

BLENDDED: A MEMOIR

by

Abbe Greenberg

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

May 2013

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Kate Schmitt, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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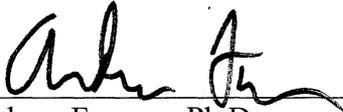
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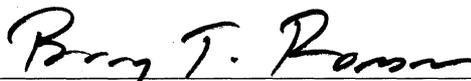
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people deserve recognition for their roles in the delivery of this manuscript: Kate Schmitt for her gentle, persistent support and her great laugh; Maggie Sarachek for her unwavering encouragement and her willingness to put our writing project aside for this memoir; my husband, Jay Asher, for being the most supportive and generous partner a writer could ever dream of; my grandmother, Viola Holtz, who insisted—until the moment of her death—that I finish this degree; Papatya Bucak, for pushing me through when I was stuck (several times); my fellow grad students whose insightful and diligent comments always inspired me to do better; and, finally, my mother, Nancy Greenberg, who never gets the credit, but deserves it all.

ABSTRACT

Author: Abbe Greenberg
Title: Blended: A Memoir
Institution: Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Kate Schmitt
Degree: Master of Fine Arts
Year: 2013

Blended: A Memoir is the author's recollection of her endeavors to overcome the difficulties that often accompany becoming a stepmother and build a "seamless" family.

DEDICATION

For Viola Holtz—

with all of the love and gratitude in my heart.

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PREFACE

When I was twenty-two, I managed a branch of a national corporation in south Florida. One of my employees had a framed photograph on her desk of a beautiful family: a bright-eyed, curly haired man with his arm around a petite, freckled brunette, both of them standing behind twin, redheaded toddlers with chubby cheeks and cherubic smiles. I never asked her about the photo, but every day I looked at that picture and thought, *Those kids could be mine*. Five years later, I was married to the man in the picture, and the adorable twins were my stepchildren.

Now, before you think I am a psychotic stalker à la Meredith Baxter Birney's characters on the Lifetime channel, let me explain. The father in the photograph, Jay, was my employee's brother-in-law, who was also the Director of my company's New Jersey operation where, and here's the coincidence, I transferred after I married my first husband. This story gets crazier when I admit that, although Jay was technically my boss because he ran four large offices all over the state, I did not actually meet him until a year after he approved my hiring—at the company Christmas party which the beautiful wife in the photo also attended. When I met him, for all of thirty seconds during which he thanked me for a job well done, I did not recognize him as the man in the photo. In fact, he barely registered in my conscious mind as I was too distracted by

the number of people coming up to me to ask if I was wearing pants.¹

It was another six months before Jay and I started to work together on a project, and another half year until he told me, unable to hold back tears, that his marriage was dissolving—that he was moving out of his house in the early part of the summer.

“At least you don’t have to deal with this stuff,” he said. “Enjoy being a newlywed.”

The thing was, I hadn’t enjoyed being a newlywed. In fact, I was newly separated, newly terrified to tell anyone, especially my parents (who at that time were married for 26 years) and my grandparents (who at that time were married for 51 years), that my own blessed union had—in just over a year—gone belly up.

“Um. The thing is...” I started, trying to figure out the least embarrassing way to break the news. “I’m getting divorced too.”

I winced as Jay looked up at me, but he didn’t seem shocked. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said. “We just don’t have that much in common.”

“Didn’t you notice that when you were dating?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I thought it would get better when we were married.

Besides, it was nice to be so...adored. I figured he’d never hurt me, you know? And, on paper, he was a pretty good catch.”

“Wow. What did your family say?”

¹ I was wearing sheer black leggings, which, apparently, in the dim light of the firehouse hosting our festivities, created the illusion that I had forgotten to put on pants. Years later, Jay confessed that he came over to meet me in the hopes of witnessing my risqué attire.

“Haven’t gotten that far,” I said. “I’m hiding out at my grandparents’ apartment while they are in Florida for the winter. Anyway, it’s tax season and my mom’s a CPA, so I figure I’ve got til April 15th to come up with a reasonable story.”

“I wish I had that long,” Jay said. “My parents keep calling. More than usual. They know something’s up.”

“You didn’t tell them?”

And so our relationship was borne of a mutual need to find a way to tell our long-married, nice Jewish parents that their children were homeless screw-ups about to be divorced, which, in my family, was not as bad as being fat, but close. Very close.

Jay and I became good friends, sounding boards for each other, laughing buddies, safe places to hide. Which, of course, is exactly what one wants in a romantic partner. So, it didn’t surprise me that, when the dust from my first marriage began to clear, the only person I could see was Jay. One morning—after his band had played until two and we had spent the next three hours bemoaning our fates—as we sat in his van in Hoboken watching the sun come up over the city and turning the Chrysler Building into a glowing ball of orange light, Jay told me I was lucky.

“Why’s that?” I replied.

“Because you are young and you can start fresh. Who in their right mind would want to date a man like me? A guy in his thirties with two little kids and a soon-to-be ex-wife who is taking half his money.”

Slowly, I raised my hand.

“Really?” he said. “You would?”

And I did.

This collection of essays tells the story of a young, relatively sheltered, extremely nurturing girl who falls in love with a sensitive, affectionate, self-doubting man with twin daughters, an ex-wife, enmeshed parents, and little economic security. Someone should have warned that girl, I hear you saying. She was too young. She didn't know what she was getting into. All true. Except I was warned. My grandmother—my touchstone—told me time and again to reconsider. Even Jay's father asked me, almost daily, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

I didn't know what I was doing, although this is the first time I am admitting that. Anyone who attempts to blend a family—to spackle and seal the fissures left behind by divorce while, at the same time, forging new connections which must be made to feel as old and familiar as your dad's college sweatshirt—goes in blind. Like childbirth, it is a life-altering experience that can be as traumatic as it is beautiful, depending on the circumstances and the people involved. There is no blueprint. No instructions or guidelines. We think (and many suggest) that there is a method—that if we just do things a certain way, follow these ten tips, everything will work out for everyone. But the truth is, it's a crapshoot. The people involved have to be willing to try, but even that doesn't guarantee success. I never lose sight of the fact that one step in a different direction could have changed entirely the outcome of the story I am about to tell.

If my daughters came to me today and asked me if they should marry a man with children—even if they are the two sweetest, most precious children on the face of the earth and the man is a nonsexist, non-Republican Prince Charming—I would still find it hard to give them the thumbs up. Blending a family is not for the faint of heart. It

requires a ridiculous amount of self-confidence, a tolerance for the complicated and unsettled, and an ability to relinquish control—none of which I have. But I didn't know I didn't have those things. So I jumped right in—baptism by fire—and surfaced, winded but triumphant, with twin seven-year-old daughters, a husband, a new baby, two cats, and a whole new definition of family.

This collection is a love letter to the people in that original photo: my [step]daughters and the man who brought them into my life. It is also a thank you note to Lauren, Jay's previous wife and the mother of Nicky and Dani, whose willingness to share her children with me has made everything in my world possible. My gratitude to her cannot be overstated. Finally, this book is recognition for all those stepmoms who consider their stepchildren their own—those women who don't let cultural stereotypes, naysayers, and the matter of genetics affect what can be the most rewarding relationships in their lives.

AUDITION

The first time I visit his parents' house in suburban New Jersey, Jay is not himself. The evening before, as was our Saturday night ritual in those early days, we had eaten an extremely rich French dinner accompanied by a carafe of red wine, smoked a pack of Marlboro Lights, drank a half bottle of Amaretto, fooled around with the intensity of hummingbirds, and then immediately fallen into an indulgence-induced coma. Hours later, Jay awoke with terrible stomach pain which heralded the violent and frequent reappearance of steak au poivre and pommes frites for the remainder of the evening. Wrung from retching, Jay lay in bed for the entire day following and would not have gotten up had he not promised his mother he would bring his new girlfriend home to supper.

“So what’s she like?” I ask as I navigate Jay’s green minivan through the neighborhood of his childhood. A cop parked at a convenience store—I’m not making this up, he was eating a donut—wags his finger at me as I pass him going quite a bit above the speed limit, and I immediately brake.

“Easy on the pedals,” comes a plea from the back seat where Jay is sprawled on his back, one arm draped over his head, the other clasping a plastic “just in case” bag. The tip of his nose and his lips—all that are visible under his arm—seem very pale. I am trying to follow the directions he has mumbled at various, not necessarily relevant, moments in our journey, but frankly I’m just not sure I’m even in the right town. I keep

waiting for him to sit up and look out the window, but he hasn't moved since we left Manhattan.

I briefly entertain a vision of the aforementioned officer pulling me over and inquiring about the body in the back seat. "Oh he's not dead," I announce. "But can you arrest me anyway?"

"Are you sure you feel up to this?" I ask, hoping he can't hear the anxiety in my voice. I extend my neck and adjust the rearview mirror so I can see deeper into the vehicle. I feel like a limo driver with an imaginary fare. "Jay?"

"I'm okay."

Then why won't you sit up? I notice my breathing has gotten shallower. I look away from the mirror, playing the age-old game. *Sit up, sit up, sit up.* I peer back at him. He is still fully supine, looking like a man more in need of an ER visit than a meal with his parents. This is going to go swimmingly.

I silently rehearse the scene at the front door of his parents' house (assuming I manage to find it): *It's nice to meet you, Bernice and Lester. Jay really wanted to introduce us but he passed out in the van. What's for dinner?*

Forcing my eyes to remain on the road in front of me, I try to sound casual: "Do you think she'll like me?"

His response—labored as it is—is one clearly borne of those first dizzying weeks of romance: "Baby, how could anyone not like you?"

Well, I did have a decent track record. After all, *my* parents liked me. And my first husband's parents liked me more than they did their own son. Still, I was not reassured. This was a very different situation than when I met my first in-laws. For one

thing, these parents had someone to compare me with. For another, there were children involved. So, not only would my physical appearance, intellect, and lineage be scrutinized, but also, presumably, my parenting skills, the only experience of which I had was in caring for a stray cat my roommate and I snuck into our dorm freshman year of college. If I am to be honest about that situation, I would say that Kitty survived despite my consistent neglect and that my roommate actually was the better candidate for parenting Jay's twin six-year olds, who I guessed would require more than occasional feedings and who probably wouldn't be willing to use a dirty litter box for days on end. Come to think of it, I had no idea what to feed kids. Did they eat the same things I did when I was their age? Did they still even make Spaghetti-O's with mini franks?

I grip the steering wheel tighter as my hands moisten. What was I getting myself into? Judging from the inert mass clad in a wrinkled oxford and ripped jeans that was their son, I'm not much of a caretaker for anyone, no less their grandchildren. At twenty-five, with one failed starter marriage behind me, I wasn't feeling so confident this was the right move for me. It would be the equivalent of Mike Tyson interviewing for a job teaching public speaking. Obviously I had some work to do. At the very least, I ought to practice being a responsible parent before attempting it with real flesh and blood.

"Jay, I don't think I'm ready to meet your parents yet. I need more time."

"Time? For what?"

To buy a kitten and raise it to adulthood. “I don’t know. It just seems too soon. We’ve only been dating for a few weeks. Maybe we should wait another month or two.”
Or six.

“What’s going to be any different next month?”

I’ll have moved away. Or at least taken a parenting course. “We’ll be—I don’t know,” I stammer. “More established.”

Jay, no doubt recalling last night’s promises we made to spend the remainder of our lives together, chuckles from the backseat. “We seem pretty established.”

“No,” I explain softly, “you and Lauren are established. For almost ten years. I wasn’t even out of high school when you two got engaged. I was still a virgin when the girls were born.”

“You’ll be fine,” comes the reassurance followed immediately by an “Ohhh. Noooo.”

“What? They won’t?” I half-yelp. I feel the panic, with its barbed grasp, creeping up my chest.

“I was just sitting up. Listen, babe, my parents are gonna love you. The kids are gonna love you. It will all work out, you’ll see.” He’s so damned cavalier about all of this.

My breathing gets shorter and I feel my face start to flush. I stare at the car in front of us, memorizing its make and model—both of which my father told me I should always know for every vehicle within a fifty yard radius of my own—trying to regain my composure. *Focus, Abbe. Focus. You can do this.*

“Are you okay?” Jay asks, and when I don’t answer, he offers, “Relax. It might even be fun.”

Like a root canal without anesthesia. “Okay,” I say. And then he points at a large, shingled house up ahead.

“That’s theirs.”

Jay’s dad is a small, penguin-shaped man in an alarmingly red sweater with a paperboy’s hat; thick, square-framed glasses; and a day’s growth of beard. He hugs his son who kisses him sweetly, and I am taken with the unabashed warmth shared by these two men. Only after this does Lester turn to me.

“How do you do?” he says with a smile. His voice is soft and crackling—like he needs to clear his throat. I find it both comforting and charming. Taking my arm gently, he starts to guide me into another room. “Bernice is having a little problem in the kitchen. She’ll be right out.”

“Jay?” comes a not-quite shrill voice from inside the house. “Is that you? Can you come in here?”

“Be right back,” Jay says without meeting my gaze and leaves me with my elbow in his father’s hand. I watch him trudge away (still holding his stomach), and I feel like an abandoned child. In fact, this whole situation is making me doubt my adulthood on every level. I am unsure what is expected of me, and even less certain of what *I* expect. A bad combination for a control freak. For the first time in our young courtship, I am miffed at Jay. (By definition, one cannot be full-out pissed off in the very beginning of a relationship; it takes several months to cultivate real ire.) I haven’t

been in his parents' house for a full minute and already he has disappeared, albeit with a promise to return, but who knows what could happen in the meantime? If the roles were reversed, I would never have left his side.

So I am standing in the orange shag carpet with strands the height of baby cornstalks, staring at the faux wood-paneled walls and wondering why Jay never mentioned that the original owner of his parents' house had been a seventies porn star. My heart, which has been rapping on my chest wall at the speed of sound, skips at least three beats. I cannot believe how nervous I am. Actually, I can because the whole extroverted performer thing is just a persona I use to hide how terrifying I find meeting new people I want to impress. And I do want to impress Lester and Bernice. I want them to like me more than I have ever wanted anyone to like me, even more than I want Jay's children to like me.

Fortunately, Lester has been doing all of the talking because I have been entranced in fantasy about the phone call Bernice will make to Jay's sister immediately following our visit, during which she will reveal that I am the most amazing girl she has ever met. Not only is she smart and funny, Bernice will say, but she is *so* much prettier than Jay's ex. He's just so lucky Lauren left him because look at who he found!

My reverie is broken by the appearance of Bernice, a short, round, red-faced, apron-clad woman with sparse curly hair, although what I most notice about her in that first instant was the sweat. Not a little perspiration over the lip or even the telling wet patch extending from the armpit, but drippings of the Saharan marathoner variety. She looks, quite honestly, like she has just been the recipient of a good hosing. Her smile is welcoming, but she looks disoriented, her eyes darting as she speaks.

“Hi Abbe. Sorry I didn’t greet you, but I’m having a little trouble with the chicken.” The equanimity with which she speaks seems incongruous with the sodden woman in front of me. I guess I was expecting her to pant.

“Oh, it’s okay,” I stammer.

“Ma,” Jay chimes in, magically returning from wherever it was he went. “I can’t find it. Are you sure you brought it in?” I raise my eyebrows in his direction. *What’s going on?* But he ignores me.

“Of course I’m sure. I rinsed it in the sink.” She sighs and places her hands on her hips. “This is ridiculous. How could this have happened?”

Jay encircles Bernice’s shoulders and squeezes her to him. He winces briefly—stomach still tender—then he smiles at me and mouths “Are you okay?” I nod and am momentarily relieved of my anxiety as I bask in our wordless intimacy. At once I forgive Jay for deserting me at the door. How can I be mad at a man so devoted to his mother? (I would just like to point out two things: (1) It is never as easy to forgive your partner’s trespasses as during the Hummingbird Phase of your relationship, and (2) this question is the very first hint of what’s to come. Twenty years down the road, when I wonder when it all began, I will come back to this moment. So pay attention to those early clues, Valiant Couplers!)

Emboldened, I decide to jump in on the action:

“Bernice, you said you were having some trouble with the chicken. I’m not much of a cook, but I’ll be happy to help.”

She smiles at me again, only this time it seems more forced. Like she has just been told she has won a prize she doesn't want. "That's very nice. Right now I can't find it."

"You can't find what?" I ask slowly.

"The chicken. I've lost the chicken."

She says this with utter frankness so I do not laugh although my first reaction is to assume this is some kind of an icebreaker. When I glance at Jay, however, I realize this isn't the case. Racking my brain for a suitable response—keep in mind this is my very first exchange with Bernice—I pose what I hope will be considered, despite its hackneyed, hard-boiled fiction roots, an illuminating question: "Where did you last see it?"

"I had it in the sink, but now it's gone. This is so embarrassing," she adds, shaking her head.

There is a lengthy silence—maybe ten or twenty seconds go by—and I try to think of something clever to say so I can ease the palpable tension filling the room.

"Well," I begin. "He couldn't have gotten far. The cars are still in the driveway."

