

Fitter, Happier, More Productive

My husband hated the beanbag chair but I loved it. Normally we were in synch about most everything. But this piece's sloppy bulk offended his preference for right angles and rationality. The black vinyl behemoth covered a significant portion of the living room floor and aesthetically overshadowed the much nicer leather couch next to it. It was not utilitarian. It was hard to get into, hard to get out of, a space-hog only big enough for one person at a time. You couldn't even have sex in it, not that we'd tried, but it clearly failed the thought experiment.

Let's keep it until we need the space for baby stuff, okay?

Patrick rolled his eyes but relented. He couldn't understand why, but I genuinely adored this absurd piece of sixties flower-power kitsch. I loved dropping down into it and immobilizing myself there, an awkward surrender. In that chair it was almost impossible to do anything but sit and stare at the walls, like the daydreaming teenager I once was. I was 33 years old, a working professional, all grown up, responsible, paying my bills and taxes on time. Newly married, preparing to get pregnant soon. But I wasn't ready to let go of this emblem of indolent youth.

For his birthday I got Patrick a CD, Radiohead's OK COMPUTER. Its strange, mournful hit single, "Karma Police," had blanketed the airwaves for months. The album was on many critics' top-ten lists the previous year. That evening we listened to it together over the chocolate layer cake I'd made. It was an oddly uncomfortable experience: a wall of distorted guitar sounds and spooky electronic noises; weirdly elongated vocal phrases from a whiny singer; no obvious lyrical hooks. You almost couldn't tell when one track ended and another began. The disc still spinning, we sat across from each other at the cheap laminated kitchen table Patrick had owned

since his graduate school days. I watched his face grow distracted. He picked up that morning's newspaper and started doing the crossword puzzle. A shadow of disappointment fell across my heart.

I was working from home in those days, doing freelance journalism and arts criticism, just starting out as a columnist for the alt-weekly Baltimore CityPaper—we had moved down to Maryland a few years back—while struggling with an attempted first novel. I was great with external deadlines but on my own project I was neurotic, unfocused, semi-blocked. At some point I had given up any conscious dreams of divahood. It would be too easy to say my parents had discouraged me. Maybe their ongoing belittlement had gotten under my skin. Maybe it had never been that deep a passion. Somehow I had lost my fire, or at least I had transferred it to new aspirations. I was a *writer* and the fact that I got paid to be a *writer* was a source of enormous pride. I could go into a bookstore and pick up a copy of Poets & Writers or Time Out New York, point to my byline and say to a bewildered passing stranger: *HEY THIS IS ME*. Music was no longer central to my identity. Other than the local alternative rock radio station in my car, and some classical tracks on my Walkman when I went running, I didn't listen often. I briefly joined a local community college choir just to remind myself what it felt like to be on stage engulfed in pleasing sounds with other humans. It was a mildly enjoyable hobby.

The day after Patrick's birthday, I avoided my unfinished book and paying assignments, instead surrendering to the black beanbag chair to give OK COMPUTER another listen, first track to last, several times in a row. Again the next day. For an entire week I listened. Brooding over the dark lyrics, memorizing each guitar lick and percussion pattern and change of sonic texture. What had seemed a mass of weird, undifferentiated sounds now began to crystallize into

distinct choruses and verses, cool syncopations, compelling polyrhythms. There were enigmas here in the soundscape that I couldn't unravel—I knew nothing about modern digital production methods—and I clung to them the way mystics cling to the non-reducible irrational aspects of a religion. Worshipfully I held the CD booklet in my fingertips, trying to parse its strange pencil drawings. Within two days I knew all the lyrics by heart. Thom Yorke's voice no longer seemed whiny. Instead it was painfully beautiful, a striking display of male vulnerability piercing through the guitar heroics. I loved his falsetto passages and drawn-out phrases that stretched way beyond normal conversational rhythms. The themes were adolescent prog-rock clichés: alienation, violence, paranoia, disaffection, disillusionment. I was vaguely embarrassed by these earnest ironies but also in love with them. A contempt for bourgeois family values laced through the entire project. One track featured a synthetic robot voice drolly listing the hallmarks of suburban achievement: regular exercise, smiling babies, safe cars, workplace contentment. I loved this non-song of a song, but what business did I have attaching myself to the bitter, depressed musings of some unkempt British boys? I should have been compiling a baby-brain-enhancing mix tape of Mozart, Beethoven, and Windham Hill to play in the delivery room.

