The Milk Tree

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Letters of the University of the South
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

May 2011

Sewanee, Tennessee
HD Immortality
1

Swirling with Grounds
7

All That White
19

Once a Runner
35

Beyond the Field of Vision
49

When the Bough Breaks: A Blog
62

The Milk Tree
90

A Fairytale, However Flawed
109
Bodies buckle in turbulence. Yellow masks fall and hiss. Overhead bins spill their contents. Next to me, a young girl pukes on her orange Converses. But I’m calm. I see Fate’s hand in my destiny. The stewardess didn’t offer me two Cokes to be nice. She knows I’m a star. Just like I know what’s happening.

Voices call out, choking and guttural. They don’t understand. This is it. “Listen,” I yell. Nobody hears me. But cameras roll somewhere, right? They’re probably built into the tray tables. I want viewers to know me. Crash a plane, see who survives: what a premise.

I got all A’s on my report card in eighth grade. Believe me, I’m not a whiz kid, but I had extrinsic motivation: my own TV. Mom and Dad are lawyers at a big-name firm with offices in Center City and the Main Line suburbs near our house, but I earned that TV. It wasn’t sitting on my dresser one day like a pony waiting in the backyard.

During prime time, the reality Renaissance had begun. First I watched Survivor, episode two of its third season, African Outback. When the credits ran, I realized I was destined for reality show stardom. Lightning didn’t strike; I just knew. A bit idealistic, sure. A bit megalomaniac, maybe. But here I am.

This past fall, I arrived at Penn State with a single bag. After six seasons of Survivor, I could pack a duffle – Swiss Army knife, can-opener, and all. My roommate was impressed. KC Hewitt’s his name. Real swell guy.

We formed an alliance for the college rigmarole: classes, dining hall dinners, even the occasional frat party. “Think of it as The Bachelor practice, Jason.” He tossed me a folded Polo shirt. “Start with one hundred girls and whittle down to one. A whole season in one night.” I
couldn’t say no to that. A pre-med major finds a corpse in his closet or under his bed, and he’s making a few cuts before calling the cops. No doubt.

The party was more like Survivor. KC and a blonde hit it off on a plaid couch while I staked out fifteen girls and nabbed alone time with three. What can I say? I have the curly dark hair, blue eyes, and lanky body thing happening. The girls were all pretty, but if I’ve learned anything from Chris Harrison and the boys on The Bachelor, it’s that most are. You gotta get to know them if you want to see their curves.

I had been narrowing the field to five when red and blue lights flashed through the windows. COPS wasn’t my destiny. Missing teeth, wife beaters, no, thank you! But I respected the show’s officers with their wooden rods and aviators. The Po-Po with the Mo-Mo.

After midterms, KC and his sofa sugar were going steady, and I handed my final rose to a Steeler fan from the ‘Burgh, Jane Smitherman. God, could she kiss. One morning over a plate of waffles, I passed Jane a napkin note: I want to see your wild side.

“Wild side?” She twirled her fork in the syrup puddle.

“We could head out to Jackson Trail to hike this weekend.”

She put down her fork. “That sort of wild. I’m a city girl.”

“But you’re adventurous. You said so yourself.”

“What about bears?”

“They’re hibernating,” I bluffed.

I packed gourmet cheese, expensive crackers, and chardonnay. I forgot glasses, though, so we had to shoot the wine straight from the bottle. And I swear on my grandmother’s ten-pound King James Bible: we saw a bear. Big and black and lumpy and scary as hell. On TV, bears could be stuffed animals or pets or Maitre d’s at vegetarian restaurants. If Jane wasn’t right next to me, I would have peed my pants. But Jane was next to me. She was pulling my arm. “Do something,”
she whispered. “Please.” Her voice sounded small. I didn’t think. I charged. I ran right into an
episode of Animal Planet’s *I Shouldn’t Be Alive*. I flailed my arms and bared my teeth. I roared. I
hissted. I punched the air. In return I willed a claw swipe, a flash of teeth. I wanted this to be
good. You know, impress Jane, the viewers.

“C’mon, bear,” I yelled. An arm’s length away, I stopped. The animal stood on its back
legs. Showtime! Jab belly or kick out a knee?

Before I could make the first move, Jane called, “Bear!” I turned to look. She had the
cheese in her hand. “Hey, bear!” she called again. Her voice shook. Then she chucked the gouda
down the trail. I didn’t even have time to growl again. Off the bear went into the brush.

I jogged back to Jane. “Next time we need a video camera,” I said.

“Take me home,” she said. We hadn’t even reached our first scenic vista. Maybe she
wanted to make-out in private, fantasy-suite style. I poured the rest of the wine into the leaf litter,
and we practically ran to the car.

But back at the dorm, Jane said, “I just don’t feel a strong connection with you. . . . I don’t
think we have enough in common. . . . You’ll meet a lucky girl someday.” I took the lines in. She
was my first girlfriend. I think I could have loved her.

Right before finals, I started watching *Top Chef*. Crème brulee, baby! Mom seemed delighted
when I offered to cook Christmas dinner. “You’re really growing up, Jason,” she said on the car
ride home. “What’s on the menu?

“I thought I would hit up Whole Foods, check out their fresh veggies and proteins.” No
chef went into a challenge saying, I’m doing a saffron leek scallop soufflé. What if the leeks were
wilted or the scallops too small? A few episodes in and already I was learning.

Mom turned to look at me, “Alright, Emeril.” Bam!
But everything I touched in the kitchen went up in flames or ended up smelling like burnt garlic, even the chocolate-infused bread pudding with a caramel-infused whipped topping. The whole meal was a mess-infused disaster. We ordered take-out from Chan’s China Palace.

Back at school, I buckled down. By January 21st, I had four applications submitted. Sure, I was destined for stardom, but I knew not to procrastinate. Oedipus, blind yourself already!

Then along came the inevitable. Last night. A reality show casting exec called during The Amazing Race. “Jim Bundt here. I’ve just made your day, kid.”

I almost hung up. “I’m too old for Chuck E. Cheese’s, mister.”

“That’s funny, kid. Your application was funny, too. You made the cut. We need you in Miami tomorrow night.”

Everything pounded. “What’s the show?”

“Ah, curious? Curious is good, but for now, trust me.”

“But how do you know I’m a good fit?”

“Like I said, your application was funny. No, more than funny. It was intense.”

“What about the bear story? Did you like that part? My epic charge?”

“I don’t work for the Discovery Channel, kid. My turn to ask a question. Are you in?”

I saw final roses, endless immunity, interviews, agent hirings, and magazine covers. “Yes, I’m in,” I said. Maybe Jane would accompany me to the post-finale cast party.

I left KC a note and phoned my parents from the cab on the way to University Park Airport. Look, Mom! I did it. I flew to Dulles. Dad had called to book me a hotel room next to the airport. I came close to squealing twice when I checked in. This morning I woke up, checked out, and boarded a plane. Destiny waited. I was so ready.

But this? Now my vision is deteriorating rapidly, literally falling in a blur of sky and trees. Between the plane’s drone and the captain’s intercom warbling and the incessant screams, I can barely form a
thought. And when I do, it’s this: the bear. That stupid bear Jane and I saw on our date. I never should have charged unless I knew Jane was filming. Danger without documentation is dumb. Really dumb. I just peed my pants.

When the plane touches down against the surf, the aircraft shivers: a wailing, heavy tremor that rips open the fuselage and lifts seats from their bolts. Mine among them. I wake up with one and a half legs and blood pooling syrupy and dark under the remains of my knee. Closeness to death seems to sharpen my mental acuity. I mean, come on. This has to be part of the show. I’m on my back at the edge of a scrubby beach. I’m alive, but of course I’m alive. This is my destiny. The star of the show can’t die. HD immortality.

God, there’s a lot of blood. The reality of it seems so unreal, cartoonish and ketchupy. I use my seat belt as a tourniquet, but still red soaks the cushion, the sand.

I have to hand it to this show’s producers. They have real balls to do something so big, so real. They got carnage right. Around me lie bits of charred metal, a hand, and two smoldering tray tables. The air smells like our kitchen Christmas Day but without the garlic. A gray haze hovers to the left, fed by smoke chimneys swirling from plane parts. Where are the other contestants? Where are the camera crews? Filming with hidden cameras is common, but this level of innovation in shooting unnerves me. Hey, the whole scenario unnerves me. Who wants to see a disembodied hand on a scrubby dune? I knew to be ready for challenges and twists and drama whether the show was about fashion or losing weight, but tragedy is new for me – an aspect of reality I haven’t studied.

Something is happening. The tingling in my leg intensifies. Hello, Destiny, is that you? Under this charcoal-infused sky, I could be the only one left. Could winning be this easy?

Jane’s on her way to class. A pink toothbrush protrudes from the sand. KC’s having lunch with couch girl. They’re still dating, and he’s intact. I squirm into a sitting position. The open
Downtown Harrisonburg is a square of eateries and boutiques around a white-brick courthouse. For the past twenty years, little has changed there. Occasionally businesses paint their ceiling pipes matte orange or fuchsia, and sometimes store fronts re-accessorize their mannequins. Other places, like The Coffee Cup, don’t change at all. We started working here in high school, five years ago. At that time, Starbucks and Panera had just moved into shopping plazas on 33 near the I-81 interchange, and we thought competition would prompt new menu items or a fresh dining room layout. We were wrong. Harriet, Bo, Lizzie, and Mabel wouldn’t allow that, and, of course, we let their desires dictate.

On Saturday, August 14, 2009, we opened The Coffee Cup early, ten minutes to seven. We were seasoned, collegiate baristas now. When Harriet arrived at 7:48, we were foaming milk for the double lattes we would share behind the counter. Most mornings, we swallowed straight shots of espresso to see us through our shifts. Today we wanted to slow down. Savor each sweet sip. We watched the wizened woman walk in.

Harriet’s white hair had been pinned back. The smell of hairspray overwhelmed any perfume dotted on her wrists. Shoulder pads bulged beneath her blouse’s nautical print, bulwarks to her petite frame. We knew from an Internet search that shoulder pads had been fashionable in the 1940s and again in the 1980s. Harriet wore them still. The boat border of her cuffed pants flapped against her shins. She stood in the entryway, anchored against the morning’s flow of patrons. A toddler drifted close, and she bristled at the child’s irreverent proximity. The lattes burned our tongues. Foamed milk clung to our upper lips, and we wiped at it with our aprons and elbows.
Ten minutes later, after we had put trays of cinnamon chip scones into the oven, Bo swung open the door. On the glass pane, she left blurred fingerprints. Just like a child! This morning, despite the breezeless air, she wore a cardigan sweater, plaid trousers, and patterned clogs. She would be an ideal candidate for *What Not to Wear*. She had dyed her long hair darker than Kona coffee beans, but we suspected she was in her seventies because she called her purse a pocketbook and complained about the market’s liver selection. Act your age, we wanted to tell her. Cut your hair. Stop smudging our windows.

The third to enter The Coffee Cup was Lizzie, the sprite. We spied her from the back as we ran a tray of mugs through the dishwasher. Her clothes were fluttering wisps in varying turquoise hues. Today, the door closed on her shirt hem, and the trapped fabric looked like a trembling butterfly. Lizzie – a believer in omens and signs – had once declared butterflies a signal of luck changing, from bad to good. Whose luck would change today?

We folded a stack of cloth napkins and filled the drawer near the coffee carafes. We didn’t believe in luck or coincidence. Our wisdom came from reality shows, web browsing, college math courses, and eight-hour work shifts. We saw life as a coffeehouse and knew patrons deserved their brews, however sweet, scalding, or swirling with grounds. This logic applied especially to old ladies who voiced loud and inconsiderate intimations about teenagers and their dangling ear-bud cords or mothers with excited children. “Satin strings,” they muttered viciously. “No discipline,” they cried. Yes, they deserved what we had done. What would happen today.

Mabel arrived as a line of customers formed. Her colossal frame excused her from punctuality. We watched her approach the waiting women, her strides lumbering and unhurried. As she passed, patrons stopped pouring coffee, and babies dropped pacifiers. She wore a king-sized sheet that hid her ridges and rolls but couldn’t diminish her size. How could it? When she plodded past the counter, we held our breaths and contracted our stomachs to ward off her massiveness.
Once gathered, the women approached the counter. They took turns ordering, but regardless of the woman ordering or the day of the week, the bill for each was the same. God, they bored us. Always the same. Regular coffee in a mug, cinnamon roll, and a paper. “$4.67, please.”

This morning, Harriet complained about the uncivilized cost of coffee while Lizzie commented on the speed with which we had the order up. And she phrased it that way: order up. Mabel scooped up seven tubs of butter, and Bo hefted their four papers into her veiny, tanned arms. Go green: share a paper or two, we wished to urge. Butter clogs arteries!

Instead, we acted delightedly surprised they had each pulled the right combination of bills and coins from their crocheted change purses to cover their meals and leave us 13-cent tips. And our gratitude – a robust chorus of “Gee, Thanks!” – was dangerously hyperbolic. Who still crocheted? We had classes to pay for, rent to cover, and a heavily dog-eared applied mathematics textbook that cost 109 dollars. We needed more. We deserved more. Didn’t we warm their cinnamon rolls during winter months? Didn’t we wrap Lizzie’s leftovers in parchment paper before boxing them up? Enough was enough. We had pooled our pennies to buy a piece of newsprint. Today the women would be forced to confront change. We salivated with anticipation as we snuck pastry bites between orders. The cream-cheese filling cleaved to the roofs of our mouths.

The four women picked a path towards their usual seats in the front right corner of the booth-lined dining room. Their table was circular, near the expanse of window that stretched the entire length of the shop. To get there, they weaved across the sesame-seed scattered ceramic tile and dodged high chairs. None of the women had grandbabies; they considered all children “hellions!” “Snake” they whispered as they dug their heels into computer power cords in their path. Louder, they punctuated their progress with “‘Cuse me, Dear,” and “Fine morning, isn’t it?” Other patrons wrapped their arms around squirming toddlers and kept their sternums pressed to the table’s edge until the women had passed. We all feared getting in their way. Why else would we offer sugar
in canisters instead of paper packets? Why else would we use ceramic dishware instead of polycarbonate plates and recycled cardboard cups? Every morning, the women tread through the coffeehouse and back in time. Before they sat down, they wanted their table and chairs buffed with a paper towel. “Nobody likes a sticky table,” Harriet said. So we buffed. And brought them cream in a cup. And polished their spoons before setting them on their buffed table. Only behind the counter did we fume. After all, they were our elders, and we needed this job as much as The Coffee Cup needed Harriet, Bo, Lizzie, and Mabel: The Real Spinsters of Harrisonburg. They sure could bring in business.

For the past twenty years, the women had been sitting in these same seats every morning. No one knew much about their personal lives and pasts except they were all unmarried and childless. Without their own families, the women found in each other companionship. But we saw their group dynamic differently. Day after day, we glimpsed their relationships with each other and the town as preservation efforts. It was folly, we knew, to resist change. We had earned A's in calculus classes since junior year of high school, and if we had learned anything from our mathematical study of change, it was its inevitability. Life isn’t a plotted point on some four dimensional graph. It’s an equation, a complicated one.

Based on their habits, the women would disagree. By the time we were in middle school, the precedent for their early hours at The Coffee Cup with their cinnamon rolls and commentary had been established, a configuration carefully carved into the city’s social structure. Each morning they cursed proposals for new shopping centers and degraded town officials who suggested updating the library’s card catalogue. By afternoon, their words rattled politicians and razed attempts to renovate slipshod apartment complexes. Children bounded in fresh from school at the heels of work-weary parents and played a game: identify whose chair was whose. But for the rest of the town, the
women weren’t a game. Their stories altered voting preferences, urged worker strikes, and occasionally led to divorce. We respected them as senior citizens, as customers, but we saw the peril of their power: anxiety, restlessness, irritability. The women were the town’s caffeine addiction, and it was time to cut back.

The women blew on their coffee and laid napkins on their polyester-wrapped thighs. They called to us for a fresh cup of cream, a few extra cloth napkins. Yes, we complied. And yes, we craved their commands, however condescendingly they stared at our pierced ears, the tightness of our pants, the black eyeliner we wore. When they allowed us to enter their circle, we felt privileged and wise beyond our twenty-something years and thirty-some hours of coursework at James Madison University. Up close, the women’s wrinkles were as deep as culverts. How many years had they seen? For a moment, we wondered if we were right to admonish their romantic reversal of the Clock. At one time, they had been as young as we were now. Then a buzzer sounded. In a whoosh, warm buttery smells saturated the air. Even though we used hot pads, the metal tray burned our hands. We left the baked goods to cool. Of course there was no going back.

We moved into the dining area again, looking for litter, hoping for hearsay. We reached for fallen napkins beneath a booth, swiping at six or seven but retrieving only three. Our eyes were on the women. Mabel dug right into her sticky pastry with both hands, and the gossip began, the Saturday paper as provocation. Shamefully, hopelessly, we listened. First the women scanned the front page, commenting on last week’s horse show and the town levy passed on Wednesday. The snap and crackle of newsprint folded into their voices before mingling with friendly greetings, oven buzzers, and our clanging cash register. It was the same house blend every morning, and yet it wasn’t. The old ladies and their chatter brewed it fresh each day.
“Harriet, did you read about the plaza going in across from Wal-Mart?” Lizzie asked, taking a Barbie bite of cinnamon bun.

“I do declare, commercial development will be the downfall of this place. As if we need another Mexican restaurant. This town needs refinement, not diversification.” Harriet lifted her coffee mug. A toast to what? Stale snobbery?

“I heard the contractor for the project was almost fired for having an affair with the Mayor’s wife,” Bo added, and just like that, the conversation changed. In the hands of these women, any material proved malleable; they could knead a ribbon-cutting ceremony into a public orgy.

“What was he doing meeting the Mayor’s wife in the first place,” Mabel asked, still chewing.

“You know the Mayor’s wife,” Harriet said. “She finds a way to work herself into her husband’s projects, especially if they involve younger men heaving and sweating.”

“Yes, but contractors don’t sweat. They hire men to sweat,” Lizzie said.

“Oh, Lizzie, dear. Must we spell everything out for you?” Bo asked.

“Speaking of spelling, I heard that little Tommy Northwood cheated in the county spelling bee and had his school trophy taken away,” Mabel said. Again, another shift.


We soaked up these snatches of chatter to share behind the counter. As we sprinkled more coffee grounds into the machine, we stewed over their remarks, the arrogance of their ignorance. Then we made our way towards them again with a broom and dust pan. We couldn’t keep away even though it was banal, every sticky crumb of conversation. Really, our interest in these women appalled us. They still wore pantyhose. Every morning, they ordered the same thing. Every morning, they gossiped about our parents, our teachers, our friends. We felt cheap, used and dog-eared.
Today would be different. We had made sure of that. The article offered usurpation. Promised change. We waited. Patiently now. The paper was in their hands, and they were turning the pages, their fingers glossy with icing, their lips smacking cinnamon.

After the front page, the women skipped, as usual, to the Life and Times section. They needed stories about people and problems, and the L&T promised a smorgasbord of lust, litigation, and loss. We knew that. We counted on that.

Then we spied our announcement on the front page of the L&T. We knocked over a sugar canister, and the fine grains spilled over the table’s edge. We swept quickly and left white patches in the grout. That piece of newsprint had all four women entirely absorbed. Of course it did. A strange silence settled at their table. The other patrons noticed, too. Unnerved, they all bought papers or fished one from the recycling bin, hoping to snag a copy only slightly soiled by coffee and crumbs. Curiosity ran rampant through the shop.

A barista managed to swipe a newspaper from a mother tending to her hungry toddler trio. On the page, the phony words looked permanent, powerful. Huddled behind the counter, we read the familiar print again.

The City of Harrisonburg would like to congratulate Ms. Mabel Roxwell on her appointment as a contestant in the upcoming season of The Biggest Loser. The NBC reality show features obese men and women battling to lose the bulge and win $250,000. Filming will begin next month and viewers can watch Mabel on TV in January. Plan to tune in Tuesday nights at 9:00 on channel 7. Mabel was nominated by her dearest friends, Lizzie, Bo, and Harriet. Mabel, stay tuned for an official congratulations from the show’s producers. Harrisonburg, stay tuned for further announcements about the official send-off parade and ceremony.

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“We did what?” Harriet asked. She looked as though she had been newly baptized in sweet tea.

“The Biggest Loser – is that with the man at the mansion who hands out roses?” Lizzie asked.

“Did you know about this, Mabel?” Harriet asked.

“Lose weight? I ain’t got an ounce on me I’m not proud of,” Mabel said. She cranked open her jaw and filled her mouth with pastry. Little remained.

“No, of course not, dear,” Lizzie said.

Bo said, “All those reality shows – garbage. And that’s all young people today care about. Those dumb shows and their video games.” Bo sat up. The color in her cheeks grew red beyond the spiced wine blush she wore so heavily. “It’s no wonder, all the terrorists and affairs and television at the dinner table. Why just the other day, I saw Joseph Templeton and his family at that new Italian place. The boy didn’t look up from the screen in his lap once. Not once.”

“I just watch my soaps and I Love Lucy. Mabel, you’re beautiful. It’s just those big family bones. You can’t help that!” Harriet said.

“So why did you nominate me?” asked Mabel. As she popped the last bit of breakfast into her mouth, the other women scanned each other’s faces, searching for the guilty party, the outlier among them. For Heaven’s sake, who thought Mabel was fat? Who had signed her up for that dumb reality show? But we saw in their eyes and postures other questions: How was time passed in the afternoon and evenings when not in each other’s company? Who watched Jersey Shore? How much did they know about each other beyond their preference for cinnamon rolls and two scoops of sugar in their coffee? Who secretly owned a cell phone? Who didn’t bake bread from scratch?

“I certainly didn’t nominate you,” Harriet said. “But it seems someone around here has an imprudent set of loose lips.”
In their seats, the women squirmed. They liked to question and speculate about the happenings of Harrisonburg, the crime of change they observed outside the wide front window. Now they sat on brooch pins. At their own table, they suspected scandal. We smelled the contretemps in the air: a scent stronger than hazelnut and sharper than French roast.

Of course, we relished this, so we accidentally dropped forks, hoping they would clatter under any one of their four chairs. We wiped and re-wiped the window in their corner, certain little Suzie Smithers had left her prints on the glass. We sought proximity, but hoped to remain unnoticed. Not that they would suspect us. They couldn’t know that we were tired of folding napkins and washing mugs, that we needed change, even for a day. And they certainly didn’t know we did it for their own good. The algorithm the women ran each morning produced junk. The sequence demanded termination.

“We’ve known each other decades,” Bo said. “But you know a little exercise wouldn’t hurt, Mabel, dear. Nothing crazy like a diet.” She wrinkled up her nose as though smelling cream no longer fresh.

“I once ate only blueberries for a week,” Lizzie said. We believed her.

“I can’t help it you’re anorexic,” Mabel said, pushing back her chair. The eating disorder sounded venomous as it slithered off her bulbous tongue. We cleared a nearby booth but left a margarine smear on the cushioned bench. What would happen now? We were witnessing quantum decoherence, a system interacting with its environment in an irreversible way. What damage had we done?

“Now, Mabel,” Bo started. “Lizzie’s just little. She’s always been that way.”

“Actually, it’s these here copper bracelets. They regulate my ions,” explained Lizzie.

“You could have just bought me a pair. No need to sign me up for a show,” Mabel said. She folded her arms across the sine curves of her chest and crossed her legs. Even huddled and
collapsed upon itself, her body was big. Then she looked right at Lizzie. “Those things don’t work, you know. And your horoscope is made-up by Joan’s boy Jason who works for the paper. She told me herself at the hair dresser’s last week.” Now it was Lizzie’s turn to shrink in her chair, a butterfly sinking back into its cocoon. How vulnerable they both looked. How old. We made our rounds with fresh coffee for nearby patrons – sloshing with each step.

“Oh, Mabel, Lizzie didn’t sign you up for the show. You do that sort of stuff on the computer, and she doesn’t even own a typewriter,” Harriet said. She reached out to squeeze Lizzie’s recoiled arm.

“It was you, then, wasn’t it?” Mabel leaned forward. Yes, we stood still, carafe in hand. When Mabel picked up the porcelain cup of cream, tension spiked exponentially. She aimed the spout at Harriet. We could see liquid flush with the lip of the cup. “How could you?” Mabel’s voice rose as she chewed and spat those three words out. Around the coffeehouse, patrons peered around their pastries. We forgot about the bagels baking. We ignored the timer’s buzz. Poppy seeds sizzled and burst.

Harriet’s eyes rose to meet Mabel’s. Mabel’s hand rose, and with it, the cup of cream. Seconds passed. Then the thick liquid flew across the table, a white and wicked trajectory.

Cream dripped from Harriet’s foundation-lathered face onto the boats and oars of her blouse. “Oh my,” Bo said. She reached for a napkin, held it out to Harriet. “Oh my,” she repeated.