There is another silence. And then, a wonderful eruption of laughter from Lester, still clutching my elbow, followed by a less hearty but genuine chuckle from Bernice. The smile this time is unqualified, warm and engaging, and I instantly feel a real fondness for her.

"I can see why you and Jay get along so well," she says, and it is a lovely statement, full of validation and acceptance. My affection swells. *She likes me. She really likes me.* I want to hug this sweaty flustered woman.

“She’s very funny,” Bernice says to Jay, and he beams at me.

This recognition fuels me. The hunger for applause, such a startlingly familiar sensation, takes me over in a way I imagine propels the junkie to chase a bigger and bigger high. Now that I have captured her approval, I must, *must* have more. And if I really want to impress her—if I really want her (and I have determined that, in this family, Bernice is the one who makes the calls to the bullpen) to overlook the fact that I don’t have any idea how to be somebody’s mother or, judging from my marital track record, wife—I know what task is set before me: I must find the chicken.

After gathering some basic information—size (2 lbs.), condition (cleaned, patted dry, seasoned), container in which it was last seen (metal roasting pan)—I begin my investigation. I start in the kitchen where I open cabinets, the microwave, and the dishwasher. I then turn toward the oven, which is heated to 350°. It’s too obvious, I think, but I open the door anyway. No chicken. The heat from the stove surrounds me, and I feel my forehead dampen.

As I approach the far side of the room, I observe boxes of pasta, rice, and cereal as well as a number of canned goods lining the countertops and stacked near the sink. At first I try to conceive of a poultry recipe involving Shredded Wheat, mandarin oranges in a light syrup, and baked beans, but, when I open the pantry and see the roomy shelves, I realize Bernice has already thoroughly searched the premises. The disheveled laundry room also seems to have been ransacked. No wonder Bernice looks like she just stepped out of the sauna.

I open the sliding glass doors to get some air and step out onto the large wooden deck, on which sits a barbeque and a wrought iron table with four chairs. The air has the

slightest edge to it—soon it will be dusk—and it feels good on my skin. For the sake of conscientiousness, I lift the cover on the grill. *Where could she have put it?*

“I’ve got it!” Jay shouts and, once again, I find myself irritated with him. It is strange to see him this way—as one who can provoke anything other than desire—and I am, for the first time in our month-old relationship, uncertain about him. About us. Maybe my grandmother is right. I don’t *always* have to look for trouble, do I? I am only twenty-five. There must be plenty of “unencumbered” men left in the tri-state area. There’s that young Jewish lawyer at the gym who keeps asking me out. He doesn’t have an ex-wife or kids. And he drives a BMW. Yes, that is what I’ll do. I’ll get through the next two hours and then I’ll marry Mr. Rightstein. Grammy will be so happy with my choice. I’ll even be able to tell my parents whom I’m dating.

“Abbe? I found the chicken!” Jay calls to me and I am reminded of my failed mission. Why couldn’t I have been the hero? They already like Jay. Sulking, I go back inside the house. The three Ashers are gathered in a formal dining room staring reverently at the missing bird, indeed seasoned and dressed, placed carefully on a trivet so as not to burn through the lace tablecloth to the cherry wood underneath. In its raw state, the chicken has a pinkish hue, which gives it the appearance of being both naked and embarrassed.

Bernice, drier and less ruddy, clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“I can’t believe I forgot to cook it,” she says ruefully. “I’m really losing it.” She shrugs and rolls her eyes in an expression of self-chastisement. Then she turns to me.

“I make some impression.”

She picks up the pan and heads back into the kitchen. Under her breath comes the word, harsh and punitive: “Schmuck.”

I look at Jay and Lester who are giggling animatedly. They seem to be thoroughly enjoying the comedic skit they’ve just witnessed. I, however, am mortified. Not that I have spent twenty minutes in pursuit of a raw chicken and come up empty-handed. Not even that I have placed so much importance on my being the one to discover it (although that is certainly worthy of some shame). What most disturbs me is Bernice’s reaction—how defeated and self-punishing her words were. She has behaved as though this is an uncomplicated job—preparing and arranging a meal for her son and his first post-divorce lover, a divorcée nine years his junior—that she, as can generally be predicted, screwed up. But I know better. I understand all too well how the desire to impress, the wish to be liked and admired, can make tying one’s shoes a tricky chore. After all, didn’t I spend the entire car ride from the city worrying that I would somehow fumble the simple act of meeting two nice Jewish seniors from Brooklyn?

I think about my quarter-of-a-century-long history of people pleasing. Once I spent six hours—an entire Sunday—cleaning and arranging my college boyfriend’s dorm room (including mildew-laden laundry) with furniture I purchased on credit because he had complained the night before that his room was a mess. Upon his return, I blindfolded him and sat him on the new bedspread, bursting with the anticipation of his gratitude, which took the form of, “Thanks, Ab. It looks nice,” followed immediately by his announcement that our dinner plans would have to be postponed due to a pickup basketball game. As I stood in his room smelling the drying paint, I couldn’t help feeling that I didn’t get the effusive praise I so desired, not because I was

dating an ingrate (a notion that only recently occurred to me), but because I hadn't done enough. If I had just decorated the room better, he would never have left to play ball. Had I been another woman—say, Martha Stewart—I would probably be sitting at some romantic restaurant whose patrons would be fawning over my boyfriend's stories of my overwhelming thoughtfulness and devotion. You are so lucky to have her, they would all say.

When I enter the kitchen, Bernice is leaning against the sink wiping her glasses.

"Hiya," she says. There is a slight note of resignation in her tone, and my affection for her grows.

"I put it in the oven, but it's going to take a while. How hungry are you?"

"Not that hungry," I admit. "I didn't really come for the food."

"Good thing," she says chuckling, and then, "you're a very nice girl. I don't know you very well, but I can tell you're a good person. Jay thinks very highly of you."

"I think very highly of him," I reply and before I can stop myself I say, "I've never met such a gentle, loving man in my life."

And this is what went through my head next: Jay may not seem to be Mr. Rightstein (and his mother may be experiencing dementia), but I am so enamored with his tenderness, his wit, and his ability to be both self-deprecating and hopeful all at once. With his pale eyes that turn electric green when he cries (which he does every night after he hangs up the phone with his children). With his voice that is so soft and his laugh that is equally loud—a deep release that shakes his belly and draws lines from his eyes. With his hands with the knuckles so big, he had to cut his wedding ring in

order to get it off. With the fact that he proudly drives a minivan, attends all of his kids' class trips, and never complains about the reality that, after child support and alimony, he makes less money than a server at Chili's. And, most importantly, with the way he adores me and defers to my wants every time (except for this outing). I will transform him into my Prince Charming. The golden elixir of youth, toe-curling sex, and an obsessive need to prove my parents wrong will render his less-than-amicable divorce, extraordinary financial obligations, substantial age difference, and unsettling family dynamics virtually invisible (at least until we are married). The myth is spun, and I recognize myself as in love.

For the first time since my arrival, my muscles relax and I breathe deeply. I am somehow aware that I don't need to impress Bernice, and she, despite having giving it her best effort, does not have to impress me. It has taken me all night to discover that my need to woo his mother is really about pleasing Jay, and Bernice has just informed me that I have already accomplished this. With the pressure lifted, I gaze at Bernice—composed and dry—and say what I truly believe:

“Behind a good man is usually a great mom.”

Again, she smiles, this time broadly and with gratitude, and I can see that we are alike in our chase for acknowledgement. What we each really want is Jay's recognition and allegiance, and we will spend the next two decades, alternately as allies and competitors, in that pursuit (to which, of course, Jay is and will always be oblivious).

When, forty-five minutes later, we finally sit down to eat, there is easiness between all of us. We laugh about the chicken, which, returned to its hiding place on the trivet, tastes delicious. Lester tells stories about Jay as a boy, and Bernice talks about

the business she ran out of their house. I, in turn, share information about my schooling, my career, my family. The conversation flows pleasantly, and the evening ends without incident.

On the way back to New York, Jay, having once again claimed the driver's seat, tells me how well he thought the visit went.

"My parents really liked you. Especially my mother. And she doesn't like that many people."

"Now you tell me," I say, smiling at him in the dark. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah," he says. "I guess I was hungry."

"Thanks for letting me find the chicken."

He looks at me, face crunched in confusion. "I didn't know you wanted to."

"It would have made me look good. Helpful."

"You looked great," he said. "My mom was worried you'd think she had Alzheimer's."

"Never crossed my mind."

He puts on a cassette recording of a Grateful Dead concert. The label says June 14, 1976.

"I went to this show," he says.

"I was in fourth grade," I say.

We both laugh, and his knobby hand finds mine. As we head north on the turnpike listening to Jerry Garcia whine the blues, I think of the phone call I will make to my parents when I get home. I will finally tell them about my heroic, queasy rescuer of poultry, who, nine years my senior, with enough money in the bank to purchase a

compact American car or an acre of land in Iowa (but not both) and twin six-year olds to raise and educate, may not be the obvious choice, but was mine nonetheless. Besides, once they met those adorable girls, they would be reeled right in...

FIRST DATE

It was to be a lunch date—inexpensive, public, and in broad daylight. And if that went well, maybe an afternoon movie—cheap and still public, albeit in the dark. And if that went well, maybe we'd go back to the house and have some time to fool around...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'm not typically a fusser when it comes to prepping for a date. Due to laziness and a principled unwillingness to spend money on lots of goop not found anywhere in the natural world except on the fur of the hapless rodents enslaved by the beauty industry, I have never been much of a “girly” girl when it comes to makeup (ChapStick[®] and sunblock), clothing choice (I prefer black yoga pants and a loose tee shirt—also black), and hairstyling (curly and wild à la Andie MacDowell²). Without all of the lotions, potions, and frightening appliances (don't eye lash curlers look like mini specula?) that are in most women's cosmetic bags, getting ready for any occasion doesn't take me very long. In fact, I didn't even have my hair done for my first wedding. Fifteen minutes before Altargate, (I'll tell you all about it in “Aisle for Four”) I fumbled into the dress, pinned on the veil, and allowed my closest girlfriend to smear a little “stain” on my cheeks and lips, which, unfortunately, was so difficult to remove, the color outlasted the marriage.

So, I did not leave myself much time to get ready for this, my most important first date. We were to meet at the bagel store near the cinema at 11:30 so we could catch

² In dry weather. In rain or high humidity, I bear a strong resemblance to Don King.

the 1:00 matinee if things went smoothly. Hmmmm. What to wear... It was early summer—the first week of June—so it was definitely shorts weather. But movie theaters are notoriously chilly, so jeans might be a better bet. Of course, popcorn expands during digestion, which may make the resulting tight waistline uncomfortable. Not to mention, the indelible red mark that would be left like a scar on my pale stomach for days after, reminding me and anyone else who happened to be in the neighborhood that the appropriate snack for my figure is celery. Better stick with the yoga pants.

Now for the shirt. Short sleeves with a jacket for the theater? A safe call. But what about the color? I had only three choices in my wardrobe: black, charcoal grey, and ebony-blue (black). Not very festive. In fact, downright funereal. I didn't want to come across as gloomy and negative. I needed something that showed my *joie de vivre*—something that says *This girl is super fun*. Or, more honestly: *This girl is so fun you will want to spend your life hanging out with her*. I needed something sunny, maybe yellow. On second thought, I look jaundiced in yellow. Yellow says *You will spend your life nursing this girl back to health*. Ahh. Maybe pink. Although would that be deceptive? I mean, pink has always implied delicate and flower-like to me. And I am anything but. I like red. But red is the color of passion and blood. I would wear red to an audition for a matador's position in Madrid, but not to a bagel store in New Jersey. I dug through my drawers in search of a solution. Finally, I found it: a hunter green shirt with Marvin the Martian³ peeking out of a breast pocket. It's subtle, yet reveals a sense



³ Source: images.google.com

of humor and an appreciation for pop culture. And it went very nicely with my black hoodie sweatshirt and black Keds.

On to the hair. For those of you who do not yet know me, my hair is perhaps my defining feature. First of all, it is red. Not Elmo red. More like Burnt Sienna, in Crayola-speak. Second of all, it is very curly, which means nice, tight ringlets on cold days and wild, puffy frizz on hot or rainy days. Third of all, it is very long—to the top of my butt crack when it’s wet (my hair, that is). So far so good, right? Well, here’s the catch: it is also very thin, which means it is not heavy enough to cascade down my back as I fantasize it will after I emerge from the shower, locks dripping. When my hair dries and it loses the weight of the water it was holding, the tresses shrink, thus turning into a nest of pubic coils that expands out from my head, rather than down my back. And nest is the appropriate descriptor, as living things often alight upon my kinky poof in search of a new home.⁴

Anyway, as a result of my particular hair temperament—let’s call it uncooperative—I did not often have many options when it came to styles. Basically, I could let it hang and spend the day choking on rogue strands, or I could wet it and pull it back into some kind of ponytail. With summerlike weather, I thought it best to go with the latter—a top mount, high on my head, with curly tendrils tickling my neck. *Not only is this girl fun, but she isn’t afraid to get dirty!* I chose the black and gold beaded scrunchie I had bought during a street fair in Little Italy—my favorite because it didn’t give me a headache. With a few swipes of strawberry ChapStick® (great sweet smell

⁴ Once, on vacation in the mountains of North Carolina, I was asked by our hiking guide where I got my lovely “hair beads,” which actually turned out to be a colony of ladybugs.

and taste, unless you are allergic to bees) and a dollop of sunblock (I am really, really fair-skinned—my high school nickname was Casper—and therefore a mecca for sun spots and skin cancers), I was out the door.

During the ten-minute drive to A Hole In One, I tried not to get anxious about the fact that my whole life was riding on the impression I would make today. This man was my future—The One. He just didn't know it yet. And it was my job to convince him. If today's date did not go well...*Breathe, Abbe. Breathe.*

I pulled into the parking lot and spied his green minivan immediately. Oh my God! He was here before me—how was that possible? No one *ever* got anywhere before me. This was not a good omen. I got out of my white hatchback, picked some random lint from my pants, and began to walk toward the entrance. Suddenly, I heard a noise not unlike the approach of a cavalry, which turned out to be a blur of long red hair, atop yellow and pink dresses and blinking sneakers galloping toward me while yelling, “She’s here, Daddy! She’s here!” At first it was difficult to believe there were only two of them—all that noise and color—but when they reached me, they pulled up short, and, slightly out of breath, shyly said my name.

“Hi girls,” I said smiling, and, remembering the advice of one of the six books I was reading on the subject, knelt down to face them eye to eye. I took a deep breath and offered a silent prayer. *Please like me.*

“I love your shirt!” one of them chirped. “Marvin is so funny!”

“And cranky,” the other one added.

“Do you want to know why he’s so cranky?” I asked, delighting in the immediate widening of two sets of identical cornflower blue eyes.

“Why?” they said in unison.

“Because,” I said dropping to a whisper which resulted in both girls leaning closer to me. “He can’t see Mars.”⁵

“Why not?” they asked, again in one voice.

“Well,” I said pausing for effect. “It’s daytime.”

“Ohhhhh,” they gasped, and then started to giggle. “Daddy! Look who’s on Abbe’s shirt!”

Pleased that my wardrobe choice had been so successful, I stood up to meet Jay’s laughing eyes. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all. “Sorry we’re so early. They’ve been begging to leave since seven o’clock. They didn’t want to be late.” He reached out and squeezed my elbow tenderly. “They made me do their hair three times.”

Not recalling their coifs, I glanced down at their heads only to discover two unremarkable (but identically colored) elastic bands encircling bunchy, not-quite-centered ponytails, which actually looked like they might be painful.

“You did a nice job,” I said to Jay who responded with a half-shrug.

“I’m still getting the hang of it,” he said apologetically. “I’m not so good with braids.”

“We wanna wear our hair like yours!” came the chorus from below.

“Ok!” I said, joining in the excitement. *They are so easy to please!* “But first let’s get some lunch.”

The sudden deflation of energy told me that I had been overconfident. And then the disheartening realization: *They are so easy to disappoint!*

⁵ This is the real reason. I looked it up.

One of the girls started kicking sand with the toe of her sneaker, setting off a blue and pink light show. Staring at the ground, she said under her breath, softly, but *very* clearly: “Hair first.”

I squatted down again to twin-level, trying to decide how best to handle my gaffe. I peeked up at Jay, who shrugged again (that gesture was moving from endearing to irritating with lightning speed). My library of “How Not to Be a Stepmonster” literature espoused widely variant philosophies concerning Daddy’s girlfriend’s role. Some suggested that the newcomer be strictly a playmate—almost like a pet—and let the parent do all of the discipline and decision-making. Others recommended jumping right in as parent #3, letting the children know immediately that she commands the same respect as Mom and Dad. A few even proposed avoiding them altogether, until they were more comfortable with their new family configuration. Most books warned of the manipulation factor—how easy it was to give in to the children’s wants in order to be liked, and how hard that habit was to break in later months—that is, if the relationship were to beat the overwhelming odds and survive that long. None of the aforementioned reading material proved to be any help in my situation. I simply had no idea how these kids reacted to adults. I simply had no idea how *any* kids reacted to adults. To be honest, at 26, *I* was still reacting to adults.