I had liked so many things right away about Pat, his low-key wit and slender Irish face, his no-bullshit New Yorker attitude. We'd been at Columbia together, he in the engineering class of 1987, although we only met for the first time at a party hosted by a mutual friend six years later. Our first date was a hike up Breakneck Ridge in Dutchess County. On our way up the steep rock scrambles I said *Is this some kind of a girlfriend test? Will I have to rappel?* He and I developed shtick almost instantly. He was very funny but not in the unsettling way of an insecure guy who's

desperate to score laughs. He had an edge, a sharpness befitting the son of a cop, the nephew of firefighters and electricians.

Once when we were basking in our deep and sudden happiness Patrick asked me, *Why do you think we get along so well?*

I said, *Maybe it's because both our peoples were oppressed by the British.*

It was a joke but not entirely. I grew up with much more money, but Patrick's blue collar roots and my immigrant origins were equidistant from the powerful privileged center of things. Whatever the reason, he and I were inseparable, immediately. There was a whirlwind romance, a few beach and European vacations, some unspoken yet obvious seriousness of intent. (*He's a keeper!* was what all my friends were saying, because they'd met the several emotional grifters who'd preceded him.) Everything seemed easy. We were both children of divorce so we didn't rush it. Step by step. Low-key wedding, homeownership, then a plan about a baby.

But now I was having belated doubts. We'd have sex without birth control and half an hour later I'd feel unaccountably compelled to start a conversation this way: *Don't you think the world is overcrowded enough already? Aren't we headed for environmental disaster at some point?*

It was so unfair of me to press such concerns at this late date, but Pat, ever the engineer, had already thought it all through. *I figure it's okay if we have just two children, as replacement people for ourselves. A wash, in terms of impact.*

Even so, I'd say, maybe one child would be enough.

Put all our eggs in one basket? Nah, I think we should go with the old rule of thumb, an heir and a spare.

I'd tell him to be serious.

PF: *Okay, look, I just think it's nice to have siblings. Your sister's very important to you right?*

SA: *Yeah but you barely even see your brothers.*

PF: *It's still good to know they're there.*

SA: *Two kids means it's even more time I'm doing mommy stuff and can't focus on my goals, though.*

PF: *So you would put your own goals ahead of your child's happiness?*

SA: *Come on, I'm being realistic! I want children but I don't want to end up feeling overburdened and resentful.*

PF: *You seem to forget that you will love your children and happily make sacrifices for them. We both will.*

SA: [silent]

SA: [considering]

SA: *But do we really want to contribute more people to this world full of assholes?*

PF: *Yeah, people generally suck, but the exceptions are great, and I see no reason why you and I won't be able to raise a couple of exceptional people.*

I'd take a deep breath in, infected by his natural optimism. Doubts lingered. I'd glance at the [New York Times](#) obituary pages, the write-ups of the people who had done important and noteworthy stuff, and my eyes would glaze over to see *man, man, man, man, man, oh a woman! man, man, man, man....* (Only as late as 2018 would the [Times](#) staff admit in print that they had consistently overlooked females of great accomplishments, due to nothing more than sexist

blindness. I didn't know this back then; I assumed I was seeing a more or less accurate picture of human accomplishment. Silly me.)

SA: *Patrick, your life is going to change a lot less than mine. Your momentum will not be interrupted like mine will. Can you just admit that?*

PF: *BOTH our lives are going to change dramatically! And your ambitions might change, too!*

SA: *See? You can't even admit it. You can't admit my life will be the one taking the blow. You're still going to go to work every day, right? You'll still have an income, a serious job. It has to be you, right? Since you're the only one earning any real money?*

PF: *Sandy. Listen. As long as you can tolerate a somewhat traditional situation, we'll be fine. Even if you stop freelancing and just focus on your novel, we can probably afford daycare a couple days a week so you can write.*

SA: [silent]

SA: [considering]

SA: *Well, I guess that's a pretty good deal.*

PF: *That's what I'm saying.*

SA: *I'm being ridiculous.*

PF: *I didn't say that.*

My mother would call, reminding me of the insanity out of which I'd just barely emerged alive.