And just like that, everything stopped. Conversations halted mid-sentence. Bo’s face flushed. Cream puddled beneath Harriet’s chair. Little Lizzie wilted in her seat, the turquoise of her top abrasively bright. Mabel shifted. The moans and groans of her chair cut through the silence like the screams of the milk frother. No one ordered. We all waited. The bagels charred. What would they say to each other now? Would Harriet retaliate with a shower of sugar? Or would they ignore
the ugliness of spilled cream and carry on with the morning, like clockwork oiled by coffee, age, and routine?

They did nothing. They sat stunned, eyes barely blinking, lips unmoving.

We expected more from these women who thrived on drama. How disappointing for it to end so quietly. And yet wasn’t that what we wanted? For years we had begged the women from afar to quit railing and rumoring so we could improve our service, our menu, our ambiance. From the oven, we pulled the tray of blackened bagels. We turned on the fan.

At last Harriet stood and tucked her pocketbook under her arm. White rivulets etched lines through her foundation. She looked right at Mabel. “Wrath is a sin,” she said. Slowed by the heavy preposterousness of her face, she made her way to the restroom.

Bo followed her. Her bouncing gait caused her limbs to flail. An arm knocked over a child’s chocolate milk. A leg smacked into a stroller, and the baby within heaved a wail. In the hallway, she jerked in place. Perhaps she worried about casting her alliance away from Mabel, who could crush her and all her youthfulness beneath the sprawling brick of her foot. Then Bo re-crossed the coffeehouse and exited, leaving in her wake the discordant clatter of bells.

Lizzie perched on the edge of her seat. Her eyes flit around the room, and then she was gone. Through the window, we watched a tail of turquoise turn the corner.

Mabel stood wearily, heavy in her wide white Reeboks. She clumped to the counter. She set down the cream cup with such force that a crack corrupted the china. A long strand of iron. We watched it travel upwards, creeping through the porcelain as Mabel moved away. At the door, she paused and looked towards the restrooms. Would an altercation go down now in the open expanse of the entryway? But Harriet didn’t appear, and Mabel leaned against the door. She lurches onto the sidewalk. If we were closer, we would have seen sweat coalesce above her broad lips or soak the expanse of fabric beneath her blubbery arms. We guessed the sinkhole between her breasts, the
crevices at her groin and elbows, and the hollows among her stomach rolls filled instantly in the August heat, and we felt sorry for her and her pitiful perspiration.

The women never returned to The Coffee Cup. They were never seen together again.

Harriet, Bo, Lizzie, and Mabel died the next year within a week’s time. By December 10, 2010, they had all passed and we had stopped studying for finals. We had had enough calculus and chaos theory.

We weren’t surprised their deaths sought convergence in time, in ultimate outcome, in publication. This was their reunion. We stopped at the downtown library to read the four obituaries in the *Daily News-Record*. Yes, we missed the women. Missed them terribly. Already we were late for our shifts at Starbucks, where we had been working since the previous spring, but we had to honor the women somehow. They deserved at least five minutes of our time. As we read the death notices, we remembered. Lacy curtains. Sugar packets. Warm cinnamon rolls. Three pennies and a dime. For a moment, we wanted to slide back behind the counter. But this time, we wouldn’t whisper about Harriet’s shoulder pads or Mabel’s impressive girth. This time, we would listen. Cream served in ceramic cups *tastes* better. This time, we would understand. We need constants in our lives; they convince us that we, too, can endure. Systems are so fragile.

Following the August incident, The Coffee Cup’s patronage had dwindled. In the lingering absence of the women, the shop grew quiet, too quiet, and the owners were forced to sell. Now the whole block has been cleared for the Target scheduled to open in early June. There, the smell of dust, dry and acrid in the nostrils, reminds us of burnt poppy seeds.
Laura’s wedding was inconvenient, given the distance and Kelly’s rotation schedule. The Friday afternoon flight was direct, Jacksonville to Pittsburgh. The sky glowed like an operating room. Kelly had a window seat. On her lap, she held case files. First one: Jack McCann. Age 59. CABG/AVR. Open heart surgery. Kelly had left right from the hospital and had to be back on Monday to start her Year 4 Surgical Rotation. She was still in her scrubs, blue ones with dosages scrawled on the right thigh in black Sharpie. Instead of studying, she traced heart valves in distant clouds before they dissolved into the glare of the setting sun.

A little after seven, the plane descended into the Western Pennsylvania foothills. The aircraft cut through a smoldering evening sky that blurred hillsides speckled with homes, commercial supercenters, stretches of wide highways, and sections of country roads winding amidst dense August forests. She had grown up in these suburbs and had then attended the University of Pittsburgh, but she hadn’t been back since graduation, three years ago. Now her retired parents visited her in Gainesville, Florida, where she attended medical school, and Christmas celebrations moved to different ski resorts each year. “Holiday nomads,” her dad explained to the bellhops. The landscape here was familiar, its hills thick with memory, memory that made her tachycardic. She felt all of it – all that was lost and gained in this place. A chest compression held too long.

When Laura asked Kelly to be in the wedding six months ago, a week or two after Jason proposed, Kelly accepted. She bought a bridesmaid’s handbook and the purple mermaid-train dress Laura had picked out for her attendants. The dress turned Kelly into a purple plexiform neurofibroma. Be positive, the handbook said. She called Laura and left a message: “What a great dress!” Once she hung up, she regretted the voluntary compliment, the lie. Six words and she was back in high school.
The landing gear came down. Kelly watched bridges light upon the land and disappear against the dark water. Pittsburgh’s topography wasn’t inspired by the same benevolent muse who had designed Gainesville and most of Florida. But the northern city responded to its three rivers, its abundant and steep hills with bridges like steely shunts and long concrete stitches. To Kelly, Pittsburgh’s roadways seemed the result of large-scale surgery to relieve the land of its complications, its wounds. That’s what she liked about Pittsburgh and medicine: the restoration of function, of purpose, of meaning.

Kelly called Laura once she made it outside with her bags – luggage bought for this trip and the residency program visits she would make in the fall. One navy-plaid bag held only her dresses and the three-inch silver heels Laura had picked out for the bridesmaids. She hadn’t bought heels in years, let alone worn them. “I’m here,” she said. A year from now, here could be almost anywhere.

Laura said, “I’m pulling around. You have your dress for the rehearsal? We’re cutting it close. How was the flight? Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Kelly said. “Terminal B.”

“I see you,” Laura said. “I see you.” A black SUV cut close to the curb, its tinted window rolled down. “Get in, girl. We’ll hug at the restaurant.” Kelly got in. According to her bridesmaid handbook, she was supposed to follow the bride’s directions, to adjust, to accommodate whenever possible. As a medical school student, she understood hierarchy well. “No, sit in the back. That way you’ll have room to change.” Kelly sat in the back. “Watch out for those gift bags on the floor.” Kelly evaded the glittery, swollen bags.

They pulled away from the curb. “You look great, Laura,” she said. Date on the bride: handbook page 7. Laura looked the Floridian Kelly was not – blond and tan – and yet the glow of Laura’s skin seemed to strain her face. The corners of her eyes and lips were pinched, her nostrils flared. The glow was effortful. Time had enacted cataract surgery upon Kelly, and now, the
opacification removed, she saw herself and Laura differently. Three years had passed, but now in Laura’s presence, she accepted her thin, soft body, void of curves, pale and floating beneath blue scrubs. Would this confident transparency last the weekend? Would she, scrubbed, masked, and gowned, see as well under OR lights?

“You, too, sweetie,” Laura said, eyes on the red light. She called everyone sweetie. In stiff ringlets, Laura’s nearly-white blond hair glowed against her bare back like x-ray imaged bones.

“I can’t wait to see your gown,” Kelly said. Another handbook rule. Re-direct conversation to the bride as often as possible. Page 32.

“I had to put it on the other day. It wants to be worn,” Laura said. After her white coat ceremony two years ago, Kelly had felt the same way. In giddy revelry, she had worn her coat over her pajamas that night. She fell asleep wrapped in the starchy white fabric, her stethoscope around her neck.

“Is there a light back here?” Kelly asked, out of her scrubs now. The pattern of her dress hid its creases – scars of the trip. Now for make-up. “How is Jason?”

An overhead light came on, but they were on back roads now, curly ribbons of gritty pavement that lay across the land, connecting one strip of corner bars and churches to another and complicating make-up application. “He’s good. Let me know if he seems nervous. You’ll love his brother Trey. That’s who you’re walking with. He went to high school with us. Trey did.”

“You mean he was in our class? I didn’t know Jason had a brother our age.” Kelly smeared mascara on her cheek when the car hit a pothole.

“You’ll love him,” Laura said. Kelly paused, the mascara brush poised in her hand. Would she? They weren’t high school sophomores. She recapped the inky brush before she blinded herself.
At the Sewickley Country Club, the landscape lighting highlighted a fine lawn and trees as gnarled as arthritic hands. “We’re here,” Laura said. “Can you help me carry those bags?”

“Absolutely.” Kelly trailed a step or two behind Laura, gift bags dangling from her arms. She was a porter of presents.

Senior year of high school, Kelly feigned interest in vampire novels, baked brownies post-break-ups, and shared tampons in Spanish class to resuscitate the friendship she and Laura had shared since kindergarten. Yes, it bothered her when Laura stole her prom hair appointment, but Kelly had invested so much into the relationship. Amputation wasn’t an option.

At Pitt, they roomed together. Laura’s idea. They shared heaping plates of dining hall desserts; Kelly would scrape icing away with a finger and leave the cake for Laura. Still Laura slipped away – into a sorority, into West Coast boyfriends, into social psychology courses. That spring, Kelly declared pre-med.

Since college graduation, their relationship existed in the periphery of friendship – an exchange of infrequent phone calls, sporadic emails, and texts. Kelly acclimated to the noninvasive nature of their interactions.

But when Laura called six months ago, something in Kelly fractured. Laura’s bright phone call, the cheery invitation to be a bridesmaid, their ten-minute conversation: what did it mean? Confirmation of friendship? Desperation? Kelly said, “Of course I’ll be in your wedding,” because she couldn’t say no. She couldn’t make the cut.

But now she was a bridesmaid and the wedding was a day away and she had to be ready for surgery on Monday. She wanted a Versed drip.
Back in high school, she and Laura had played a game in the hallway. They had labeled their peers, taking in their downward glances, their slapping shoes, their chapped lips, and defined them accordingly: “Closet Christian,” Laura would say. “Bench all-star,” Kelly would say. “Certified bird-watcher.” Trey would have been a parking-lot stoner.

Tonight Kelly met him in the buffet line between manicotti and chicken parmesan. He was tall. His thick hair and wide eyes both had a sandy, dirty quality. He would have been the bad-boy heartthrob.

“Great bag,” Trey said as he approached Kelly’s booth. Gifts had been exchanged, toasts made, and the engaged couple’s future grandchildren named. Everyone else was at or near the bar.

Kelly looked at her monogrammed toiletry case with its purple zebra stripes. Her bridesmaid gift. “So plush. So practical.” She petted the stripes.

“Just like my pen,” Trey said. That had been the groomsmen gift.

“What a nice pen.” Pens. They were talking about pens. “Who was your English teacher?” she asked. “Senior year.”

“I wasn’t in any of your classes.” Trey sat down. He had to cross his legs because they didn’t fit under the table.

“Maybe we passed each other in the hall,” she said.

“Valedictorians didn’t walk past stoners. We had our own water fountains.”

“Huh,” she said. She unzipped her toiletry bag. She zipped it again. An instant incision.

“Tell me,” he said. “Do you have the life a valedictorian dreams about?”

She looked up. “Maybe. Do you have the life a stoner dreams about?”

Trey turned sideways and stretched his legs into the aisle. Dark material sagged where the hem of his pant legs had fallen out. “Let me guess,” he said. “Law school?”

“Wrong. My turn. Gas station?” She leaned forward. He thought he knew her.
“Wrong. Medical school?” He was smiling now.

“Right. Mailman?” she asked. Was she that knowable? What would Jack McCann, Age 59, see on her face during rounds Monday morning? *Be focused, poised.* Another handbook suggestion.


“I’m gonna say no.” She was tired of his little game. She had to get away. “I think I’ll get a drink now.”

“But there’s so much we don’t know about each other,” he said, his face propped up in his hands.

“I’m going into surgery,” she said. “There, game over.” She tucked her toiletry bag under her arm. She stood up and started walking towards the bar, forgetting about Trey’s legs in the aisle. Their shins collided. Before she toppled over, Trey grabbed her arm and steadied her. His calluses rubbed her skin.

“You cut into people.” It wasn’t a question. She stared at his hand on her arm. She didn’t explain that right now and for the next sixty hours, surgery was just a field of study, one among hundreds she could have chosen. “Landscaping,” he offered. “I’m a landscaper.” His voice was soft now, a warm compress on her agitation. But she was thinking about chest cavities, clogged arteries, and damaged valves.

At the bar she ordered a beer and joined the family and friends near the bride. She would tell Laura how great she looked tonight. She would ask if she could help with something. She would drink her beer. This process she would repeat until it was time to leave.

The wedding party consisted of fourteen friends and family. Kelly was joined by Laura’s two sisters, a friend from work, and two Delta Gamma brunettes from Pitt. Their glossy pink lip balm smelled
of cherries. On the groom’s side, Jason had his brother Trey, two cousins, a buddy from his bowling league, his college roommate, and the captain of his ultimate Frisbee team. Everyone stayed to help clean and consolidate gifts after the dinner. As they worked, the group talked about wedding complications. Cake, flowers, balloon decorations – everything had risks and side effects. Kelly swept confetti from tables into a garbage can.

“At my brother’s wedding last May, one of the groomsmen replaced the ball and chain cake-topper with an actual chain link. The whole four-tier number collapsed,” the sorority girl named Lyla said as she laced her long dark curls through her fingers.

“My buddy’s wife had a bee land on her bouquet when she walked down the aisle. She tried to swat it but got stung. Found out she was allergic. When she started to swell, she got stuck in her dress. The paramedics had to cut it off,” said bowling teammate Chad.

Later the honor attendants and the not-quite newlyweds made their way to the parking lot. The breeze carried a breath of fall. All that was ahead for Kelly rushed across her skin: Monday’s surgery, the interviews next month, the plane trips, the rotations, the long hours, the decisions. Trey stood near Laura’s car. “You can have the guest room. I’ll take the couch,” he said.

“Don’t you have your own place?” Kelly asked. She watched Laura kiss her other bridesmaids on their cheeks. A kiss was so versatile – used to say goodbye, to seal a marriage, to bestow bravery before surgery.

“Hey, can’t a younger brother hang with his older brother the night before he gets married?” Trey smiled.

“I suppose,” Kelly said. Under the parking lot lights, she saw Trey differently. What would it be like to kiss him? Would his lips taste like the night air, smoky and sweet?

“That and the younger brother’s car is in the shop. And he’s had too much to drink. Plus, he needs to be punctual for the wedding.” Still he smiled.
“Alarms clocks aren’t new inventions,” she offered. She kept her arms folded across her chest, hugging her make-up bag. Still she shivered.

“C’mon, Florida girl. Can’t you handle a breeze?” Trey asked.

“Wait – no. I don’t need your jacket. Really, I’m fine,” but even as she spoke, he crossed the distance to her and wrapped his jacket around her shoulders, tugging at the lapels to pull the coat tight. She knew she should thank him, make eye contact.

Instead, she turned to find Laura. “We need to get home. Laura has a big day tomorrow.”

“Astute observation. They give you that medical degree for your sharpness?”

“Astute is a pretty big word for you, isn’t it?” Kelly asked as Laura skipped to the driver’s seat. Beside Trey in the backseat, still bundled in his sports coat, Kelly felt bare. She needed redirection, stat. She asked, “How are you doing your hair, Laura? Curls? Any flowers?”

They drove home, Laura detailing where every strand of hair would be tomorrow. Kelly admired the assertive specificity of the explanation. She was always grasping what was to come, and she marveled that anyone could have such a firm handle on anything, even if it was just a French twist.

At the house, Kelly told Laura she looked beautiful in her pink-striped sateen pajamas when they hugged good night.

The next morning Kelly woke up at seven in a tangle of crisp, unfamiliar sheets. The two-story condo was still as she walked across the hall to shower. Usually she was at the hospital by now. This morning’s laziness was a luxury.

With the water on, steam climbed the mirror. She liked hot showers. She stepped in, behind the white curtain, under the running water.
Her hair wasn’t fully wet when she heard the door open. She was envisioning coronary arteries, so the sound only registered peripherally. A shadow appeared against the bright curtain. Was the tall outline Trey’s? Would he join her? Did she want him to? He was an ex-high school stoner. He mowed grass and planted shrubs. He teased. He gave her his jacket. She peaked around the curtain. Trey stared into the mirror, brushing his teeth. In a couple of hours, she had to wear a purple dress, and on Monday she would shake hands with a 59 year-old patient suffering from heart disease. Here, now, she wanted Trey to join her. She pulled back the curtain and stepped aside. “Get in here,” she told him. He nodded. His clothes came off. Kelly’s slippery fingers pulled at his tanned arms. He was the land’s plastic surgeon; she was the body’s mechanic.

Trey climbed in, moved behind her. He breathed into her hair. He had three fingers on the white of her waist. His fingers were needles. They stuck her. Water rolled down their faces, their necks. Kelly leaned back. They formed a single unit cauterized with water and desire, body soap and need. What did he smell in her hair? On her neck? Trey smelled like a cut-lawn after the rain.

Kelly acted on impulse, without a handbook, her hands grasping, her lips fervently seeking. But the shower was wet and slippery and soap-sudsy. She started to turn. From there, it was dominoes. Legs, arms, stomachs, fingers, and noses knocked into each other on the way down. The tiled floor was hard. Water fell in scalding streams. Kelly’s arm twisted, and Trey’s shoulder dug into her thigh.

“Valedictorians can be clumsy,” Trey said, pulling his weight off Kelly.

“You’re too tall,” Kelly said as Trey lifted her out of the shower, onto the bathmat. “Do I look like a potted geranium? Gentle.”

“Aren’t doctors supposed to have thick skins?” He was lathering up.

“You’re showering? I was showering.” She wrapped herself in a towel.
“Shouldn’t you be getting dressed? Don’t you have a hair appointment?” He closed his
eyes, tilting his head under the water. Kelly picked up his clothes and tossed them into the shower.
Trey groaned. She pulled the shower curtain closed and walked out, back across the hallway to the
guest room. But she was smiling. Remember, the handbook emphasized, it’s not your day.

The rest of the bridesmaids met Laura and Kelly at the salon. From there, they drove to the church
to get dressed. Kelly sat in the backseat next to the sorority girls. She smelled Trey’s grassiness
despite the hairspray and top coat. Laura shrieked at every pothole dip in the road. Outside the
window Kelly saw neatly trimmed lawns. Ivy, the sinews of Sewickley, climbed red brick facades. In
these neighborhoods, yards had been face-lifted with foliage and flowers. She wondered at the
area’s anatomy, the names of the budding plants and trees. Trey would know.

Kelly was elbow-deep in taffeta, the wedding thirty minutes away. “Okay, we got it this time.” She
gave another tug. What a dress, she thought. Every inch of the fabric was covered in diamonds and
pearls. Now the bodice and crinoline were straight. Standing, she suffered in her high, silvery heels.
Kelly started fastening buttons. “It looks heavy. Is it heavy?”

“At least twenty pounds,” Laura said. “The sales clerk warned me about the weight, but this
was the dress. This is the dress.”

Kelly smiled. “It’s perfect for you,” she said. “There. All set.” The two sisters swooped in
to clutch Laura in their arms.

“Oh, my!” the older sister said.

“I think I’m going to cry,” said the younger one.

Kelly stepped back. Three nails had chips in the polish. Her feet stung. The stilts altered
her center of gravity. She looked at Laura festooned in diamonds and pearls and all that white. She
should be gushing, too: the handbook’s recommendation for moments like these. But she saw a
gaudy glimmer. In two days, organs, vital tissue, and fluid would be exposed. Each action, every
movement would matter. She should tell her friend she looked beautiful. *Never lose focus,* the
handbook warned. Or was that advice from a resident? “I’ll just go see how things are coming
upstairs.” She turned in her heels and walked away as quickly as she could manage. Behind her,
Laura giggled and squealed.

“Well, well,” Trey said, jogging down the stairs. They met on the landing. Kelly felt an
anesthetized calm in his presence.

“Can we come up now?” she asked. Then she was in his arms, his fingertips digging across
her shoulders, his breath pushing past her ear. Her purple dress constricted around her.

“Why the hurry? Big date later?” he asked. Kelly heard footsteps and greetings and the
organ rumble above. Her calves burned, standing there. Later. Kelly thought about later. The
wedding was ten minutes later, the reception to follow. Her return flight was eighteen hours away.
What about later for her and Trey? Her and Laura? Maybe Christmas cards, phone calls, or emails.
They could arrange a rendezvous between Florida and Pennsylvania, say on the Outer Banks in
North Carolina, Jason and Laura in one hotel room, she and Trey in another. The two couples
could walk the beach at night remembering the wedding weekend. A chime rang once, its brightness
muffled in the stairway. The guests would be seated now, fanning themselves with programs. An
empty aisle waited.

“Maybe,” Kelly said, smiling wider now. But Jason was calling for Trey, and Laura was
waiting for her. The wedding was now. The pain returned to her feet. Kelly clung to the railing.

At the bottom of the stairs, Kelly paused as Laura rushed over. The wedding gown tugged
against the bride’s tanned body; the hem dragged along the carpet. “Is it time? It’s time, isn’t it?
It’s really happening,” Laura said. Kelly wanted to share in Laura’s happiness, but Trey smelled like
grass and the heart looked like a giant bulb planted in the body. She kept thinking about later. The bride looked beautiful, and she would tell her so. Wasn’t that enough? “You look beautiful,” Kelly said. She took up the front of Laura’s dress, and the sisters held the back. Together, they walked as a unit up the stairs.

“Almost there.”

“One more step. Careful now.”

At the top of the stairs, Kelly paused. Her foot pain was acute, at an eight and climbing. She had been designated official dress-fluffer because Laura assumed aspiring surgeons had good hands. Now she lifted Laura’s dress. She let the fabric drop in a great flop, a white umbrella. Fluffing is a special duty, the handbook said. The gown has to look good at all times. Kelly reached for her flowers. The stems were still wet and wrapped with a glittery ribbon, a purple tourniquet.

“Okay, places everyone, places,” Laura said. Bridesmaids and groomsmen would walk in together because the groom wanted his moment, too. A less typical ceremony set-up, but absolutely acceptable, the handbook noted.

“Kelly, back here,” Trey said. Kelly limped to where he stood. They would be the fourth couple to walk. He offered her his arm.

“You look like a game-show host.” Her words surprised her.

“Thanks,” he said. “That’s funny.” Music started to play, slow and classical.

“I feel like an eggplant in this dress,” she said. “And my feet hurt.” The words just tumbled out. The doors to the church opened. The first couple started to walk. She clung to Trey and shifted her weight, seeking respite for her aching feet.

Trey looked down. “Maybe you should have worn more comfortable footwear.”


The third couple walked into the church. Trey and Kelly stood in the doorway. She wanted an
anesthesiologist to do posterior tibial nerve blocks. Ahead the altar and surrounding area gleamed white while bushels of purple flowers in pots and vases offered a rich, substantial contrast. In the aisle, purple petals lay like cells floating in crystal violet stain. The white-robed minister seemed far away, a distance too far to be traversed just now, in these heels. She thrust her bouquet into Trey’s chest. “Here,” she said. “Hold this.” She reached for the buckle on her right shoe.

But it was time. Trey pushed the flowers back and tugged her forward. “Sally forth,” he said softly. Kelly lurched. But then Trey paused, pulled her upward, and she regained her balance. She exhaled deeply, righted her bouquet. *Walk slow,* the handbook said. *And breathe,* it stressed. Each step hurt. Wide ribbons of pain wrapped her feet, her legs. Her hands shook.

At the front of the church, they parted. Kelly drew in quick breaths as she joined the three other bridesmaids. Her heart rate was climbing. Down the aisle came Laura’s sisters, one after the other. They blinked fiercely. The music stopped. The Wedding March started. The crowd stood. Kelly’s vision tunneled.

Laura’s walk down the aisle was slow. She crawled past pews under the weight of her dress, the weight of the moment. Light bounced off diamonds, pearls in dizzying displays. Among the guests, a woman in coral lace blew her nose loudly. Kelly’s toes tingled. Just before the altar, Laura hugged her dad, and Jason came down the five steps to meet them. Kelly wished Percocet pills were embedded in the purple blossoms she held to her chest. Hand in hand, the bride and groom climbed the stairs. Laura gave her bouquet to her older sister and reached again for Jason.