My experience with kids: (1) dealing with my younger brother, which mostly involved avoiding him and his lizard-limb collection, and (2) babysitting one summer for two boys who refused to wear clothing and who had a penchant for tossing their

hamsters from the second floor landing, while I scrambled at the foot of the stairs to catch them.⁶ I was thus woefully unprepared for taking on Jay's six-year-old twins.

Zoom in on me kneeling in the parking lot of the bagel store, faced with my first parenting dilemma. If the literature on the matter was to be believed, how I handled this situation would shape my relationship with the twins (and possibly, their father) for the rest of our lives. I could feel my heart quicken as I closed my eyes and let the words tumble out. "We don't have to eat right now. Let's do your hair!"

"Yay!" the girls cheered.

"Sounds like a plan!" Jay joined in. Then he leaned into me and said, "I'll get some bagels to go." Catastrophe averted. I could breathe again.

I followed Jay back to his parents' house, where he was staying until he (we?) found a more permanent abode. As soon as I pulled into the driveway, the girls swarmed to my car. They were in a heated discussion:

"Me first!"

"No, me first!"

"I get to go first!"

"You always go first—it's my turn."

"No *you* always go first."

"Do not."

"Do too."

I was, at first, entertained by this exchange, until I realized that I was to be the arbiter of justice. Then I was momentarily panicked. *How do I choose?* I scanned the

⁶ That job lasted only three weeks, after which my record of perfect catches ended in tragedy.

scene for Jay, but he, as was to become his modus operandi, had disappeared just when things got dicey.

“Abbe?” The girls were tugging on my shirt. “Who goes first?”

I looked down at their freckled faces—positively angelic—and experienced a vision. Singing to the bluebird perched on my finger, I was a red-headed Snow White (a bit fuller in the face and derrière, but still recognizable as the lovely naïf), surrounded by joyful woodland creatures, including my beautiful, twin stepdaughters, each in high-ponytails and Marvin shirts,⁷ who stared at me adoringly as flowers danced all around us.

“Abbe?”

Their wrinkled brows snapped me out of my trance and brought me back to the situation at hand.

“Pick me!” one of them said earnestly. “I never get to go first.”

“That is such a lie! You always go first.”

Vision #2: I am the evil queen in the black cloak (admittedly much more my style than Snow’s white and yellow frock) and weird hairnet (perhaps she had my kind of hair, which would have to be tamped down in order to wear a crown) scheming in the mirror while terrified twins in chains huddled in the dark, weeping for their mother.

There was definitely a right way to handle this situation. I just didn’t have any clue what that was. I only knew I couldn’t make a mistake. Not this early in the game—not when I didn’t have any trust or love banked with which to trade for forgiveness.

“How ‘bout we flip a coin?” I offered. That always worked for football teams.

⁷ Mixing Warner Bros. and Disney characters is bad form—I apologize.

“Okay!” they exclaimed good-naturedly. *Phew! That wasn't so hard.* And then, as I dug in my purse for a quarter:

“I call heads!”

“No, I want heads!”

“You always get to be heads!”

Realizing that we were headed for an entire day of “eeny meeny miny mo” and “rock paper scissors,” I opted for a bit of manipulation.

“Alright, girls. This isn't such a big deal. I can do both of you at the same time.” I recognized that this was just semantics—somebody would have to go first at some point—but I was getting hot and hungry.

“Yay!” they shouted in unison as they dragged me up the driveway. “This is going to be so fun!”

“It sure will!” I agreed, while scrambling to figure out how to do a four-handed job with only two hands.

“Anybody hungry?” Jay asked, cream cheese in the corner of his mouth, as I was towed into the kitchen.

“Yes!” I said catching a whiff of fresh bagels and beginning to salivate.

“Not yet!” the girls said together.

“I can wait,” I said over my shoulder as I was led away from the food and up the stairs into the guest bedroom where the girls plopped onto the bed and stared at me expectantly. The clock on the night table said 12:15. Was this possible? It had only been an hour?

One of the twins grabbed a brush from the dresser as they both stared at me.

Now what?

“Okay,” I said sitting on the edge of the bed and inhaling deeply, “Here’s how this works: We all sit in a line.”

“Who sits next to you?” one of them interrupted.

“You both do. I’m in the middle.”

The girls quickly shuffled to either side of me. “Now,” I began slowly, “we all turn to the right.” The troops obeyed instantly.

You may have noticed that I have been calling my charges “the twins” or “the girls” up to this point. This is because I did not yet know which one was who. I suspected that the one in front of me was Danielle, but I wasn’t willing to get that one wrong. *Where the hell is Jay?*

“What do we do now?” the one behind me said impatiently.

“Now.....we.....” A loud rumble from my stomach broke the silence reminding me that, if these girls had short hair, we’d now be eating bagels and lox with hot coffee. “We proclaim our readiness!”

“What’s that?” they asked, again—I swear this is true—in perfect unison.

“It means we announce the new hairstyle so Daddy will know to come up here and see it. Like this: Abbe is ready for a new do!” I shouted this gleefully so it would seem like a bona fide part of the activity (and loudly so Jay’s curiosity might cause him to come upstairs).

And then, magically, from behind me: “Nicky is ready for a new do!”

I poked Danielle gently in the ribs. “Your turn.”

“Dani is ready for a new do!”

“Then let the wild rumpus begin!” I exclaimed, wondering if they had read Maurice Sendak.

“Yay!” they cheered. *This is working. I am going to make this happen.*

“Nicky, you pull the scrunchie out of my hair while I pull Dani’s out. Then we turn to the left for step two.”

Tiny fingers grabbed my ponytail and wrenched the beaded elastic, still bound to a clump of my hair, from my head.

“Done!” Nicky declared, waving her prize. Resisting the urge to ask if my head was bleeding, I blinked back tears of pain and gently pried the rubber band from Dani’s ponytail.

“Okay. Switch!” I said, and we all turned our bodies to face the window. “Now Dani *gently* brushes my hair while I remove Nicky’s rubber band.”

After this step, which went much less painfully than the previous one, we again switched directions so I could brush out Dani’s hair, while Nicky took her turn brushing—more accurately raking—mine. I began to worry about ending this date with a bald spot. Then, with one final position change, I brushed Nicky’s hair while Dani checked my ends for splitting—a ridiculous job, I know, but they went along with it without a question. It seemed I had found a way to circumvent the Sequence Dilemma, which would always be an issue for this set of identical twins, and increasingly challenging as the years went by.⁸

⁸ We are currently dreading Sequence Dilemma #7306: Given that both are living with longtime boyfriends, who gets married first?

Back to the guest bedroom: at this point, with knotless hair, we three were ready for the high ponytail. I was just trying to figure out how to do them both at the same time when Jay appeared.

“Da Da!” came the chorus. “We’re doing our hair!”

“I see that,” he said, sipping from a yellow coffee mug. “I came for the big finale.”

“You may need to put down your cup,” I said, eyeing it longingly. “We need some more hands.”

“No problem,” he said. And then, a soft voice from behind me said, “Can I wear your scrunchie, Abbe?”

I turned around to look at Nicky’s bright blue orbs twinkling with what I then took to be innocence. “Sure, sweetie.”

No sooner had the words come out of my mouth than a wailing, “But what about me? I want to wear that one tooooooo....” erupted from my right.

“I asked first,” Nicky said and promptly put my scrunchie around her wrist for safekeeping. *Possession is nine tenths of the law.* “You’ll get it next time.”

“But that’s too long!” Dani cried. “She always gets everything!” And then there was an explosion of angst followed by rivulets of tears and snot. It was utterly astonishing how a perfectly dry child could become so completely soaked and gooey without the aid of a bathing environment or inclement weather.

“Wow,” I said to Jay. “She seems *really* upset.”

“She is,” he whispered and then rushed to comfort her. Nicky, meanwhile, seized this opportunity to jump off the bed and stand next to me. “Can you do my

ponytail now?” she said smiling beatifically up at me. *You got me in my own game—well done!*

Not wanting to exacerbate Dani’s anguish, I told Nicky we should wait until her sister settled down, despite my desire to reward such clever, and dare I say Abbe-like, scheming.

“Maybe they can share it?” Jay offered hopefully, as Dani blew her nose in his sleeve.

“How?” Dani whined.

“I’m wearing it first!” Nicky chirped.

I imagined spending the remainder of the day sitting by an egg timer while each twin took her turn parading around in my scrunchie. The thought wasn’t entirely unappealing—I could probably eat a nice breakfast and drink a hot cup of coffee or two in between the ponytail changes.

“Or,” Jay pressed on, “We could buy another one just like it.”

Danielle suddenly perked up. “Could we?”

“That might not be so easy,” I replied. “I got this one on the street in New York.”

“That’s okay,” Jay said, throwing me a “just play along” look. “I know where the street vendors get them from.”

“Where?” came the chorus.

“At the mall,” he said, rising to his feet. “At Claire’s.”

“We love Claire’s!” came the unified declaration. Then both girls barreled into Jay’s legs, which they hugged fiercely. Impressed, I nodded at my dates, celebrating as if they had just been told they had won a puppy.

“Yes,” I said to Jay, “I’ve read that the mall is world renowned for its scrunchies. I think there’s even a jitney that leaves the city for East Brunswick every Saturday for collectors.”

“Can we have our bagels before we go?” I asked hopefully.

“I’m not hungry!” Nicky responded.

“Me neither!” Dani echoed.

And with that, we piled into the van—my stomach aroar with the acidic demand for sustenance—on our search for scrunchies. I must admit I was not very optimistic about this field trip. I didn’t believe we’d find a similar enough hairband to please the girls, and, even if we did, there would still be the issue of who gets to wear mine and who gets stuck with the ersatz scrunchie. On a more positive note, malls had lots of places to grab a slice of pizza or cookie for on-the-go munching, so I would no longer have to worry about passing out from starvation.

Amazingly, Claire’s turned out to be a veritable scrunchie emporium. There were several beaded ones like the one I sported, and the girls were delighted with the options. In fact, they liked the selection so much, they each opted for their own, which solved the problem of who would get to wear mine. After our purchases, I quickly did their hair (they were so enthralled with their acquisitions they forgot to fight over sequence), and then, finally, it seemed we could turn our attention to food. The twins

must be starving, I postulated, having not eaten anything but a Pop-Tart all day. And what kid doesn't love mall food?

"Are we going to the movie now?" Dani asked.

"Didn't we miss it?" I said, pushing my lower lip forward as a sign of disappointment, while secretly begging whatever deities were in earshot to pull the plug on any projector within a ten-mile radius.

"We missed the 1:00," Jay said. But I think there's a 2:00 we can catch."

I looked at my watch—1:30. "Will we have enough time to get to the theatre?" I said, choking on the bits of saliva trapped in my dry mouth.

"You're silly, Abbe!" Nicky sang. The movie is right *there!*

Following the direction of her pink-polished pointer, I saw that, indeed, not fifty steps from Claire's, was the East Brunswick Cinema.

"Can we go, Daddy?"

"Only if it's okay with Abbe," Jay said, and, before I could glare at him for yet another abdication, the split screen appeared: (1) Lovely, sweet Snow White, holding the hands of her darling twins, dancing with deer and chipmunks into the theatre. (2) Rotten, evil queen, narrowing her dark eyes at the cowering twins, before waving her snake-headed scepter at the movie theatre, causing it to burst into flames.⁹

And there they were again: those innocent blue eyes, peering anxiously up at me, who would decide their fate.

"Of course we can see the movie!" I said a bit manically, to which the girls responded, in stereo:

⁹ To be honest, I was beginning to wonder if the Evil Queen had been horribly misunderstood. Did anyone ever consider the possibility that her attitude was related to plummeting blood sugar levels?

“Yay!”

And so I found myself being towed at breakneck speed into the cinema, where I was immediately assaulted by the smell of overly buttered popcorn. I felt a pool of drool form under my tongue as I imagined the salty morsels dissolving in my mouth. Had I ever been this hungry?

My gastronomic fantasy was abruptly shattered by one of the twin’s shrieking: “Daddy! Look at that line! We’ll never get in!”

Reluctantly, I turned away from the concession area to witness what appeared to be an elementary school riot—kids everywhere screaming and tugging on their chaperones’ arms, legs, shorts, shirts while soda sloshed out of overfilled cups. Amid the excited chatter of the children, I overheard a few adult voices: “Get back here this instant!” “Do you have to go to the potty?” “One more word and you are in time out!” A trail of gummy somethings (bears? fish?) and popcorn littered the festive carpet. Melted chocolate was stuck on every visible surface, including the walls. The sounds of regurgitation echoed from an alcove on my left. It was, in short, sensory overload.

The twins looked positively stricken—as I’m sure I did too—but Jay seemed relatively unruffled. “Don’t worry girls. It’s a big theatre. There’s plenty of room for everybody.”

“But we’re all the way in the baaaack,” Danielle whimpered, her lower lip trembling ever so slightly.

“Well, if we hurry up and get in line, we won’t be in the back anymore,” Jay said confidently. I turned to stare at the concession stand, and then slowly followed my

dates into the dark abyss of popcorn breath, poopy diapers, and sweaty parents awaiting Disney's latest release.

When we got to our spot in the crowd, my mild claustrophobia kicked in, and my heart started to thud loudly in my ears. *I cannot have a panic attack on our first date*, I told myself, and searched for a distraction from the heat of so much nearness. About five feet away, a toddler dropped her box of Junior Mints and picked up a piece of popcorn from the floor. She studied it for a few moments before popping it into her mouth. Then she spotted another piece of popcorn a few feet away and skipped to it gleefully. *She'll never go hungry*, I decided enviously and then, a more sinister thought arose: *I could swipe the Junior Mints while she forages for discarded popcorn, and no one would be the wiser!*

Ever so stealthily, I crept a few steps to my left, all the while reminding myself that (1) she obviously wasn't planning to eat the mints as she left the box on the floor, and (2) toddlers should not be eating junior mints anyway—they could choke. Inches from my prize, I heard my name.

“Abbe? Where are you going?”

“Nowhere,” I stammered peering down at my captor. “Just getting a little air.”

“Yeah. It's really stuffy in here,” Nicky said. “And my feet hurt from standing so long. I wish there was a place to sit down.”

“Your wish is my command,” I declared, dropping to one knee. “I believe you asked for a bench?”

With a huge grin, Nicole hopped on my knee and put her arm around my shoulder. “Thank you! That’s so nice of you!” she said with genuine gratitude. Then she leaned in and whispered: “Daddy was right. You are *so* much fun to play with.”

“You are too,” I responded, “and so clever. I like the way you think.”

And then it happened—when I least expected it. The first kiss. Soft, feathery, and wet against my cheek, accompanied by a full-body-contact embrace. Tentatively, I reciprocated, wrapping my arms around her slight body, resting my head against hers to inhale her apple pectin shampoo and cinnamon gum. A feeling of serenity washed over me as I accepted her warmth—the first moment of many which would make her my own daughter, *my* lovely Nicole.

I peeked up to see if Jay had witnessed our intimacy, which he must have because he was striding rapidly toward me, a tearful Danielle holding his hand.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Dani wants to sit with you too,” Jay replied sheepishly. “I tried to make her a chair, but it seems *my* knee is substandard.”

“No problem!” I announced as I pulled Nicky flush against my hip thus making room for her sister who hopped aboard joyfully. Grateful for their slight builds and my yoga practice, I remained in bench position for ten minutes. Then, my quadricep started to tremble under the 70-pound twin load. Between the shaking leg, the yowling coming from my food-deprived tummy, and the barely-at-bay claustrophobia (at its peak since I was kneeling among what must have been the entire population of central New Jersey), I was beginning to wonder if I was physically equipped to handle the situation. As much

as I wanted to break in to Jay's inner circle, I didn't know if it was worth ending up in traction.

Just when I thought I would collapse under their weight, the girls began to cheer.

"The line's moving! We're going in! Come on Daddy and Abbe!"

The tide of people carried us to the entrance to the theatre where Jay and the girls immediately bolted for four seats in the middle. Grateful to have a moment, I waved to them and hobbled next to a man carrying a vat of popcorn. Unable to control myself, I snatched two pieces and, ducking down, shoved them in my mouth. Great. Now I was stealing food. What's next? Rummaging through garbage cans in the alley? I tried to get my grandmother's scowl out of my mind as I pushed my way to the seat, in between Nicky and Dani, they had reserved for me.

For those of you who have not yet had the opportunity to see *The Lion King* (I highly recommend that you do—it's one of Disney's most beautiful efforts), you may wish to skip the next paragraph or two, as I am about to reveal an important plot point: Within the first fifteen minutes of the opening song (which showcases the cutest lion cub sneeze ever committed to celluloid), the cub's daddy, Mufasa, is killed in a brutal stampede. Now the higher-ups at Disney may have felt that, so early in the movie, no one could possibly become so attached to a character that his death could be traumatic to its viewers. Well, those people should be fired and made to serve hundreds of hours of community service consoling other people's sobbing children.