Patrick is going skiing without you? Why haven't you learned how to ski yet? You must learn how to ski. Are there other women going on this group ski trip with him and his friends? Oh no no no

no you have to learn, you HAVE to go with him on his ski trip.

Mom, Patrick is not going to leave me for a ski bunny.

Hmph.

Or else she'd call and say, *Sandhya! I had a terrible dream last night, I dreamed that someone in Maryland came and killed you for all your money!* This was just bonkers. I wasted too many precious life minutes trying to make sense of it. It had been well established that I personally had no amount of money that could possibly be called "all your money." I figured my mother was projecting her own fears, money paranoia, maybe even genuine Christian guilt for being a poor girl who'd become wealthy. But everything she said and did seemed designed to undermine my confidence, my resolve, my interior safety. I'd hang up and there it would be again: the pit, the stinking oily pit, the blackness in front of my eyes, the dark nothingness, the palpable fear that I'd never be truly happy or stable as long as she was alive and pouring this poison into my ear.

Pat would come home from work; I'd tell him what had happened and start crying again. He'd sit with his arms wrapped around me, kiss me on the forehead. I'd be restored to myself. I had a simpatico human sharing my days and nights, serving as a counterweight to mother-induced depression. Later on we'd poke gentle fun at me. I'd put my half-curved hands up by eyes and wiggle my fingers around to pantomime tears. He'd say *Waaaaaah!* We'd both laugh.

I was the crier, the feeler. Pat was our house optimist and problem-solver. I had long ago stopped believing in the myth of inevitable progress, the world-historical hopefulness that had buoyed my early teen years. Maybe it was it the first Iraq war, which I had watched on CNN, appalled at the news anchors actively romanticizing deadly missile launches over Baghdad.

Maybe it was the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings: heartening for all the brilliant black female lawyers, professors, and government managers testifying on her behalf—self-labeled Rockefeller Republicans in short hair cuts and horn-rimmed glasses—yet deeply demoralizing for the way Hill was bullied by the old white male Senators and labeled crazy by the rightwing press. Maybe it was just the cumulative effect of growing up and seeing the continued evidence of misogyny and patriarchal discrimination, anti-black racial violence, gay persecution, ongoing ethnic, religious, and tribal conflicts around the globe.

SA: *There is so much pain and suffering everywhere. Do we really want to actively force a new being into existence just to experience all that?*

PF: [gimlet-eyed] *C'mon. Is that really how you feel? That there's nothing to life but pain and suffering?*

SA: [silent]

SA: [considering]

My mother was the one calling me about murderous muggers, yet it was her future I vaguely dreaded. Stories about abandoned mothers haunted me. After watching Joanne Woodward play the addled, neurotic, nearly delusional mother in the 1987 movie version of The Glass Menagerie, I wept for ten minutes while my friend Andrea rubbed my back and tried to get me to calm down. And don't even get me started about the tragic fate of the mother—a Christian Indian, as it happens—at the end of Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. Even with Reginald in her life, my mother seemed so alone, so joyless. I half understood this to be an artifact of her self-pitying rhetoric. On the telephone we'd make terse meaningless small talk for a few minutes; then something would trigger her and she'd start soliloquizing on her favorite

themes.

I have never been a woman, Sandhya! Do you know this? I have never been allowed to be a wife and mother! I was always just a workhorse and slave, working working to make everybody else money. How stupid was I? Hunh? Do you know that at the divorce I just cried and cried and told the judge, Let him take everything! Yes, it's true, I had all the money and then I couldn't even think right and I gave it all to your father. And now nobody will help me, my daughters don't want to come see me, what has it all been for anyway?

I'd suggest maybe she should talk to a therapist about all this, and she'd shout:

I don't need a therapist! I have Jesus Christ!

It was a terrible irony that both my mother and father were showing signs of deafness. This condition was possibly due to having taken quinine as children in malaria-prone India. My father handled his loss of hearing in his usual queen-of-da-nile fashion.