Now Kelly approached to fluff the dress once more. In her heels, in her eggplant dress, Kelly stooped to pick up Laura’s train for a good fluff. She picked up two fistfuls of the dress. God, her feet hurt. It was visceral and ugly, that pain, and in her hands, the dress seemed responsible. To Laura, to the wedding, Kelly was a handmaiden: a giver of favors and compliments, a fastener of buttons, a fluffer of wedding dresses. But on Monday, she would step into a sterile
gown and hold medical instruments. The bypass machine would whir. The fellow would crack Jack McCann’s sternum and expose the heart. Clogged arteries would be fixed. A diseased valve would be replaced. She would stitch closed the eight-inch incision. She would be a surgeon. A prolonger of life. A heart fixer.

What was she doing here? She should be studying. She should be in the suture lab. She was so far from where she needed to be. She felt hot, flushed. Flight or fight.

She straightened her legs. It was time to leave. But Laura’s dress was in her clenched fists, and she couldn’t feel her feet. Her legs shook, her knees locked. She used the gown to steady herself. She pulled to prevent a fall.

But she fell anyway, and Laura toppled on top of her. Pews creaked. Mothers and grandmothers cried out. The organist struck a stray chord. On the ground, Kelly tasted the buttons that climbed Laura’s back. It was bright under that dress, all that white. More weight now, crushing her. Laura would have held fast to Jason, pulling him down with her. Kelly was buried. Asphyxiation seemed plausible. The three of them lay on the stairs – white, purple, cummerbund, bow tie, buttons, veil, heels, vest, hands, hairdos, pant cuffs all tangled and entwined. The handbook didn’t troubleshoot a situation like this. Trey would be watching. He would ask her why valedictorians had to be so clumsy.

“Oh, my,” the minister said.

The bridesmaids gasped.

“Laura,” Jason said.

“Kelly,” Trey said.

The crowd gasped.

“My dress,” Laura said.

“Can’t breathe,” Kelly said.
The groomsman disentangled the mess of bodies and garments, but before Kelly stood, she unbuckled her heels. Trey extended a hand, and Kelly grabbed it, shoes dangling from her wrist. Dozens of diamonds and pearls puddled at the bride’s feet. Already the bridesmaids were fixing Laura’s hair and smoothing her dress. They realigned her veil and offered lip-gloss. Kelly was reminded of parents at a child’s bedside moments before surgery. “It’s okay. Everything is okay,” Laura’s sister reassured. That same comforting tone. But those calming words masked the grim reality. Surgery was painful. Bloody. Operations could fail. Lives could be lost. And weddings, however beautiful, were only the beginning. Marriage was hard. Relationships could fail. Love could be lost. Kelly stood next to Trey. Her feet ached a little, but otherwise she felt relief. She breathed in its intoxicating sweetness, like the fragrance of so many purple flower petals broken at her feet. On her arm, a bra strap rested, and she left it there. She stood and watched. The bridal party, all landscapers now, restored the scene’s beauty. Kelly wanted no part of it. The fix she sought was below the surface. And painful. A dangling heel dug into her stomach.

Then Laura turned to her. “What the hell?” she asked softly.

Kelly breathed and put herself in the operating room. She imagined a steel table surrounded by carts of instruments. She reached for a scalpel. “I shouldn’t be here,” she said. “I made a mistake. I lost my balance.”

“Are you trying to ruin my wedding?” Laura’s voice rose. A curl fell against her cheek.

Kelly laid a hand on Laura’s flushed arm. “The wedding is beautiful, and you’re getting married. You look beautiful.” She paused, and Laura tried to pull away.

“Look at my dress. Why are you doing this?” Laura hissed.

But Kelly held fast. The incision made and sternum cracked, she reached into the chest cavity to make the repair. “This isn’t about you. On Monday, I start my surgery rotation. I need to
study. I need to be in Florida.” She thrust her heels at Laura. “You can have these.” Then she
walked back down the aisle.

On the stairs, she heard organ music. The wedding had resumed.

In the church basement, she called a taxi.

As the car pulled away from the church, she glanced out the back window. Trey would have
been standing next to his brother at the altar.

On the plane, Kelly will watch hills flatten in the distance and rivers darken into black lines that cut
across the land. There will be no Christmas cards exchanged this December, no weekend trip to
North Carolina next Memorial Day.

At her apartment, she will put her bridesmaid’s handbook on the top shelf of her bookcase,
next to her high school yearbooks. These, she will want to pull out to look for Trey’s pictures, but
she will have to leave for the hospital, where she will tuck her tangled curls into a bouffant surgical
cap and scrub her nails, hands, and forearms for five minutes. Then she will enter the sterile field.
According to *US News and World Report*, three jobs ranked below bank teller. The bottom-dwellers all processed in one way or another: chicken, recyclables, laundry. She, Marian Walker, processed money. She learned these rankings in a doctor’s office waiting room a few weeks after signing her contract with the bank, and by now – after only a short time – she wasn’t surprised. Money didn’t smell like day-old ground chicken legs or burn like commercial iron steam, but it was often heavy with heartache, monotony, inadequacy, and greed. At Gridiron Bank in Ocala, Florida, her job processing checks had reduced Marian to “Yes, Ma’am,” and “Have a nice day, Sir.” But then again, she was in debilitation mode, literally. In four months she had become a torso and a nametag in a window. She missed her old job at Alliance Fitness. She missed what it had demanded of her: movement, energy, strength. She missed the swing of her ponytail as she ran, rhythmic and sweeping. The bulge of her calves when she pushed off the pavement. She missed the women she trained – skirted suit professionals, motivated mothers, and empty-nesters chasing those final five pounds. She missed her muscles flexing as she squatted. She missed that she could squat. And lunge. And jump. And swim. And run. Especially run. Now she had lifeless legs. God, she missed so much.

_Four months ago._

“What brings you to my office today, Marian?”

“I stumble when I run, and I’m having trouble standing up. Not every time. Maybe three times a day. My legs just go numb. But I’m teaching a couple of extra classes at the gym. It’s probably just fatigue, right?”

“Let’s get the nurse in here for a complete history. I’ll be back for the physical.”
“Fatigue makes sense, doesn’t it? This new class, Booty Boot Camp, isolates the quad, hamstring, glutes, and hip flexors, and the exercises are designed according to the lactate threshold, so—“

“The history and physical will tell us a lot.”

Now

Friday was unsettlingly hot, even for central Florida in April. Marian had spent the morning at a doctor’s appointment and then physical therapy. Already her dark hair had tangled and frizzed. She tied it in a knot and wiped the sticky wisps off her forehead. Back at work, sitting in her wheelchair and awaiting customers at her window, her body ached, her mood soured. A hobby? Her doctor wanted her to do something with her hands. A hobby, she had said. Learn how to juggle while spinning donuts in her wheelchair? Too juvenile. Knit a sweater for those tepid Florida nights? Not practical. Cross-stitch coordinates for yard gnomes? She would turn thirty this summer, not seventy. The two tellers next to her talked weekend plans. The content of their conversations ranged from pornography to nail polish, and occasionally they discussed farmer’s market produce. The wheelchair repelled outreach, and Marian was fine with that. Besides, she had nothing to contribute. In her isolation, she listened, she observed. Both twenty-something women were organic vegetarians. Beneath their strappy dresses, both had slim but toneless bodies. They detested sweat. The blonde shared a preference for sex on her antique coffee table. Robust, she called the sensation. The only thing Marian could do with a table now involved Pledge and a rag, and she and Stanley didn’t make a big enough mess for cleaning to become her hobby. But she could master hand gestures like the cranky customer two windows down. That hobby may even improve her relationship with Stanley. Muscular dystrophy affects voluntary muscles, and what was marriage if not one of those? Marian rubbed her temples, thinking of Stanley and sex and her failure
with both, together and separately. Hadn’t there been a time when she and Stanley were good in and out of bed? Hadn’t he called her his goddess, his queen? When was that? A year ago? Six months? Last month? Too recently. Too long ago. Yes, she needed a hobby.

A man walked in, rested his hands on her window, and asked to open an account. Marian nodded, still staring at his hands, which were manicured, or rather manicured. Hands. How about that for a hobby, doc? No gesturing, no reading palms, no painting nails: just hands. Literally. They were everywhere. Hands reached for money and receipts. They held, lifted, and examined her. Hands messaged her quivering calves after therapy. They begged and demanded from her. Every month, hands slid a needle into her left arm for four tubes of blood. Her body was no longer hers; hands controlled it. Now she’d notice them. Study them. Her new hobby, handsology.

That afternoon, she opened up the account for Kipton B. Jefferson, marveling at his pen grip and the way his hand moved over the forms. As he signed and initialed, Marian imagined his hands elsewhere, engaged otherwise. She saw his hands grip the handles of her wheelchair. They were friendly, helpful hands. Marian felt dizzy as she welcomed Kipton to the Gridiron family and shook his smooth, friendly, helpful hand. Already she felt better.

At home, Marian sat on the back porch feeling the darkness soak up the day’s heat until only stillness stayed. She smelled ink and traced fingers in the stretching shadows. The cup of tea Stanley had made for her remained untouched on the porch railing. Cold now. Forgotten. In bed later, Stanley’s arm felt heavy and warm across her back. She shrugged away from him.

Three months ago.

“Resting and ibuprofen and icing don’t help. I trip during Aerobics and almost fell twice during Step. How can I lead a class when I can’t stay on my feet?”

“I’m going to order a blood test and a muscle biopsy.”
“What will the blood test show?”

“CK stands for *creatine kinase*. If there’s a problem with your leg muscles, like progressive weakening, we’ll see elevated levels.”

“Weakening? But they can get strong again, right? This is temporary?”

“The nurse will be right back to prep you for the blood draw and biopsy, which may be uncomfortable but shouldn’t be painful.”

“I teach Spin this afternoon.”

“We should have the results in a few days. For now, take it easy.”

Now

As the temperatures climbed in May, Maria rolled into work early and turned her gaze downward. Doctor’s orders: she attended to her hands hobby. In knuckles and veins and wrinkles, Marian imagined stories. Some hands were long with careless fingers; they dropped heaping plates of spaghetti and meatballs on customers and still expected twenty percent tips. Other hands were thin and crafty; they picked backdoor locks and hot-wired cars in bank parking lots. Or they sewed buttons for a co-worker in a bathroom. Buttons popped in an erotic workroom rendezvous. One set of hands was as rounded and heavy as the opposing ends of a dumbbell. Still another pair had texture. They were hundred-year-old hands, ghost hands; they held a watering can and pulled weeds in a square garden. Perhaps by nurturing new, green life, they hoped to prolong their own.

No one had hands like Kipton. He came in every Friday with his paycheck. Money deposited, Marian held out his receipt, just barely beyond the window, and watched his hand reach. Then time slowed. In what his hand lacked, she saw an escape. No pencil or ink smudges. No cuticles stubborn and thickly white. No wrinkles deep and wide as culverts plowed through the knuckles. She studied the minute lines in the skin field before her. There, she lost herself. She saw
his hand wrapped around a bike handle or held fast to a pull-up bar. Then, the hand flipped filets on a grill and poured her a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon. And later still, the hand cupped her face, fingers honeyed and knowing on her cheek. It should have been Stanley’s hand there, that way. She knew that. But whenever her husband touched her now, she cringed and drew away. His touch was cold with memory: of who she used to be, the strength she no longer had. Her husband’s touch left her weaker. As if that were possible.

Receipt in hand, Kipton nodded and turned away. Marian watched his hands swing at his sides until he disappeared into the heat around the corner.

Two months ago.

“Marian, it’s time for a cane. I’m concerned by the number of falls last week.”

“As long as I can walk, I’m not using a cane. I’ll wear kneepads and wrist guards. My grandmother doesn’t even need a cane.”

“You’re taxing your muscles, which will speed up weakening. It’s time to cut back and seriously consider a new line of work. Something you can do from a wheelchair.”

“I’ll take the cane.”

“Marian, I’m not sure you understand your diagnosis. You need a career change. We can slow the rate of atrophy and maintain a certain level of muscle function, but you’re going to need a wheelchair – permanently. We can monitor this condition with monthly blood draws and weekly physical therapy. We can’t reverse or cure it. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll take the cane.”
Now

She pulled in the driveway just as Stanley hopped down from his truck. His jeans appeared filmy with dirt, a reminder of May’s drought and record highs. Graph paper tucked under his arm, pencil behind his ear, he met Marian at the car and leaned in. “You’re later than usual. Long day?” In the air, Marian smelled onions, sharp and dry, from the forest surrounding their home.

“A typical Friday,” she said. Stanley’s hands reached into the car, and Marian let herself be pulled out.

“That’s good preparation for a typical Friday night dinner. How does spaghetti sound?”

“Didn’t we just have spaghetti two nights ago?”

“Yes, and two nights before that. We have to make do somehow. Think of it as hard core carb-loading.”

“Stanley, I’m stuck in a wheelchair.”

“C’mon, Marian. The doctor said we need to keep our sense of humor.”

“That wasn’t funny.” He didn’t respond, just kept a hand on the arm of her wheelchair as they made their way inside. So Marian studied it. A gray smudge swept over the fleshy pad below his pinkie – an unfading continent of pencil smears from his sketches and blue prints. He had just been trying to make her laugh. It was a hardworking hand. His fingernails were cracked in places and bitten close. She had been too harsh. A martyr hand. A few eraser shavings clung to his dark hair, his knuckle creases. He didn’t deserve her frustration, her impatience, her pain. It was a hand that had done so much for her: the house, the doctor’s appointments, the weekendless workweek, the building projects in Georgia and Alabama when he needed work because they needed money. She couldn’t help it. Dirt highlighted murky, swollen veins. Her body was a shell. Hollow. And he wasn’t funny. His hand, an ugly reminder of her emptiness.

She turned away.
“Actually, I’m tired. Think I’ll just go to bed.” More and more, she had wanted to go to bed early and stay there late. Under the covers, her imagination could exercise the power she no longer had in life. And there, Kipton’s hands, polished and lovely, found hers time after time.

She laid a hand on Stanley’s, but then pulled back.

He reached for her. She could feel his eyes reaching, too. Even his words reached, stretched towards her in a desperate, searching way: “Feel okay? Want me to call the doctor? Want to talk?”

But she didn’t want to be reached. She slumped back in her wheelchair. “No, she said this was normal. The tiredness. I just need to go to bed.” The one place she didn’t need a wheelchair.

Marian kept her hands folded in her lap. “Thanks, Stan,” she offered, a substitute for the apology she owed him.

Tucked between cottony sheets, Marian retreated to her dreams. Their vibrancy satisfied her deeply. Kipton chased her through seaside dunes. Sand flew in bright bursts behind their frolicking steps. Waves crashed against the shore, sweeping away debris, smoothing the sand’s surface.

One month ago.

“Marian, listen to me. Limb-Girdle Muscular Dystrophy is serious. You’ve been fortunate so far because it’s only affecting your legs, but this isn’t going away. We’ve talked about this. You need a wheelchair, and the longer and harder you push yourself, the sooner you’ll need it. That means, as you know, you need a new job. Personal training is too strenuous. We’ve talked about this.”

“And what, exactly, am I supposed to do in a wheelchair?”

“Customer service? That way, you can still work with people. My husband Gary manages Gridiron Bank down the road. One of his tellers is about to have a baby, and she wants to stay home after the birth.”
“Personal fitness guru forced to become a bank teller in a wheelchair. What a prescription, doc. Jesus.”

Now

The following Thursday, a sluggishly hot June day, a woman came in like she was fresh from a sleeping aid commercial. She glowed: a smiler in her sleep, a woman for whom coffee was just coffee. When she skipped to the window, Marian hated her instantly. What right did this lady with her slender, silky fingers and toned, toffee arms have to waltz into her bank, stand at her line, smile, and announce in her commercial voice – breathminty and urgently relaxing – that she was finally, finally going away, far away, to the West Coast. She grabbed Marian’s hands in both of hers. She wanted to withdraw all of her funds in large bills, please. She punctuated each spoken word with a hand squeeze. Yes, she wanted her account completely liquidated, not one penny left behind, she said, close to giddy. Marian smiled back, close to perturbed, and pulled her hands back. She told the LA-bound lady it would be just a moment; she needed to get her supervisor.

As she dialed, Marian heard the beach-bound blonde prattle about a lover and five years and leaving her husband and together at last and broke as an antique butter plate but happy, happy, happy, and Marian envisioned the woman’s small, perfect hands crusted with salt and sand, burning in the surf. Who in god’s name gave her the right to prance in here without a chip in her pink polish and pretend it was easy and simple to get away like that? To start over with the man you love? She couldn’t even make it to her car without her wheelchair. They waited for clearance, and Marian pushed past perturbed. She longed to reach her hand out and a) slap the woman across the face or b) grab her ticket for the West Coast. Violence or escape. She imagined herself on the sandy shores of the Pacific, straw hat and all. Kipton could meet her there. He could rub sunscreen lotion across
her shoulders, down her arms, up her legs. You didn’t need a wheelchair to move in the waves. They could float for hours, his hands tickling and playful, then maybe serious and sensual.

Three weeks earlier:

“How’s physical therapy?”

“Depressing. And what’s the point?”

“Give it time. The exercises are designed to keep your muscles from stiffening.”

“Is there physical therapy for marriage?”

“Of course. I can refer you to a counselor. Marian, remember, you’re going through a major life crisis, and it’s going to take time to adjust. That goes for Stanley, too. I’m glad you got the job at the bank, but I think you should consider a hobby. Something to keep you busy. Something you can do with your hands.”

Now

After leaving the bank that evening, Marian turned onto State Route 40, the road that stretched through Ocala National Forest from Ocala to Barberville, where her husband had built his first house, the plantation home they now owned and lived in. Though the sun continued to choke the day, the forest fought back, fierce and green. On both sides of the road, rows of trees lashed out. Towering armies of sentinels, stubbornly holding their lines amidst the onslaught of threateningly high temperatures and savage humidity. Marian appreciated the tenacity of the tall, slender trunks, rising, not wilting, growing, growing, growing no matter the weather, the temperature. Oh, the strength of wood. Oh, the weakness of muscle. She rolled up her window once the air conditioner provided respite, but the defiance of evening pine, the bite of wild onions, and the oppression of heavy air unnerved her. Somewhere, a woman crossed the country while she
was weighed down by disability, doctor’s bills, and bank telling. She couldn’t remember the last time she and Stanley had made love. She wondered if he would have dirt caked under his fingernails when he sat down for dinner tonight. The air conditioner blew bitter gusts around the car, and Marian withered behind the wheel.

_Two weeks earlier._

“How do you like the automatic wheelchair?”

“Fine.”

“And what about driving? Do you still feel comfortable pushing the pedals?”

“It’s fine.”

“Marian, chronic conditions require emotional adjustments. Just saying everything is fine isn’t productive. Let me help you.”

“No, really. I’m fine. I feel better than I have since our first appointment. I feel like I just ran a marathon. Spent and satisfied but wanting to run more.”

“Are you and Stanley seeing Dr. Johnson?”

“I’ve run nine marathons. I’ve qualified for Boston four times. Next April, Stanley was going to take me. He was going to stand on top of Heartbreak Hill and cheer for me. The climb is just 88 vertical feet. I could have done it. So many people have to walk it, but I think I could have kept running. With Stanley at the top, I know I could have run it.”

“Marian, I’m sorry.”

“Did I tell you I picked a hobby?”

“That’s great, Marian. That’s really great.”
Now

By the time Marian left for work the next morning, the day swirled in an inferno of breathless heat. When she reached the parking lot, she had to pull her legs off the driver’s seat.

Inside, Marian encountered swollen air. She felt heat condense around her, gluey and thick. She heard a steady whir. She continued to her window, thankful her wheelchair’s speed provided a draft. Fans lined the reception area. Fans sat at every window, on every desk. Marian listened to the two other tellers as she settled herself and started her computer.

“Can you believe it? Overnight, the system just goes haywire. Caput. Finished. Just like that.”

“Are they coming today to fix it?”

“That’s why we have the fans. A crew can’t come until Monday.”

“But my make-up!”

“I know, I know. Just awful. I’m already sweating.”

“Gross.”

Marian tried to shrug out of her cardigan but couldn’t slide off the sleeves. She looked down and saw she had forgotten a button. If only every problem were as easy to solve. She imagined Kipton’s fingers plucking the final button, close, so close to her skin. She hoped he wouldn’t stop with the sweater.

Last week.

“I have good news for you, Marian. Your heart and lung tests came back normal. With the fast rate of muscle weakening, that had been a concern, but everything looks good.”

“I think the hobby is helping.”

“Oh? And the hobby is?”
“Your hands are a bit veiny and tight. Do you use moisturizer?”

Now

The fans pushed heat around the reception and office areas, and Marian watched the clock. Patrons tugged ties and flapped dresses and checked balances, wondering what on earth had happened to the air conditioning. By 3:00, Marian started to shrug and say, “Gee, I don’t really know. It does seem awful hot in here, doesn’t it?” The scorched air had spoiled her patience. By 3:30, all hands looked the same: fleshy and needy. And when Kipton walked in later, Marian didn’t realize she had seen his hands until she saw his account information still on her screen. She stared after him, noticing for the first time a baseball-sized bald spot and shirt sleeves an inch too short. Marian felt betrayed.

As heat spiraled around her, customers seemed to float. She noticed other things through the fan-blown air. Yellow teeth. Treated hair. Missing buttons. Tan lines. Sagging bras. Squealing voices. Burnt colognes. She tried to go back to the hands, to escape into her visions, but the heat locked her in her chair, at her window. What she was became agonizingly clear: Broken. Bank Teller. Bad Wife. When had she stopped caring about Stanley? When had her feelings stopped working like so many muscles in her legs? When had her sweat turned into tears? Did her customers notice? Did they see her for who she was? What she was? Disabled.

Her imagination was useless now. Her hobby, too. Reality was inescapably clear. She had to get out. Literally. Even with two customers waiting and ten minutes to go, Marian scooted away from her window, through the sapping air, and down the ramp to her car. Then, she was in the forest driving. The road seemed squeezed, the trees smothering and close. Like guilt. Like understanding.
At home, she left the wheelchair in the car. She was done. She didn’t need it. Later, Stanley would retrieve it from the trunk. For that, she hated him. She crawled across the driveway. Bits of gravel burned her hands as she pulled herself to the house. The air, heavy with oniony heat, crawled down her throat. Marian gasped when she reached the porch ramp. On the hard wood she rested, her legs splayed before her. She had tentacles, not legs.

But she still had her hands. “Work,” she urged, throwing a fist into a thigh. “Work,” she demanded as she drove a hand against her shin. She pummeled her calves with punches. “Work,” she willed. “Work, work, work,” she repeated with each hit, every slap. Up and down her legs, her hands flew, finding new flesh to pound. Again and again she struck her useless limbs until they hurt. The skin burned with bruises. That burn, she relished. She kept hitting. Her blouse cleaved to her body. Sweat seared her skin. Around her, the pungency of onions sharpened the stinging pain. The forest hovered, so green and strong. The world collapsed upon her: the onions, the trees, her own sweat. How much she missed before.

Finally, she lay along the ramp, the smooth pine against her spine, her eyes closed against the dazzling brightness above.

Later

When Stanley’s car pulled down the driveway, Marian tried to stand up, but her legs buckled. A car door slammed. Feet shuffled through gravel. Her head in Stanley’s lap. His hands holding her.

“Stanley?”

“It’s okay. I’m here.”
She pulled back and gripped his hands in hers. She couldn’t bring herself to look up, so she stared at his hands. Marian could feel the toughness of his palms, the ridges of his knuckles. Heartbreak Hills, all of them.
Beyond the Field of Vision

We had planned a family vacation, our first with our son Julian, for the last week in July. I had stopped taking pictures long before that. That is to say, I still had weddings to shoot, but later the images on my computer surprised me, as though someone else had aimed, clicked, and captured. My desk was scattered with bags of Jordan almonds and folded vellum invitations from every weekend in May and June, but despite that proof, I felt decidedly that I had been elsewhere all that time.

I began to feel the same around Julian and Colette. At the end of the day, I wondered whether I had held my son or talked to my wife at all. I suspected I had, but I couldn’t remember the smell of Julian’s skin or the quality of Colette’s voice. How odd: my life felt like a picture forgotten in the developing tray, all details blurring together, the real picture ruined.

The night before we left to meet my parents at Lake Chautauqua, three hours north of our home in the Pittsburgh suburbs, I cleared the wedding favors off my desk and found a handkerchief, worn sepia and tattered. I owned a limitless supply of handkerchiefs, Christmas gifts every year from my father for as long as I could remember. This one, I knew, wasn’t mine. I held the antiqued cloth to my nose and smelled soil and hay, summer and corn. I imagined my father, leaning against a fence post, pulling this very handkerchief out of his pocket to draw across his forehead as the day began to fade, his eyes trained on something beyond my field of vision. As I sat with the handkerchief pressed against my own forehead, I had the sense, the same one I had as a boy and even as a teenager, that what he was seeing across the green and golden fields was profound. I suspected the vision couldn’t be captured in a photograph, and that made me sad. My wife and baby were sleeping. The house was quiet. I pocketed the handkerchief and went upstairs to pack.
On our third morning in Chautauqua, mom and I were up early. “Great artists always wake up early, and the best never go to bed,” mom said, making tea at the counter in her lavender robe. I wasn’t an artist: I was just too damn sad to sleep. We sat at the kitchen table, across from each other but far, far apart. I posed with my coffee and newspaper in a white undershirt and flannel pants, now fuzzy with age. My feet traced the floor’s wood grains. Mom sipped her Earl Grey and attended to the lecture series schedule.