Yes, you know where this is going. My little dates, happily singing and dancing to the opening number, burst into the loudest, wettest show of empathy I have ever witnessed when Mufasa died. They were wailing and hiccupping and snorting with

genuine grief, and I was their sole source of comfort as Jay, apparently suffering from movie-induced narcolepsy, had once again found a way to avoid trouble.

Pulling them both into my lap, I began to rock them and stroke their backs.

“Shhhh. It’s going to be okay. Don’t worry, Simba will be just fine, I promise.”

“But he doesn’t have a daddy anymore!” Dani sobbed.

“Yes he does. He’ll always have his daddy,” I said, tears slipping down my own cheeks. “His daddy loves him so much he will always be with him,” I choked and then I had to stop talking because I was really crying. I’m not sure if it was the hunger, my aching legs, the claustrophobia, or my tingling scalp, but I suddenly felt like I couldn’t handle one more difficult moment. My senses were utterly overwhelmed with movie theatre smells, cartoon animals singing and dancing in the jungle, and two beautiful little redheads clinging to my shirt—the shirt of a stranger who was in love with their father and wanted to build a life with him and with them, but who knew absolutely nothing about how to do that—and so I cried with them. I cried for Mufasa, who died, and for Simba, who lost his father, and for the twins, whose parents split apart, and for myself, who was going to have to figure this all out quickly, on the fly, and on my own.

“Why are you crying, Abbe?” Dani asked, looking into my red eyes. I paused to collect myself before I answered her, and, when I finally did, I surprised myself.

“Because you are, sweetie. It hurts me to see you sad.”

And then, another surprise: Unlike her sister’s sweet, soft peck, Danielle’s kiss was strong and committed—full of gratitude and warmth—and persisted against my cheek for at least twenty seconds.

“Should we go?” I whispered into her hair. “We don’t have to stay until the end.”

“I wanna stay, but can I stay on your lap for the whole time?” Danielle said shyly.

“Me too,” chirped Nicky.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said, squeezing my girls.

An hour later, after the villainous lion was killed and harmony was restored to animated Africa, we all turned to look at Jay, blissfully asleep, ignorant to what was lost and gained in his absence. The girls delightedly pounced on him and, at Burger King, (finally, food!) provided a full synopsis of the film, including a rousing performance of *Hakuna Matata*.¹⁰ Interestingly, when they came to the tragic part, they skimmed right over it with no mention of either their reaction or our intimacy. It occurred to me then that what they would remember about this day (sitting on my knee in the lobby and all of the words to every *Lion King* song) and what I would remember (falling in love with each and both of them) was the beginning of us—the first of a timeline of memories, both private and shared, that would make our foursome a family. Now, if I were to ask the girls when it all began, I suspect they would find it difficult to remember a time when we weren’t together. But I do. I clearly remember the line of demarcation—when I no longer worried that I wouldn’t be enough to win them over; when I knew that, although I couldn’t mend the tear in their nuclear family, I could offer them comfort and

¹⁰ A Swahili phrase meaning “no worries.”

love and support and be a worthy addition to their lives; when I stopped looking at them from the outside and allowed them to take me in.

When I returned home that night, I was dismayed to find that I was not relieved the day was over. Instead of treasuring my solitude, I found I missed the colors and the sweet fruity smells and the feel of their heads under my chin and the sound of their voices pleading with me to stay longer. It was the best first date I ever had and, as it turns out, the last first date I would ever have.

The next morning, a Sunday, I was awakened at seven by a phone call from the girls asking me if I was available to play. My heart soaring, I replied, “Absolutely!” And, as would be the case for the next twenty years, I packed a bag filled with tissues, extra scrunchies, and *lots* of snacks.

TRIAL SEPARATION

When most people undertake a new task, they employ their eyes, ears, and hands in the process. For example, when learning to saddle a horse, the majority of the population grabs the saddle and heads to the barn to figure it out. I, however, am what I call a “biblio-learner,” which means I prefer to acquire knowledge, not through my senses, but through books. As such, when given the aforementioned challenge, I also begin in Barnes—and Noble, where I buy every volume written in the last decade on equine care including, but certainly not limited to, feeding, grooming, riding, showing, breeding, buying, selling, and a slim, grim primer on euthanasia.

As one would therefore expect, when it came to learning how to parent my husband’s daughters, with whom I had been living for several months, I began at the library. In fact, I spent three full days in the East Brunswick branch exhausting not only all of the literature on parenting, but also each of the four supremely patient librarians, one of whom became so panicked upon my diurnal approach that she actually ducked behind the reference desk, whacking her arm against a cart in the process. Thereafter, she always massaged her shoulder whenever she saw me, no doubt reminding herself of my painfully thorough research skills.

A dedicated student, I threw myself into this, my most momentous assignment.¹¹ Every minute when I wasn’t driving the girls to and from school, preparing their meals,

¹¹ Plus, I had quit my job to be more available to the girls, especially since Jay was commuting to and from New York, and their mother had started a full-time job.

helping them with homework, or doing their steady accumulation of laundry, I was reading. Books with titles such as *The Joy of Twins; Your Second Grader; Stepparenting: Issues in Theory, Research, and Practice (Volume 108);* and *What Kids Eat* rested on every table and toilet in the house. Note cards littered my desk and the front seat of my car. Highlighters of various hues, one of which impaled Jay while we were making love on the sofa, showed up in our bed, in clothing drawers, and on the rim of the bathtub.

In my Ivy-League experience, one never failed a test if she was well prepared, and I was determined to get this one not just right, but perfect. Not only would I be the most competent stepparent who ever roamed the earth, but I would also be an expert in a variety of relevant subjects, ranging from developmental milestones in the toddler years (never mind that Jay's daughters were seven) to the New Jersey elementary science curriculum. I would leave no stone unturned. I would not screw this up.

To this end, I typed, using my texts for reference, and laminated (twins spill twice as much juice twice as often) a list of the most important teachings to use as a readily accessible guide in my stepmothering endeavors. Towards the top of the list was "Focus on helping twins to develop separately" which, judging by the sheer number of mentions in my books, I had come to understand was positively crucial in the rearing of emotionally healthy children. I immediately switched highlighters—I believe I chose pink—to underscore the resounding importance of the strategies to be utilized in this regard, all of which can be summed up by the following command: Encourage the children to *insert any verb here* differently. One book went so far as to suggest that, if a parent did not help her children "individuate," all else was lost. *All else was lost!* There

was simply no way I would allow this to happen in my household. Individuation would take center stage from this point forward. In fact, nothing else would happen until everyone—including Jay and I—had individuated successfully.

If you are wondering what this means exactly, here's the *CliffsNotes*: The process of individuation—by which people learn to distinguish their identities from others—is key in a child's social development and is especially difficult for identical twins because they are often seen as two parts of one person. This is compounded by the fact that even family members have difficulty distinguishing between them. We still chuckle at the memory of our nephew addressing both girls as NickyDani until he was sixteen. Even Jay had a great deal of trouble, especially during bath time when there were no clothing-based cheat sheets. A fairly recurrent exchange would begin with Jay's stern command for "Dani" to get out of the tub.

"I'm Nicky," the offending child would chirp. "Dani's getting dressed."

Or vice versa.

When I got irritated with Jay for his error, he shrugged. "Naked and wet, they look exactly the same."

But the thing is, they didn't look the same to me. After our first date, which was initially tricky, in twenty years of step-parenting, I have never once confused them. For starters, their skulls are shaped differently (we've always called Dani "blockhead"). Also, Nicky has always been fuller in the face. As children, Dani had more freckles, and Nicky's shoulders were more rounded. And their voices, even over the phone, are quite distinct (Dani's is higher, slightly more nasal, and bouncier, while Nicky's is lower and

throatier). Which is why I used to get so aggravated when, before the days of caller ID, Jay would respond to “Hi Daddy!” with “Which one is this?”

Outsiders, especially, couldn’t tell the girls apart and often wouldn’t even try. This socially acceptable joke nonetheless offended me, and when, once, in the carpool line, a mom innocently remarked that she didn’t know how I could tell who was who, I casually responded that I couldn’t tell the difference between her kids either.

“But mine are different sexes,” she said, recoiling.

“Oh are they?” I sniped. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Upon sharing this story with Jay, he expressed his concern that, if I continued to be so sensitive, I probably wouldn’t make many friends.

“But how can they hope to individuate when everyone in the world treats them like they are one person?”

“I see your point,” Jay conceded and touched my cheek soothingly. It was so nice to have somebody understand my plight.

One of the books—I think it was *Double Duty*—remarked, somewhat casually, that despite everyone else’s predisposition to mistake one twin for the other, a mother always knows. *A mother always knows*. And I always know! I interpreted that (and the fact that the girls—freckled redheads with toothy grins and full lips—look so much like me) as a sign from above. These twins were destined to be mine.

And so I felt it my divinely-bestowed role to rescue the girls from the unbearable injustice foisted upon them almost daily. When Jay inquired about dinner one evening, I excitedly revealed my plans:

“You and Nicky are having pasta, and Dani and I are having scrambled eggs.”

He smiled at me so tenderly I felt my body warm. “Ok. Just don’t be upset if the same thing happens as last night.”

I frowned at the recollection of yesterday’s dinner disaster, during which I made my first attempt to help the girls develop individual tastes. Suffice it to say that the meal ended in a lot of crying—each twin only wanted what her sister was eating—and a trip to the local Burger King, which was the only way they would be consoled.

“Maybe it would be easier to start with something smaller,” Jay said while the girls were happily biting into cheeseburgers.

“Like what?” I said miserably.

“I don’t know. Like ice cream. Girls, do you want to go to Magnifico’s for dessert?”

But when we went to the window to order, both wanted mint chocolate chip on a sugar cone.

“Nicky, why don’t you try a new flavor?” I ventured. “What about chocolate chip cookie dough?”

“No thanks,” she said.

“It’s kind of like mint chocolate chip. Or what about plain chocolate?”

“I like mint chocolate chip the best,” she said without thought.

“Okay Dani. What about you? How about trying something different?”

“Nooo,” she whined. “I want mint chocolate chip too.”

“How about a different cone?” I said helplessly. “Or a cup?”

“Yeah!” came the excited chorus. “We want a cup!”

It didn't take long for my mission to devolve into obsession. Oppressed by the implication that if I didn't get this fundamental parenting skill right, all else would be lost, I was determined to remove the scepter of duplication from our world. With my lack of success in the kitchen, I decided to focus on other arenas where we would become a veritable collection of drummers marching to our own beats. Pioneers and innovators, one and all.

Jay, forever the good sport, fully supported my well-intentioned despotry of which the twins remained unabashedly unaware. They saw me as a new playmate—a comical buddy who loved to do all of the voices in a Dr. Seuss story. Someone who cooed over their drawings and allowed them to brush (read: knot) her hair as much as they wanted. A pal always willing to erect a tent in the living room or to let them use her laptop to write books of their own. I was an energetic, silly, wild-haired ball of fun (except at mealtime), and they had learned to expect a good time whenever I was involved.

“Girls,” I said at the breakfast table one Saturday morning as I served up identical hard-boiled eggs in identical blue bowls, “would you like to go on an adventure today?”

Their blue eyes widened as I continued my seduction.

“I was thinking we'd go shopping for school clothes!” I exclaimed, my own eyes dancing. I knew this wouldn't be a difficult sell.

“Shopping! Yay!” they shouted simultaneously.

“Ok. But remember, this is not going to be a typical shopping experience. It's going to be an *adventure*,” I said, stretching out the last word in a breathless whisper.

The twins, egg yolk in the corners of their mouths, smiled gleefully and proclaimed, as if on cue: “We love adventures!”

When we arrived at Kids“R”Us, I was fairly optimistic that my plan might work. Nicky and Dani were in excellent spirits—supremely cooperative and helpful—and had not yet engaged in any major disagreements. They were wearing the same pink leggings and blue-hearted tee shirts, but they had allowed me to put Dani’s hair in a high ponytail while Nicky’s I had fashioned into two Pippi-Longstocking braids. Individuation was just a step away. I could feel it.

Once we walked into the store, however, my hopes began to deflate. Both girls immediately ran to the sweater rack which housed cable knits in a minimum of ten vibrant colors.

“These are pretty,” I said. “Why don’t you each pick one.”

Each girl grabbed a light blue sweater and held it out to me.

“Oh, that’s a nice color. But don’t you think that purple one is even nicer?” I said to Danielle.

“I like the blue one,” she said.

“Me too,” said Nicky.

“Ok. Why doesn’t one of you pick a different shade of blue? Then you can share both. How about this?” I asked, waving a navy blue one.

“I don’t like that color blue,” Nicky said.

“Me neither,” Dani said.

“Ok,” I said, struggling to hide my disappointment. “Remember how I said this was going to be an adventure?”

Two heads bobbed up and down in agreement.

“Well, going on an adventure means doing something different than what you are used to or comfortable with, right?”

Again, two heads bobbed, albeit less enthusiastically.

“So,” I took a deep breath, “maybe you shouldn’t both get the exact same clothes this time. Maybe, for an adventure, you should try to be different from one another.”

“Nooooo,” Dani said tearfully. “We like to be same and same.”

“Oh sweetie,” I said, kneeling down to kiss her freckled cheek. “Don’t get upset. We’ll still get the light blue one. I just think we should get another color too.”

“Blue is my favorite color,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. I thought about pushing it further, trying to appeal to some sense of reason, but their trust of me was still so new. It just wasn’t worth risking that. Besides, I had promised them a good time, which, this outing was hardly turning out to be for any of us.

“Alright,” I said standing. “Two light blue sweaters it is.”

“Yay! Thank you!” they both cheered, and it was hard not to feel like a bit of a heel taking advantage of their naïveté to appear heroic. Guiltily, I swept them up in my arms and promised them matching socks, shoes, and belts as well as mint chocolate chip ice cream (in a cup) after our spree.

Same and same. For the next several days, these words tumbled in my head like sneakers in the dryer. How do I combat such adorably packaged resistance? Especially

when it didn't seem a fight worth waging to their biological parents. A conversation I had with their mother:

ME: I'm trying to get the girls to try something separately.

LAUREN: Why?

ME: So they begin to think of themselves as individuals.

LAUREN: They already know they are individuals.

ME: But they always do everything the same. They even have to pee at the same time.

LAUREN: I know, isn't that funny?

ME: But don't you think that's a little strange?

LAUREN: Not if they had the same amount to drink.

This was precisely what the books had warned about! Even their own mother thought of them as a single unit. The more I thought about it, the more I realized what a disservice had been done to the girls. I became more determined than ever to lobby for their right to individuate.

"But they don't seem to *want* to individuate," Jay said while stroking my back.

"They're just kids. They don't always know what is best for them. That's why they need parents," I said, turning my head to glower at him.

So I continued my quest to pry my stepchildren apart, although my attempts became subtler, and I handled each ensuing failure with significantly more grace. Occasionally, however, something would send me over the edge. One such event took place that summer when their camp counselor posed Nicky and Dani together for their picture even though every other child in the bunk sat for her own individual portrait.

The twins didn't seem to mind, but I was incensed. When I confronted the offending counselor, she shrugged and said she figured we'd want it that way. Why wouldn't we want a picture of *each* of our children? And more importantly, weren't the girls entitled to separate mementos of their summer experience? "Well," she said apologetically, "it's the way we've always done it."

When I got back to Jay's house that afternoon, I scanned all of the photos on his dresser. Sure enough, there wasn't one image of either twin without her sister. I was incredulous. Is this how the world sees them—as one being with two heads? Had anyone ever documented them apart? What would happen when the girls one day moved into their own homes? Would they spend an afternoon halving photos? Or would they flip a coin for each shot?¹²

The next day, in my first camp-related act as a parent, I requested that the girls be allowed to sit separately for makeup photos. If it's one portrait per customer, I argued, then we should have to pay only one tuition. Needless to say, when the summer ended, I had two adorable pictures--one of Danielle and one of Nicole—each wearing the same red tee shirt, identical denim shorts, and identical braids. The girls, however, for a reason I couldn't then discern, hated those photos, so I never framed them.

Another instance of what I felt was supreme insensitivity to my girls' individual identities occurred after their eighth birthday party when we were at home opening presents. One large box, festively wrapped in multicolored tissue paper with a beautiful matching ribbon, stood out from the others. The twins were immediately drawn to the lovely package, and both began tugging the bow with delight.

¹² When they moved out of the house, we spent a small fortune having copies made at Target. Thankfully, with the advent of the digital age, we no longer have this problem.

“Read the card first,” I said, thinking of the thank-you notes I would be forcing the girls to write, “so we’ll know who it’s from.”

“It says, ‘Happy Birthday, Girls. Enjoy!’” Nicky and Dani read in perfect unison. But before I could inquire about the author, they had shredded the wrapping and opened the box. Together, the girls removed its contents—a lace-trimmed, cornflower blue dress—and held it up by its poofy sleeves.

“Oooh,” came the simultaneous gasp. “Pretty.”

And it was. In fact, it was gorgeous. Any eight-year-old girl’s dream.

“What’s the other one look like?” I asked.