[Me:] *Dad, you need to get checked out and maybe get a hearing aid.*

He'd laugh under his breath.

[My sister:] *It is getting pretty obvious, Dad.*

Laugh, laugh, pretend it's a joke.

[Me:] *Dad, seriously, I don't like making ultimatums but I'm not going to visit you again until you do something about this.*

Then the laughter would stop. He'd don his Proud Patriarch persona, shouting loud enough to shake the walls. ***Listen, you girls! Who do you think you are, talking like this? I'm your father! Show some respect!***

My mother was her usual practical self. She outfitted herself with a hearing aid as soon as

necessary, the same way she'd earlier procured glasses, adult braces, and Mr. Reginald Nath. But now when she and I argued, she'd say, *Please, baba, you have to go slow with your voice, I cannot hear your high-pitched yelling, I cannot hear high female voices, please.* She was probably speaking the truth, but the woman had never really heard me even when her ears worked perfectly.

I followed my own advice and started seeing a therapist for the first time in my life. I fell in love with her the way you're supposed to, even though she was a woo-woo type I'd normally avoid. Amanda was a white long-haired hippie in her 60s, a practicing Buddhist who'd give me long, warm hugs at the end of our sessions, who'd let my tears soak into the shoulder of her patterned cotton blouse. *I love you!* she'd say. I wasn't sure this was appropriate or professional, but I needed it.

Those are ancient tears. It's gonna be okay, you're going to be okay. Everything is perfect. You are perfect.

Amanda was the first person to hear my stories about my mother and actually laugh out loud—because I'd be laughing, too, laughing and crying at the same time.

I like Maxine. She's a hoot. But she could not meet your needs as a child, because her own needs had never been met. Your father, same story.

I'd nod my head in assent. Oceans would pour down my face. My chest would heave piteously.

We choose our own parents. Do you believe that? We choose them to teach us the lessons we need. It was New Age spiritual gobbledygook of the kind I'd usually mock. It actually offended me from an intellectual standpoint, but I still ate it up. *When our parents fail, then we*

have to become our own good parents. You need to become your own good mother, and you can do that, I know you can.

At some point I told Amanda that I felt resentful about the whole idea of giving my parents grandchildren. *They don't deserve it! To have everything normal and traditional. They should be grateful their daughters aren't dead in a gutter somewhere with needles in our arms!*

Amanda said my anger was perfectly justified, but one day I might feel differently. *Sandy, sometimes people have a real transformation when they become grandparents. It's low-stress but also just what they need to snap out of it and grow up. Your mother and father might just show you their better sides.*

I didn't believe her. I didn't want to believe her. Transformations, and the forgiveness they might require of me, were possibilities that curdled in my imagination. I was like a bratty three-year-old standing in a corner with one shoe off and sticky jello fingers, screaming at the world I DON'T WANNA I DON'T WANNA I DON'T WANNA.

But there was barefoot long-haired Amanda standing up to hug me after the fifty-minute hour, saying *I love you* and *Everything's perfect, you're perfect*. I'd dry my blotchy face in the bathroom before driving back home to Patrick.

PF: *C'mon. We're having fun now, right? With a couple kids it'll just be the more the merrier.*

SA: [silent]

SA: [considering]

PF: *We're not the same as our parents. We're not those people. I promise you.*

SA: [silent]

SA: [considering]

PF: *I know it's hard for you to believe, but some people do actually have happy
childhoods.*

SA: [silent]

SA: [considering]

SA: [tears, tears, tears]

Money

This was America. People did what they loved and eventually the money followed. By the time I was done with graduate school I'd gotten it into my head that I was a novelist-in-training in the same way my friends were second-year law associates, junior professors, or production assistants in Hollywood. Soon I'd sell my first book for actual pay, then another and another. Advances, multi-book contracts, maybe even the occasional literary prize. After a few notable publications I'd be recruited to teach at a liberal arts college. If for now I was making next-to-crap as a freelancer—if I sometimes had to borrow a few thousand bucks from my beloved Patrick (whom I'd met in my last year of the MFA) so we could go on a vacation together—it was fine because eventually it would all work out. I would find a ladder somewhere in the thickets, work my way up toward a middle-class income. I'm sure I wasn't the only creative type who thought this way in the late 1990s. We had grown up steeped in the Dream.

