamas and with a hairless dog in my lap, writing books, lots of articles for magazines and newspapers, and then with occasional other projects, like teaching art history, art crime and writing at university, helping with ARCA (the Association for Research into Crimes against Art, a research group I founded back in 2006 that promotes the study of art crime, www.artcrimeresearch.org), giving talks and sometimes presenting on television.

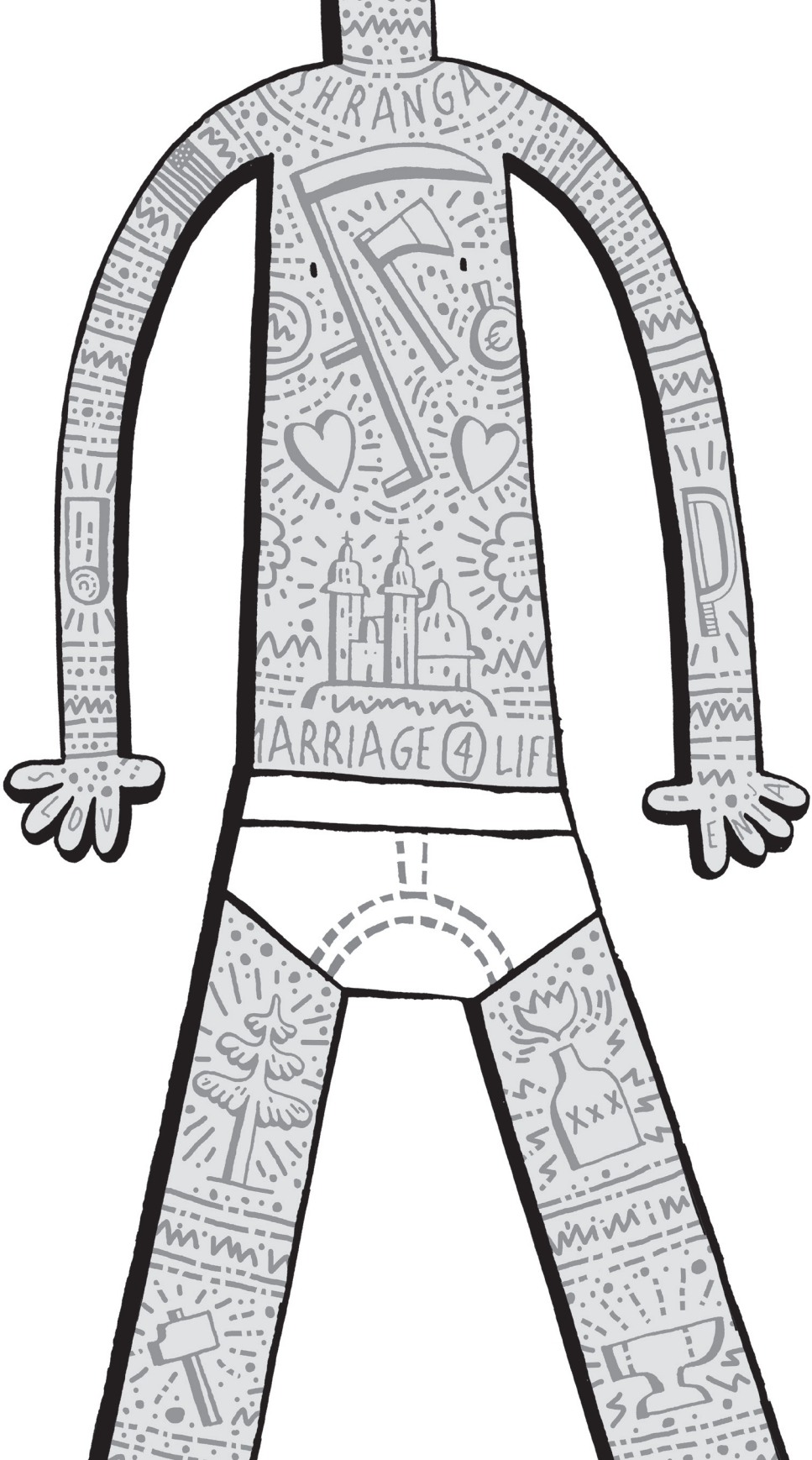
Choosing a Roost

From the time The Art Thief sold, I knew I wanted to live in Europe full-time. I'd spent a lot of time in Italy, more so than France, simply because the art I was most interested in (17th century Roman art and 16th century Florentine) was Italian. So I decided to try out, to audition, as many European cities as I could, to see a) which I liked best, and b) where I might encounter the future Mrs. Charney.