“There is no other one,” Nicky said, riffling through the tissue paper.

“What do you mean? There must be another one!” My voice sounded shrill, even to me.

“I think they’re meant to share it,” Jay said ruefully.

“How?” I practically shouted. “Nicky gets it Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and Dani gets it Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays? That makes no sense!”

“Who gets it on Sundays?” Danielle asked with some concern. There was a lengthy pause while we all considered the situation. I could see Jay glancing at the girls who looked dangerously close to tears. I felt the lump rise in my own throat.

“I do,” Jay announced. “And I get to wear the tights with it.”

The girls erupted in giggles and pounced on their father who looked up at me and winked.

That night in bed I said, “You really made them feel better today. You’re their hero.”

“I don’t think they were so upset.”

“Yes, they were, Jay. Did you see Dani’s face? She was on the verge.”

“Yes, but not for the reason you think.”

“You don’t think that present upset them?”

“No, I don’t. They’re used to sharing clothes. They like that.”

“So why were they upset?”

“They saw how upset you got. They really love you, and when you get distressed, they react to it.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “They know how much you care about them. They can feel your desire to please them. To make everything perfect for them.” Tears slipped down my cheeks as I let my husband hold me. “You don’t have to try quite so hard.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I conceded softly. “Maybe I did overreact a little.”

Jay caressed my face, catching my tears with his calloused thumb. “Just a little.”

“I’m gonna lighten up.”

“That would be good.”

But as I fell asleep with the small of my back pressed into Jay’s stomach, I indulged one last fantasy of the thank you note my girls would write to the offending parent:

Dear Mrs. Scrooge,
Thank you for the pretty dress you got us for our birthday.
We cut it in half so we can each enjoy it.
Love,
Danielle and Nicole
PS) Our stepmom says you deserve bulging hemorrhoids.

The final chapter in the individuation saga took place one weekend as we prepared to leave Jay's parents' summer home on Long Beach Island. Jay had gotten stuck at work on Friday night so the girls and I had come down in my car. The next morning, Jay drove the van down, arriving before we awoke. Consequently, we would be driving home in two separate cars, a situation which, in my estimation, lent itself naturally to an even split: one parent and one twin per vehicle.

"Who's coming with me?" Jay shouted as he came down the stairs.

"Me!" two voices screamed back.

"But then Abbe will be all alone. Who's gonna ride with her?"

"We will!" came the sweet echo.

"Okay," Jay said good-naturedly. "I'll go with Jerry (Garcia). You guys can follow me."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "This is silly. Nicky, you ride with Daddy, and Dani, you ride with me. This way, nobody has to be alone for such a long drive."

The girls stood between their dad and me, their eyes darting anxiously back and forth. I looked at Jay, silently pleading with him. I concentrated on sending him a telepathic message: *Just this one time. Let's just try.*

"That's a better idea," Jay said after several long moments. "We can stop at the Wawa and switch halfway home," he added brightly.

"I don't want to go without sister," Dani said sniffing.

"Me neither," Nicky said.

"It'll be fun," I interjected quickly. "Like an adventure!"

With that, I produced two rainbow-swirled lollipops from my purse (I had purchased them for just this purpose), and, while the girls were distracted by the task of removing the plastic wrap, Jay and I herded them to the cars.

The first thirty minutes of the trip went astonishingly smoothly—Dani was occupied with her candy and the first four tracks of the Ace of Base CD, which we played over and over. By mile 35, however, the lolly was too sweet, and “I Saw the Sign” no longer inspired any interest.

“Where’s Daddy and Nicky?” she whined.

“Right in front of us, sweetie. See the van?”

“I want to be with them.”

“We will be soon. We’ll be at the WaWa in about twenty minutes.”

“Noooo. I want to be with them now.”

I peered at Dani’s heart-shaped face in the rearview mirror. Drops leaked from the corners of her eyes, and her little, sunburned nose was running.

“I want Nicky,” she said, beginning to cry in earnest.

“She’s right in front of us,” I reported, handing her a tissue.

“What do you think she and Daddy are doing?”

“Probably talking and singing. Just like we were.”

“About what?” she said hiccupping slightly.

“I don’t know. We’ll have to ask them when we’re all together.”

“How much minutes?” she asked, her voice quivering.

“Not many, sweetheart. You’re doing so great. Weren’t we having fun before? Let’s sing some more.”

“Nooooo,” she wailed, and before I could respond, she shrieked, “WHERE ARE THEY?”

In my efforts to console Danielle, somehow I had allowed a few cars to get between Jay’s van and us.

“I can’t see them!” she sobbed.

As if I were a participant in one of those cinematic high speed chases, I jerked the wheel hard to my left and lurched into the passing lane, much to the dismay of the driver behind me, whom I could see cursing and gesturing wildly in my rearview mirror. *Sorry buddy, but this is an emergency.*

“I want Nicky and Daddy,” Danielle continued in a crescendo of genuine grief, and I pressed the pedal against the floor mat. We may die in the process, but I *was* going to end up behind Jay’s Caravan.

As the speedometer hit eighty, Dani shouted, “I see them!” We weaved in and out of traffic—I had never driven with such ferocity—until we caught up to Jay and then, after waving apologetically to the driver on my right, I swerved into place. Clutching the wheel so hard my knuckles ached, I peered back at my stepdaughter who had finally stopped crying. She smiled weakly at me, and I realized, with some shock, that this child and her sister had more power over me than any other human being. And with that awareness came another—so central to parenthood I couldn’t believe none of the books had mentioned it: that they had more control over me than I would ever have over them.

“I’m sorry about that,” I said softly. “We won’t lose them again.”

And we didn't. We stayed so close to Jay's bumper, he must have appeared to be towing us. Or being threatened by us. In either case, we were given quite a wide berth until we reached the WaWa.

As soon as we pulled into the parking lot, Nicky jumped out of the van and galloped to her sister who had managed to extricate herself from my car just as quickly.

"Sister!" they shouted as their petite bodies entwined. The image of them in one another's arms, their faces overcome with joy as they held on to each other—cheek to cheek, eyes squeezed shut against the world—is still poignant to me. I know I have never felt as safe and as loved as did those girls, now women, who still hug one another, cheek to cheek, as if the standard embrace doesn't bring them close enough.

We bought them potato chips and Snapple iced tea, and Jay shared with me his experience with Nicole (she was fine for the first half hour and then, when she saw our car fall behind, she became hysterical). Smiling, I suggested both girls ride with me for the remainder of the trip, and he readily agreed.

And so, less than a car length behind Jay, we made our way back to East Brunswick, the three of us singing "I Saw the Sign." When we got home, I gathered up my parenting books and put them in a box in the basement (where I'm quite sure they still sit); then I made pasta and butter for dinner, which we all ate on identical plates. After, we went to Magnifico's, where we all had mint chocolate chip ice cream in a cup. As I watched my girls enjoy their desserts, I realized that, even if others didn't think of them as individuals, they knew who they were: two people who had a connection like no other—a connection which, as the years would pass, I would come to appreciate and sometimes envy. They have always taken great pride and comfort in their shared

identity, and I now see how much that has contributed to their sense of themselves as adults.

Last month, as I was going through photo albums from the girls' younger years, I came across some pictures of them taken at the day camp they attended for several summers. All of the shots were of both of them with the exception of two photos—one of Nicky and one of Dani, neither smiling. Removing them from their individual slots, I taped the pictures together and slid them back into the book where I can always find them. Side by side. Same and same.

CHRISTENING

I have creative parents. Creative parents, who, once they have made a creative choice, seldom see the need to alter it. This can spell disaster. Or, in my case, A-B-B-E. No, that is not a typo. That is how you spell my name. Which is not short for Abigail. What's that you say? No, I am not forgetting the "y." Yes, I am sure. Although many folks seem to feel I should have a "y" anyway. For instance: the Social Security Administration. I waited for two hours one August afternoon in a stuffy storefront in Delray Beach, Florida, when the air conditioner was on the fritz, in order to patiently explain to the supremely generous agent that I did not want the "y" tacked on to the end of my name.

"Okay," she said. "Fill out this form and we will correct it."

Three weeks later, I received my new card in the mail. Not only was the "y" still bringing up the rear, but my "e" had been removed. After calling to see if the a/c was operational, I again drove down to Delray. Again, I waited for two hours while our nation's senior citizenry bickered and hollered and wagged their fingers at the same agent I had spoken with in August.

"Hi again," I said. "I'm going to need another name change form."

"Why? You don't like the one you have?"

"No, I do. It's just not the one you guys assigned to me."

"You've been in here before. I remember you."

“Yes,” I said hopefully. “I was trying to get the “y” removed from my name, but” (I brandished my new card) “as you can see, the “y” is still there. And my “e” is gone.”

“So you want it to say A-B-B-E-Y?”

“No. It should end with the “e.”

“A-B-B-Y-E? Wow, that’s unusual.”

“No ‘y’—just ‘e.’”

“You better put that on the form.”

“You mean spell it out? I did last time.”

“No, you should say ‘no y, just e.’ I’ll highlight it.”

And it’s not just government agencies that have a problem with my name.

American Express, with whom I have not left home without since 1985, addresses all of my correspondence to Mr. Abe Greenberg. Yes, I have called them. Yes, I have emailed them. Yes, I have sent in a change of name form. Twice. At this point, getting the error corrected would probably entail doctors’ notes testifying to my new gender or some such nonsense. It just doesn’t seem worth it.

The first time I Googled myself, before I had a Facebook page, it said, “did you mean Abe Greenberg?” Even my gynecologist’s nurse got it wrong the first time.

“Really?” I said as she led me from the waiting room. “Why would an “Abe” need a pap smear?”

When I recounted these trials to my parents, they could not contain their laughter.¹³ They didn't understand my discomfiture. Perhaps this is because their names are Nancy and Mark. Sure you can swap a "c" for the "k," but it will hardly make a difference when it comes to pronunciation. My husband, too, has little sympathy for my plight. His name is Jay.

When I was younger, I fantasized constantly about turning 18, which was when I could legally change my name. I had selected Pat for my new title—as far as I could tell, there was absolutely no way anyone could screw up that spelling—and stayed committed to it until Julia Sweeney from *Saturday Night Live* chose "Pat" as her ambiguously gendered character.¹⁴ Then I opted for Wendy, after the smart, nurturing character from *Peter Pan*, until my cousin Wendy tried to drown me in my swimming pool. Kathy seemed a simple enough choice, until I met Cathy, a schoolmate, who said that if she had to spell her name one more time, she was going to start wearing a shirt that says "It's with a C" wherever she went.

"Sue's a nice easy name," I remarked once to a girl on my bus. "I bet you don't have many problems with it."

"No?" she said. "Just once I'd like a teacher to call roll on the first day of class without saying 'Is that short for Susan?' And I *hate* the name Susie. My name is Sue. Just Sue."

¹³ My father found it so hilarious, he now begins all of his emails to me with "Dear Abe."



¹⁴ Source: images.google.com

“Got it,” I said backing away slowly. “Bye Sue.”

Since I had a few more years to go until I turned 18, I decided to address my spelling problem by agreeing to whatever was proposed. For example, when I went with some friends to sit on Santa’s lap at the mall, the elf that was taking names said “and that’s spelled A-B-B-Y?”

“Yep,” I responded and took my place in line.

When having tickets to a Tom Petty concert held for me at will call, the agent on the phone said, “A-B-B-I-E. Did I get that right?”

“Perfect!” I retorted. And so on. It became easier and easier to allow the desecration of the name my parents had so carefully chosen for their only daughter. “We loved the way Abbe Lane¹⁵ spelled her name,” my mother once explained. “We thought it would be unique. Like you.”

Alas, when I turned 18, I didn’t change my name for three reasons: (1) I couldn’t find a substitute that couldn’t be bastardized. (2) It seemed a slap in the face, as my initial act of legal maturity, to revoke Mom and Dad’s first parental decision. It was an inauspicious start, but they got much better over time.¹⁶ (3) My name, as difficult as it had been, had grown on me, and I couldn’t see myself as anyone else but Abe or Abbé.

“You could change the spelling,” my mother offered sheepishly.

¹⁵ I didn’t know who she was either. This is what Wikipedia has to say: “Abbe Lane began her career as a child actress on radio, and from there she progressed to singing and dancing on Broadway. Lane achieved her greatest success as a nightclub singer, and was described, in a 1963 magazine article, as “the swingiest sexpot in show business.” Oh, and one more thing: she was born Abigail Lassman.

¹⁶ My brother’s name is Steven.

“No. It’s unique. Like me.”

And, with the exception of an eighteen-month blip, when I took my first husband’s surname—an eight-letter catastrophe with two consecutive a’s—I committed to finishing this life as Abbe Greenberg.

“I can’t wait until you’re officially Mrs. Asher,” Jay said to me as we did the dinner dishes a few weeks before our wedding.

I looked at him blankly. Was this going to be a problem?

“Um. I’m not going to—well, what I mean is, I’m going to keep my name.”

Jay abruptly shut the water off and toweled off his hands. He looked at me sadly, then shrugged.

“I didn’t think that would matter to you,” I said.

“I guess it doesn’t make a difference,” he said before tossing the towel on the counter. “Can you finish these? My stomach’s a little off.”

“Are you upset with me?” I asked.

“No. I just don’t understand why you don’t want to take my name.”

“Well, for starters, there’s already a Mrs. Asher.”

“My mother?”

“No—your ex.”

There it was, released into our kitchen: the humid green mist of envy that I had tried so hard to contain whenever I thought about Lauren. The woman who was married to my fiancé for almost ten years. The woman who had given birth to the children I so desperately wished were my own.

“I’ll ask her to change it,” Jay replied casually. “She probably doesn’t want my name anyway.”

“You can’t do that!” I barked, much louder than I planned.

“Why not?”

“Because she’ll think it’s ridiculous.” Because she’s been Mrs. Asher for a decade. Because her children’s last name is Asher. *Because she was there first.*

I followed Jay into the bedroom and sat down next to him on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” I said leaning into him. “I hope you can understand.”

“I don’t,” he said. “But it seems important to you.” With that, he pulled me back with him into the pillows. Later, as we lay in the dark, he rested his chin on my shoulder and asked, “If she gets remarried, will you take my name?”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, feeling triumphant and, then suddenly, ashamed. *Why did I let him see my jealousy?* Sensing my discomfort, Jay wrapped his arms around me and dropped the conversation completely. Sometimes, loving a man of few words is a blessing.

The name game only got more complicated after Jay and I got married. Suddenly I found myself with a title I had never envisioned would apply to me: Stepmother. Having had no direct experience with blended families, my only references were from Disney—whose most evil characters were always stepmothers—and a college friend who called her father’s wife “The Beast.”

“You don’t really hate her that much,” I had said one evening after overhearing a particularly nasty phone call. “I mean, there must be something you like about her.”

“Yeah. She’s older than my dad so she’ll die sooner.”

I flashed back to the 1985 film *St. Elmo’s Fire*, in which a young Demi Moore spends her time trying to figure out how to dispose of her dead “Stepmonster.” If I remember correctly, the final solution was to have her chopped up and fed to sharks.

Clearly, “stepmother” was not a prized moniker, and this bothered me quite a bit. Etymological research was very disheartening: The word “stepmother” comes from the Old English *steop*, which connoted loss and bereavement. A *steopcild*, for instance, was an orphan—one who lost his/her parents. The meaning of *steopmodor* thus came to signify a woman, deprived of children, who takes care of children deprived of a mother. All and all, not a happy scenario. Born of a combination of grief and dispossession, it is no wonder that “stepmother” became synonymous with wickedness and destruction. Rather than having been celebrated for loving another’s orphans as her own, she was denigrated for stealing what wasn’t rightfully hers.

Upon further reading, I learned that, in the 1880s in England, one’s mother-in-law was commonly referred to as a “stepmother,” who the British conceived of as “a mixture of ales old and bitter.” In fact, it wasn’t long before “stepmother” became slang for any unpleasant female. The prefix “step,” in addition to its association with bereavement and suffering, has been linked to the negative implication that the stepmother is “one step removed” or “stepping into another woman’s shoes.” That the stepmother is second best, if she has any value at all, is abundantly apparent.

The ancient Greeks and Romans, too, used the label pejoratively: a day bringing good fortune was called a “mother day,” while an unlucky or bad day was designated a “stepmother day.” Those born in the native country lived in the “motherland,” while

immigrants inhabited a “stepmother country.” The cruel and often murderous stepmother was a stock character in both Greek and Roman tragedies. In a play by Euripides, a dying woman says to her husband, “Do not remarry and impose on these children a stepmother, who, being a more ill-intentioned woman than me through jealousy will lay hands on your children and mine. For a stepmother comes as an enemy to the children from a former union and is no more gentle than a viper.”¹⁷ A snake! Perhaps the most evil character in literary history—what could be more terrifying to children than that?