I had ideas, a flair with language, an some inchoate sense of story, but the chasm between my ambition and my ability was vast. I'd spend hours alone in my office, aimlessly moving sentences around on the electronic page, getting into and out of my chair many times an hour, as if tortured by hemorrhoids. Spiritual hemorrhoids, inflammations of the soul. I didn't know the mechanics of plot. Every time I tried to write about one discrete thing, the entire spectrum of interconnected things, the entirety of my life and all its confusions, would pour into my head at once.

From a polite distance Patrick would encourage me to stay the course, be workmanlike rather than over-ambitious. *You don't have to reinvent literature with your very first book, you know.*

My parents were a problem. Every time I tried to write about other characters, my mother and father, in their thinly veiled fictional versions, would intrude on the story. I could not get away from them; I could not bear the thought of writing honestly about them. My mother had paid for my MFA, and I was using it to trash her.

Can't you do, like, stylized versions of your mom and dad? asked a super helpful writer friend.

Sure! I said. *Sure! Sure! Sure, stylized, that's the trick!*

Maybe you can explain how to do that, super helpful writer friend.

I blamed my day job as a freelancer. I thought if only I didn't have to do *other* kinds of writing to pay bills, I'd have more time and energy to sail through the book manuscript. To some degree we lived "up" in lifestyle because Patrick had a much better income, but I was scrupulous about pulling my weight. Sometimes, though, I harbored a secret dream. Patrick would get a significant raise or change jobs to work with a technology start-up job offering lucrative stock options. (It was the late 90s and this very thing was happening to engineers and software coders we knew: sudden paper millionaires.) Such grand luck might enable me to take six months off to finally, finally, finish this project to its finished state, finally. Hadn't various male artists throughout history received that kind of support from lovers, wives, or patrons?

One typical Sunday, he was in the living room reading the paper when I came churning out of my office in a mini-tornado of frustration.

I'm going to be working on this novel for fucking ever.

He must have looked at me but I missed any meaning in his glance. I went into the kitchen, fixed myself a sandwich, ate it ferociously. I returned to my office for a few hours of

pointless fiddling. When I emerged that afternoon, Patrick was watching football in silence. He had his arms crossed in front of him. His face was stiff.

Hey. What's wrong?

He looked up from the television and stared at me silently.

Honey, are you okay, are you not feeling well?

He answered my question with a question:

Are you serious about finishing this book, or what?

I laughed. *What?* He had listened to my anxieties and fears about it on many occasions, but I'd never seen him take personally.

I watch you keep adding and adding things to this book. If you're serious about finishing it, why don't you just start, I dunno, taking some things out?

It doesn't work that way! For a moment I was filled with pure disdain for this man I loved. What the hell do engineers know about writing novels?

(Years earlier, on our very first phone call, I'd complained about my slow progress on my novel draft. I bitched and moaned until it occurred to me to stop sounding so self-involved. *Well, I guess you must know what this is like, I mean, you had to write a master's thesis.* Pat had charmed me with his modest response. *Um, my thesis was called *The Electrical Breakdown Between A Wire and A Plane*. It did not require character development.*)

At this moment his voice sounded unusually high and jumpy. *I just don't know if you're serious about getting this book done, getting it published, and moving onto the next project.*

Of course I'm serious! It's just really difficult. Really, really difficult. I just can't explain how difficult this is.

This is supposed to be your career, right? Are you treating it like a job?

I barreled back into my office to cry and rage in private. Maybe I had made a mistake to throw my fortunes in with a person so different from me, who'd never understand what I was going through. On the other hand, how weird that he cared enough to take such a stand. Was it possible Patrick valued my ambition, took it even more seriously, than I myself did?

I'M the artist, I thought but didn't say. A bubble of hot black oil lurched up into my brain.