I once counted all the places I've lived in for at least a month. The list, as best I recall, is as follows: in the US, New Haven, CT (where I grew up), Wallingford, CT (where I went to boarding school), Waterville, ME (Colby College), Chicago, IL (summer working), Boston, MA (another summer working); in the UK, London (MA in art history) and Cambridge (MPhil in art history); in Italy, Rome, Florence, Venice (all three for research) and Orvieto (where my family has a home); in France, Paris and Pau (where I studied abroad when I was sixteen); elsewhere in Europe, Madrid (to eat as many things as possible covered in *ali-oli* sauce) and Leiden (studies). And in Slovenia, where I

settled down, I've lived in Ljubljana (where I finished my PhD, in architectural history), Tunjice (with my in-laws), Kamnik (home with my family), and the wonderfully-named village of Ig, famous for a Bronze Age settlement of houses on stilts, for bear attacks and for a women's prison. While Eurocentric, it's a fair lifetime's worth of different places to call home.

My favorite city is Rome. My favorite place to visit is London. In the US, I love New Haven and could easily live in Boston (go Red Sox!). But when I add up all the pluses and minuses, the complete package, considering not only aesthetics, food, culture, safety, cleanliness, ease of access, approachability, friendliness of locals, reasonable taxes, education and health programs, diversity of landscape, architecture, non-Kafkaesque bureaucracy, professional opportunity, and much more, Slovenia has the best complete package of anywhere I've lived. I'm such a fan of my adopted country that I'm eager and proud to share it with anyone wise and worldly enough to come visit. Or to heck with it, why not just move here? If anyone moves here inspired by my writings, then the beer is on me…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LOVE & SCYTHES: FEATS OF MANLINESS AT A SLOVENIAN WEDDING

On the morning of my wedding, in the tiny alpine village in Slovenia in which my fiancée grew up, I walked with my best men and a trail of one-hundred guests up the curling road to the tiny Baroque church on the hilltop. As I rounded the bend, I was stopped by a rope strung across the path. A cluster of stern and angry people I'd never met stood blocking my way. They carried Medieval-looking implements: a long rusty saw, an axe, an old scythe, and a wooden pitchfork. If I was planning to marry my Slovenian fiancée, I first had to pass the "tests of manliness."

Slovenia is a gorgeous country, lying just east of Venice and south of Vienna. Full of cliff-top castles, mysterious caves, waterfalls and alpine fields, it looks like the backdrop for fairytales. The most culturally and economically advanced of the former Yugoslav Balkan states, it weathered the Balkan Wars unscathed, after having thrived within the Habsburg and Napoleonic empires, under which it was known as Illyria. Slovenia's prosperity earned it the EU presidency in 2008, and its adherence to tradition and government-protected industry makes it, both economically and socially, the sort of unprepossessing country that Western powers may come to envy.

But centuries-old traditions still lurk in the idyllic mountains, some more ominous than others. It's not unheard of during prenuptial celebrations for one's "friends" to tie the groom naked to a wooden cross and smear Tabasco sauce on his balls. Needless to say, I didn't invite any Slovenes to my bachelor party. But on the morning of my wedding I was faced with an ordeal of my own, known by the menacing title of *šranga*.

Feats of Manliness

Šranga (pronounced "shranga"). The name conjures up some Polynesian tribal tattooing ritual or a horror movie involving saws. Neither image is far off.