My eyes blurred with the endless pages of horrors associated with ophidian stepmothers who poisoned, drowned, even tortured their stepchildren. How could I be part of such a nefarious sorority? Would Nicky and Dani one day call me their “stepmonster?” Would they, as they got older, think of me as an obstacle to their happiness—as the woman who stole their father from them? Would I end up being a source of pain to them? These thoughts were unbearable. I had just spent every moment of the last year cultivating what I thought to be a truly maternal relationship with Jay’s girls. Could it all have been an illusion? Were they just being good sports about including me in their lives? Did they think that was the only way they could stay close to their dad? The endless questions kept me awake at night, struggling to come to terms with my breed’s demon history. Whenever I could, I asked people about their experiences with stepmothers, and, almost universally, the relationship was fraught with conflict and dissatisfaction. The one woman who did seem to get along with her stepmom admitted that both parties had resigned themselves to one another—basically,

¹⁷ This quotation and all of the information I just presented came from Patricia Anne Watson’s *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality*, published in 1995 by EJ Brill.

they had called a truce for her father's sake, but deep down resented the hell out of each other. The news got worse and worse.

The straw that broke that camel's back, however, was a Saturday afternoon, shortly after we were married, when Dani and Nicky invited their friend from school over for a play date. This friend, an adorable, precocious second grader, spent the day regaling us with stories of her father's new wife and "mini-mansion."

"How do you get along with your stepmom?" I asked innocently as I was fixing sandwiches for lunch.

"Oh, not so good. She doesn't like kids."

I stuck the knife in the mustard and wheeled around to face the three girls, sitting patiently at the table awaiting their food.

"What do you mean, she doesn't like kids?"

"She never wanted any. My dad said she had a bad childhood. Anyway, when I go to the mini-mansion, she disappears."

I was amazed how matter-of-fact this little girl was in discussing the woman married to her father. She didn't seem the slightest bit hurt by her stepmother's rejection. Quite to the contrary, she seemed to expect it. I snuck a peek at my girls, who also didn't seem fazed by the conversation. I, on the other hand, was more than distressed. How could a father marry a woman who didn't like his child?

When I related the story to Jay that night, he too was shocked.

"That's terrible!" he said. "Poor kid."

"I know," I said miserably. "And this is what I'm up against. Everyone thinks stepmothers are monsters because they are!"

“You’re not,” Jay reminded me. “You’re the best stepmother in the universe.”

“Well apparently that’s not saying much,” I growled. “It’s like winning the title ‘Best Stomach Virus.’”

It was then that I decided that I simply would not be identified with such a malevolent coven. I would not be Nicky’s and Dani’s stepmother, and they would not be my stepchildren. There would be no steps in my house—only stairs. We would be a real family, even if only partially biological; after all, they did look just like me. My crusade became to eradicate not just the word “step” from our family lexicon, but the notion of “step” from our lives. After all, “step” and all of its negative connotations could only make our blended family seem less than a real family, and, as you must know about me by now, I do not take to a Deficit Hypothesis kindly. My girls deserved more—I deserved more. I loved those children as if they were my own, and I was not about to let anyone, or any word, puncture our bubble.

This mindset had a few side effects. For one thing, anyone who even suggested that the girls were not my children received such a strong reaction that they were afraid to call me. An example:

MOM: I can’t wait til you all arrive. I’ve been telling everyone at the club that I can’t play in the tournament because my stepgrandchildren will be in town.

ME: Why would you say such a thing?

MOM: Well, it would be rude to play golf the whole time you’re here, wouldn’t it?

ME: (voice lowered to a hiss) Why would you call them that?

MOM: I must have missed something. Are you angry with me?

ME: Can't you just say "grandchildren?"

MOM: I could, but that wouldn't really be true.

ME: (on the verge of tears) They are my children. Which makes them
your grandchildren.

MOM: Pussycat, I barely know them.

ME: Well, don't call them that in front of them.

MOM: They don't know?

ME: (crying) Please. We're trying to be seamless.

On another occasion, when my closest friend since college hadn't called for a week, she finally confessed that she was afraid she might slip and call me the "S" word again.

"I know you believe Nicky and Dani are your own children," Maggie said tentatively, "but other people need some time to catch up. Some of us evidently missed the pregnancy."

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," I said, feeling like I might start crying. "I don't know why I got so mad."

"I understand. You are trying really hard to establish your family as a real unit. You want everyone to recognize your relationship with the girls as legitimate."

Yes! That was it! Recognition.¹⁸ I wanted the world to know that I was a bona fide Mom. I bathed them and cooked for them and brushed their hair and spent all of my

¹⁸ Looking back, I don't know why that was so surprising. I have spent my entire life craving acknowledgment in one form or another. Just last week I snapped "Your welcome" at an osteoporitic octogenarian, when I reached up and pulled down a jar of pickles from the top shelf he pointed at in the supermarket. He didn't even smile or nod at me. The nerve! As I

money on them. I wiped their runny noses with my shirt, carried them in my arms when they were too tired to walk, sat up with them all night when they were sick. I did homework with them, drove them to the library and the dentist and the toy store. I listened to them ~~run~~ practice the violin for me. I read to them for hours and watched *The Aristocats* with them five times in a row and took them horseback riding in the rain and picked them up from school. I extracted linguine from Dani's throat (twice) and removed splinters from Nicky's foot. I iced several parts of each of their bodies on what seemed like a daily basis. I played the soundtrack from *Pocahontas* nonstop in my car for an entire summer. I loved them with all that I had—more than I loved even their father. And still, upon discovering that the twins were a product of Jay's first marriage, people reacted with a visible deflation, as if to say, "Oh, they're not your real kids. They already have a mom." I refused to be thought of as either a wicked stepmother or an unpaid babysitter. I mothered my girls with a commitment and dedication some biological moms can't sustain. Why couldn't everyone see that?

Just when Operation Step Storm reached its peak, something miraculous occurred. The girls and I were shopping in the now defunct Borders bookstore—a behemoth of a warehouse with endless corridors and shelves that was surely designed by Sir Lancelott Maze himself in order to torture mothers and other childcare providers trying desperately to keep tabs on their charges. One benefit of having twins was that they *always* stayed together¹⁹ so I didn't worry much when, tired of listening to me

pushed my cart out into the parking lot, I heard a woman ask, not especially kindly, "Why do we need pickles? You can't have salt." But still, he could have said "thank you."

¹⁹ Even in the shower. Not anymore, though. I mean, it stopped when they were twelve. God, I hope the girls skip the footnotes.

mutter under my breath in the parenting aisle, they asked if they could go to the kids' section. I figured that if an abductor could carry two screaming, hair-pulling, clawing, 45-pound eight-year-olds out of the busiest retail corner in central New Jersey, he deserved to keep them.

Anyway, I was leafing through yet another depressing book on stepmotherhood, whose subtitle was something about having the courage to survive without feeling wicked, when I heard one of my girls call "Mommy!" My heart sank as I darted toward the children's section. We had been having such a blissful day—not one interruption of the fantasy where I am their biological mother. The cashier at the grocery store had even said, "I can see where your girls get their beautiful red hair," which made all three of us giggle collusively. Now, however, the dream bubble was about to be slashed by the appearance of Lauren (real mom) who, with good cause, would probably be pissed that her children were left unsupervised in a gigantic bookstore, positively crawling with potential pedophiles.

I was preparing my apology, when Nicky ran to me, clutching *The Story of Ferdinand* in her hands. "Look!" she shrieked gleefully. "Your favorite book! Can we get it?"

I turned around, expecting to see Lauren behind me. Then I turned back to Nicky, who was tugging on my oversized sweater. "Can we, Mommy?" *I was Mommy!* I dropped to my knees and pulled my daughter into my arms.

"I love you so much," I said, squeezing a bit too tightly. "You make me very happy."

"Ow," Nicky said, wriggling out of my grasp. "Why are you crying?"

“I’m not. Just allergies. My eyes have been watering all day.”

“No they haven’t.”

“Yes they have. Where is your sister?”

“Right here,” Dani chirped from my left. Suddenly, I was overcome with the urge to clutch her in my vise-grip too.

“Can we get the book?” she said, not resisting my embrace. Her voice did sound a little strangled, though.

I am Mommy! “Of course. Anything you want!” My soul was doing backflips and cartwheels behind my validated eyes. This was the moment I had been longing for since our first date. It was better than receiving an Oscar or the Pulitzer Prize or being told I was too thin—the three wishes I had prepared in the event that a genie ever actually showed up in my living room. No name had ever meant more to anyone than that one m-dominated designation. I can still, almost twenty years later, hear it, and it is still magic music that makes me dance inside. But, as is often the case with pure joy (and Dairy Queen Georgia Mud Fudge Blizzards), the ecstasy was fleeting, and, within minutes, I was left with a gurgly stomach. So one child had called me Mommy. What did this most probably a slip-of-the-tongue really mean? Maybe Jay could shed some light on the situation.

“Nicky called me Mommy,” I told him that night in bed. “It was the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“That’s wonderful, sweetie. You deserve it. You *are* a mom to them.”

“I know,” I started, “but I’m not sure if it’s okay to be Mommy.”

“What do you mean?” Jay asked, raising himself up on an elbow. “Of course it’s okay. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, they already have a woman they’ve been calling Mommy since they could talk.”

“But now they have another mommy—a better one, if you ask me.”

“You are not exactly objective,” I said frowning. Clearly Jay was as invested in my fantasy as I was. “So are they supposed to call us both Mommy?”

“Sure.”

“Won’t that be confusing?”

“She could be Mommy #1 and you could be Mommy #2. Isn’t that how lesbians do it?”

I didn’t know how lesbians dealt with this issue, but I didn’t like the name “Mommy #2” any better than “Stepmom.” Both connoted second best. Runner up. I wanted the tiara.

Realizing that Jay might actually have convinced himself that I was the girls’ biological mother,²⁰ I thought better of using him as a resource for figuring this one out. I tried to put the situation out of my mind, but when Nicky again called me Mommy—this time when she needed help drying her hair—I knew I was going to have to deal with this issue head-on. Especially since Danielle wasn’t in synch with her sister’s line of thinking. Every time Nicky summoned me by Lauren’s title, Danielle looked confused and uncomfortable. As I write this, Dani’s reaction seems perfectly justified and understandable, but at the time, I was hurt by it. I assumed, erroneously, that Dani’s

²⁰ He once asked me if I remembered where we had the girls’ second birthday party. I reminded him that I didn’t attend that party because I was in college.

unwillingness to call me “Mommy” was a rejection—that she didn’t think of me as a mother and maybe never would. I was devastated, although I couldn’t let on to anyone how I was feeling. Afraid to suck Jay into my vortex of emotion, I didn’t share my thoughts with him, or anyone else for that matter. I spent my days with the girls, loving them both equally, but painfully aware that my love, when it came to my older child, was unrequited.

I can remember crying softly in my closet one afternoon after bringing the girls home from school. The conversation in the car had something to do with Lauren, and the name “Mommy” was mentioned about 2000 times. Per child. And none of those references were to me. By the time we got to our apartment, I was trembling and could barely swallow past the knot in my throat. The closet seemed the closest and safest place to let my tears go. I grabbed one of Jay’s old Grateful Dead tee shirts and buried my face in it, trying to cope with alternating ribbons of jealousy and heartbreak. I don’t know how long I was in there, but I remember that it was long enough that the girls came to look for me. I made some silly excuse about why I couldn’t come out yet, and blew my nose into a pair of Jay’s ugly lime green too-short shorts that I was planning to throw away anyhow.

It took a conversation with a wonderful child psychologist named Larry Rispoli to help me see the situation from a different perspective. On the recommendation of our brother-in-law, David, Jay and I had been seeing Dr. Rispoli every Tuesday night for the better part of a year in an effort to help the girls and ourselves through the divorce and remarriage transitions. He was a warm, caring, devoted father himself, and he gave us so much excellent advice—it would not be an overstatement to say that Dr. Rispoli is

the reason our blending was significantly less lumpy and bumpy than is true for most stepfamilies.²¹

Here is what Dr. Rispoli said to me regarding Mommygate: “Don’t make your children choose between any of their parents. They will feel disloyal.”

Here is what I heard: I am one of their parents.

Perhaps the voice of authority was what did it, or maybe I was just ready to face the truth, but that session was a watershed moment in my parenting life. It was suddenly so clear to me how unfair I had been to Dani in discounting her love for me simply because she wouldn’t call me Mommy. And I had been equally wrong to encourage Nicky to do so. After all, I wasn’t Mommy. I was a new parental figure in their lives who adored them and who desperately wanted them to recognize her importance. But, as is true of most good parenting, it is not the needs of the parent that inform the decisions. More than I wanted to be Top Dog, I wanted them to be happy and secure and confident and relaxed. I didn’t want them to feel like they were betraying their mother whenever they called for me. I would get my validation elsewhere.²²

A few days after my discussion with Dr. Rispoli, the girls and I were playing a board game—most likely PayDay—when Nicky again called me Mommy. For a moment—just the minutest sweet millisecond—I was sucked back into the fantasy, and I felt a warm sense of predestination. That we were meant to be. Then the newly

²¹ Stepmoms and stepmoms-to-be: go out and get yourselves a Rispoli right away! There is nothing more helpful than an objective professional, especially in the beginning, when things are so new and missteps are inevitable. Think of him/her as a GPS for blended families.

²² We had two Birman kittens named Smokey and Bandit whose biological mothers lived in another state and had nothing to do with them, thus leaving me to be Mommy #1.

educated parent in me cleared her throat and announced that we girls needed to have a powwow.

“Dani,” I said, looking into her eyes, the color of which reminded me of my favorite marble I collected in my youth. It was called Columbia Blue and had almost imperceptible gold tendrils which were visible only in direct sunlight. Such a clear piercing blue, fraught with trust and allegiance.

“Is it weird when Nicky calls me Mommy?”

She nodded, her eyes filling instantly, and I realized that I had not been suffering alone.

“I don’t call you Mommy!” Nicky half-shouted.

“Yes you did. A couple of times,” her sister corrected.

“You probably just got confused,” I offered, mama bear protector taking over. “I can imagine it must be very hard to go back and forth between mom’s house and our house all the time. It’s not easy to live in two places.”

“Did I really call you Mommy?” Nicky asked with a genuine look of confusion.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said reaching for her and pulling her into my lap. Dani immediately sidled over and burrowed into the crook of my free arm. “We all know I’m not Mommy.” I stopped and inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled. “But I wish I was.” The girls stared at me, unmoving, so I pressed on, battling the lump in my throat, biting the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood.

“Your mom is the luckiest woman in the world to have you,” I continued. “I know your relationship with her is very special—she is the most important person in your lives. And I would never want you to feel like you have to choose between us.”

I choked a little bit then on my saliva and wiped quickly at my eyes. Another deep breath. The lump only grew. At that moment, Dani—my sweet, sensitive, nurturing Dani—slid her arms up around my neck and kissed my face.

“We love having two moms,” she declared softly.

“Yeah,” said Nicky. “We’re lucky to have *you*.”

“Oh girls,” I said not bothering to stanch the rivulet of tears streaming down my cheeks. “You have no idea how much I love you.” And then I let slip what was meant for only my ears: “I hope it’s okay with you that I pretend you’re mine.”

“We don’t mind,” Nicky said. “Besides, we look just like you. Everybody thinks you’re our mom anyway.” *Heaven. I’m in heaven.*

As we hugged and cried, I wondered if I had overstepped my boundaries. Was it fair to have confided my insecurities and jealousies to them? I still don’t know the answer to that question, and I never asked Dr. Rispoli about it. (By the time our next session rolled around, there was another issue, another crisis to manage and handle.) But I’d like to think my honesty with Nicky and Dani—even about the really complex emotions we all were experiencing—is a large part of what cemented our bond in those early years. They got to see me struggle and grapple, so it became okay for them to do the same. To this day, we lie in bed together and let it all out, sharing with each other our anxieties and disappointments. Sometimes we just cuddle and cry or sing our special song.²³

²³ It’s called *Jelly Belly*, and I wrote it for them. If I reveal the lyrics, however, they will never speak to me again, so you’ll have to use your imagination.

Two things happened as a direct consequence of Mommygate: (1) The girls and I had waded into uncharted territory with that conversation, and we had all survived it; thus, we had a new standard for honest discussion. Nothing was off-limits. It was also, I think, the first time the girls got a glimpse at how much they meant to me—how much I really wanted to be their mom. For better or for worse, the cards were on the table. (2) I received a new name.

Still uncomfortable with the title of stepmother and wanting something more descriptive of my relationship with the girls, I asked them to choose a name for me—something special that they wouldn't call anyone else. A name that would mean I was theirs and they were mine. After all, what could be more proprietary than naming someone?

"It just can't be Mommy," I told them. "That name is taken."

"How about Annika?" Nicky offered.²⁴

"I like it," I said, not wanting to discourage her, but not eager to embrace another spelling nightmare. "What else you got?"

"SMom," Dani said. "You know, like mom but with an S in front of it."

"Too much like Mom," I quipped, grateful that she hadn't thought of SMother.

"How about Apple?" Dani said.

"Apple?" I said, considering my body shape.

"Yeah. 'cause you're super sweet and you are a teacher and you always use an Apple computer."

"And also your hair is red and it starts with an A," said Nicky. "I *love* it!"