When she stopped talking about an upcoming art history session, I looked up. Her chair was pushed back, and she was away from the table, her reading glasses askew in her gray-tinted hair. I hadn’t heard my father come down the stairs, but mom must have. She met him in the doorway, and as I watched over the paper’s edge, dad picked mom up and swung her around. She giggled and sighed as they turned in circles. A carousel of contentedness. He set her down, and they held each other; my father’s tanned arms plowed across mom’s robe. But then, life spoils the best moments by moving on. Dad lit the stove and started frying some bacon. Mom poured his orange juice and began outlining the day’s itinerary. I turned back to the paper, which I didn’t read at all.

Sitting there, I felt a tug within. More than any picture I’ve taken, watching my parents captured for me the yearning for more – even when you aren’t sure what you want more of. Even when you are a husband and a father and a son and a photographer and the smell of bacon makes you want to cry, and if your father taught you anything, it was that you carried handkerchiefs, but you didn’t cry.

For the rest of our time on the shore of Lake Chautauqua, surrounded by farmers’ markets and string quartets and white rocking chairs, I couldn’t stop thinking about that morning. Colette seemed to sense my preoccupation, but when I caught her staring at me, I only shook my head. I didn’t know what to say. There was nothing to say. I focused on my parents. For the first time, I saw them as people. Emily and Leo. Complicated, storied, layered. Who were they, really? I had
heard the usual tales over weeknight beef stew and biscuits and Sunday morning French toast and
eggs while growing up. That wasn’t enough.

Our last night of vacation, I rocked my son to sleep. I held him against my shoulder and
wondered if my unshaven chin and cheek tickled or bothered him. Colette had asked yesterday if I
was ever going to shave, and I told her I might. Julian was four times the weight of my camera with
the telephoto zoom lens attached, but softer, newer. Holding him, I felt the burden of my
childhood and the malleability of his. He fell asleep. We rocked. The chair creaked, rubbing against
the wood. I missed Colette terribly. She was in the next room sleeping. When had our marriage
become a distance I couldn’t cross? A conversation I couldn’t have? A picture I couldn’t take? I
lay Julian in his crib. I sat back in the chair. I rocked.

As we started our drive South, back into the gray hills of Pennsylvania, I longed to know
how Emily and Leo had done it: how they had met, started a family, reached their fifties, and been
able to spin around, giggle, and hold tight to each other. The answer, I knew, couldn’t be found in
questioning them. Parents censor for the sake of their children, part of an impossible effort to
preserve innocence. And, too, I felt an unsettling urgency to know their story, as if I had this car
ride and only this car ride to acquire that knowledge or else consequences awaited. With the details
and anecdotes I remembered, I would reconstruct their past by filling in the rest with my own
imaginings. Julian was in his car seat, head slumped forward, a string of drool hanging from his
bottom lip. Colette, too, was passed out next to me, her hand unmoving and soft on my leg, hair
behind her ears, and cheekbones reflecting the window’s glare, like photo flare.

I pulled my father’s old handkerchief from my pocket and held it against the steering wheel.
Then it was just me and the road and my imagination.
Emily attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. For spring break freshman year, she signed up to go to New York City with her art history class to tour the museums, sketch in Central Park, and “soak up the creative energy of so many restless, yearning, poor souls.” Thus her teacher, a balding man who used words like copasetic and conundrum with charming regularity, had billed the trip, and Emily had submitted her down payment the next day.

At National Airport, she wandered into a magazine shop to browse. While flipping between an interview with Olivia Newton John and an article on why people fall in love, Emily’s purse disappeared. Fortunately, her parents had given her a document holder to wear under her clothes while traveling, so she lost only her Pretty Pink lipstick, a few bobby pins, and her boarding pass. Emily hurried to the ticket counter. The wrinkle-shirted attendant frowned as Emily explained, and Emily mistook her frown for sympathy. Perhaps the attendant was upset because she had discovered last night that her boyfriend of two years had tattooed his ex-girlfriend’s name – Cynthia – onto his right foot. For two years he had worn socks during sex and socks to bed. Most likely, she assumed he had cold or ugly or smelly feet. When Emily said, “Miss, you see, I need to get a new boarding pass printed right now,” the attendant had nodded and known what to do but would have only heard Cynthia, Cynthia, Cynthia.

Julian shifted. I reached back to hold his hand. The smoothness of his skin surprised me. He pulled his hand away, settling back to sleep. Did he dream? With his eyes closed, did he see rattles and stuffed animals the way I saw hay stacks, tractors, and silos?

Emily grabbed the boarding pass and scrambled for the gate. The last one to board. In the window, she saw her own glossy hazel eyes framed by a pearl face, then mahogany hair. Past that, she saw brush strokes of roads and rivers. Hot tea in hand, she looked around for her classmates. She saw
none and heard only the squeak of the refreshment cart. She asked the gentleman rocking beside her where the flight was heading. He didn’t look at her, just continued rocking and said, “Cincinnati.”

She cried.

A hand extended from the seat behind her. A calloused, hairy hand. In that hand, a handkerchief, long since newly crisp and white, fraying in one corner. Emily took the worn, soft cloth and blew her nose. Loudly. The gentleman beside her paused and the man to whom the hand and handkerchief belonged laughed. Emily followed the hand and the laugh back to see a cowboy hat, a boyish, tan face, and a Farmer’s Almanac open in a lap. When the landing gear came down, Emily was rocking gently, too, and had learned the ins and outs of crop rotation from Leonard, who owned a farm across the border in New Alsace, Indiana, off State Route 1. Emily thought he looked too young to own his own farm, but he assured her he wasn’t. “Been milking cows and growing corn my whole life.” He was on his way home from a convention. “Tractor talk,” he called it.

By the end of spring break, Leonard was Leo, and Emily had a pair of overalls and tan lines on her neck, arms, and ankles. A seed of something sweet had been planted.

Back at VCU, she turned her art interests towards Regionalism and the American Midwest. Leo wrote letters every week and sent a shipment of early corn the week before finals. (Did she still have those letters now? Tucked away in a shoebox perhaps in her closet or under the bed? Did Colette save the photographs I sent her while we were dating? What would those images show now?) Emily sighed when Leo compared her skin to cow’s milk, her voice to the twitter of crickets in a dewy morning field, her smell to that of upturned soil. He was simple and lovely. She barely passed French II and told her parents the problem with foreign languages was the foreign part. That summer, she went organic.
I pulled into a rest stop. The handkerchief fell from my hand as I reached over to shake Colette. Julian had been whimpering for ten miles, and now he was awake and hungry. “Babe, time to feed Julian.” She turned, her face grimacing. Then she unwound her arms and legs from her blanket and looked at me. I attempted a smile and felt my face strain with the effort. Had facial expressions always hurt? Colette looked beautiful: hair unkempt, clothes wrinkled, face clean and bright and young. She smiled back, hesitant, almost pleading. But what could I give her? She deserved more than a painful grin. I offered to change Julian’s diaper while she ran to the bathroom.

Back on the highway, Julian fell right to sleep with a full belly, and Colette turned towards the window, her back hunched in fatigue or frustration. I picked up the handkerchief and set cruise control. The road stretched on ahead; my parents’ story did, too.

Emily and Leo spent their wedding night in the hay loft. In the morning, their backs were rubbed and red, their hair flecked with blond, stiff streaks, and the cows wouldn’t leave them alone. The honeymoon had to wait until after the last corn was harvested, but by then Emily couldn’t drink milk right from an udder and had to nap every afternoon before lighting the dinner fire.

Eight months later, wind cut across the eastern Indiana landscape, mincing it, ravaging it until bits of grass and fence and barn and cloud blurred. (I feel Indiana’s wind sometimes in the middle of winter when I’m lying on the cusp of sleep. Fifteen years after leaving the farm, it still cleaves to my dreams on blustery nights.) Inside the farmhouse, Emily mistook a puddle on the kitchen floor for melted icy footprints, one on top of the other.

The snow started. Inches fell in seconds. The world turned white night, and when Leo tried to call the doctor, the line only hummed. They were on their own at least until a lull or perhaps morning or maybe spring.
But the baby wouldn’t wait. Emily lay on the bed, and Leo crouched between her legs as he had for so many mares. Together, they prayed and cried, their voices competing in fierceness if not piety with the wind. Emily bit into one of Leo’s handkerchiefs and gripped the bed posts while Leo clung to her calves. Four calloused hands hanging on for a dear life.

Three hours later: “Welcome to our family, Everett Rainier Scott,” Emily said as she clutched her baby. Leo cut the umbilical cord with a kitchen knife and bathed his son in a bucket.

“We need to talk.” At first, I thought I had turned the radio on, but then I saw Colette looking at me. I rubbed the handkerchief across my eyes and let it fall into my lap.

“Let’s not do this now,” I said, passing an Expedition. A man drove, singing along with the radio and air drumming. He looked like an idiot. I wanted to be him. I could handle a melody; harmony I couldn’t bear.

“When, Everett? When? You said after work, so I waited. You said after vacation, so I waited. It’s after, Everett, and we need to talk.” I heard her pitch rise on the last four words. Tears would fall.

But I hedged again, “When we get home. As soon as we get home.”

“At some point later is going to be too late,” Colette warned, curving her back into a harsh C and pressing her face to the window. Her body shook, trembled really.

The problem with comforting another’s sadness when you’re sad is emotional proximity. When you’re zoomed in too close, it’s hard to know what you’re seeing. I drove on.

When Everett was five, Santa gave him his first camera. Emily wanted him to appreciate art and Leo said, “Indiana farmland is the prettiest there is.” A camera, the compromise. That spring, Leo finished building a studio for Emily, and she quit her job teaching at East Central High School to
paint full-time. In her studio, Emily breathed in the smells of plaster, plywood, and acrylics. She put color on canvases and turned her dream into works she sold at Cincinnati art festivals. During the days, their lives diverged: Leo outside with nature, Emily inside with art, and Everett in and out, attending school and snapping pictures. They all cultivated and created.

But sometimes, bounties can be too great. Over-exposure ruins photographs. Bliss burdens the bearer. The heart, joy’s silo, can only hold so much.

For their tenth anniversary, Leo surprised Emily with a trip to New York City. He had arranged for her parents to stay with Everett on the farm. Leo had been saving up from each crop to give his wife the trip she had missed to meet him. When he said it like that, Emily laughed and looked away. “Thank you,” she told him, the words grainy and rough on her tongue. For the past few months, maybe years now, and more and more frequently, Emily found herself in her studio staring at the fence bordering their land. Life seemed fine, just fine, but still she played with what-ifs. What if she had gotten on the right plane in college?

Something rattled behind me. I looked back to see Julian’s fleshy hand reaching for the giraffes hanging down from his toy bar. The noise didn’t awaken Colette, and for a moment I felt a kind of peace: My wife next to me. My son playing quietly in the back seat. Our family life unfolding day by day. Was that enough? Shouldn’t that be enough? I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. Dad’s handkerchief felt like a reminder of something I had forgotten long ago and now wondered if I had ever known in the first place. Perhaps something unknowable entirely.

The trip was what Emily needed. Mostly. They stayed in a midtown hotel with a bellman who stopped addressing Leo as Sir when he saw the trail of soil his boots left on the red carpet. Walking around the city’s concrete fields, Emily took in a place where calloused hands and soft handkerchiefs
felt sorely, embarrassingly out of place. On the streets, she and Leo moved parallel to each other, sometimes bumping up against the other when crowds condensed at street corners, waiting for the light to change. But then they visited the Metropolitan, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and SoHo galleries. In those places, Emily felt her head throb with the beauty and thrill and energy and mystery of it all. In those places, she and Leo held hands. (When was the last time Colette and I had held hands? I wasn’t really the hand-holding type, but still I imagined we had at some point. Couples held hands. Couples who loved each other. We must have.) In those places, Emily was inspired. At night, they made love, the kind of love-making that seeks and searches and wonders how ten years had passed and if satisfaction alone were over-rated. Wasn’t marriage about something else? Something more enduring? Something like art.

On their last morning in Manhattan, Leo and Emily waited on the curb while the bellman hailed a taxi for them. “I won’t miss the noise of this place. Or the crowds, that’s for sure,” Leo said, rocking in his boots. Under the hotel’s gold awning, they watched black trench coats scurry and dart. When at last a cab pulled over, Leo climbed in first and Emily followed, dragging her feet and glancing up at the skyscrapers and around at the hotdog vendors once more. As she pulled her hand, her painting hand, into the car, the bellman slammed the door on it. They drove away. Leo squeezed her other hand, kissed her cheek, and offered her his handkerchief. Outside the cab window, the city blurred: street blocks and apartment buildings and billboards a wide ribbon of gray.

By the time their flight took off, Emily could bend her fingers again and fold her hand into a fist. Everything was fine. Just fine.

Colette rolled over, still asleep. Black eye make-up saturated the space beneath the red rims of her closed eyes. Her lips held a stubborn, tight pout. I had a hard time believing this was the same woman who had woken up so beautiful before. I sensed my responsibility in this transformation,
but from a distance and only vaguely. I reached out to tuck a straying strand of hair behind her ear, but then remembered the handkerchief I was holding. She was right. We needed to talk. But not yet. If I started to share now, she would soothe me and that would be that. I didn’t want just that. I kept my hands on the steering wheel.

Back in her studio, though, Emily’s hand wasn’t fine. Her brushes hurt to hold. Lines wobbled. Figures wavered. Scenes shook. One day a few months after returning from New York, she drove to Dr. Hildabrand’s farm. There, she told him about the cab door and the swelling and increasing pain in her finger joints, especially in the morning. He examined her knuckles and told her what she had already feared: “Early-onset arthritis. It’s common in painters, and the car door didn’t help. You can take painkillers, but it’s only going to get worse.”

That night, Emily told Leo. “I’m sorry, Jules,” he said, moving his hand gently along hers. She could feel his hardened skin. A stiffness of its own.

“The pain’s not that bad.”

“What will you do?”

“Keep taking Tylenol.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I know.”

A month later, Emily met with the superintendent about returning to the classroom. “Well, we can’t offer you an art position in the high school, but we are short a fourth grade teacher,” Mrs. Klinesboro said, leaning forward on her desk. “Evelyn Fletcher just had her baby over the weekend. Nine pounds, can you believe it with her such a petite bitty thing? How does tomorrow look for you?” Emily held out her left hand and asked where her new classroom would be.
Then, and as it happens, time passed. (Was our ride home almost over? Already we were only two exits away. I used to think I had power as a photographer. With a snap of my lens, I could suspend time. But that power had never been mine; I understood that now. Just a clever trick of flash and film that betrayed the truth – that time passed just as it was passing now.) Emily liked walking into her classroom, greeted by hanging pictures and sketches her students had drawn over the years, pictures of her smiling at the chalkboard or a family dog named Spike or a farmhouse at noon, the sun quarter-sized, throwing yellow spears through clouds above fierce green plumes. The cushion on her chair was as soft and worn as one of Leo’s handkerchiefs.

And when she came home after work, Leo would listen to her stories and watch her face brighten or darken, her students’ successes and failures painted across her features.

And during the harvest, Emily would make bacon and pour orange juice for Leo before he left for the fields. At night, she let him rest while she and Everett took over the household chores.

And when Everett graduated from high school and left the farm to attend NYU on scholarship to study photography, Leo would ship fresh corn in time for finals and Emily would call to talk color and composition.

And later in bed, they would make love some nights, and other nights they wouldn’t. Some nights they would read. Other nights they just held each other. At times, they argued – about money, about Everett’s New England prep school girlfriend, about the farm – about what couples argue about when it’s just them and the rest of their lives stretching out before them like a wheat field in August, wispy and haunting.

I eased the car off the interstate at the Fox Chapel exit, slowing for the red light at the end of the ramp. Three left turns and a right and we would be home. Our two-story on a cul-de-sac in a suburban neighborhood waited for us. Sunlight bounced off the windshield, reflecting and
refracting light. I fiddled with the air conditioner vents, trying to direct enough cold air my way so I could breathe. Just breathe. Cars passed: yellow hatchbacks and red sports cars, blue and orange and silver beetles, and for an instant before the light turned green, I was somewhere else, watching another red light sink down and rest on the land’s edge. I stood at a fence post, alone in a field, green stretching and waving and growing all around me. There, I could almost see what my father must have seen at the end of every day. I pulled the handkerchief across my face, and the light turned. I stalled. I wanted that vision to be mine, a moving image, not a still shot set in a frame. Staring ahead, I hoped to discover what was there, past the fields but in them, too. My foot stayed on the brake until the car behind me honked – a raucous, ugly noise. I crawled into the intersection, needing more time, but traffic swept the car along. Already we were at the second light. And now Colette stirred, moving a hand across her mouth, the other through her hair. I blinked hard. I tried to go back, to see what was there. I opened a window. We passed a strip mall on our right, Wendy’s and Sheetz on our left. I kept looking. All I needed was a ribbon of green, a row of ready soil – thick and brown. A third red light stopped us.

“Here,” Colette said, “That one you have is dirty and wet.” She held out a clean white handkerchief from the glove compartment. We traded, and as I held the crisp cloth to my eyes, my nose, I felt a new softness. I saw earthy stains, dried tears. I heard cicadas, cow bells, a baby’s cry. I drove, past cornfields and white farmhouses, past giant cows resting in the summer heat or posing for a picture, past silos and memories, imaginings and horses lazily chewing grass, past hay stacks and fear, nostalgia and regret. Another red light. I drove, past memories and into moments, into the unimaginable future and the calm comfort life can provide when at last we surrender to it. More crying now. And cooing, too. Colette reaching back for Julian, letting him know it would be okay, we were almost home, almost there.
Surrender was sweet. As sweet as summer corn and fresh milk, cut hay and tilled soil.

When we talked, this is what I would tell Colette.
When the Bough Breaks

A Blog

Thursday, April 8, 2010

First Night at Home

Hello, readers, whoever you are! This is my first blog post, and I feel a bit silly and nervous. I want to explain why I've entered the blogging world, but first, let me tell you about last night:

SANDY woke up at midnight. The nocturnal newborn wanted to play. We went to the family room, so BREAD could sleep. On the couch, SANDY’s legs and arms jerked and reached. Alien limbs. The refrigerator murmured. The walls creaked. SANDY whimpered. My first night home as a mom. The first night-shift. That should have been something to celebrate, right? But I didn’t pull out the video camera. Just then, maternity leave didn’t feel like vacation. No morning lattes. No project meetings. No working lunches. Just SANDY. For eight weeks.

I turned on the TV while SANDY squirmed. Channel after channel of Bender Ball infomercials. Then a movie. A scary one. A girl with two long braids ran from a masked man brandishing a knife. The chase did not end well. SANDY was turned away and the sound muted, but I watched. I couldn’t stop watching. Braids, curls, and

About Me: JAM (just another mom). I work for a marketing firm in Ross Township, but now I’m home for two months. I’m a business woman trying to figure out the business of being a mom. My husband BREAD (short for bread-winner) works for a high-profile corporate design company. He has an office in Cranberry Township but travels frequently. We live in Ben Avon Heights, just northwest of Pittsburgh. We enjoy dinners in Sewickley and season tickets to the Steelers. But now we have our daughter SANDY (short for sandwich), and already so much has changed. When I go back to work, we’ll hire TEAM SANDY: day care, babysitters, and a housecleaner. For now, I am the project team. Welcome to my blog.
ponytails disappeared on screen. But scarier than the serial deaths were the close-up shots of the female victims before their inevitable ends. In each face, a trace of SANDY. Round chin. Wide eyes. Wrinkled nose. When the credits crept up the screen, she was nestled in my elbow, her lips puckered, eyelids sleep-sealed. Adrenaline filled me, masked my fatigue. I had never liked horror films. Why tonight? SANDY’s arms jolted when I laid her in the bassinet next to our bed, but she stayed asleep. I crawled beneath the covers next to BREAD. Eyes closed, I saw blood, those braids… I heard SANDY’s cries. I sat up and leaned over the edge of the bed. She was asleep.

Right then, what scared me was how quickly, how completely SANDY filled my world. Literally, filled. She weighed seven pounds, but the diapers, the breast-feeding, the blankets and onesies, the bedside bassinet, the wipes and powders, and the crying, that all-consuming din. And I’m supposed to make it all okay. Know when to nurse. Discern diaper discomfort. She depends on me to survive. God, that’s terrifying. Bring on the masked man; it’s this fear I can’t take. I slept with SANDY’s pink blanket crushed against my laden chest.

This morning, I wanted reassurance, a way to validate my new identity. I turned to the Internet. I found countless blogs by mothers about their lives, their little ones: Metro Mama, Fussy, Cool Mom, Mom101. Maybe that’s how you become a mom: you blog about it. You make up a name and figure out life as a SAHM (Stay At Home Mom) one post at a time.
The more I thought about creating a blogger account, the more I understood the urge. Digital journaling. Self-reflection. Faceless audience. “Look what I’ve endured,” you say into the blogosphere. “See who I am!” I created a url. I chose a layout, a design. I started to write.

Who am I? I used to be a marketing executive. I used to be a career woman. Now I have a baby, a family, and I’m not so sure anymore.

So for now, I’m JAM. Does that explain it?

*Posted by JAM at 5:52 PM  3 comments*

**Jason** said:
Were you watching the movie replaying on TNT all night? It’s not even scary!

**WorkaHolly** said:
Welcome, JAM! I would have loved to have two months of maternity leave. My company only paid me for four weeks! It goes by fast. You’ll be back at work in no time. Enjoy every minute with your LO (little one).

**Anonymous** said:
Great. Just what the Internet needs. Another mommy blog. Yeah, your kid pooped. We get it.

Total Hits: 5. Today’s Hits: 5.

*Monday, April 12, 2010*

Baby as Band-Aid. Or to Go Back…

I explained my entry into the blogging world, but not the mother one. Don’t fret: I won’t share any gory birthing details. If that’s what you’re after, search for *water birth* on *YouTube*. Besides, my delivery was routine: contractions, broken water, hospital admittance, five hours, epidural, thirty minutes of pushing, crying baby, then a giant pink balloon shaped like a bottle. So standard.
But progeny was in the ten year plan, after a pair of BMWs, and we’ve only been married five. Yes, I jumped the gun. BREAD couldn’t really say no. I think he just wanted me to stop crying.

See, a year ago, my mother died. She ran 32 miles a week and didn’t eat after 7:00pm. She was 56 years old. Stupid, inexplicable heart attack. I was 29 and stopped birth control a week after her funeral. I thought a baby would Band-aid the hole in my heart. Sometimes, I still do...

The day after the doctor’s appointment to confirm my pregnancy, BREAD and I had dinner out to celebrate. At the table behind us, two couples dined. All night the women steered conversation back to babies even though their children were with a sitter. “I just hope this little one is nothing like his older brother. Josh was a terror. Got into everything,” the one mother said, hand on her bulging belly.

The other woman nodded. “We started the terrible two’s at two months with Suzie, and she’ll be three years-old next week. When does it end?” I excused myself from the table. That conversation triggered my first trimester nausea, I’m sure of it. For the next ten weeks, I threw up twice a day.

The rest is banal. I passed the glucose test. I set up a registry. SANDY’s nursery looks nothing like ohdeedoh's kids' room tours. My baby shower would not have been posted on Sandi’s Oh, Baby! Custom Shower Décor blog. When my water broke, I sent off a few emails and asked our department secretary to reschedule my afternoon appointments. Then I called BREAD to meet me at the hospital.
Until I held her for the first time, SANDY seemed so hypothetical, distant – a

dream. But now she’s here. SANDY’s here and home and
real. I can market her downy hair, the droop of her
earlobes. Care for her? I didn’t earn my MBA in
motherhood. When I have questions, I search the web.
When I need support, I browse BabyCenter’s message
boards. When I want to share, I blog.

How did my mother manage to raise me and my
brother without the Internet?

Posted by JAM at 1:04 PM 4 comments

Momathon said:
Rome wasn’t built in a day…you’ll be changing diapers with one hand before too long.

Hannah@Home said:
So sorry to hear about your mom. Hugs!

imarealmom said:
Kiss those BMW dreams goodbye! Babies are expensive.

rrsfeedme said:
Amen for the Internet. I even have a weekly playdate online.


Friday, April 16, 2010

Single Mom, viz

BREAD’s firm is sending him to Florida to oversee renovations in a dozen department
stores. He leaves Monday. Monday! He’ll be gone a month, more likely two. He’ll fly
home for weekends, but still.
He tells me this is a great opportunity. He tells me he tried to move or shorten the trip, but this arrangement was the best he could do. And that’s why he’s only telling me now. Days before he flies to Tampa.