Three-hundred years ago, a stranger coming to a village, intent on marrying the local beauty, would have had to prove his mettle and competence as a provider. In the remote alpine settlements of the 18th century Habsburg Empire, that meant being a woodsman. I should say that I'm not particularly good with my hands, aside from typing, which definitely doesn't count. As a soft-palmed American city boy, my idea of a big adventure is to order an extra shot of espresso in my mocha frappuccino. So I was pretty darn nervous as I approached the scythe-wielding villagers blocking my path to the Baroque church, framed behind them by precipitous white-capped mountains.

My experience of Slovene wedding customs began the week before our big day, when the next-door-neighbor and a band of followers came over by tractor, dragging two enormous pine trees. They proceeded to shave the bark off the pines, with my help (my first tree-shaving experience, though not the last), then drilled holes in the earth and erected the shorn trees on either side of the driveway. The "Erection of the Pines" at the home of the bride is a long-standing, and almost certainly Freudian, tradition. As with most Slovene customs, it was followed by a long night of homemade schnapps-fueled revels and the consumption of much illegally-produced smoked pork, prepared by the next-door-neighbor who, disconcertingly, always seems to be laughing maniacally.

On the wedding day, flanked by one-hundred wedding guests who watched from the roadside and aided by my four groomsmen (none of them particularly handy with a hatchet), I stopped before the roadblock. Six burly villagers, all dressed in dark green hunting uniforms, their hats incongruously bedecked with flowers, stood with their arms crossed. They looked like a rugby team whose bender had been rudely interrupted. Behind them I saw the instruments of my impending tests, the axe and scythe and

saw: the Slovenian equivalent of hot coals across which I would walk.

It's easy to see the *šranga* as a sort of preparatory exam for the rigors of married life. Instead of axe-wielding, maybe in this digital age we might swap in a test of word-processing, programming a web page, and cheating on your taxes. But whatever I had to do, no matter how difficult, was a rite I was eager to endure, if it meant that I could marry the love of my life. The goal would be not to lop off any useful body parts in the process.

Bring it on.

The Sawing

I was led first to perform the *žaga* ("dja-ga," the sawing), in which I would have to team up with my best man, a skinny Spanish lawyer, in splitting a thick log with a rusty saw. Testing our powers of observation, the villagers presented us with the saw upside-down. I may not be the sharpest tack in the box, but I could tell we weren't going to get too far with the saw-teeth facing upwards. We flipped the saw over and sunk it into the log, beginning the surprisingly difficult rhythmic sawing that was required. The saw wanted to bend when we wanted to thrust (there's an analogy to married life in there somewhere). The villagers lubricated our efforts with white wine, first poured over the saw and then into our mouths. I remembered wondering if wine stains and wood shavings can be dry-cleaned out of a Ralph Lauren Black Label suit.

Whatever. I was in the zone. The first test was passed.

Chop, Shave, Fork

Now came the *sekira* ("seh-kee-ra," the chopping) in which my axe-work was put to the test. As I am only slightly more coordinated than a drunken orangutan, this had both the villagers and the guests worrying. An axe was lodged in

a tree stump in the middle of the road. I would have to whack the stump in half, preferably without losing any of my own limbs in the process. After five or six mighty hacks, the villagers decided to take it easy on me and allowed me to move. Had I been obliged to cleave the stump in two, the wedding would have had to be rescheduled for the following Tuesday.

A pine tree had been felled across the road and suspended on two wooden horses, and I was next obliged to shave off its bark—good thing I had practiced during the "Erection of the Pines" a week before. A good ten minutes of tree-shaving, and I'd developed quite a sweat, which was almost certainly staining my Ralph Lauren suit. But it must be said that Ralph designed a surprisingly comfortable suit, with good freedom of movement, ideally suited for shaving pines. My confidence was rising. Three down, two more to go.

Bales of hay had been scattered across the road, beside a rickety horse-drawn cart. I was handed a wooden pitchfork, one of those diabolical two-pronged numbers that looks like it might've fallen out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. One of the villagers hopped into the cart and began to push out the hay as I scooped it in. Feeling brash, I dumped my next load of hay onto his head. Then I froze for a moment, wondering if I had just made a faux-pas that would result in him practicing the *sekira* on my clavicle. The villager turned beet-purple and burst out laughing.