*I'M the artist, you're an engineer. **You** don't get to tell me what to put in or what to leave out!*

Maybe This Time

I was blocked. It was impossible to deny. Technical assistance was needed. This pissed me off. I had wanted it to just happen effortlessly. An improvisation, spontaneous. I did not want another *project* or *ambition* like my abandoned Broadway dreams or unfinished novel. But nothing had occurred in our first year without birth control. In early 1999, I started tracking my ovulation as my gynecologist urged. Every morning I'd open my eyes, pop a thermometer in my mouth, write the results on graph paper, look for an elevation in average basal body temperature. Then schedule sex accordingly, every other day for a week.

A calendar is the quickest way to kill a libido. The first few times we went through the "system," I tried to embrace it in a spirit of fun. Hooray for procreation. The month would roll by; I'd imagine I was late by a day or two; I'd get excited. Then my period would come. Bad cramps and dashed hopes. The black pit would crack open again. Shame and despair and catastrophic thoughts.

Patrick had an easier time of it all, although it wasn't a sex-soaked fantasyland for him, either.

Maybe we should just leave it to chance? I ventured.

We're not getting any younger. Pat's face betrayed genuine worry.

I didn't dare use the actual words resonating in my brain at the moment. It was an old church-lady suggestion—or was it an Alcoholics Anonymous principle? *Let go and let God.* I was embarrassed to have such Pollyanna language welling up in me. I'd become staunchly anti-

metaphysical, or maybe just anti-agnostic, uninterested in questioning or seeking. I no longer sought out the the high-class intellectualized musings of a James P. Carse or an Elaine Pagels. Yet I could not shake the deep, visceral intuition that some things in life should be left to fate.

Gynecologist put me on Clomid, gateway drug of fertility interventions. I'd take the pill, monitor my temperature, have the required congress, all the while trying to maintain a positive outlook. *Maybe this time I'll be lucky.* Four or five days after taking the drug, I'd crash. I'd obsess about missed opportunities. My stalled fiction "career," my abandonment of New York City, the books I hadn't finished reading and the countries I hadn't visited or lived in. I'd muse, bitterly, that I'd be much more accomplished by now if I'd had better parents.

My parents—those fuckers.

NO was the sound surging up from the depths. *NO NO NO.*

At the same time *YES. YES. Patrick, let's have a house, a family, a life plan, a college savings account. A will in case something happens to us and provisions are required for our children. YES, OF COURSE.*

I assumed I would rise to the occasion. Pregnancy itself would make me happy and hopeful about the future. We had sex every other day for fourteen days in a row, like training for an Olympic sport. Stamina and joy pretty much disappeared by bootcamp session number three. We plugged along, getting undressed by rote, climbing into bed, groping at each other with as much passion as is required to do a load of laundry. A doctor's test had confirmed that Patrick was in fine form for procreating. He was possessed of a superabundance of hyperactive little swimmers. Biologically destined to be a father. Even so, by the middle of the second week, his enthusiasm would flag.

We'd go through the motions.

And it would all be in vain. Again.

I said to my beloved, *I really need to take a one-month break.*

His normally measured voice gave way to a desperate yelp.

I don't want to take a break! We don't have that kind of time!

I said nothing. Went into my office to cry furiously. Long tendrils of black bubbling self-hatred seeped up out of the ground and grabbed me around the calves. I felt pulled into darkness. What a great marriage we had. What a perfect match. I had apparently been born without the proverbial ticking clock. Patrick had an internal timekeeper as loud as a deafening cathedral bell. He could no longer hear me.

Instead of a baby, I conceived a crush. Completely inappropriate flirtation with a twenty-something guy who worked at my gym and was a fan of my [Baltimore CityPaper](#) column. In my pundit persona, I was positively bursting with pointed anecdotes, political gambits, sociological ventures. I must have seemed very confident to my readers while falling to pieces in private. *Hey babe*, I'd say to my gym buddy. *Hey babe*, he'd say back. He played it cool but I could tell he found me impressive and alluring. I just found him...nice. Nicely soft-spoken. And not my husband.