I tell him to go. I understand ambition. I’m the one on maternity leave, not him.

He promises to bring back princess presents from Disney World for his two princesses. He promises to change all dirty diapers when he returns on weekends.

I promise to text him pictures of SANDY. I promise to SKYPE him before bedtime, so he can tell his daughter good night. I promise we’ll be fine.

He tells me it’s not fair. He doesn’t want to leave his baby girl. He’ll hate to say goodbye so soon.

I tell him he’s being overly sentimental. She won’t even realize he’s gone. It’s not like she’s going to perform a piano recital or pitch a World Series winning softball game. She’s not even going to roll over.

I tell him he’s right. It’s not fair.

Posted by JAM at 10:27 PM 4 comments

yoyomama said:
Honey, you get on that phone and talk to BREAD’s boss. No way they need to be sending a new father away so soon. Raise hell, you hear? Fight for those paternity rights!

Beth said:
Why don’t you and SANDY go with him? It’s not like you’re working. Did someone say vacation?

Ms.Mod said:
It is so much easier to keep the house clean when the hubby is gone. You’ll see. This is a blessing in disguise.

Jason said:
Someone needs to make BANK.

Thursday, April 22, 2010

The Pink Bunny by My Laptop

This morning, I finally put away baby shower gifts because SANDY woke up with a blow-out diaper. She needed more clean clothes, and I was tired of washing the same five onesies. While she napped naked, I pulled gift bags from the nursery closet and cut tags from frilly outfits. BREAD’s been too busy to SKYPE, so he might not recognize his own daughter when he comes home on Saturday. I hung dresses, assembled a bouncy seat, and folded bibs. I placed a pink stuffed bunny by my computer. I told myself SANDY might like to look at the furry animal while I looked up diaper rash remedies and symptoms of thrush. But that’s not it. The truth is darker.

On the way to my mother’s funeral, I ran over four or five rabbits. We left for Virginia in the middle of the night. BREAD was asleep in the backseat of our Mazda. He had flown back from a product press conference in San Francisco to drive down with me. I swerved, but the kamikaze creatures kept tumbling across the median, emerging from the shadowy shoulder. By the third car-shaking crunch, I started to laugh. I could barely see the road through my tears, I laughed so hard. At my parents’ home in Danville, I saw the massacre remains on my front tires and bumper – fur tufts, dried blood, bits of nail, tooth, and flesh. I threw up. I wasn’t laughing.

The bunny brought back the pain of that night, and that pain, still ragged and raw, made mom real again.
When SANDY woke up, I dressed her in a skirted onesie and sat her in the safari-themed bouncy seat. For a moment she lay still, her forehead so pale beneath dark tufts of hair. I should have taken a picture to send to BREAD and post here, but my camera and phone were in the kitchen. The next room, sure, but I didn’t have the energy for the errand. Instead, I watched SANDY. In this respite, her nose and lips softened. Only her eyes remained alert, like the dark globes of an animal staring into a car’s headlights.

 Posted by JAM at 3:30 PM 3 comments

Dude’saDAD said:
This is why women need their own lane. Do us all a favor and stay off the road.

Courtneeee said:
Ha, road kill. Get it? ROTFL.

MomofMunchkins said:
Insensitive people shouldn’t be allowed to comment on blogs. So sorry for your loss.

Total Hits: 177. Today’s Hits: 42.

Thursday, April 29, 2010

Lunch at the Library

SANDY and I did it. We got out of the house today. We had to break the quarantine. Last night, I felt the townhouse walls fold upon me, fetter my hands and feet with their paint and plasterboard. SANDY lay on the carpet for tummy time an arm’s length away. Unreachable.
DOC told me about the Mommy & Me lunch hosted by the county library every Thursday from 12:00 until 1:00 at one of my third trimester check-ups. “Pack up the diaper bag and go. You’ll be glad you did,” he had assured.

We went, but I’m not glad we did.

Behind a bookshelf labeled Large-Print Mysteries, I met Linda. “You must be new. Oh, isn’t she precious.” Why do people describe babies as precious? Did SANDY look like a gemstone or antique silverware set you could buy on eBay or craigslist?

As per Linda’s perky instructions, I wrote my name on a nametag, and below I wrote SANDY, girl. Linda assured me the gender notation was necessary. “You’d be surprised,” she said. Of course I would be. Motherhood is full of surprises. In and out of diapers.

Linda explained the set-up. “Lunch is on the table there.” She pointed into the alcove. “Each week, we offer a favorite kid’s meal. Today, we’re having grilled cheese and tomato soup.” Fun, but I wanted a favorite Mommy meal. Goat cheese crostini. Spicy tuna roll.

At another long table, moms forced their palates to digress. I pushed towards an open seat. Unlike me, the women assembled had put effort into appearance. Rosebud red lips. Curls. Droopy, diamondy earrings. Strands of pearls falling into cleavage deepened by lactation. These women read Mom Fashionista. Some women were breastfeeding and eating at the same time; they dipped sandwiches into soup bowls as they draped babies, like silk pashminas, across their chests. What dexterity! Even the

**Mom Meetup Groups:**

- New Era Moms
- Motherhood Later
- Holistic Moms Network
- Hip Mama Meetup Group
- Moms in Motion
- Alphabet Soup
- MOMS @ Play

*Check for chapters in your area!
babies, the ones bouncing in their mothers’ arms, looked shiny and bright and new. I bet these moms shopped at Zulily. Soft little shoes hugged little feet. Three boys wore overalls with Polo shirts. The girls, with or without hair, had pink bows slung around wobbly heads. Frills abounded.

I didn’t get the memo. This was some alternate universe. In the stroller, SANDY slept, still wearing the white onesie she had worn to bed. We almost matched. I wore black yoga pants and a white t-shirt. I had pulled my hair back and rubbed concealer under my eyes. Jewelry never crossed my mind.

I left SANDY in her stroller and walked to the food table. As I ladled soup, I felt eyes on me. New mother paranoia? I grabbed two packets of crackers. Gazes lingered. Those scanning eyes took in my gym clothes and unbronzed cheeks. They knew I hadn’t showered in three days. I put one cracker packet back. They saw my extra pounds, too.

I had made a wrong turn, and these women knew it. I sat down. I smiled. I bent over the stroller, reached a hand in, laid it on SANDY’s chest. Ten breaths. Yes, she soothed me. Meanwhile women shared crock pot cookery techniques and argued the merits of cloth diapering. Why was I here? I could type these topics into a search bar. Soon all conversations merged into one: a litany of baby-related railing. My palms started to sweat.

“I swear, Aiden refuses to sleep more than two hours in a row. I want to pull my hair out.”

“Janie spits up all the time.”
“Hugh hates baths. He screams from the moment we set him in the water until his hair is dry. You’d think I was torturing him.”


“What drives you crazy about your little one?” a woman asked. The eyes returned to me. Even the babies stared. Bookcases boxed in the table. I brought the spoon to my mouth. Tepid tomato jelly on my tongue. I swallowed the thick redness, and along with it the desperate urge to spill everything about SANDY and missing mom and missing work and missing BREAD. But that’s what my blog is for – to spill, spill, spill. At least online, I can choose to read comments or not. In public, in real life, people open their mouths, and you have to hear what they say. There’s no hide feature, no delete option. Instead of sharing, I watched SANDY sleep, and my hand fell away from my mouth. It just dropped away and toppled the teeming bowl of soup. What sort of mother spills soup into her own baby’s lap? Me. It splashed on SANDY’s skin, across her white onesie. It puddled beneath her calves and soaked her diaper. Across the table, Linda gasped.

Then the library got loud. That intake of air activated maternal instincts around the table. Mothers pushed away sandwiches and held tight to dry infants. They scanned their babies’ faces, checking for soup splatters. SANDY’s screams filled the hollow library as she tried to communicate her discomfort at her sopping and sudden arousal. Between her cries, this is what I heard:

“Is the soup hot?”

“Make sure she doesn’t roll over and drown.”
“Do you need a napkin?”

I pulled SANDY out and held her to me. Her body writhed with each wail. She shook, gagging on an unutterable cry.

“Breathe,” I demanded.

Four seconds passed.

Finally she let out a yelp. The mothers issued a collective sigh. I got out of there. Linda asked, “Do you need any help?” but her words lodged in the motherese around her, the soft hum picking up around the table. Probably about me. “That’s how not to care for a child,” they would say in my absence. “Poor baby girl” they would lament. Who knows? Maybe they blogged about me afterwards. Post title: You Can’t Cry over Spilled MilkSoup.

In the parking lot, I stuffed a blanket into the soup-soaked car seat and buckled SANDY back in. Now she stared. Her eyes sized me up. What if the soup had been hot? Her little body would be blistered, the tiny pores opened and angry. I ran a finger down the length of her arm. Her skin burned me.

If BREAD calls tonight, he will ask about the luncheon. I’ll say how relaxing it was. How I can’t wait for next week. Right.

Posted by JAM at 4:43 PM      5 comments

5o’clockHERE said:
Uh, no! I burned my tongue on tomato soup when I was a kid. Haven’t had the stomach for it since.

rrsfeedme said:
You’re freaking out over a little soup spill? That’s nothing. My son fell down a flight of stairs. I win.

Dr.Bree said:
Have you thought about hanging out with friends? Meeting at the park?

LovinGranola&Green said:
If you weren’t online so much, you would have plenty of time to shower every day.
Ms.Mod said:
Library? What is this place you talk about? Check out Swap.com. Welcome to the 21st Century!

Total Hits: 512. Today’s Hits: 57.

Tuesday, May 4, 2010

Reading Already?

One of my readers last week suggested park dates with friends. Great idea!
Unfortunately, my four closest friends don’t have children. Two aren’t even married.
We text sometimes. Occasionally, we chat as they drive home from the office and I sway with SANDY. I gush about how soft her hair is; they share project updates, campaign news. We hang up. We post on each others’ facebook walls. Sometimes, we poke each other.

This past weekend, BREAD brought home The Runaway Bunny for SANDY.
He’s spoiling her already. He said, “It’s a classic,” but I haven’t heard of it. Today I did some research and found the book in the top 60 best children’s stories of all time. See childrensbooksguide.com for the complete listing.

Anyway, I read the book to SANDY this morning. These lines bug me:

“If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.”

“If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother, I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.”

Here’s what I want to know – why do I feel like I’m caught on a hook, dangling on a line, and fighting for air. Wasn’t it supposed to be the other way around?

Yes, I’m venting about children’s books, and, no, I’m not done yet. On kidshealth.org, I read an article about the benefits of reading to infants. Of course I
want SANDY to have early cognitive learning experiences, but reading these stories depresses me. The child can’t understand what I’m saying, and I feel the compulsion to speak in singsong, as though carrying on a conversation with Lambchop. I sound ridiculous. Who says goodnight to the moon? Okay, I’m done.

What’s your favorite baby book?

Posted by JAM at 10:18 AM 11 comments

UberAngela said:
The Very Hungry Caterpillar. I read it to my DD (dear daughter) every night.

WorkaHolly said:
Where the Wild Things Are, of course!

Jason said:
Any Frog and Toad book.

imarealmom said:
Sorry, but I have to say Goodnight Moon. And your baby doesn’t think you sound ridiculous. Who are you trying to impress?

Anonymous said:
The Giving Tree.

Beth said:
Someday.

Dude’saDAD said:
Everybody Poops.

Ms.Mod said:
Any book I can download on my iPad!

Hannah@Home said:
Moo, Baa, La La La

rrsfeedme said:
I’m with you. Children’s books are depressing. We skipped right to TV.

MommyLovesVampires said:
I’ve started reading Twilight to my baby girl. She’s an Edward fan.

Thursday, May 6, 2010

Pump It Up

Male readers beware: this post is all about breasts. More specifically, breastfeeding.

Yes, it’s painful. Engorgement hurts. Let-downs hurt. Latching on hurts. But I am determined to stick with it even though my milk supply seems low. I spent the morning browsing breastfeeding websites like kellymom.com. All advocated extra pumping sessions to increase supply. Maybe SANDY cries so much because she’s hungry? More let-downs mean more milk. More milk means less crying. Less crying means I can take in her tiny toes and bulging belly and marvel at her skin’s splendor.

Less crying means I can watch her eyes blink and wonder at the world she sees. Less crying means more sleep. For both of us.

So even though my nipples are still sore (five weeks after leaving the hospital), I pumped breast milk for the first time this afternoon. The first and last time.

Fifteen minutes after SANDY went down for her nap, I pulled out my Medela machine. Once I had the nipple shield against my chest, I turned the suction on. Each wheeze of air burned my red, raw skin. Against the pain, I closed my eyes. Seconds passed. Then minutes. I was hoping I would open my eyes to a full bottle.

Instead, I found the nipple shield splattered with blood. The red startled me. Even the milk in the collection bottle appeared pink. I pulled the device away from my chest. Blood dripped from the cracks in my exposed nipple. Milk, too, dripped down my
chest. When I reached to turn off the suction, I dropped the bottle. Pink milk spilled onto the couch, the carpet. First the soup the other week and now this! Is that how mothers are made? Are working women bled until only the mother in them remains? That's when SANDY started to cry. Right then. Right as I tried to make sense of the blood and my swollen, cracked nipple.

An open wound, and SANDY's shrieks, the salt.

I pulled wet wipes from a container lying on the floor. I used one to clot, one to wipe, one to pad my bra, and another to sop up the spilled milk. Soon I had a pile of pink wipes. SANDY still cried from her crib. I went to her. I reached for my baby. My hands folded around her body. I saw bloody streaks drying on my fingers. I imagined the blood was hers.

 Posted by JAM at 3:58 PM 5 comments

BigBrother said:
I think this story is better suited for a diary or a gynecologist.

rrsfeedme said:
TMI

imarealmom said:
Just switch to formula already.

Dude'saDAD said:
I am totally turned on right now. Pumping mommas are hot!

UberAngela said:
Oh, honey, don't give up! Your baby needs her mommy milk. I've been breastfeeding for 18 months already. You can do it. Breast is best!

Total Hits: 1128. Today's Hits: 120.
Visitors! Last weekend, BREAD stayed in Florida to finish a project before a tropical storm climbed Florida’s Atlantic coast, so my brother and dad drove up to Pittsburgh together. BRO’s in law school and DAD’s in planned giving, both at the University of Virginia. They had met SANDY when we were in the hospital, but I had made them wait a month too long to see her again, they complained when they walked in.

It occurred to me then what the baby means for our family. She restores balance: the boys and the girls, the grief and the celebration, the death and the life. But for me, SANDY causes vertigo. For weeks now, I’ve only slept two hours at a time. Around the clock, she nurses, she squirms, she cries. My head spins with hormones and emotions and fatigue, so many changes and choices. Cloth or disposable. Huggies or Pampers. Taggies or Lovie. Powder or cream. Sterilize or sanitize. Travel system or stroller. Bumbo or Boppy or Binkie or Blue’s Clues. I hadn’t wanted the men in my life to see me so out-of-sorts, but I didn’t want to be alone for the weekend.

DAD wore a pink tie and carried carnations. He traded me the flowers for his granddaughter. Since I had last seen him, his wrinkles and dimples had deepened. BRO, law-school scruffy, burst in,-demanding to meet his niece. “She has my eyes,” he said. SANDY was impressively docile as her grandfather and uncle passed her back and forth. She may have even smiled for several of the myriad pictures BRO snapped. DAD boasted he still had his touch when SANDY fell asleep in his arms late Saturday afternoon.
“Your mother would tease me that I bored you two to sleep,” DAD said. He leaned against SANDY’s crib and stared in.


“She would have been so proud of you,” DAD said to me. He kept his eyes on SANDY but seemed to look past her, to another baby, another time, when our family was whole.

“Mom made it seem so easy.” That was all I could say. I laid down for a nap that ended too soon. Hours too soon.

They left on Sunday. They couldn’t wait to see SANDY again. They covered her in kisses and squeezed her tight. Already, they had fallen in love. They handed her back to me.

Posted by JAM at 11:12 AM 4 comments

Jason said:
Baby whisperer…that’s pretty funny!

Dr.Bree said:
Glad you had some company, JAM. It takes a village…

LovinGranola&Green said:
Powder. Always powder. You really want to put chemicals down there? Think about it.

Mom&Order said:
UVA School of Law Class of ’04. Now I’m a SAHM. Go figure, right? I traded the bar for the brats.

Total Hits: 1356. Today’s Hits: 58.

Wednesday, May 19, 2010

Wailing Woes

I thought SANDY would have run out of tears by now. Still she cries. Do all mothers suffer this inundation? Are we all swept away from the successes we knew before and
stranded with our newborns on a distant shore, exhausted and forlorn? No, that can’t be. I’ve read too many cheerful blog posts with titles like Our Life Has Been So Fun Lately and Our Sweet Package: Sent From Heaven.

I’m going to find a cure, a way to make it stop. I’m searching the Internet. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Google.

So far, each sound, scent, or activity I’ve tried has afforded a lull, but then the crying resumes, intensifies, and my quest continues. Peace is fleeting. Sleep? That’s my computer’s energy-saving mode. SANDY needs a mute button. Or to change the channel. The Sobbing Baby Show needs to roll credits. Enough, child. Enough.

Last night, I relearned the lyrics to “Rock-a-Bye Baby.” The lullaby had been MOM’s answer to ear infections, fevers, and monsters under the bed. I started to sing, but I couldn’t get past the rocking cradle. I couldn’t remember, couldn’t think. What happened to make the cradle fall? Faulty manufacturing? I found the answer in 0.24 seconds. Rock-a-bye baby / In the treetop / When the wind blows / The cradle will rock. / When the bough breaks / The cradle will fall / And down will come baby / Cradle and all.

In the treetops, it rains. SANDY and I wait for the bough to break.

Posted by JAM at 9:33 PM 6 comments

50'clockHERE said: Have you tried mixing a little whiskey with the breast milk?

Momathon said: Sweetie, the sleep sack. That’s what you need.
imarealmom said:
TYLENOL.

Beth said:
Don’t obsess about the crying. Work on communicating with your LO. Talk to her. Explain the situation.

Teenietweets said:
Let her CRY! It’s natural. Like newborn detox.

WorkaHolly said:
Hire a nanny. And a wet nurse. Best investments you’ll ever make. Trust me.


Monday, May 24, 2010

Out & About @ Midnight

Guess where I went last night with a newborn? No, not to a bar. Not the ER either.

BREAD had to stay in Florida again because the tropical storm caught up to him. Usually, he stocked us up on diapers and wipes for the week, but since he didn’t come home, we ran out. Yes, I blamed him. We tried to SKYPE yesterday, but the connection kept failing. I blamed him for that, too. Of course it was his fault SANDY and I left the house last night. He’s not here, so the strike count climbs quickly. As I drove to the store, this is the voicemail I left him:

“It’s 10pm, and SANDY and I are in the car driving to Wal-Mart. Picture this: her legs are smeared with mustardy poop gobs, and she’s crying. Thanks for leaving us without any diapers and wipes. Thanks for not coming home again. Hear that background noise? That’s your daughter screaming.”

Later at home, cleaned and dressed in footed pajamas, SANDY sat in my lap while I searched for diapers online. On diapers.com, first-time customers receive a five-dollar coupon and free shipping on orders over fifty dollars. I filled my virtual cart with Pampers and came up with virtual ad campaigns: Tested on adults so they will work for
babies. Go ahead…pee A LOT! Or better yet, A bucket for your baby’s bottom. I shared my ideas with SANDY. She slapped her hands against the desk. I tickled her. She giggled.

I didn’t place the order, though. I was too tired to enter shipping and billing information, and I couldn’t imagine needing more than the two jumbo packs I had already purchased.

Posted by JAM at 8:07 AM 4 comments

Dude’saDAD said:
Stock up! You can never have too many diapers.

rrsfeedme said:
Check out Amazon.com’s subscribe and save purchase option. You can schedule diaper deliveries.

Jason said:
Do they actually test diapers on adults?

UberAngela said:
Good thing you didn’t order those diapers. Pampers leak ALL THE TIME. You want to buy Huggies.

Total Hits: 2485. Today’s Hits: 134.

Wednesday, May 26, 2010

Searching for Solace

Commence rambling now.

Today I noticed SANDY has my long lashes and high cheek bones. We have the same wide forehead. The same searching eyes. I don’t discern BREAD anywhere in her features. He returns home in three days, at least for the weekend and as long as the storm clears. I go back to work in ten days. Not soon enough. Too soon. I can’t figure out SAHM. How the hell am I going to handle working mom? I need to be

Return to Work To-do List:

1. Lose ten more pounds.
2. Dry-clean suits.
3. Practice walking in heels.
4. Confirm daycare start date.
5. Confirm appointments for first week back.
6. Figure out how to do it all.
amorphous. A flood of self to fill these new roles and titles and responsibilities. Who’s cutting the molds? Send the specs my way! On top of all that, SANDY has colic. According to webmd.com, colic is when babies “cry like crazy for no reason at all [my interpretation of the medical jargon]. It is common to feel scared, upset, or frustrated when you cannot get your baby to stop crying [check, check, and check]. But remember that colic is normal – and temporary [doesn’t feel that way].” Then I scrolled through message boards and blog posts on the condition. Most moms recommended Dr. Karp’s video, “Happiest Baby on the Block.” MommySusanSnuggles and MotherHenofTen praised it as the kryptonite of colic. I bought the DVD yesterday, and last night, I tried everything The Colic Solution suggested: shush, swing, swaddle. I even skipped to the next alphabet letter and tried several things the good doctor didn’t suggest: telepathy, television, and Tina Turner. But I had to turn off Tina when I started asking what’s love got to do with it over and over again. It’s hard to love a wriggling air-horn.

Posted by JAM at 7:46 AM 11 comments

yoyomama said:
Both of my babies had colic. It’s bad for a while, but it gets better. Hang in there!

SeriouslySoHappy said:
Lol – telepathy!

MomofMunchkins said:
Dr. Karp is a genius!

Ms.Mod said:
What kind of swaddle blanket are you using? That can make a big difference. We switched to the Miracle Blanket. Now our DS (dear son) is sleeping six straight hours.

Courtneee said:
Instead of short bursts of shushing (shush, shush, shush), try to hold out the shush for as long as possible (shushhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh).

LovinGranola&Green said:
Have you tried wearing your baby? I put my baby in a sling and off we go.
Beth said:
Cut the caffeine from your diet. It can transfer to your breast milk and keep your LO up for days.

5o'clockHERE said:
How about this S...Scotch. How about this T...Tequila.

Anonymous said:
I sure hope the previously poster meant for you, not your little one.

Jason said:
I think I’ve seen videos of drunken babies on YouTube. Hilarious.

UberAngela said:
I’m a Happiest Baby on the Block certified educator. Feel free to email me for a consultation. I’d be happy to help.

CreativeCarol said:
Oh, I have an etsy store called Soothing Sleepers. I make and sell just what you need: pajamas made from 100% natural and breathable cotton. Your baby will feel like she’s back in the womb! Next day shipping is available.

Total Hits: 3774. Today’s Hits: 304.

Tuesday, June 1, 2010

Thank Goodness for PillsBlogs

I scoured the Internet. I don’t think it exists. Still. I want a drug to activate my mommy-ness: some bubblegummy stimulant to ease my transition into motherhood.

I had my post-partum check-up today. Everything has healed. DOC is pleased. He wasn’t worried about the black beneath my eyes, my sleepy squint. He says what I’m feeling is perfectly normal. He says I’ll be tired for the next 18 years. Not what I wanted to hear. No pills for me there either.

I get that it’s supposed to be hard. For some women, it’s a lot harder. Some women create entire blogs about their infertility issues. Women suffer horrible pregnancies and blog about it. Women find out their babies have Down’s Syndrome, Menkes Disease, SMA and then blog about it. Me? I’m just drowning in tears. And blogging about it. But these past six weeks have been rough. It’s all in my blog archives. You’ll see. SANDY and I. And I’m alone. My husband, dad, and brother
wouldn’t understand even if they were here with me. BREAD comes home for good this Friday night. This Friday! He’ll be home soon, but still.

Now I know the truth. Online moms understand. The darkest, deepest maternal instinct: Babies only leech life from their mothers: blood and fluid before birth, milk and identity after. That’s why we create blogs. That’s why we have Internet identities. We’re reasserting ourselves. Reinventing. We’re rediscovering what we’ve lost to our wee squalling things one post, one page hit at a time. We’re beyond tired, but we’re posting. It’s how we endure. It’s how I endure.

See, I have plenty of virtual support. Thank you, kind readers! The web isn’t cold html. Google can comfort. Online, I’m a resourceful, connected mother. Check my link lists. Click through my blogroll. Read my comments. You’ll see.

But offline, it’s different. When I look at my baby, my precious baby girl, I see too much of me in her helpless gaze, her fragile frown. I’ll show you. I’ll take pictures. I’ll learn how to post them. You’ll see. It’s just that the image in the viewfinder would blur, and I can’t think through these tears.