The hay back in the cart, I was faced with the last test: I had to sharpen a dulled scythe with a hammer and anvil. This might have proved a real challenge, but I had been given some covert training. A group of family friends pulled me aside at a barbecue some weeks before the wedding to give me the low-down on scythe-sharpening. Now I was totally in the groove and even clanged the hammer down in rhythm to the live accordion polka music that provided a memorable, if not pleasurable, soundtrack to the morning's events. Maybe I could make it as a Slovenian woodsman after all?

How Much for One Wife?

The final step before I could enter the church and wed my beloved was the *barantanje* ("bah-rahn-than-yay," the haggling). I had to buy my bride from the villagers—easier said than done, when I had to negotiate in Slovene.

I didn't like the sound of this "wife-buying" business from the start. Having to buy your wife brings to mind mail order catalogues and, of course, prompts the sticky question: exactly how much is she worth? 12.99 USD per pound? That was the cost of the outstanding illegal smoked pork provided by the neighbor—the one who had been laughing maniacally throughout my *šranga*. It's an awkward idea to fit a price to the love of your life, but it's even weirder when you're also expected to argue the price *down*.

At least my future wife didn't seem to mind being considered a tradable commodity. So if tradition called for me to buy my wife, then darn it, buy her I would. But not before driving down the price. The trick was to convince the villagers to cut me a deal without belittling the bride in the process and risking that she might shave my pine tree when we got home.

My best men and I developed a strategy. I had brought a Lonely Planet guide to Slovenia with me that morning, and I began the negotiations by stating that, according to my guidebook, the villagers were obliged to pay the *groom* in order for him to take the bride off their hands. In my opening gambit, I said firmly that I would not marry her for less than 300 EUR.

The best defense is a good offense, and this had the desired effect. Normally the groom is meant to squirm and argue about the sorry state of the village pavement or the odd odors from the fertilized corn fields or the fact that farmers are always laughing maniacally at nothing in particular, and thereby lower the price. But grooms regularly pay around 1000 EUR, despite their protestations. I insisted that my guidebook explained the tradition very clearly: the villagers were expected to pay *me*. When they tried to convince me that it was the other way around, I had two Slovene wedding guests step forward and say that everywhere

else in Slovenia the villagers pay the groom—this local village must have had it backwards for the past few centuries.

My ploy wasn't going to work forever, but it did sow confusion among my challengers. In the end I relented and gave them the sum I'd intended to pay all along—exactly 300 EUR, plus another 12 that I found in my trousers. Not a bad price, considering that I was acquiring the woman of my dreams (and only 2.36 USD per pound, if you're keeping score).

The *barantanje* completed, and a not-insignificant portion of my wife's grandmother's homemade schnapps (first prize in this year's village tasting competition!), I was carried in victory up to the church, in the very cart which I had so recently filled with hay. Since I had survived the *šranga,* albeit a little tipsy, a little sweaty, and covered in a lot of sawdust, the wedding could proceed.

While finding true love and maintaining a happy marriage are certainly tricky, getting married in this modern era can be all too easy. We just pop down to city hall, or drive to Vegas on the spur of the moment to be married by someone dressed as Elvis. Gone are the days of earning a girl's hand through valiance, chivalry, and attrition: of the future King Charles I of England galloping incognito across bandit-strewn 17th century Europe to woo the Infanta of Spain, of slaying minotaurs and climbing through fields of poisoned thorns. While I'm not sure how well I would do if it came to minotaur-slaying, I am grateful that I could prove my love through sweat and feats of manliness, both to the villagers, who would finally accept me as one of their own, and to my beautiful wife.

Lots of people *say* that they would "do anything for love." But there, on that alpine hillside, with a sharpened scythe in my hand and a freshly-shorn pine tree at my feet, I can truly say that I *did*.