²⁴ Pippi Longstocking's best friend. They were going through an everything-Pippi stage.

Apple. I rolled it around in my mouth, bounced it off my tongue. Daddy and Apple. It had a nice ring to it. And who doesn't love a really ripe, crunchy Macintosh? Sure I would have preferred something more cleverly cryptic—insider's jargon—like say, "B-Moe" (short for Best Mom Ever) or even something more straight-up explanatory like "Favorite" or possibly a symbol: "Rolls Royce" or "Gold." But it needed to be their choice and it needed to represent me. Which "Apple" absolutely does.

"Brilliant!" I said to the girls. "I love it!"

"We love you Apple!" they said in tandem and promptly deposited themselves in my arms.

So I now have an easy-to-spell and pronounce, non-pejorative name that has, over the years, become the best title I could imagine. I have loved my fruity moniker so much, I don't even mind that my biological son calls me Apple as well. I imagine my grandchildren will follow suit. As for the girls, they are my applets, and they have not fallen far from the tree.

And, by the way, I still pretend they are mine.

AISLE FOR FOUR

My first wedding, a Saturday evening, black tie affair at a tony Boca Raton country club, had everything a young bride could want: a canopy of 300 white and red roses under which to take her vows, a seven-piece band complete with horn section, an ecru pearl-encrusted gown with a seven-foot train and accompanying pearl-studded veil, top shelf liquor bottles labeled solely for the occasion, a Viennese table containing a dark chocolate fountain, and even a white Corvette, appropriately graffitied and waiting under the portico for the newlyweds. Really, the only thing missing was a couple in love.

To clarify, one of us believed he was in love, but the other, and I won't mention any names here because it is rather embarrassing, wasn't even sure she was in deep like. "You do know this is death til you part?" Maggie, my closest friend since college, whispered as we started our way down the petal-strewn runner toward the altar. "I was thinking first major illness," I quipped over my shoulder. And that was that. Thirty minutes later, I was a Mrs., smiling toothily in the 45-minute receiving line while holding the hand of my new husband, more of a handsome accoutrement than real live being, with whom I had just sworn to spend the next seventy years.

My father, who never leaves a stone unpolished, had scampered about all day, plucking roses which looked droopy, sending glassware to the kitchen for de-smudging, "helping" photographers set up their lighting, and otherwise coordinating the event. To say he was a tad overbearing might be disputed by the florist who, at one point, burst

into the dressing room where I stood in my underwear, and shrieked, “If you don’t sedate that man, you are going to have to sedate me!”

Needless to say, everything was perfect. Except for the rain. Torrents of it, in fact. Buckets. Of course who would expect anything else at five o’clock on a June afternoon in south Florida? Still, Dad managed this obstacle with finesse: within minutes a staff of gloved men in tuxedos carrying giant white golf umbrellas escorted me and my 120 guests to the now-indoor site of the nuptials. And then it went off without a hitch.

My second wedding had a slightly different tone. Jay and I chose a small inn in Basking Ridge, New Jersey for our Friday afternoon event. We planned to marry outside on the deck among the maples, oaks, elms, and birches, which, in October, would surely be showing off their glorious plumage, thus eliminating the need for a florist. Our altar consisted of a piece of fabric attached to four aluminum poles which Maggie, my brother, Jay’s best friend Lewis, and our brother-in-law David—all clad in dark suits and glasses like Secret Service agents—would hoist over our heads as we exchanged our promises. Regarding music, we had my Aunt, who played a slow and tripping version of “Here Comes the Bride” on her flute as we walked the six-foot length of the deck (we arrived at the altar three bars in), on which stood the 28 most important people in our lives. I did not wear a gown, but a simple ivory dress from Macy’s and my grandmother’s pearl earrings. After the ceremony, we went inside to the “The Fireplace Room,” where everyone ate Caesar salads and pasta. Instead of a pastry

table, we had a two-tiered chocolate cake, topped with six figurines: a bride, a groom, twin girls, and two cats, nestled in the vanilla icing.

There were other significant differences too. At my first wedding, I weighed 124 pounds after six weeks of a self-explanatory regimen called “The Grapefruit Diet,” the only permanent result of which was a lifetime of acid reflux. My undergarments consisted of a lacy bra, thong, and silk stockings. At my second wedding, I weighed 150 pounds²⁵ which meant that my only undergarment was Spanx.

Unless I take a third husband, I will die having never made love on my wedding night. The first time around, in the Presidential Suite of the Palm Beach Ritz Carlton, while waiting for my husband to calculate our evening’s earnings, I did a crossword puzzle²⁶, drank a mini bottle of champagne, and passed out. And while we had no checks to sort after Wedding #2, Jay and I spent most of the evening trying to figure out how to pay for the day’s festivities when neither of us had a job or much in the way of savings. Money, as it turns out, often trumps romance.

Speaking of romance, I would be remiss if I neglected to mention how my husbands proposed to me. Hubby #1 took me to a fondue restaurant where, in my zest to spear the fattest marshmallow, I almost ate my two-carat, nearly-flawless, marquise-cut diamond in a platinum setting with twin baguettes. To say I was surprised to extract jewelry from my dessert would be an understatement, but I’m pretty sure that the real excitement for me was the pot of bubbling chocolate and the platter of pound cake,

²⁵ More like 155. Those of you who struggle with the scale will understand my five-pound rule, but this is non-fiction so I feel the need to come clean. Also, my mother is too lazy to read footnotes.

²⁶ They didn’t have Angry Birds back then. In fact, they didn’t even have iPhones. Or texting. Or Skype. Or color televisions (just seeing if you were paying attention).

strawberries, bananas, and brownies sitting just beyond my soon-to-be-fiancé's questioning eyes. It became clear to me that the only way to the chocolate was through marriage, and as I listen to my sugar-addicted brain making its case for just one more little bag of mini M&Ms[®] from the Halloween stash, it still seems a fair trade. Nevertheless, I have to give my first husband props for ingenuity.

I cannot, on the other hand, give Jay credit for anything as it was his father who, after accidentally opening the box containing the gold band with nine tiny shiny chips of what the Israeli guy from the jewelry district in New York assured us were diamonds, said "This is a very nice ring. You should put it on so you don't lose it." When Jay came home from work that night, I was already engaged. He never had to ask me a thing.

At my first ceremony, my maid of honor was Patsy,²⁷ my intended's younger, single, and extremely bossy sister. She had all kinds of plans and ideas (and lots of marital advice, 40 minutes of which she shared with me and everyone at my bridal shower) that annoyed Maggie and me, but I humored her for the sake of ease. Patsy may have "stood up for me" at the altar, but Maggie stood where she always does—right behind me so she can catch me when I fall. Regarding bridesmaids, I believe my cousins Lauren and Wendy got those jobs, and Lauren's beautiful four-year-old daughter, Amanda, was our flower girl.

At my second ceremony, I didn't have a bridal party. We didn't really even have an aisle. What we had was perhaps a ten-foot stretch of three feet of space in between two groups of white plastic folding chairs. There simply wasn't room for a procession.

²⁷ This wasn't really her name, but Maggie started calling her Patsy, and now I can't remember what is actually on her birth certificate.

My father, dazzling in his tuxedo, walked me down my first aisle to give me away. However, since that didn't ultimately stick, we decided I'd go to my second husband on my own volition. Of course, the real reason dad lost his job was that four of us were planning—hand in hand—to walk down the “aisle” to our “altar.” And this was the most conspicuous difference between my two weddings: at the second one, I already had kids.

Nicky and Dani were utterly ecstatic about the event. For weeks, they discussed hairstyles, clothing choices, the appropriate nail polish, and lip gloss. They were obsessed with which jewelry they would wear—faux pearls or faux diamonds—and we went to several stores before finding the perfect pairs of patent leather shoes for the occasion. We spent far more time outfitting the girls than either Jay or me, and the only reason we agreed to visit a flower shop was because the girls felt certain a marriage without a bouquet spelled doom. While we were there, the girls picked out their own floral arrangements, which had to include star-gazer lilies, the only flower on this earth that makes me sneeze. “Don't worry,” Jay had soothed. “We'll be outside. You'll never smell them.”²⁸

Jay and I were thrilled that the girls were so happy to participate; we didn't mind that they thought of our wedding as their own: “How many more days 'til we get married?” Nicky asked for weeks, and then, on the day itself, “How much minutes?” And Dani told her grandmother on the phone that she couldn't join her for breakfast on that day because “I'm having my hair done for my wedding.” We conceived of our nuptials as a family commitment ceremony, for, in truth (and this is the case with all

²⁸ I sneezed so much during the ceremony that the Rabbi made a joke about it.

stepfamilies, whether or not the parties know/recognize it) we were promising ourselves not only to each other, but to the twins as well. The traditional “love, honor and cherish ‘til death do you part” didn’t quite fit the bill—we were promising to stay a foursome for the rest of our lives.

To Jay this seemed to be a relief. He had found a partner he loved who adored his girls and with whom he could do what he loved most: be with his children. For me, the commitment meant that the girls would be officially mine—at least half of the time—and that I would have a sanctioned (by God and the state of New Jersey) role in Nicky’s and Dani’s life (although stepmom was not my first choice of terms to denote it). I would, after noon on October the sixth, be their *parent* and they would be *my children*. No membership, award or honor had ever meant so much.

Writing vows to capture these sentiments was not an easy task. Jay, as disinterested in poetry as he was in, let’s say, having his nipples pierced, felt there was no reason to reinvent the wheel:

“Don’t the vows come with the package?”

“What package?”

“You know, the Rabbi, the chuppah, the wine glasses, the candles—all the stuff we paid for.”

“So you’re saying you don’t want to write our own vows.”

“I’m saying, for fifteen hundred bucks, he should throw that in.”

“But we’ve already said those vows—and we broke them,” I pointed out.

“You think anyone’s gonna call us on that?”

“I guess not,” I replied, but I walked away from that conversation very uncertain.

After all, we had promised to love, honor and cherish other people until death tore us asunder, and, yet, here we were, reasonably healthy, and not loving, honoring and cherishing those people. So what do we say to everyone who witnessed our first marital pledges? Oops? Just kidding? This time, we *really* mean it?

I had often joked that Brian had been my “starter marriage,” much like a townhouse is a “starter home,” and that Jay was the real deal. Brian had been the minor leagues, while Jay was The Show. And, as my first marriage lasted only 18 months and there were no children or significant sums of money involved, I could get away with those characterizations. But Jay and Lauren had been married for nearly ten years. That’s no starter marriage, by anyone’s definition. Suddenly, my chest tightened. Jay’s relationship with Lauren, although ultimately not sustainable for either, was still a respectable attempt. My connubial history—easy in, easy out—was a different story. Clearly Jay had no issues with permanence. But what about me? Could I do this for the long haul?

One night, a few weeks before the wedding, as I was tucking Nicky in, she asked me a question: “How do people know if they should get married?”

I paused for a moment before answering her. “Well, I guess when a couple realizes that they want to stay together forever and ever, they want to share that with everyone else. So they make an announcement that they are an official couple forever. That’s what a wedding is.”

“Oh,” she said. I could see in the sliver of yellow from the nightlight that she was chewing her cheek, which meant there were more questions.

“What else do you want to know?” I said, lying at her side and nuzzling her neck.

“So when Daddy and Mommy got married, they were going to be a couple forever?”

“Yes,” I said, a lump rising in my throat.

“But they aren’t a couple anymore.”

“No, sweetie, they’re not,” I said, measuring her petite hands against my own. We lay quietly for a while. Then I heard a small snuffle.

“It’s okay to be sad that they aren’t a couple anymore,” I said, feeling my own eyes watering. “Although, because of you and Dani, they will always be connected. They will always be family.”

Nicky nodded and buried her head into my chest. “I love you Apple. I’m glad you and Daddy are getting married. I hope it’s forever and ever.”

I kissed her forehead, inhaling that cinnamon scent that was so intoxicating, and tiptoed to Danielle’s bed to kiss her too.

“Good night, sweet baby,” I whispered in her ear, and then she was in my arms crying.

“What? What is it? Dani?”

“What if you and Daddy aren’t forever and ever?”

“Oh sweetheart, don’t you worry about that.” And then her sister was in bed with us, and we were all three wrapped in each other, a tangle of limbs and hair.

“Listen to me, girls,” I began, the lump in my windpipe aching to the point where my words came out in a gasp. “I promise you—do you hear me?—I promise you both, here and now, that Daddy and I are forever and ever. That we are all forever and ever.”

“But—

“I know. Your mom and dad probably thought so too, but, when they said their vows, they didn’t know about The Special Rule.”

I don’t think that, in my entire life, before or since that night, I have commanded such rapt attention from anyone. My cats don’t even stare at me with such intensity when I am opening the treat jar.

“The Special Rule, girls—and you must remember this for when it’s your turn to get married—is two simple words: NO QUITTING.”

“No quitting?” Dani said.

“No quitting.”

“I don’t get it,” Nicky whined.

“I know. I didn’t either the first time I got married. But I get it now. And so does your dad. Okay?”

“Okay,” they said.

Then I looked at them with the most serious face I could muster. “Pinky swear,” I commanded and they did as they were told.

With that, I carried Nicky back to her bed, blew kisses from the doorway (exactly the same number for each girl), and bounded into my bedroom, certain that I was absolutely capable of doing this for the long haul.

First, however, I was going to have to get through the actual wedding day, which did not start out as I had hoped. I had hoped to put the laundry basket filled with clean clothes in my closet before getting ready to take the girls to the beauty salon. When I bent down to lift the basket, I felt a strange twitch in my left lower back—like a moderate electric shock—and then, when I tried to straighten my spine, a voltage ten times as intense tore up and down my back and legs. The pain sucked up my ability to defy gravity, and I immediately found myself on all fours yelling for Jay.

“What is it?” he asked, rushing to my side. “What happened?”

“I can’t move,” I moaned. “I did something to my back.”

“Maybe you should lie down,” Jay said pointing toward our bed.

“Good idea,” I replied and collapsed forward, face first, into the carpet.

“That can’t be comfortable,” Jay said.

“It’s better than moving,” I mumbled.

“Do you want me to rub your back? Maybe a massage would help.” I was happy my soon-to-be-spouse couldn’t see the evil glare he would have received had I been facing him.

“Apple, why are you lying on the floor? Are we going to get our hair done?”

“Which one is that?” I said into the Berber.

“Dani.”

“Yes, sweetheart. We are absolutely going to get our hair done. But first Daddy is going to find me some medicine so I can walk down the aisle. Until then, I’m just gonna rest here.”

“Do you want a pillow?” she said and I could tell from the tone of her voice that she was worried.

“No sweetie. That’s okay. I’m fine just like this. Jay, are you locating the medicine?”

“Umm. I have Advil.”

“Honey, I think I’m going to need something stronger. Like an epidural.”

“Do we have anything stronger? Should I call the doctor?”

“Nope. Just call my aunt. She’s got everything. And she delivers.”

Ninety minutes and a Vicodin later, we three girls were having our hair curled and pinned in identical dos. “We look like triplets!” Dani had shouted gleefully just before her stylist burned her neck with the curling iron. “Ow!” she screamed and then burst into a torrent of tears. No amount of consoling or ice seemed to ease her pain (“Apple it hurts soooo much!”) and her angst (“My makeup is all ruined!); to get her to sit in the chair again was nearly impossible. After two treacherous hours, my back was beginning to throb although I was distracted by the headache caused by the army of bobby pins stationed all over my fancy coif.

When we arrived at the inn where the ceremony was to take place, it was 11:20. The service was called for at noon, and none of us, with the exception of Jay—who had arrived thirty minutes earlier and was sipping a cup of coffee—were dressed. Nicky’s makeup was, thankfully, still intact, but Dani’s had been drowned, so there was that to consider. Our parents were already there, both sets obsessively early to every event, and were mingling with one another—sort of. Actually, they were fighting over Jay’s attention, which meant that he couldn’t help me with the girls. So the three of us went

into the dressing room together. I got the girls into their identical dresses and jewelry and redid Dani's makeup. Then Nicky felt that she needed a touchup, so I obliged. By then it was 11:40. I was in a black ripped tee shirt and faded jeans with no makeup on my face. I looked like I was headed to an archeological dig, not my betrothal.

I stepped outside of the dressing room, hoping to find a suitable babysitter so I could get myself ready. Jay, naturally, was nowhere to be found; the only person within earshot was my four-year-old nephew Benjamin.

"Hi Abbe."

"Hiya Ben," I said as I searched the patio for my grandmother.

"You and Unc are getting married soon."

"Yes, that is the goal," I said. "Do you know where your mom is?"

"She's in the bathroom. Can I come in and see Nicky and Dani?"

"Sure, buddy. Just no wild stuff, okay?" *Great, now I have three kids to supervise.*

Tick tock. 11:50. Tick tock. 11:53. Still in my tee shirt, although I managed to start putting on some makeup. I just finished with my left eye when I hear a shriek and then crying. I leapt from my chair at the mirror and followed the sobs to Danielle, who immediately ran to me.