Posted by JAM at 7:22 PM 9 comments

Momathon said:
Oh, dear, it’s going to be okay. We all go through times like these. I used to take daily crying breaks in the bathroom when my boys were little.

UberAngela said:
Get those pictures up, JAM. We want to see SANDY! Have you taken any pictures of her yet? With my first, I filled ALBUMS in the first week. SANDY won’t be small forever. You’ll want to look back. You’ll want to remember.

SeriouslySoHappy said:
JAM, you are so right! You’re being reshaped and remolded into a mom. Online and in real life, too. Sure, it doesn’t make sense, but you’ll be better in the long run. Stronger. Tougher.

Jason said:
It’s simple. Suck it up. Ten people just died.
imarealmom said:
Thanks for sharing, JAM. I have enjoyed reading your blog from its inception. You just put it all out there. That’s what I like – a real blog about a real person. Through your trials, you’ve been so composed. I admire you.

Hannah@Home said:
I’m crying. My head hurts for you!

WorkaHolly said:
Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Get out of the house more. Shop. Walk. Get a manicure. It will do you and your baby a world of good.

5o’clockHERE said:
I know the drug you need: Whiskey.

LovinGranola&Green said:
Stay away from pills. And alcohol. Both will infect your breast milk and your brain. And you could die. Buy a soy candle instead.

Total Hits: 7521. Today’s Hits: 733.

Friday, June 4, 2010

The Storm

Bread was supposed to be home tonight. Now he’s not getting in until tomorrow afternoon. Eighteen hours. An eternity. We fought about it over the phone:

“I’m flying in as soon as I can tomorrow, and I’m coming straight home. Before dinner, for sure. It’s the best I could do,” he said when we talked earlier.

“But you said Friday,” I said. “You said you would be home Friday.”

“I know what I said. But now I’m getting home Saturday. Now I’m saying Saturday. It’s just one more night.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, (I was crying at this point) “how long a night is.”

“Listen, I have to go. Kiss SANDY for me. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Now I was yelling. “No, wait. That’s not good enough. You need to get on the plane. Go. Right now. I need you here.” But he had already hung up.

Then SANDY woke up crying. She hadn’t been quiet long. Twelve minutes. A heartbeat. I went to her. I just wanted it to stop. The noise. I wanted her to sleep.
SANDY, enough, I told her. Why won’t you sleep, I asked. I picked her up. I shook her. No more, I said. Daddy’s not coming home tonight. We need our sleep. Please, I pleaded. Pretty, pretty please. You need to stop this. Stop this, I sobbed. Just stop. She stared at me. I was just so. tired. of. the. tears.

At last it was still. The walls pulled back, and I could breathe. She was soft in my arms, so peaceful. The room was quiet. The night was dark. We rocked. I laid her in her crib.

Posted by JAM at 11:57 PM 8 comments

Jason said:
OMG. No....

MomofMunchkins said:
Please tell me you didn’t just shake your baby!

Courtneee said:
That’s it? There’s got to be more to this post.

GagaforDrama said:
Going to get some popcorn...

imarealmom said:
Yeah, I get tired of changing diapers, too. Motherhood is tiring. Period.

Teenietweets said:
You’re kidding, right?

BigBrother said:
By shake, you mean sway, I hope.

Momathon said:
Parents always hurt their children. It’s inevitable. Wait until SANDY’s a teenager.

Saturday, June 5, 2010

The Calm

SANDY hasn’t cried all day. What welcome relief! Her naps have been long. So long.

Nursing hasn’t hurt, and I seem to have surplus milk. Diaper changes aren’t as frequent, and she holds so still while I powder her bottom.

Maybe I’m getting it now. BREAD will be home any minute. My little sleepy-head is still napping, so I think I will shower before he gets here.

Posted by JAM at 4:33 PM 20 comments

WorkaHolly said:
JAM, is your baby alright?

UberAngela said:
Okay, is this lady for real? What’s going on? She shakes her baby and now everything is fine?

Jason said:
I have a bad feeling…

Dude’saDAD said:
Way to take control of the situation. Show that baby who’s boss. Mothers need to be assertive. Coddling creates monsters.

Mom&Order said:
Very funny. BREAD’s having an affair, isn’t he? That’s his JOB in Florida, right?

SeriouslySoHappy said:
Why would someone post something like this? This post ruined my day. So NOT funny.

Anonymous said:
CRAZY

imarealmom said:
That poor baby. I hope someone calls the cops.

rrsfeedme said:
You don’t think she actually killed her baby? I mean no one would do something like that and then blog about it.

GagaforDrama said:
This is better than Real Housewives anywhere!
Ms.Mod said:
I am disturbed greatly. You know she probably just wrote these last couple of posts because some ad company is paying her big bucks. What a sick sell-out!

Hannah@Home said:
Can you blame her? No one reads my blog. I mean, how nice would it be to stay home and post about naps and nursing all day?

Momathon said:
I think she did it. I think she shook her baby.

yoyomama said:
What a lesson for sex-crazed teens! Babies are hard work.

BigBrother said:
This is why we need enhanced Internet regulations. Blogs like this shouldn’t exist. Here’s what’s really happening: women exploiting motherhood. Next thing you know, JAM will have a best-selling memoir, a cookbook, an appearance on the Today show, and a kids’ clothing line.

Teenietweets said:
I think I know this woman. If so, she can’t cook.

MomofMunchkins said:
JAM, you need help.

Dr.Bree said:
GET THAT BABY TO A HOSPITAL.

Beth said:
I think it’s a little late for that.

NervousNewMom said:
Wait. Is it bad to shake your baby?

Total Hits: 14887. Today’s Hits: 3887.
Thursday afternoon, in that splinter of time bordered by work and dinner, Jerry watched his son Arnie ride a tricycle in the driveway. The late September day was restless. Across the town of Marianna – even across Washington County and the entire Laurel Highland region – leaves on their branches quivered, a breath from falling. Jerry leaned against the corner of the house and loosened his tie. In two days the house and yard would teem with grandparents, Arnie’s classmates, and their parents, but for now Jerry could stand still. The boy – almost three and short and thin for his age – pretended to be a dinosaur explorer. Slung over his shoulder was Jerry’s old leather satchel. A stick from the tree-lined yard balanced along the handlebar, and Arnie had to stretch his fingers to hold his spear and steer his Schwinn Roadster.

But because of his small hands and the rapid pedaling of his little legs, the stick fell on his third pass. He swerved and reached, but he was still pedaling. And the driveway was bumpy and grainy and at a slight grade, downhill towards the garage. The tricycle tilted, then toppled. Jerry rushed over. He unwound the poky parts from his son’s sprawled body and squatted down before the boy. “Where does it hurt?” he asked. The boy sniffled and pointed to his knee. The skin was intact, but Jerry could see a lump already. “I’ll be right back,” he said. He walked through the open garage door to the deep freezer. From the shelves lined with bags of frozen breast milk, Jerry pulled one. He read the label: Date: Sept. 1, 2010. Amount: 6 oz.

Outside Arnie huddled, holding the splintered stick. In thirty seconds, the inky purple of broken blood vessels had oscillated outward, spreading into a quarter-sized contusion covering his kneecap. “I’ve got just the thing,” Jerry said. The boy flinched when the icy bag touched his skin, but he let his dad hold it there. They watched the milk start to breakup, its whiteness creamy and soothing.
When Karen called to them for dinner, Arnie was discussing dinosaurs. “I like the flying dinosaur. He's my favorite. What dinosaur do you like, Daddy?” The bag of breast milk had softened into a smooth slush, and the driveway had grown cool and bright as the sky's light drained through the leafy treetops.

“Tyrannosaurus Rex,” Jerry said as they walked inside, hand in hand. In the garage, Jerry discarded the thawed milk. He shook the trash can, jostling the contents enough so the bag disappeared beneath the empty boxes of flaky, fiber-filled cereals and browning avocado rinds. “Don’t tell Mom, okay?” Jerry said. He reached for the door, the cold knob, and added, “Or no birthday party this weekend.” Arnie looked up. His small nose was still red from crying earlier, and his thin lips formed a straight line under his dark eyes. The boy had Jerry's eyes, the only readily-observable paternal stamp, but Jerry was starting to see more of him in his son's personality, like time-release DNA.

Now Arnie nodded. He knew – of course he knew – how serious his mother was about those precious blocks of breast milk labeled and stored in the garage freezer. Her milk wasn't ice pack material, and they had used it anyway. They would share this – this bit of defiance. A father and son bond. They walked inside.

In two days, Arnie would celebrate his third birthday. Last year Jerry and Karen had both turned 35, but their birthdays had been quiet occasions: dinners at Station Square in Pittsburgh, just the three of them. For Arnie’s party, the entire preschool class – fifteen girls and boys – and their parents had been invited to the house. Jerry’s parents were flying in from Bend, Oregon, for the weekend, too. They hadn’t visited since Arnie was born, but two months ago they had called a new Italian restaurant, hungry for Hawaiian pizza. Since they had placed the 49th order, they won two round-
trip tickets to anywhere in the continental United States. Jerry’s parents couldn’t afford weekdays off, but they wanted to see their grandson for his birthday. Their only grandson.

The party was Karen’s project. For months, she scoured the Internet for plates and napkins stamped with dinosaur silhouettes and Jurasically-relevant patio décor. “Are you sure?” Jerry had asked when she said yes, she wanted to celebrate at the house for the third time.

“Your parents are coming, and I want to make this birthday special for Arnie,” she said. “Besides, parents and kids will be in the back yard, and I’ll write on the invitations one to three. Even if families linger, I'll have plenty of time.”

Jerry said. “And you're fine with my parents staying at the house?

“Do they know?” Karen asked.

“About what? The pumping or the freezer? No. My mother fed me formula.”

“I can pump in the van now that I have the plug adaptor. It'll be fine. It'll be fun. For Arnie.”

So Karen continued the preparation frenzy. Last weekend, she custom-ordered a cake shaped like a Velociraptor and filled a Stegosaurus piñata with dino-egg candies ordered from paleontologyconfections.com. Arnie, too, was in preparation mode. On his desk lay the khaki shorts and brown collared shirt he would wear Saturday afternoon. His hiking boots, usually worn daily, had been toothbrush-scrubbed and set beside the door. Tonight at dinner, Karen gave Jerry two tasks of his own: come up with a game for the kids to play and clean the house.

Jerry shrugged. “Sure.” He forked more potatoes into his mouth.

“Thanks,” Karen said. “With your family coming Friday… I thought I would have enough time. . . .” After a decade of marriage, she no longer needed to explain that her Tuesday presentation had required fifteen additional slides and a migraine had surprised her yesterday.
afternoon. Of course she still had party errands to run. This was their code, their way: Karen attempting to get it all done; Jerry finishing what she couldn’t.

Across the table, Arnie ate his dinner quietly. Jerry watched his son bury green beans beneath mashed potatoes and then dig them out to eat. “Can I be done now?” the boy asked when his plate lay empty except for a white film at the excavation site.

“Good work, buddy.” Jerry reached over to pull his son’s chair out, but Arnie had already slid down. His bare feet slapped the tile floor as he raced to the living room.

Karen looked at her watch, laid down her fork. “I need to go pump. You’ve got the table?” Why did she bother asking? Every night it was the same.

“Of course, honey,” Jerry said, and he watched her follow Arnie into the living room. Karen was in a state of workday decay. Her dark and fine hair, like Arnie’s, spilled from a clip, and the snake-like strands slithered as she walked. In her navy knee-length skirt, her thin hips rocked, jiggling despite the tight fabric across her backside. The hem of her blouse poked out at the waist, poofed and wrinkled. Jerry dug his fork back into the mashed potatoes. The creamy mound reminded him of the breast milk softening in the evening air. Jerry dropped his utensil and started clearing the table.

Three years ago, Karen and Jerry delivered at the local hospital a baby boy: heavier than a gallon of milk and long enough to fill Jerry’s forearm. There had been a complication with the delivery, a placental problem. Their son would be an only child. They named him Arnold but called him Arnie. Back at home a week later, Jerry unloaded the car while Karen nursed their son on the couch. In the doorway, Jerry hesitated despite the diaper boxes cradled under both arms. Green veins ran down Karen’s blooming chest, giant ropes that flowed into Arnie’s gaping mouth. He watched the infant swallow Karen’s thick, purple nipple. The baby’s jaw trembled, and milk spilled from the
corners of his thin, pursed lips. His half-open eyes gazed over his mother’s shoulder. Jerry had plenty to do, but watching his wife and son, he felt disconnected – from his family, from the moment, from the plunge into parenthood. Karen looked up and smiled. “Aren’t we naturals?” she asked, and Jerry nodded. He went to the garage for his toolbox to finish assembling the swing.

In two months, nursing had become a ritual to Karen. “Distractions, especially television, ruin the sanctity of breastfeeding,” she told him. How could she know such a thing? At first, he suspected a Google search for breastfeeding routine had directed her to the blog of a co-sleeping, placenta-eating mother, but then he saw the thousand-plus-page reference book published by the La Leche League on her nightstand.

On nights when Karen fell asleep first, Jerry stole the thick volume on breastfeeding from her bedside table. He read about clogged milk ducts and mastitis and let-down. The book defined colostrum and thrush and delineated between baby-led and mother-led weaning. He studied a chart comparing the vitamin content of breast milk to the leading brands of formula. The numbers fascinated him: one hundred calories burned per five ounces of milk generated, twenty-five ounces consumed each day by the average infant. His favorite chapter discussed the composition and evolution of the mammary gland. At its core grew the lactiferous tree, a sideways tree made up of areolae and lobules and myoepithelial cells. Money didn’t grow on trees, but apparently milk did.

When her maternity leave had ended, Karen bought a breast pump. The contraption unnerved Jerry at first even though he had studied similar devices at Target during diaper runs. Later he would realize the purchase signaled a new epoch in the evolutionary processes of parenthood and marriage for him and Karen. It became a fixture in their home, utilized more than the crock pot and vacuum combined. But unlike any other appliance, this one turned them into recluses. Outings lasted no longer than three hours, and visitations had to be squeezed around Karen’s pumping schedule. Karen asked her parents to stay at a hotel when they stopped on their
way to and from Florida. Jerry met his friends at a bar or their homes. “Double ear infections again. Mind if we grab that beer at your place?”

By Arnie’s second birthday, the boy had self-weaned to Vitamin D milk, though Jerry saw Karen try to breastfeed once or twice more only to have Arnie turn away and say, “No, Mommy, no.” But she continued to pump. Soon their kitchen freezer was full; white misshapen bricks barricaded the vanilla ice cream and boxed in the peas. Over beef stew one night, Jerry asked why she was still pumping and what she was planning to do with the stored milk. She said, “I can’t stop yet. Don’t you see? I won’t be able to do this again.” He wanted to ask Karen if a freezer full of breast milk could make-up for a house full of children, but the words dried and soured in his mouth. He went back to eating his stew and didn’t bring up the matter again. They bought a Sub-Zero for the garage, and Jerry planned to stock it with strips, filets, and chops as soon as Karen’s milk dried up. He created an account with Omaha Steaks and waited.

And waited. Karen prepared coolers with dry ice and rows of milk bags for a monthly donation. Pittsburgh’s breast milk bank sent a Christmas postcard last December. He read the bold cursive: “Lactation – the gift of a healthy start for babies throughout the Pittsburgh area. Your milk helps premature babies get the nutrients and antibodies they need. Thank you, and Merry Christmas.” In the bedroom, Jerry found nipple shields and tubing among the sheets. The sound of rhythmic pulsing became his wake-up alarm and lullaby. One night last month, he slipped a hand to his sleeping wife’s chest. Under her nightshirt and beneath the nursing bra she wore at all times, he found the bumpy topography of her breasts. His fingers traced swollen veins, palpated fatty tissue, uncovered lobules. Her areola and nipple had hardened, calloused with continual use. He pulled his hand back and rolled away. Karen didn’t stir, but her milky smell lingered on his fingertips and kept him awake. He resented her pungent, rough skin. “Cow,” he whispered to his sleeping wife.
Jerry wiped down the counters, the table, and the sink. In the living room, Arnie was sprawled on the carpet, still turning pages in *Dinosaur Anatomy*, an early and heavy birthday gift from Karen’s parents. The boy relished tailbone and claw diagrams of carnivorous Triassic creatures. “Don’t worry about the floor, dear,” Karen called into the kitchen. “I just have a couple more ounces.”

Jerry retreated to the office to Google a party game. Up popped a list of possibilities: *Pin the tail on T-Rex Tony, only $49.99.* *Bobbing for Dinosaur eggs.* *Tag! You’re a Triceratops.* Jerry read descriptions of each game, not satisfied with the uninspired simplicity of the proposed entertainment. His boy chased extinct animals on his bike every evening and knew the classifications of dozens of Jurassic species. No, these wouldn’t do. He listened to the rhythmic whooshing of Karen’s pump from the adjacent room. How would he explain the sound to his parents? Or why Karen disappeared every three to four hours for thirty minutes? Silently he chanted to the beat, *din-o, din-o, din-o.* He pulled out a legal pad and uncapped a pen. Karen’s pump attachments, when put together, resembled an archaic tool. Jerry shaded his drawing, adding camouflage. Maybe the milk gun could draw out something besides milk from the dinosaurs. Maybe the device could target other glands, trigger *non-cuboidal cells* to secrete *something.* Ah, he thought. The device could extract dangerous *pathogens.* It could save the dinosaurs from extinction. *Pin the Disease-Extractor on the Dinosaur! Save T-Rex Tony from a Terrible Demise!* He had his game.

In the kitchen, he found extra pump equipment between the bread maker and juicer, wedding gifts now fossilized, buried in a cabinet below the surface of the kitchen. The rest of the supplies he would buy on his way home from work tomorrow.

Now Arnie and Karen both sat at the dining room table. Two glasses of milk stood near an open notebook and an issue of *Parents* magazine. Jerry didn’t know how they did it, drink milk. He was milked out. On his way out of the kitchen, he popped a few Tums from the medicine
cupboard. Lately it seemed even the sight of milk products aggravated his insides. Karen thought he had adult-onset lactose intolerance, but he knew that wasn’t the case.

As Jerry approached the table, he stared at Karen’s chest, which was flatter now than it had been at dinner. The times they were together passed according to breast fluctuations, their own domestic tide. Even after pumping, her chest swelled, and Jerry appreciated lactation’s effect on her cup size even if he couldn’t touch her breasts most of the time or in certain ways. At all times, he refrained from kissing them, though that was his rule, not Karen’s. “What are you coloring?” Jerry asked his son.

“Dinosaur footprints,” Arnie said. Down the page crawled squiggles and dots and wobbly triangles.

“Where are they going? To a party?” asked Jerry. Across the table, Karen took a sip of milk.

“To my party.” Arnie reached for his glass. Jerry smiled and backed away from the table. In an hour, he would read to Arnie from their Encyclopedia set. Already this week, they had read about Hadrosaurus, Haplocheirus, and Harpymimus, and tonight was Herrerasaurus’s night. Karen had another two hours until she had to pump again. Jerry didn’t want to start cleaning the house yet, but he needed an undershirt for work tomorrow.

He pulled the hamper out of their walk-in closet. The smell was surprising and unmistakable: breast milk. Almost like the scent of milk and honey and butter, melted and mixed, left to sit out an hour, maybe two, too long. But why on his boxers? Karen’s socks and suit pants? Was the smell absorbing into the porous fibers of cotton and nylon and polyester blends? In the laundry room, Jerry turned on the washer and added two capfuls of Tide to the rising hot water. He poured more detergent on top of the load and turned the knob to heavy cycle. “There,” he said. “Bye, bye breast milk.”
Then he walked into the family room. He had to know, and he had to know now, before his parents arrived. At the window, he pulled the hanging curtain towards his face and buried his nose in the thick gold fabric. Could it be? The stiff material smelled just like the clothes, but more stale, as if the afternoon sun, day after day, had burnt the scent. When, he wanted to know. When had the smell of breast milk taken up residence in their home, escaping the tightly sealed bottles and bags in the garage freezer? His parents would arrive in 24 hours. They would sit on the couch. They would tread on the carpet. They would breathe this air. Something had to be done. First he returned to the kitchen for a handful of Tums.

The next morning at the bank, Jerry discussed investment strategies with the Smiths, Joan and Stewart. The couple was ready to retire, but illness and recent hospital stays had decimated their nest egg. Had they been breastfed as infants? Would a few more months of their mothers’ – or any mother’s – milk have bolstered their immune systems enough to preclude this predicament? During his lunch break, he ate last night’s leftovers cold. He left shortly after rinsing out the Tupperware in the workroom, citing a family emergency when Linda the teller asked, “Why the rush?” on his way out. He had supplies to buy, a house to clean, and a scent to neutralize.

“Honey? You’re home early,” Karen said as she walked into the bedroom, her pump bag on her shoulder, heels dangling from a wrist.

“I wanted enough time to clean before my parents arrive,” said Jerry. Now Karen moved to the bed. Sitting, she reached up to squeeze each breast. She had explained once that this was how she kept tabs on her supply. She started to undress.

“Do you think they can pick up the cake in the morning? I’m worried I won’t have time to decorate and pump before guests arrive.” Now she had her Medela machine plugged in and sat
hooking the milk gun together. Her left breast hung out of her tank top and bra. Once, Karen had
called her milk “liquid gold,” and Jerry looked at the udder-like droop of her swollen chest and saw
a vault, continually replenished with new money, manufactured gold. But Jerry knew his Economics
well – especially the danger of flooding the system. Hyperinflation.

“As long as the flight and the shuttle are on time. Otherwise they might need the morning
to rest,” he said. He guessed Karen wanted them out of the house so she wouldn’t have to pump in
the van. “You’re going to love the game I came up with.” The pump whooshed into action, its
pulsing regular and quick. “It’s perfect for Arnie.”

“If they’re sleeping, you’re on cake duty. Can you get me a glass of water?” Pumping always
made Karen thirsty, but she never remembered to pour her own drink before attaching herself to
the machine.

From the doorway, Jerry said, “I was thinking we should do dinner out to keep the kitchen
clean.”

“By the time our food comes, I’ll be engorged and your parents will be knocking at a locked
door. Let’s do take-out.” She studied her nipple, the streams of milk issuing forth.

“Can we get pizza?” Arnie tapped Jerry on the leg. His dinosaur book was propped against
his hip, and his whole body leaned to that side under the weight.

“Of course, birthday boy.” Jerry reached down to high-five his son.

“Honey, we’re having pizza at the party tomorrow. You don’t want pizza two days in a row.
Let’s order Chinese.” The boy looked up at Jerry. The dinosaur book slipped from his hip.

“C’mon, Arnie. We’ll get extra fortune cookies,” said Jerry. He picked up the book and his
son and walked into the hallway.

“Dear?” Karen called. “Forget something?” Jerry looked back around the corner. “My
water,” she said. The pump pulled at her nipple, distorting it massively.
Jerry didn’t get to bed until after midnight. His parents had arrived at nine, and he greeted them while Karen pumped in the van. “We’ve missed you,” he said as he carried their bags upstairs. “I didn’t think we’d see you until graduation.”

“Good thing your father was craving Hawaiian pizza that night, or we wouldn’t be here,” Jerry’s mom said.

“Good thing your mother found a coupon in the Sunday paper and had to punch the number in three times before she dialed the right place,” said Jerry’s father.

“It’s the touch screen. I wanted a flip phone with buttons, but your father never listens to me.”

“I’m glad he didn’t this time, Mom.” Jerry set down the bags in the extra bedroom and hugged his mother. She smelled fresh and flowery, just as she had every night when she tucked him in and every morning when she kissed his cheek before dropping him off at school. Jerry smiled, breathing her in.

“Put any meat on Arnie’s bones? He looked like an Ethiopian orphan in the last pictures you sent,” Jerry’s dad said. The man had grown up on a farm. Even in his mid-sixties, he filled the doorway.

“At his check-up last week, he was in the 16th percentile for height and weight. That’s almost double last year’s marks. He’s just small.”

“Don’t pay attention to your father. We’re tickled to see the boy. And you and Karen. Is she home? I didn’t see her when we walked in.”

“She’s…exercising,” said Jerry.

“It’s after midnight for us, you know, so we’ll just have to save our hellos for morning.”
“Of course, Mom. Get some sleep. Thanks for coming, Pops.” Before he left the room, he made sure both plug-in air-fresheners were on.

Later in the garage, Jerry worked on his game. The breast milk bags in the commercial-grade freezer emitted their smell, a liquid and alive scent, sweet and terrible, but he didn’t want to disturb Arnie or his parents by working inside. As he spray-painted the milk gun, he inhaled the metallic fumes. In shades of green and brown and black, the milk gun looked suitable for Prehistoric Man. “There,” he said.

While the paint dried, Jerry drew T-Rex’s monstrous body, little arms, and fierce jaw on poster-board. He rounded the tips of the scaly claws to soften the image enough for the preschoolers who might be intimidated by the animal otherwise. Once he finished coloring the dinosaur’s hide pea green, he cut around the creature and duct-taped the figure to the freezer door. He took a step back. The drawing was simple but massive. The game was ready to play. If his parents or any parents asked tomorrow, Jerry planned to tell them he had ordered a kit online for 16.99 plus shipping.