We'd choose side-by-side elliptical trainers, watch the news together, talk about books. (He was big into Jeanette Winterson.) Cable news had begun to include long segments devoted to the ups and downs (or rather, the ups and ups) of Wall Street. This seemed strange and disconcerting. When had the inner workings of high-stakes capitalism become everybody's

business? I supposed many of us were invested in the stock market through our retirement funds, but still, I was befuddled by and worried about this relentless focus on finance as opposed to other types of business or economic news. On Fox I saw an interview with a man—thirty-ish white factory worker—who supported the privatization of Social Security. *Why should the government hold my money when I could just put it in the stock market for a guaranteed 20 or 30 percent return.* Hunh? What the fuck was he talking about? And why wasn't there an actual financial expert after him to explain why such expectations were absurd? Was this the news or a PR piece for Republican legislators? (I figured out the answer to that soon enough.)

I loved Patrick but I'd made a mistake thinking I could become a good wife and mother. I'd be better off with a cute young guy who thinks I'm brilliant. Like this one. My idle fantasy of running away with my gym buddy was not deterred by the fact that he was currently living in his parents' basement.

Patrick came home one night and said he had to travel for his job in a few weeks. We looked at the calendar. He'd be gone during prime baby-making time. He started to get upset. Really, really upset. I couldn't handle his disappointment. I left the room. I was relieved he'd be gone. At least for one month I wouldn't have to feel like the little sex-engine that couldn't. All around me, women were pregnant. Half my friends back in New York: pregnant. Right there in South Baltimore were girls everywhere, I'm talking white girls, high school graduates or maybe high school dropouts, pushing strollers with one hand that also clutched a cigarette butt, holding their cellphones to their ears with the other hand. I'd pass them on sidewalks, hoping for the child's sake that this was just a nanny or older sister. *Mommy, mommy!* the child would call. *What is it?*

What the hell do you want now? the mother would yell.

One Sunday afternoon, I drove out to the Marley Station Mall, a place lousy with depressed-seeming, overweight mothers, white and black, and their infinite supplies of demanding, whiny children. Welcome to America! Was this my future? My mother had been fat and depressed my entire childhood. It did not turn out well for her or her progeny.

When Patrick returned from his trip I said,

Look, I know you're feeling anxious all, but maybe we should take a few months off from the baby thing. The pressure is really getting to me.

What?! No way! I do not want to take a few months off!

We sat together on the couch in silence for a while. I was burning with things to say, but couldn't speak. I got up to leave the room in a hurry, went upstairs sniffing, lay down on the bed in the dark with all my clothes on. My imagination started sprinting, dreaming up schemes. This was over. I would leave him. Yes. Pack all my stuff and head out to...a motel, yes, that's right. Call my gym friend. Just for support, of course. Call my sister, let her know what was happening.

He came upstairs a while later, got undressed, got into bed. I jumped up and left the room. He followed after me.

Are you avoiding me?

I wanted to scream at him, *YES! YES I AM! ISN'T IT OBVIOUS?* but instead I just cried. When I was finally able to speak, I said: *I'm not happy!*

Well, yeah, I can see that!

I can't stand this pressure! I don't want to do this baby thing anymore! I hate it! I totally hate it!

It's not a lot of fun for me, either!

I don't think I want to have children with you, anyway! I think I made a mistake marrying you! This is too fucking hard!

Great. That's just fucking great. Thanks for letting me know!

Or maybe I do want to have children, but with someone else, someone more like me.

Another artist, maybe.

What? What? That makes no sense. Two artists, trying to make a living and raise a family? Your life would be harder then, not easier.

That's not the point! Why do you always think money is the point?

Who knows where the argument went, how it ended, or how we got to sleep that night. Next day I let the previous night's escape fantasy evaporate in the clear morning air. I dragged myself out of the depths of unhappiness to get on the phone with story sources or to write up a few articles just in time for the deadlines. I was a successful freelance writer. My column was popular, controversial. It generated record-breaking numbers of letters-to-the-editor, both pro and con. Waiters in restaurants recognized my name from my credit card. I received an award from the state journalism society. People admired me. Foolish, foolish people. And Patrick was living in his own kind of fog. We'd have these horrible eruptions, I'd say these terrible things to him, and then somehow life would go on. Maybe I'd apologize a day or two later. I'd tell him I didn't really mean all those things I'd said. I did not want to leave him for an artist. I did not regret marrying him. Was that true? Maybe, maybe not. I was no longer able to tell what was real.