Arnie’s birthday party started thirty minutes early when Lydia, a short girl with blond pigtails and gumball eyes, arrived with her parents. Jerry still had coolers to fill with drinks and ice, balloons to inflate, and a pizza delivery at the front door to pay for. “Where’s Karen?” he grumbled as he counted bills. He really wanted to know when she would be done pumping. The unutterable question.

His parents met him in the hall. “She's in your closet,” his mother said. The four words were separate, icy bricks. Hi mom kept her arms folded over her chest. She didn't meet Jerry’s eyes.

“We followed the mechanical beat.” His father looked down the hallway, hands stuffed into his pockets.
“It's not our business, it's really not, what you and your wife do,” his mom added. Then they walked away. Jerry felt the distance between him and his parents grow in geological proportions. Dinosaurs evolved and disappeared in the widening space. Jerry stood just inside the front door and listened to the bell ring once, twice more. He smelled pepperoni and bacon. He imagined Karen on the floor next to her trunk of winter clothes, legs crossed, chest exposed, hunched and squeezing, milk gun cupped around her nipple. Perhaps a full bottle rested against her shin. How familiar the sight! But to his parents, how unsettling. How odd. They didn't know about the monthly donations. They didn't know why Arnie would be an only child. And yet knowing alone wasn't enough. In three years, Jerry had uncovered more: understanding, tolerance, and acceptance, each in its own stratum. Now, though, he realized this exploration had only led to resentment and loneliness. He had to dig elsewhere.

By the time Karen emerged from the bedroom at noon, over half the class was present. Jerry and his parents hadn't spoken since their confrontation. Boys and girls played in the backyard with bubbles and balls. They climbed the swing set and dug in the sandbox. Parents happily drank their adult beverages. “Don't you love Miss Oliver?” one mother asked. “Those earrings. I must have them!” another gushed. “Miserable golf outing this weekend. Woods, lake, trap, repeat,” a father confessed. Jerry's parents mingled but stood out because of their age and the matching Grandfather and Grandmother of the Year buttons pinned to their shirts. Jerry's father wore a camera around his neck and snapped pictures of everything – the guests, the bubbles blown across the lawn, even the empty pizza boxes. Of the six carnivore pies delivered, only two remained. Grease from the open boxes smoldered in the bright afternoon air.

The festivities were well underway, and Jerry was busy. He greeted guests and tied dangling shoe laces. He retrieved more juice boxes and napkins from the kitchen. But even as he emptied full trash cans and recycling containers, he kept an eye on Arnie. He didn't want to miss this time with
his son. The boy would only celebrate his third birthday once, and then it would be over, finished except for an extra stack of Stegosaurus plates, a vestige dug out for peanut butter sandwiches on Saturdays in the months ahead. By tomorrow the party would be part of the past, an artifact of time. By Sunday his parents would be flying over the Rockies. Someday Karen would cease to pump and store breast milk. Those activities would end. Jerry considered, while the dinosaurs roamed the earth, they couldn't have understood their existence to be a mere blip in the geological record. They wouldn't have foreseen extinction. Time passed, but the middle of things felt interminable.

The men had congregated near the coolers. Jason's dad had a foot propped on a chaise lounge, and Amanda's father fished for a Corona. Jerry watched his parents settle into lawn chairs before joining the fathers. He reached into the open cooler for a Yuengling. The icy water burned his skin. The men talked football. "How about Ohio State this year?" Jerry asked.

"This is their year," said Jake's dad, as he tipped his beer bottle towards Jerry. Jerry toasted back, thinking about this year. In a day, Karen pumped six times. In a month, 186 times. In a year's time, she would pump 2232 times. Dravidosaurus's weight in pounds.

Jerry took a long gulp. His hands were sweating, and when he brought the bottle away from his mouth, it slid out of his grip. Upon contact with concrete, the bottle cracked. Beer oozed, wetting the mottled gray surface. The liquid spread, sliding into the grass. Jerry stared. The other dads looked over, paused their quarterback comparisons. Out in the lawn, the kids didn't notice the dropped bottle. A group of girls chased after the bubbles Mary, mother of twin boys, blew through a pink wand. Three boys chased a red balloon. Jerry looked for Arnie and found him on a swing. His birthday boy hat leaned to the side, and pockets of hair stuck out. He pumped his legs, willing his swing higher. Next to him, Lydia pumped hard, too. Their four feet fought the air as their bodies rose and fell, rose and fell. Lydia's skirt flapped against the seat. The chains groaned. Jerry
heard the air breathe, its sinus rhythm of give and take, in and out. Too much pumping. He looked
down again at his spilled beer, saw a puddle of breast milk, smelled its sweetness. He stepped back,
away from the broken bottle, the mess he had made.

“Jerry?” his mother called across the yard.

“Jerry?” Karen appeared. “Take the kids to the garage. I’ll clean this up and bring your
parents around. We don’t want anyone stepping on broken glass.” Jerry nodded. He looked up at
his wife, but his eyes clung to her chest. Beneath her shirt and bra, white discs pressed against
purple, swollen nipples to prevent leaking. That’s what he saw now. That’s probably what his
parents saw now.

Jerry nodded again. He raised his arms over his head. “Boys and girls. Boys and girls,” he said.
“Do you want to play a game?” he asked, louder. Arnie and Lydia slowed their legs and
jumped from the swings. The balloon chasers raced forward, their knees brown and green, hair
matted to their foreheads. “Right this way.” Jerry urged the crowd to follow him around the side of
the house to the closed garage door. For a moment, he questioned his own creativity, the game
about to be played. A milk gun turned into a disease extractor: a silly innovation. Extinction was
permanent. Like when a baby ceases to nurse and a woman’s prolactin levels decrease. *Apoptosis*
causes the lactiferous tree to die. If a woman can’t get pregnant again, that death is permanent, too.

Arnie stood in front of Jerry. One of the boy’s boots had come unlaced, and the leather
tongue folded forward. Behind him, boys and girls bounced, and beyond them, parents toted their
drinks and held plates of creamy brie and honey-colored crackers. They munched and chatted about
an upcoming chorus concert and the harvest festival the week before Halloween. Jerry’s mom and
dad followed, arm in arm. Their buttons reflected the sun’s glare. The camera bounced against his
father’s chest with each step. Karen appeared around the side of the house. “Dad?” Arnie tugged
at Jerry’s shorts. “What’s the game, Dad?” The boy was smiling, but Jerry wanted to tell him no
game; it wasn’t a game. It was three years ago to the day and it was possibly genetic but more than likely just a fluke, a fluke that affected 1 in 2000 families and meant they couldn’t get pregnant again, couldn’t give birth, couldn’t raise another baby of their own. This was the only third birthday they would celebrate.

“Wait right here.” Jerry disappeared into the garage, then the kitchen. He filled his mouth with Tums. He crunched into the chalky discs as the garage door hummed ajar. Awash with sunlight, T-Rex smiled viciously. His teeth threatened despite the rounded edges.

But the crowd of kids didn’t notice the danger affixed to the pebbly door of the freezer. They rushed up and reached out to touch a claw, rub the green hide. “He’s bigger than me,” a boy said. Kids bobbed into each other. They vied for proximity to the carnivorous beast. Jerry gulped, his mouth and now throat and possibly his larynx full of fruity powder. He needed a drink, some water. Behind his back, he held the camo-colored milk gun.

“Line-up, young dinosaur explorers,” Jerry said. The words seemed muted by the bits of Tums adhering to the mucous membrane lining his mouth. If only he had a sip of water. Jerry bent down to his son. “Let’s pretend the dinosaurs aren’t extinct yet, at least not this one here, but he needs your help.” Arnie didn’t blink. Jerry continued, “You can save him.”

“How?” Arnie whispered. He pulled at Jerry’s elbow. “How, Dad?” The rest of the kids leaned forward. They all wanted to know, and Jerry knew he had them. They were in it with him – this place of impossibility, of extended life. What an intoxicating place to be! He knew, of course he knew, the perils of this place, but it was Arnie’s birthday, and the boy loved dinosaurs, and it was time to play a game.

“With this disease extractor!” Jerry stood up and brandished the milk gun. The crowd hushed, eyeing the spray-painted device, taking in its odd contours, the wide flange. Jerry’s dad snapped a picture, and Jerry cringed. He continued, “But you’ll be wearing a blindfold.” Again the
camera clicked. The kids reached their hands out and tried to grab the dangling tie. Jerry looked back into the huddled herd of adults. Parents squinted in the bright sun. His own parents whispered together. The camera fell from his dad's hands to hang from his neck. Karen stood with her milky arms at her sides. Her lips pressed into a red smear while her eyebrows scrunched towards the bridge of her nose. She leaned forward, as though the milk welling in her breasts had caused her center of balance to shift. But now an arm reached. Her mouth fell open.

Later Jerry would realize it was because he was staring at his wife, her dark hair washed out to a dull gray in the sunlight, her breasts like balloons slowly filling, growing heavier, denser with milk by the minute, that he didn't feel the camouflaged milk gun leave his hand. Right then, did her left breast expand? He imagined the black and gold stitches of her animal-print blouse distending to accommodate her blossoming boobs. And as he strained his eyes and questioned his observance of a phenomenon he couldn't have seen, even with a microscope, Arnie reached for Lydia and said, “Let me show you how it’s done.”

Slowly Jerry became aware of the flurry of activity around him: the fumbling and flinging of Lydia’s pink polka-dotted dress, the twin boys holding the hem high enough, gathering the crisp cotton in stretched fingers and clenched teeth. The sudden sight of Lydia’s creamy thighs confused Jerry. He saw her soft belly, rib ripples, and plank-like chest – all exposed. Arnie held the milk gun in both hands, pointed towards Lydia. He positioned the flange over her left nipple, pressed the device to her bare chest. He said something about suction requiring a tight seal.

At first, this sight and Arnie’s prattle immobilized Jerry. In the middle of the garage, the crowd of kids stood still, also mesmerized by the impromptu course on expressed breast milk and Lydia’s modeling. “Ooo, eee. Ooo, eee. Ooo, eee.” Arnie pushed in and out on the milk gun, and Lydia swayed. She reached her hands out and helped Arnie hold the device in place. Their four hands gripped the plastic funnel while twenty-four little eyes watched the bottle. Through the spray
paint, the preschoolers must have hoped to see liquid appear, a puddle grow. And beyond them, the adults stared, too. Who isn’t mystified by the creation of something new? Presto, milk!

Jerry couldn’t look at his parents. Instead he watched Karen push through the adults at the edge of the garage. Her lips dipped into a frown. “Arnie,” she called. “Arnie.”

But Arnie wasn’t listening. “My mom says breast milk is best for babies, and she has to make more milk to keep babies healthy and happy.”

Parents fell upon their children. Suzie yanked her daughter’s dress down. Mary grabbed her sons and pulled them into the garish sunlight, where she chastised their complicity in Arnie’s dangerously inappropriate demonstration. “You know better,” Jerry heard her say, and he wondered if they could have known any better how to behave in a situation involving a camouflaged milk gun. As mothers and fathers latched on to their sweet, vulnerable babies, their voices rang with consternation:

“Well, I never…”

“You should be ashamed of yourself, letting your boy carry on this way.”

I can’t believe you exposed my daughter to such behavior.”

“You’re lucky I don’t punch you right now.”

“Charlie will be scarred for life because of you.”

But Jerry wasn’t knocked out, and though he apologized again and again for the misunderstanding, parents stormed from the garage with children slung over shoulders or clutched in white-knuckle grips. Outside, Jerry’s parents stood huddled together, motionless amidst the chaos. The breeze had picked up, and leaves started to fill the air, float down to the driveway. Somewhere, a timer had gone off, and a let-down had been triggered among the trees. By next weekend, the yard would be covered with enough fallen foliage to fill dozens of trash bags. Jerry would spend hours raking and bagging. He would marvel at the number of bursting bags by the end
of October, each one twice the size of Arnie. But finally the trees, the driveway, the yard would be bare. The bags would be lined up curb-side and hauled away, and the work would be over.

Jerry heard voices from the yard and cars starting in the street. Lydia’s parents promised her ice cream, but the girl cried. She wanted pizza. She wanted cake. She wanted to swing for just a little while longer. Leaves continued to fall. Soon there would be singing. The family, the party’s sole survivors, would sing “Happy Birthday” to Arnie, and Jerry’s dad would take more pictures. Then the five of them would eat Velociraptor cake and lick butter-cream frosting from fork tongs.

“Jerry?” His parents watched him from the driveway. “What’s going on here?” his mother asked.

His father didn't say anything.

Jerry turned to the freezer. “Would you mind getting the cake out in the kitchen?” he asked. “We’ll be right there.” He didn't need a cataclysmic event or some unfamiliar pathogen, but this had to end today. The milk, the pumping, all of it. Now, even. “I have to talk to Karen.” He turned to his wife, who was kneeling in the middle of the garage with Arnie in her arms. The boy still held the milk gun. His eyes were leaking tears, and his lips trembled. Together they would figure out how to get past this point. They would evolve and thrive, the three of them. They’d start by pulling the plug.
A Fairytale, However Flawed

She waits at a red light two streets away from home, where Sproul and King Roads cross. Intersections are risky, she thinks. Just not for her. When the light turns green, she goes. Stop at red, go at green: good upstanding conduct by a responsible adult, wife, and mother. Meet Sharon Price: fifth grade classroom parent, Little Eagles swim-team mom, Associate Vice President at TechCorp. At 40, her belly is tight despite carrying three children past their due dates. She celebrates the chance to run 5-Ks for breast cancer research and premature babies, but truth be told, she prefers races that boast downhill finishes. Around her blue-green eyes, the skin has started to sag, but otherwise, her face is smooth, wrinkles barely ripples. Her long hair is Goldilocks blonde. She likes how it trembles across her back, a light and playful tickle.

It’s nearing six o’clock when she pulls into her shrub-lined driveway off Brookmont Circle. She would have been home sooner, but right at five, just as she was logging out, her boss stopped by her office and asked her to sniff tea bags. He wanted to know which smelled the most virile, but sweet, too. Daniel laid out fifteen triangular and rectangular tea-leave satchels, and Sharon pressed her nose to each at least once.

“This one,” she said and pointed to the fifth from the left.

“That’s an African Rooibos blend. A red tea.”

“Did I pick the right one?”

“An excellent choice,” he said. “Thank you.” Then he slid the bags back into his wooden tea chest and walked out.

Before she pulls into the garage, she notes two crooked wreaths, their bows bending rebelliously to one side. At the door to the kitchen, she slides her black boots off, but she doesn’t put them on the shoe rack she bought at Pottery Barn along with a matching coat rack, umbrella
stand, and key hook last March in a bout of post-partum nesting. She leaves them where they lay.
The garage door smacks the concrete floor, and the space shudders into stillness. In the cold, now
dark garage, she hesitates. Her family waits, yet she lingers as though held up by a jaywalker. When
she opens the door, she hears her family’s suburban suppertime symphony. Meet Sharon’s husband
and children: Anthony orchestrates the arrangement as he pulls plates from the cupboard. Talia, the
oldest child – all of 10 – fills glasses with crushed ice. The refrigerator rumbles, then settles into a
hum. Jacob’s at the table, bent over a notebook. His pencil moves meticulously, forming letters at a
plodding pace. At eight, he is rigid in his penmanship, his mannerisms, his ways. In the high chair,
Jonas cheerfully smacks his tray and watches yellow puree slide off his short fingers into bouncing
cheerios. Amidst the bustle, Sharon frolics. She stirs the boiling pasta, tastes the steaming sauce,
and kisses on the lips each child and her husband. As she moves, she targets her family with a flurry
of questions – “Honey, did Mr. Wharton get his prescription figured out? Talia, how was dance
practice? Spelling test, tomorrow, Jakey? Baby boy, why don’t you try eating your food?” Make
contact, conduct a survey: this is how working mothers return home each night.

After dinner, after dishes, after bath-time and teeth-brushing, Sharon reads The Velveteen
Rabbit to her scrubbed and slippered children in her bed. The older two rest their damp heads
against her thighs while their arms wave against her shins and ankles. The baby sits in Sharon’s lap
and reaches for the open pages. When the story ends, she announces, “And they all lived happily
ever after.” Sharon has to believe in the fairytale ending, and she needs her children to believe in it.
This belief bolsters her against the badness she has started to crave. Once her children are neatly
tucked into their own beds, Sharon kisses their button noses. Everyone who knows Sharon Price
knows how much she loves her adorable sandy-haired babies, eyes like raindrops.

Anthony does dinner, and she does bedtime: this is their evening arrangement. Now it’s
after nine when she joins her husband at the table. He doesn’t lift his head from a Journal of
Pharmaceutical Sciences when she sits down a glass of milk for him. She loves her husband, even though his forehead and waistline are growing, even though his dimply smiles are infrequent, and even though, at 46, he is and isn’t the man she married. This is real love. She sits across the table with the latest Ladies Home Journal and a mug of warm milk and honey. She has her share of daydreams, but not tonight. Tonight she’s satisfied with this fairytale: the mechanisms of marriage and family life in a three-story brick Tudor on the southeast corner of a cul-de-sac in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Later in bed, she’ll make love with her husband. She’ll tell him, "That was nice. Really nice.” Then she’ll fall asleep wearing an eye mask, listening to her Bose Wave Machine. Working mothers with snoring husbands require sleeping aids.

Other nights, the suburban fairytale eludes her. It’s the Tuesday before Christmas, and she wants more. Needs more. But – and this is unfortunate – not from her husband, the pharmacist who refuses to put his dirty clothes in the hamper each night. This is what she holds against him tonight when she’s rocking Jonas, her teething ten-month-old. The baby has a thumb lodged in his mouth and his head tucked against her neck, which causes hair tufts to poke her ear. But she can’t reach her itching ear with either hand because her son’s body is folded around her and she doesn’t want to disturb him, not now that his eyes are glazed and droopy. Here’s how she distracts herself: First, she considers which cookie recipe to make for the neighborhood cookie exchange – chocolate crinkles or Russian teacakes. Then she wonders what to buy for Anthony’s stocking. Socks and boxers, but what else? What else is there? Working mothers know domesticity. Sharon does – intimately. Her son’s weight presses upon her. All she smells is lavender. Her neck aches, and her left arm is asleep from the elbow down. On nights like these, she needs a distraction from her distractions. Escape. She doesn’t want a baby in her arms; she wants fingers. Unfamiliar fingers to be precise. Playful, serious fingers. Fingers in her hair. Fingers filling her. She keeps rocking. Back and forth. Back
and forth. The night stretches, opening for Sharon a breach in her banal world of work and home. Here she ponders possibilities that might, could, perhaps rock her in other ways. These thrill her.

On Christmas Eve, Sharon guides her Suburban home. Her thoughts drift again to foreign fingers and the youthful lovers to whom they belong. A honking horn brings her back to the road. Working mothers are always driving to or away from home. This time, she’s on SR-202 headed west, back from King of Prussia’s palatial mall. Despite dry roads and snow-free air, traffic is heavy. Sharon blames 7:00 church services that showcase toddler bell choirs and other eleventh-hour shopping endeavors like hers. The radio is tuned to her favorite channel for holiday music, and between Christmas songs, the deejay asks callers to air their sordid holiday romances.

“I kissed my boss at our holiday Christmas party. I was married then, and my husband was at the party, but he was drunk on eggnog and flirting with my department’s administrative assistants. The four sluts.”

“I once broke up with a woman two days before Christmas because her early present to me was a puppy from the pound.”

“I’ve made out with fifteen mall Santas. In costume.”

Two hours earlier, the kids had written their letter to Santa. “If Santa brings me a pogo stick, I’ll know he’s real,” Talia had said. Then Sharon lied and left her family watching The Grinch. She said she had to get two cans of whole-berry cranberry sauce before the stores closed. Instead she had gone to all five toy stores in the King of Prussia mall. Now the cranberry cans purchased last week roll into the Flybar 800 in the trunk, and Talia’s Christmas can be magical.

Everything in her life is under control – even her daughter’s faith in Santa – but the radio is broadcasting cabaret Christmas, so she surrenders her thoughts to her daydream. Just the possibility
of an affair consumes her. She’s in the car. She’s almost home. Working mothers are always goal-driven. Even driving time demands objectives.

The light at the end of the exit ramp turns yellow, a bright and terrible warning to slow down. This thinking, the red light now glaring in her face, the frantic rush to the closing stores to find a pogo stick, even the stupid lie about the cranberry sauce so she’d have an excuse to leave the house on Christmas Eve: all of it does something to her. Triggers something. She rolls down the window. Her seatbelt feels tight. Sharon’s Type A personality, that which informed her she could – yes, indeed – do it all, seeks conquest. She can be undone by her own undoing and still maintain the appearance of moral uprightness. Honor and shame can be hers at once, damn it. She can have an affair and not get caught and love her husband and adore her kids and cherish the life she had BEFORE but with the critical knowledge that another man touched her with his fingers and called her beautiful and fucked her. Who’s to say an adult – and Sharon Price in particular – can’t be naughty and nice?

Briefly, Sharon considers the facts: One, she lives on Philadelphia’s Mainline, where proximity to three Targets affords a certain stability. Toilet paper and Tide are always on sale. Two, she works, which means she doesn’t have time for personal training sessions or handymen named Sebastian. Instead, she has PTA meetings and neighborhood potlucks featuring deep fried turkeys, boxed wine, and at least twelve different salads with mayo-based dressings, all set-up on folding tables in the cul-de-sac. When the light turns green, Sharon pushes down on the pedal. The car jumps forward, almost into the rear bumper of a white SUV. She’s an inch or two from collision, just not the sort she fantasizes about.

When she can no longer discern the letters and numbers on the SUV’s license plate, she proceeds. The facts are disregarded in a shake of her blonde hair. What she feels acutely, menacingly now, at this precise moment in her family car when she’s almost home on Christmas
Eve of all eves, is her desire to have a desirable man fall for her despite her three children and years of sixty-hour work weeks. How flattering. Her husband doesn’t count. Anthony’s desire for her corresponds to the calendar alarm on her BlackBerry, set to repeat every ten days. And when she looks good, say for one of Talia’s dance recitals, and he tells her she’s beautiful, the words don’t count either. Repetition has killed their goosebumpy sizzle. She smiles and blushes because she knows if another man shared the same sentiment, it would mean more. And that’s mean.

Tomorrow she’ll open gifts from her husband – maybe a tennis bracelet or a new camera or another Coach purse – and she’ll say thank you. But he can’t give her what she needs, so she’ll have to play Santa again.

The Sunday after Christmas, Sharon fiddles with her hymnal during a sermon on the Need for Vision in the New Year. The spiritual message eludes her because she’s examining men in nearby pews. She takes in the ties they received as Christmas presents from their students or clients or children. And that, she thinks, is precisely the problem: these men are encumbered. They have offspring and rotund bellies and white hair and ties too short and too thin. No conquests will happen at Abiding Grace Lutheran Church of Malvern. When she shakes Pastor Dave’s hand at the end of the service, she says, “Sometimes we need to look elsewhere, don’t we?”

After Sunday School, while Anthony grills chipped ham and cheese sandwiches in the kitchen, Sharon sits at the table with the children, a ream of white paper, and pencils – both colored and standard #2. “Family activity time,” she says. “We’ll write our New Year’s resolutions and post them on the refrigerator. Our New Year’s Visions.” Jonas sits in his high chair, banging goldfish into powder. Jacob asks how to spell resolutions, and Sharon tells him, “G-O-A-L-S.” He writes bold block letters across the page. These letters, he colors in one by one. In the kitchen, the griddle sizzles. Sharon smells the rolls Anthony now breaks open. Already, Talia is on number twelve:
Learn how to play the harmonica. Sharon’s one resolution looms unwritten but out there, alive. It’s a loophole thrown into the carefully cross-stitched monotony of her working-mom life. She chews on her pencil’s eraser.

“Mommy, why aren’t you writing anything?” Jacob asks as he turns the L a deep blue. Sharon considers for a moment and then writes on a blank sheet, Kiss Jacob, Talia, and Jonas more.

“There.” She holds up her one-item list. Jacob smiles, reading the words. Talia, too, looks up.

“That’s so boring,” Talia says. Sharon knows. This she knows well.

Jacob says, “You forgot Daddy. He needs more kisses, too.” Her son continues to color.

Had she?

“Lunchtime,” Anthony says. He carries the steaming sandwiches to the table. Had she?

“We’ll finish our lists later.”

In the morning, the kids eat toasted waffles, Sharon pours too much milk into her oatmeal, Anthony folds napkins into origami shapes for lunches, and the forgotten lists are still on the refrigerator beneath a #1 Mom magnet.

And then it’s later, a Wednesday night two weeks into the New Year, and Sharon is striving to seek satisfaction elsewhere. She, Jacob, and Talia are at the grocery store. The aisles are congested because it’s dinner time and weekend snowfall is expected. While comparing unit prices for peanut butter brands, Sharon cases the men around her. Could it be the doctor in scrubs, piling rice cakes into his cart? Could he be the one who will take her for a romantic retreat to the quaint bed n’ breakfast in Lancaster, the one with the wrought iron gate and the wide white porch, the one she’s only seen from the street? She imagines more pillows than those pictured in an entire Pottery Barn catalogue. Or maybe they will jaunt over to the Motel Six by Brandywine Regional Airport and rent
a room for a couple of hours, a Spartan wood-paneled room with a frugal twin bed outfitted in floral polyester. Either scenario will do. But then she sees another man – younger, leaner, jeans-clad. He’s inspecting bread brands. She watches him jab a finger into a hearty oat loaf. A pair of trendy, thick-rimmed glasses rest in his spiky, highlighted hair. His face is smooth. She pushes her cart closer though she still has two loaves of whole grain white frozen at home. Proximity creates opportunities. She parks close and pulls down a pack of hot dog buns. She can smell the lemons bagged beside a carton of Omega-3-enriched eggs in his cart.

She hears, “Mom, Talia and I can’t find the beans.” The man chooses sliced 7-grain and lays the loaf on top of the eggs. Neither hand bears a ring. When he turns to glance at Sharon and her bean-less son, a crooked half-smile brightens his face. But Jacob is tugging at her long coat, and she’s squeezing buns in her fists. As the man maneuvers past, he steps close to avoid another middle-aged woman, her children, and cart. Sharon feels his coat rub against hers, a gentle pressure along her hip.

Silently, she counts to five and turns to her son. “Great northern,” she sighs. She puts the scrunched buns back on the shelf and lifts him into the cart. “Hang on. We’ll go together.” She leans into the cart and pushes hard. Yes, she’s giving chase. Yes, she’s pursuing. At the end of the aisle, she steers to turn, but she’s looking for spiky hair and sniffing for lemon. She cuts the corner close and fast. A man with sideburns in a red mock turtleneck turns into the aisle just as she’s rounding out. She doesn’t see him or the orange two-liters he carries in a hand-held basket, and he probably expected her to turn out of his way seconds ago. Instead, they collide. She feels the cart shudder as it strikes the basket before she sees the man bounce back a few feet and reach forward to save his carbonated cargo before it topples out. But the four bottles are beyond his fingertips and he’s off-balance, and Jake, who had been stretching for his favorite salty snack at the moment of collision, is off-balance, too. The pop bottles hit the ground. One fizzles into a bright
sizzling spray while the remaining three roll hither and thither. Then Sharon hears a thud and the simultaneous inhalation of six or seven shoppers in the immediate vicinity. Jake is a green winter coat puddle on the floor, surrounded by prone Pringles canisters and a bag of Bugles. The busted two-liter bottle still spews soda, and the man’s mock turtleneck and Jacob’s bright jacket drip orange. Her son starts to move and cry, but Sharon only registers the child’s actions peripherally because she’s wondering if the man with the styled hair will return to the commotion. Maybe this mess is necessary to procure a phone number scrawled across a Kellogg’s coupon? Now the man in front of her wipes his sticky shirt and mumbles something about women and driving, and meanwhile Jake holds his head and looks at her. He’s sobbing. Sharon sees an angry knot on his otherwise white forehead and from it soda flows, but it’s a deeper shade of orange. And that’s when Sharon realizes it’s not soda issuing forth from her son’s forehead: the sticky liquid he’s wiping out of his eyes and into his hair is vital bodily fluid.

Red. It’s all she can see. She pushes the cart out of the way and reaches for her son. He’s shaking and scared and she’s scared because there’s a lot of blood dripping into the orange soda slick she’s crouched in. She tries not to cry as she picks Jake up and cradles him in her arms. Someone hands her a glove, and she pushes the fleece fabric against her son’s bleeding forehead. Sure, she’s crying. And yes, she’s cooing, “It’s okay, baby. It’s going to be okay.” She treads carefully on the wet tile, navigating the three shaken but otherwise perfectly purchasable bottles of soda and the chip cans her son had taken down as he tumbled out of the cart, headfirst into the bottom shelf’s sharp lip. The gathered crowd watches. Among them, she doesn’t see the man with the grainy bread and wrinkle-free face. An employee in a stained apron approaches with a mop bucket and offers Sharon a first-aid kit. Mock turtleneck man asks if he should call an ambulance, and Sharon shakes her head. She says, “It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.” She leaves her
cart. She flees the scene. Talia is no longer waiting by the sweet corn and succotash; instead she’s in a check-out line, three cans of chickpeas against her purple coat.

“I’ve been waiting,” she says. Her pre-pubescent tone, pitched to register annoyance, doesn’t grate Sharon at all. In fact, she’s grateful for the irked voice because it’s so normal and expected and exactly as it should be, which is not the case with Jake, who’s going to need stitches and be kept awake all night because of the concussion he is diagnosed with at the emergency room, where Anthony meets them with Jonas fifteen minutes after Sharon pulls out of the parking lot with one hand on the wheel and the other stretched into the back seat to keep blood-staunching pressure against her son’s sliced skin. Sharon stays awake with Jacob because every time she closes her eyes she sees red and smells lemons and tastes the upsetting corn syrupy sweetness of orange soda.

When she tries again, she doesn’t involve her children. That had been a mistake. In February, she stops at the bank twice a week, just when she knows Sal will be at his window. Meet Sal the Stud: dark Italian skin, dark hair, dark eyes. No ring on any finger. Wears a simple gold stone. She observes and checks her balances. She leans in and deposits a refund from the electric company. She asks questions and withdraws enough small bills to pay the cleaning woman this month. After two weeks, she feels their relationship accrue interest. She applies strawberry lip gloss before she walks in, and she’s glad to have discovered underwire and Spanx body-enhancing technology.

On Valentines’ Day, her husband brings home a bouquet of flowers. It’s not from the grocery store. There’s no flower food packet rubber-banded to the stems. Anthony designed the arrangement himself at the Flower Pot Boutique: Asiatic lilies, gerbera daisies, and roses. The freshly-cut stems are wrapped in silky red tissue paper. But the burst of blossoms, even for boutique-bought flowers,
is ephemeral. By the week’s end, petals will litter the countertop; in ten days, she’ll have to throw out the browning carcasses.

Back at the bank, Sal can’t stop talking about his girlfriend. Sharon doesn’t get the hint until March 5th when she’s there – a stunning Italian woman in a denim mini-skirt, a white halter top, and red stilettos. Of course she’s the sort of woman who turns a photography pastime into a blog-based business. Spanx would never fit between her skirt and backside. Damn misinterpreted innuendos. Damn stunning Italian women. Sharon takes a business card when one is offered, though, and promises to call or email Sophia about a summer photo session for the kids. “Check out my galleries online,” Sophia says. “You won’t be disappointed.” But Sophia’s wrong, and when Sharon gets home, she throws away the card with the day’s mail, three insurance company mailers and an invitation to a mattress sales event.

Sharon has the Share Point Technology Conference to attend in San Francisco mid-March. Daniel was supposed to go with her, but he contracted the flu. Sharon considers his spiking temperatures and need for intravenous fluids fortuitous. Now she’ll be alone in a city of strange men. Oh, the prospects! Oh, what luck!

Before she leaves for the airport, she tells her family, “I don’t know how to say goodbye.” She hugs them. She holds them tight. She can’t wait to get away.

Later at the gate, she hands her ticket to the attendant. On her outstretched hand, she sees her wedding band, a simple white gold ring with three in-laid diamonds, each a sugar grain. Would it be wrong to take the ring off? Fingers swell on business trips all the time, something about the altitude change or cabin pressure or jet lag. “Ma’am?” The attendant hands her ticket back. “You’re all set.”
She coaxes her carry-on into a roll as she heads down the ramp. It’s a cheap trick, she
decides – the disappearing wedding ring – and she’s Sharon Price, baker of Christmas cookies for
her children’s teachers. But maybe someone interesting will sit down in 14C, next to her. By
interesting, she means attractive male, aged 19-35, with or without an accent, definitely with hair,
preferably dark hair. Instead, a woman in plaid plops down and pulls out a Sudoku book. Sharon
dons her sleep mask. Her fingers remain swell-free.

The first day passes. In the afternoon, she spoke with an older gentleman in a corduroy coat
the color of creamed corn about a presenter’s misuse of modifiers. Then she told a young man,
probably in his twenties despite his shadowy facial hair, his shoes were untied. God, she felt old.
Now she eats dinner alone in her room. “Where’s my Prince Charming?” she asks the mirrored
closet door. She considers calling Daniel to see how he’s feeling. She should call Anthony to check
in, something like a post-it note reminder of her vows and good moral fiber. But she, recycler of
plastic sandwich bags and foil, recognizes the golden opportunity this weekend away affords. It’s go
time.

Sharon enters the hotel lounge. Tonight she desperately desires a glass of bitterly urbane,
heart-healthy, mind-numbing merlot. She loves a beverage that can multi-task. When the bartender
sets her glass down, he says, “SPTechCon.” He adds, “Sounds complicated, Sharon Price from
West Chester, PA.” She groans into her glass and looks down to see her name badge lying against
her blouse.

“Hehence the wine.” She takes a big gulp, then another. She starts to feel breathless. Beneath
the name tag, she pops open a blouse button. Her glass is soon empty.

The bartender pours her a refill. “This one’s on me. Looks like you need it.” She’s titillated
by the deepening crimson pool in her glass. Is he flirting? Would he tend to her non-alcoholic but
equally intoxicating needs? At the far end of the bar, two men in dark suits and brightly striped ties
perch. The bartender raises his towel to Sharon and wanders away. She sits back and crosses her legs, glad she picked the shorter pencil skirt despite San Francisco’s blustery chill and the scratchiness of her tights. The men look over at her, and the one palming a BlackBerry smiles. She senses this moment’s potential. A pivotal crossroad. With a finger, she traces the rim of her glass. Her options abound: she could lose her wedding ring and slide down the bar; blush, finish her merlot in a single swallow and run away; fake a phone call to her husband to seem occupied; call her husband to actually be occupied; smile back and wait for the men to make the next move; join them for another drink or two, flirt a lot, possibly wind up in a white oxford shirt in a disheveled bed with disheveled hair and know exactly how it happens; or, ponder the moment enough to miss it entirely, as the two men take their beers and head over to a high table surrounded by saccharine-scented women in patterned peep-toe pumps, their cleavage in no way concealed by nametags.

Sharon takes another sip of wine, hoping to resurrect a buzz, but it’s lost, ruminated away. So she does what she thinks any other middle-aged mother of three seriously contemplating adultery on a business trip would do. “Bartender,” she calls. She holds up her half-full glass of wine. “I need a real drink.” He nods to her, and she downs what remains in two mouth-filling swallows. The buzz returns. The bartender smiles and brings her a red apple martini, and she wants to pull out her phone and take a picture of his smile, to capture how it warms his face and makes his eyes squint. His squinting eyes remind Sharon of Jonas, a comparison she tries not to consider just now, so she pretends to share her room number for reasons beyond opening a tab. This internalized artifice distracts her from the reminder of motherliness that encroaches even here, at a bar far, far away from her happily ever after. She pulls the nametag over her head and shrugs out of her suit jacket. If she opens another button on her blouse, she might expose her bra, but her armpits tingle and the back of her neck burns like a broiling toaster oven. She pops the button. The bar teems with professional men and women. The gathered conglomeration creates a din of laughter and
stories, and below the surface slinks the steady steam of seduction. As the volume and vapors rise, the lights dim. Suitors swarm in the artificial twilight. Sharon can smell pomade, starched shirts, and aftershave. One minute her glass is full, and then it’s not. Another martini, and she’ll join the two men across the lounge. The bartender stares at her.

Sharon says, “One more red appletini, please.”

“Really?” He shakes and pours a frugal refill.

“Really,” she repeats, but now she’s thinking about Jonas and his squinting-eye smile and Talia’s hair woven into braids and Jake’s Friday constipation before spelling tests. It’s the poisoned apple. She’s stares at her glass, which looks like two glasses, and when her hand stretches for the stems, she sees her wedding ring, which looks like two wedding rings. She pulls out her phone to call home. Above the bar’s raucous discourse, the ringing is barely audible. Anthony doesn’t answer though she calls three times.

She’s ready to leave, but then hears, “This seat isn’t taken, is it?” She turns, looks. The man standing there wears his own SPTechCon nametag over a pink pinstriped shirt and navy sportcoat. His eyes are bright, shining beacons amidst a tan and scruffy face.

“It is now,” she tells Barry from Atlanta, patting the empty barstool. Sharon drops her phone into her purse and picks up her martini glass. Coast downhill and breathe.

At last call, Sharon and Barry leave the lounge together. Both have East Coast families. Both work for technology firms that operate in six-story buildings. Neither likes sourdough bread. Neither has stayed at a bar until last call before tonight. All of this is reassuringly positive. Fate’s green light. In the elevator bay, where they wait with a couple touting luggage and travel-weary expressions, Barry plays with the nametag again around Sharon’s neck. That’s when she realizes the time difference meant her husband and children were asleep when she called earlier.
Cue the elevator’s arrival. The two couples cross the threshold into the confined space. The travelers push seven, Barry pushes five, and Sharon hesitates. Should she push four, since that’s her floor? Does he want her to join him? They can’t talk about this because of the other occupants, and she doesn’t know the protocol. The elevator starts to slide upward, and Sharon feels like she’s sinking. She pushes four and establishes her own rules: if he follows her, she’ll stake her adulterous deed on Barry and his pink pinstripes. The elevator reaches four. She darts her eyes in his direction and steps off. The fear of eye contact’s excruciating awkwardness prevents her from glancing back. She pauses a beat, then turns slowly right. As she walks, she thinks, “This could be it.” She hopes, “This could be it.”

In the morning, Sharon’s head throbs with red hot pain. She’s alone among the satiny sheets of her king-sized bed. No Barry. No sheet stains. No sex smell to shower away. No sordid romance to replay endlessly on the flight home. She should have stayed on the damn elevator: that had been the mistake. Next time she’ll go like hell and get it right.

In mid-April, Sharon gets technical. That’s what she does all day and does well, so well she received a promotion to VP of Product Management last week. Now she’s in a square office with a window box full of artificial ivy.

Days after settling into her new desk, Sharon uses her superior Excel skills for personal gain. She pulls a company roster and creates a new spreadsheet. She cleans out her inbox, drafts a memo, then rates all 37 males in the company on a scale of one to twenty-one according to seven virtues, each worth up to three points: Penchant for Pursuing an Affair, Resistance to Baldness, Lack of Offspring, Tone of Abdomen, Capacity for Discretion, Ability to Share, and Zest. Under the desk, her pumps lay toppled, and she digs her bare toes into the soft saxony. Tim O’Neal earns a 12. Justin Frank: 16. She asks administrative assistant Anna to hold her calls. At first, she doesn’t
include Daniel because he’s her boss, but as the crunched numbers dip into single digits, she evaluates him anyway. Last month in the workroom, he mused over his mug, “I don’t really enjoy drinking tea. I burn my tongue and I over-steep.”

Sharon turned from the copier. “But you always drink tea. You keep a tea chest on your desk.”

He said, “Sometimes brewing gets complicated.” On his way out, he stopped just behind Sharon. His tea smelled like cinnamon. Together they watched the machine churn out collated copies. When the print job ended, Sharon reached for the stack and Daniel headed into the hallway.

He scores a respectable 18. Right before her lunch break, she calculates Jeremy Jenkins’s score. Jenkins rides a motorcycle and greets her by name in the elevator. She has a winner at 20.5 points. Then she remembers the HR email sent last week, which announced Jeremy’s termination pending an investigation into office supply misuse. Daniel came in second, but he is, well, her boss.

On the way home, she keeps her window down. The outside air reminds her of an early date Anthony had planned: a riverbank picnic to celebrate their last set of exams. Cherry blossoms and snow from the close, fast-moving water had saturated the breeze. They had been seniors at Georgetown. Their lives had been unburdened, their love exhaustive. Sharon wonders if they would recognize in each other the lovers they once had been. But that’s the story of all marriages—the good, the bad, the bored, the broken. She rolls up the window, shivering. Beyond the windshield, the road stretches, filled with cars, lined with strip malls, punctuated with traffic lights, all green now. She hopes they will stay this way, long enough for her to reach the intersection where she will turn for home, but even as she wishes for smooth, fast passage, the far light turns yellow, then red. Brake lights fill the lane.
In May, TechCorp prepares for its annual audit, and Sharon’s in Daniel’s office Monday morning. She hasn’t even stashed her purse yet. Daniel asks her to work late this entire week, so they will be ready for the audit team’s arrival June 1st. That’s fine with her because she’s failing at an affair and can barely remember what Barry from the bar smelled like. Mint? Forget an email address or rendezvous; she’d settle for a wink or a lingering look. It’s not like she’s not trying. She’s probably reading too much into everything about the men around her – their pant wrinkles, their phone grips. Now she doesn’t know which is worse – four consecutive nights of processed meat and Dr. Seuss or five months of unsuccessfully seeking an affair? Domesticity versus desperation. She says yes to Daniel.

But when he replies, “It’ll just be us tonight. I hope that’s okay. We’ll keep it simple,” she nods, and a new understanding dawns. She knows this code.

That he’s her boss no longer matters. She’s desperate, and he earned 18 points. She cross-checks her initial calculation with a visual assessment: pressed pants, right-side dimple, double cowlick. From the mug on his desk, a tea-bag string hangs. That Celestial Seasonings label matters. She smells sweet virility and meets her boss’s eyes. “I can do simple,” she says.

“Tonight then,” Daniel says.

She saunters to the door and lets her hips sway. She needs to call Anthony to let him know she’ll miss family dinner and Jake’s baseball game and baths and most of bedtime.

In her office, she stares at a blank spreadsheet until Anna calls with a client holding on line one. When her fingers reach for the phone, she takes a last look at her wedding ring and its measly stones before she stashes it in her paperclip caddy.

By 7:00, even the most diligent employees are gone. Sharon relishes a wicked sensation as she peers into the conference room. Along three walls, windows look out on different streets. Observe the
conference table layout: take-out, chopsticks, soy sauce packets, and fortune cookies scattered at one end; file boxes, two open laptops, and Daniel at the other. She appreciates that his pretenses are thorough. The room is air-conditioned. The overhead lights are off. As the sun sets beyond the west windows, shadows fling themselves across the table, the food, the folders. Darkness crawls from beneath the furniture and climbs the trunks of the potted plants in each corner of the room. Between the chilled air falling from the vents and the dying day, the room is cool. Then Daniel looks up at Sharon, who’s waiting for a green light to enter. His glance cancels the chill, warms her splendidly.

“Good,” he says. “You’re here.” Daniel stands, and she itemizes his appearance. His tie is off, draped over a chair, and his dress shirt is untucked and unbuttoned, revealing a white undershirt. Casual dress is dangerous in the workplace, especially coupled with the lack of humming artificial light. In a room filled with dark furniture at this evening hour, his undershirt gleams. He seems so accessible. Through the cotton, she can almost discern the indent of his belly button. But she’s in her heels, her suit jacket drawn together with hook clasps. She’s still in the doorway. What kind of vibe is she giving off? She wants to get this right, but she doesn’t know the keystrokes.

Daniel is watching her as he walks around the table, so she releases the clip holding back her hair. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your long hair. This is a good move, efficient and effective.

“Please,” he says. It’s a breathless, pleading request. “Get comfortable, okay? We’re the only two here.” His words summon her. She enters the room.

“The only two. I like that.” She doesn’t recognize her voice. She reaches down to take her shoes off, but her fingers fumble with the thin ankle straps. Hair falls across her face. Blood pools in her cheeks. When she stands up – her footwear arranged neatly before her – Daniel is at her back. His hands rest on her shoulders.
“How are you?” he asks. Closeness is dangerous – proximity, proximity, proximity. Sharon feels a goose-bumpy weight affixed to this moment in the heaviness of his fingertips. Daniel is too close and they are too alone and the implications of his nearness and their isolation are about to morph into actions that have up to this point only inhabited her mind and mostly when she’s driving in her car-seat-compatible car on roads with traffic signals that clearly denote stop and go and decide for her which action is appropriate when. She’s on the brink of behaving badly. With the overhead lights off and night falling, the conference room is set to gray scale, and Sharon Price – supermom and moral compass for friends and family – is about to slide outside the margins.

"How am I?” she repeats, feet bare in the plush carpet. Her affair is finally happening. With her boss. Sharon Price: spreadsheet queen and now bombshell diva for TechCorp. God, yes. She continues, “I’m scared I’m going to mess this up.”

Daniel says, “Messy is good,” and she wonders at the warm words that tickle her ear. He reaches around her. His fingers release her jacket clasps. The fabric falls freely at her sides. With a wrist snap, her coat is a navy heap next to her heels. Daniel still stands behind her. He’s so close she should be able to smell him over the take-out food. His nose presses against her neck, and he cups a hand under her right elbow. “I’m glad you’re here,” he says. These words, spoken into the artery pounding in her neck, are a murmur. They don’t matter. It’s the context. It’s the proximity. It’s the closeness. But the entire room smells like garlic and ginger, and on the table in front of her lie two fortune cookies. One is cracked and crumbly. She can taste its cardboardy sweetness. Once, Talia’s cookie had three fortune strips tucked inside. Her daughter, her benevolent and honorable princess, gave one to Jake and one to Jonas.

“Wait,” she says. But when she spins to face Daniel, he kisses her. And for a second, she lets the kiss happen because it is happening and she’s confused. His tongue slides along her teeth. His fingers tangle her hair. Her head hurts. Pleasure and pain blur. Her eyes are closed. She sees
red. She pulls away. Stop red. It throbs beneath the pulsing vein in her neck, deeper than the washing-machine whirring of her heart. She aches. Her gut feels heavy. But Daniel reaches again, and his hands slide down her back. She feels his fingers dig into her skin. His teeth graze her left ear. The touch is intimate, but it’s more than that. It’s more than she can handle. She pushes against Daniel’s chest. Her breathing is thick, as dense as the shadows condensing in the corners. Her boss stares. His shirt glows in the heavy darkness.

"Stop," she says. And then she’s on the run. She grabs her jacket but leaves her heels behind. Glass slippers left at a ball. Maybe Daniel will place them discreetly in her office. She hears him call her name twice. Already she’s at the elevator. She can’t wait for the door to open, so she takes the stairs. When she leaps to the landing between the third and second floors, the seam running up her pencil skirt pops, but she doesn’t slow down. Through the lobby, through the parking lot, she races. She reaches her SUV, its backseat littered with crayon pieces and lollipop wrappers. She can still make it home in time to help Talia with her homework. She’s missed Jacob’s baseball game, but there will be more games this summer, a dozen more.

On Paoli Pike, Sharon drives too fast. Her daydream a pile of straw, a pile of sticks, she wants only to return to her home, mortared with monotony. She keeps the windows up, the radio off. Both hands grip the wheel, and her bare foot presses on the gas, hard enough that she feels the pedal’s grooves imprint. When she gets home, she’ll show Jake and Talia her patterned skin, and they’ll trace the pathways with thin fingers. When Anthony asks about her heels, she’ll tell him, "I’m sorry about tonight," though he will think she’s referring to the missed baseball game, the missing shoes. She makes a left turn, and she’s almost there.

The light, two streets away from home where Sproul and King cross, is red as she approaches, but she doesn’t let up on the gas. She thinks of the baby she hasn’t held tonight. She thinks of her husband pressed against her in the night, their tandem heartbeats. His fingers will
comb her hair. The windshield is awash in rich merlot. Yes, she runs the red light. Yes, she
swerves to miss the sedan with the right-of-way. But she makes it through the intersection. Sharon
Price, an almost adulteress, will not pay for her transgressions by perishing in a car accident or killing
another driver. That’s not the way to end a fairy tale, however flawed.

At home, it’s bath time. She hears water shut off. Then a splash, a giggle, another splash.
Anthony’s voice is muffled, but still she senses its mirth. The tiled floor is cold and hard. Sharon
treads forward, but she’s wading through water. A moat of shame. In the kitchen, the dishwasher
rumbles oppressively. The murmurings of her family seem far away. Far, far away and once upon a
time. Though little steam slips from the sliver of space between the floor and the bathroom door,
the air is heavy. She stands there, at the bathroom door, about to join the sudsy scene. When she
enters, she will ask a feverish flurry of questions. How many runs did Jake score? Did they go out
for ice cream afterwards? What story should Sharon read tonight? Can they see the stain on her
lips? The handprints on her back? She reaches for the door knob. A chill climbs her shins, her
calves, holds her there.

This is what she can’t see: in the bathtub, her children play with colored foam shapes. Their
eyes squint with smiles. Splashes drip from their lashes. Anthony rubs their blonde heads with
shampoo until all three wear foamy white hats. Between Sharon and her family stands a dungeon
door, wide and dark.