"Ben pulled out my bow," she choked and handed the hairpiece to me. "He ruined it."

"I didn't mean to," Ben squeaked. "I just wanted to see what it was."

"Okay, okay," I said. "This is not tragic."

“I’m really really sorry Dani,” Ben whispered, hands over his face to contain the tears that were leaking, despite his efforts, out from the sides.

“Hey, come here buddy,” I said reaching for my about-to-be-nephew.

“Accidents happen. It’s not a big deal. We’ll fix it.” *Where is your mother?*

“It won’t look the same,” Dani wept.

“Yes it will, honey. Try not to cry so much. We’ll have to redo your makeup again.” *Where is Jay?* It seemed to me that I was always looking for him, or he was always missing, or both. I felt myself getting more than annoyed, but couldn’t hear my thoughts over all the crying.

I led my two distraught charges over to the red leather sofa and sat down between them. Regrouping, I had discovered, was a great way to soothe upset children. Plus, it would give me time to figure out where to locate a babysitter.

“I need a tissue,” Ben said.

“Me too,” Dani said.

I looked around the room for something absorbent. Nothing.

“Use my shirt,” I said to them. “It’s better than tissue.”

Nicky wandered over tentatively. “Are you going to be able to fix Dani’s hair?”

“I think so. Why do you look so sad?”

“My tummy hurts.”

“Do you have to make?”

“No. Can I sit on your lap too?”

And so, when Maggie—my sweet heroic Mags—finally opened the door and said, “Abs? It’s time. Where are you?” the scene she came upon was of her best friend buried under a pile of children in varying stages of distress.

After surveying the situation, she immediately took charge:

“Ben, you need to go find Unc. He wants you to help him, okay? Girls, you need to get up. Apple has to get ready.”

“But I don’t feel good,” Nicky said.

“Okay, you stay on the couch. Try not to mess up that gorgeous hair.”

“My hair and makeup are ruined,” Dani sniffled.

“Come with me, and I’ll fix it for you.”

“But I want to stay with Apple.”

“Apple needs a few minutes to herself. Just five minutes so she doesn’t walk down the aisle looking like the guy from *A Clockwork Orange*.”

“What’s that?” Dani asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it while I do your hair.” As she led the pack of children away, she winked at me and smiled. Neither Jay nor Ben’s mother could ever have accomplished so much so quickly.

Returning to the mirror, I saw myself wince as the pain in my lower back once again made its presence known. In the quiet, I finally allowed myself to feel the anger Jay’s absence had inspired. Why did he always leave me to handle everything? Why couldn’t I ever be the one to disappear?

The clock said 12:04. No more time to aggravate.²⁹ Oh well. I wouldn't be the first bride to be late to her wedding. In fact, I would submit that all brides with children should count on it. How different this was from my first nuptials! Then, *I* was the center of attention—the one everyone else catered to. My every need was considered, my every move scrutinized by the team of beautifiers my parents had hired to ready me for my grand entrance. My makeup was done for me, my gown lowered over my body by two pairs of attending hands. Forty-eight pearl drop buttons were fastened by Maggie. I didn't even put on my own jewelry.

I quickly lined my other eye and plumped my lashes, pulled the sopping wet tee shirt gently over my head, and stepped into my simple ivory knee-length dress. I zipped it up as far as I could, put on my grandmother's pearl earrings, and slipped into the ivory satin pumps that would carry me, with not a small amount of discomfort, into my new family. When I stepped outside the dressing room, Maggie was there waiting to zip me up and paint some gloss on my lips.

"You know this is death 'til you part," she said, tucking a loose curl behind my ear.

"I know," I said.

"I mean it. Your parents are not going to show up for the next one if you screw this up."

"I know," I said. "I'm ready."

²⁹ There would be plenty of time for that on our honeymoon, when, after another disappearance, I lost it completely. Jay just reminded me that I shrieked, "I refuse to be married to Houdini!" so loudly the hotel employee chose to leave our room service cooling outside our door rather than interrupt our first marital fight. After two decades of dealing with Jay's vanishing acts, I guess it's only fair to say that I am, in fact, Mrs. Houdini...

As we stepped outside onto the patio, I felt an unseasonably warm exhalation of wind against my face and was reminded of my first wedding back in Florida, the air heavy with moisture but lacking the anticipation churning around me now. All was abuzz with chatter and laughter; our closest friends and family, dressed comfortably³⁰ and sipping champagne, awaited the opening notes of Wagner's march. A few feet to my left, I spotted Jay, sporting a black suit with a crisp ivory shirt and his favorite Jerry Garcia tie—one that I had bought for him as a holiday present when I was just his employee—and noted how breathtakingly handsome he was: black curly hair just overlapping his collar, green eyes that said all the words his mouth, hidden behind a rich, full beard, could never seem to find. My heart pounded with excitement and my knees began to knock against one another. *So this is what it's like to be a bride.*

“Apple! Apple!” came the chorus as the girls bounded to me. And then, sandwiched between my little redheads, our identical hairstyles sprinkled in sunlight, we clasped hands tightly and started our steps down the aisle to Jay. The photo my dad took of that walk is my favorite picture: in it, the girls are staring up at me, eyes shining and bright, their smiles filled with adoration and excitement, and I am looking down at Dani, on my left, with a mother's love and reassurance. My lips are slightly parted, as if I were saying something just to them. No one but me remembers those words I whispered—the last I would say to the girls before they were officially my children: “NO QUITTING.”

³⁰ With the exception of my mother-in-law, who, in preparation for an outdoor October wedding had purchased a heavy wool dress in bullfighter red and who was now, as she was when I first met her, drenched in sweat.

WIFE-IN-LAW

Other than being more likely to receive an offer for a reality show on television, there are few perks to being in a stepfamily versus a traditional family. In fact, blended families are frequently victims of what I call a “Deficit Assumption,” which is best exemplified by the following exchange I had with a college friend who found me on Facebook:

FRIEND: Do you have any kids?

ME: Twin girls and a boy.

FRIEND: Wow! You’ve been busy. How old are they?

ME: The girls are 24 and the boy is 13.

FRIEND: (most likely subtracting 1988—when I last saw her—from 2011)
How long have you been married?

ME: (most likely sighing loudly and rolling my eyes)
The girls are actually not my biological kids.

FRIEND: I didn’t think so. Did you adopt them?

ME: (most likely wondering if I could get away with lying)
They are my husband’s children from his first marriage.

FRIEND: That must be hard. ☹

ME: (most likely wondering if anyone would ever react positively to my declaration)
Not really. Pretty great actually.

FRIEND: So you just have the one boy then?

ME: Kids just walked in. Talk to you later.
(clicking “unfriend” next to her name)

The irony is that blended families experience the exact opposite of deficit: in fact, one of the characteristics of stepfamilies that can be the most challenging is the surplus of individuals that “come with” the children. This list begins with the ex-spouse and his/her Family, but can also include ex-friends, ex-neighbors, ex-hairdressers, ex-pediatricians, and the ex-spouse’s new partner(s). In essence, when I became a stepmom, I was bequeathed with my two girls and *all* of the people who had populated their lives for the almost-decade Jay was married to their mother. It’s kind of like inviting Snow White to come live with you only to find that she has asked all of the dwarves and their mining buddies as well as the Huntsman, some Prince named Charming, a whole slew of singing forest creatures, and the evil Queen (who was probably a stepmother) to hang out in your living room.

And these “surplus” people did not play by my rules. In other words, they knew who gave birth to Nicky and Dani, and they were not going to indulge any of my fantasies to the contrary. In fact, this constituency always seemed to ask the same question whenever we ran into them: “Girls, how’s your mom?” I admit I tend to be a bit sensitive, but here is what I heard every time that query was posed: “Girls, the woman holding your hands is not your real mother.” If it were up to me, I would have waved a magic wand and erased these vestiges from our lives. But the girls had this astounding capacity to embrace love and support from everyone who offered it—in fact it was this very characteristic that allowed them to embrace me—so I couldn’t really bellyache about the multitude of caring individuals in their world without coming across as some kind of Grinch.

Of course, no one was able to make me feel more like an imposter than Jay's first wife. Whenever she was around, she was the star attraction, and jealousy sank its fangs into my gut. Allow me to describe my rival: she was (and is) intelligent, smartly dressed, cultured, and—to add insult to injury—petite. A MILF if I've ever seen one. Jay's parents had told me more than once how pretty they thought she was, and colleagues at work routinely called Lauren "Jay's hot wife." Once, at lunch with two acquaintances who were also part of blended families,³¹ one remarked that she couldn't understand how her husband could have been attracted to someone who so closely resembles Janet Reno. My other friend laughed and said, "My husband's ex looks like Roseanne Barr from that movie *She-Devil*." I just sat there, my mouth open in shock. I couldn't believe how lucky these women were! Why did my husband's ex have to look like Diane Lane in *Unfaithful*? As Nicky would say, "not not fair fair."

What was worse was that Lauren was always kind and respectful and even encouraged the girls to develop a close relationship with me, so I couldn't justifiably hate her. Which doesn't mean that I didn't try anyway.

"Tell me something you don't like about Lauren," I prompted Jay one morning when the girls were at school.

He looked at me quizzically, then his eyebrows popped up in an "aha!"

"She forced me to go to see Broadway shows all the time. Musicals. I hated that. Slept through most of them."

³¹ See how far I went just to avoid "stepmother?"

I considered some of the possible answers Jay could have proffered that would have been more satisfying, such as, “She beat the kids constantly,” or “She smelled like booze 24/7,” or “She slept with everyone I knew.” But Broadway? Really?

“Come on,” I prodded.

“She used to get \$250 haircuts in the city. And she shopped too much. Sometimes she hid the bags in the car so I wouldn’t know how much she bought.”

“Okay, let me get this straight. The things you most hate about your ex-wife—the woman who threw you out of your own house—are that she likes to be well-groomed and see shows?”

“Oh—one more thing.”

“Yes?” I said hopefully.

“Her Brooklyn accent drives me crazy.”

So much for Jay’s help.

In all fairness, Lauren and Jay didn’t hate each other. They had married too young and quickly—before either really had a sense of themselves or each other—and had each been disappointing to the other as a spouse. They didn’t enjoy the same things (other than their children, whom they both adored) and ultimately didn’t work hard enough at their marriage—weren’t willing to give it everything and plow through the hard times—so it broke apart. This is not to say that their divorce was without animus. But most of their resentment took the form of sarcastic quips on the telephone; I cannot honestly recall a time when, in person, they were anything but civil. Lauren was not a loud-mouth, didn’t curse or call Jay names, and seemed accepting of my new role in her children’s lives. Of course I have no idea what she said in my absence. For all I know,

there was a chubby voodoo doll with curly red hair in her purse.³² Still, she was nice to me whenever we saw each other, which was almost daily in those early years. And I have to believe that, if Lauren had ever let the girls know that she thought ill of me, they would never have welcomed me so adoringly. Thus, Lauren and I coexisted peacefully—which was, I admit, neither what I had expected, nor what I wanted.

This may seem counterintuitive, but having a good “ex” made things much harder for me. If Lauren had been malicious to me or anyone else (other than Jay, to whom she was only mildly disagreeable and who deserved it, according to his own later admission), she would have been the villain against whom Jay’s parents and I could rally together. We would have had a common nemesis: a go-to tirade whenever things got a little too silent. Our contempt for her would have been an easy bond—a way for me to glow under a halo by comparison—and thus a quick invitation to take her place in the family. But Lauren’s place in the Asher family, it turns out, was not up for grabs.

When Nicky and Dani were in the third grade, they had small parts in the school play. Upon walking into the auditorium on the night of the show, we spotted his parents and sister sitting in a row close to the stage. Waving, we began walking toward them, assuming the two vacant chairs on the end were reserved for us. Before we got there, however, Lauren appeared from backstage (where presumably she was helping the girls get ready) and took one of the empty seats next to Jay’s sister. I understood before Jay did, before we got to his mother’s seat, that the saved chairs were not intended for us, but we were too far down the center aisle to avoid the awkward conversation that followed.

³² I did notice more injuries and aches than usual. Coincidence?

“Hi Mom,” Jay said with confusion in his voice.

“Oh Jay. Hi. Hi Abbe,” Bernice said, distress making its presence known in the deepening lines across her forehead.

“Honey,” I said in Jay’s ear, “there’re some seats a few rows back.” He allowed me to lead him away, but he continued to stare at his mother, who shrugged worriedly. When we sat, I took Jay’s hand, which was shaking slightly. I squeezed it, but he said nothing. I was angry at Bernice for wounding her own son, for taking sides even though no lines had been drawn. Jay and Lauren had gone through great lengths to present their split as “amicable.” Why shouldn’t Lauren sit with Jay’s family? They were, after all, her in-laws for the last ten years. Their relationship didn’t have to end just because she and Jay no longer were married.

Yet, something about the situation felt aimed at me. Not that I would have preferred to sit next to Lauren, but being excluded from the Asher row altogether was hard not to take personally. They had made a choice, and I had, for reasons I couldn’t possibly fathom at the time, come up the loser. I had to excuse myself so I could sob in the ladies’ room, but I didn’t make it past the corridor before the tears came and I felt like a third grader myself—ostracized by the cool kids who insisted on calling me “Blabby.” They didn’t choose me for their team either.

When I returned to Jay, my eyes red and puffy, he was still staring at his mother’s back.

“How could she do this?” he whispered.

I didn’t have an answer.

“Doesn’t she know how hard this is for you?” he added, and I heard the hitch in his voice.

“Maybe she doesn’t like me,” I offered.

“No way! She told me she thinks you’re great.”

Just then, Benjamin, Jay’s sister’s son, tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hi Unc!” he said.

“Hiya Ben!” Jay responded, instantly uplifted, as he grabbed his nephew into a hug. Few people could affect Jay like Ben, who was the smartest, most self-assured four-year old I had ever met. “Wanna sit here with me and Abbe?”

“No thanks,” Ben replied, sliding out of Jay’s grasp. “I’m sitting on Auntie’s lap.”

Writing this now, I can clearly appreciate that a small child would prefer to sit on Freddie Krueger’s lap if it would bring him closer to the action, but then, all I could feel was rejection by yet another of Jay’s kin.

The incident at the girls’ school only fueled the competition between Lauren and me. That this rivalry was one-sided was immaterial. She had, unbeknownst to her, declared herself an adversary, thrown down the gauntlet, by occupying the hard metal folding chair next to Jay’s sister.³³ And so I accepted the challenge, swearing to win my rightful spot and oust Lauren in the process. After all, she was trespassing on *my* territory, wasn’t she?

The following weekend was Lauren’s turn with the girls, so Jay and I decided to drive down the Garden State Parkway to Long Beach Island, where his parents had a

³³ And by having given birth to my stepchildren.

beach house. Although I missed Nicky and Dani, I was looking forward to a respite from the pandemonium in my head. It would be so nice to go two days without hearing Lauren's name, without the constant reminder of my runner-up status. It would be an opportunity for me to bond with Jay's family—for them to see how much I loved their son and grandchildren.

Dinner with the Ashers, however, turned out to be a veritable chorus of stories about Lauren, Jay, and the kids, with the occasional embarrassed glance from my brother-in-law. He seemed to understand what I was feeling—perhaps he could become an ally—but I was afraid to approach him. I tried not to let my misery show, but I was unusually quiet. It was too hard to swallow past the giant stone of envy lodged in my esophagus.

“You're not hungry?” Bernice asked.

“I had a big lunch,” I squeaked.

All I wanted was to disappear, to go back to our cozy apartment with sea foam green carpet and pink vertical blinds (not my choice—we were renters) and cuddle with Jay in our queen-sized bed. The place where I was Jay's only wife and the girls' only mom. The place where I was a hero to be adored, not an intruder to be mistrusted. But I was stuck in this house, haunted by the ghost of Jay's ex, who wasn't even dead. No, she was alive and well and able to be, it seemed to me, both at home with our kids and here with my new family at the same time. Still trying to win Bernice over, I got up and washed every dish and wiped every surface in the kitchen. I was grateful to be busy and to have an excuse to get away from the table, where Lauren's ghost sat smugly, eating my dessert.

After dinner and a long, hot shower, I felt much better. I knew I was overly sensitive; I had surely been overreacting to what must have been innocent comments. Clearly, I was going to have to get a bit thicker-skinned. Thumbing through Jay's closet, I found a blue terry bathrobe and a pair of matching slippers, which I donned and headed back to the living room where the family was watching TV.

"Hi everyone!" I said warmly as I strolled toward the sofa on which Jay was perched. "Whatcha watching?" I had decided in the shower to be sunny and bubbly, to let my sense of humor take over for a while.

"Isn't that Lauren's robe?" Ellen asked.

"Where'd you find that?" Bernice chimed in.

"In Jay's closet. I thought it was his." Dejected, I began backing away from couch, my hands fumbling with the sash.

"You don't have to take it off," Bernice said. "I don't think she'd mind."

"That's okay," I mumbled. "I'll find something else to put on."

"No really," Bernice continued. "That stuff has been here for years. I don't think she even knows it's down here."

"I'm sure she has found an expensive replacement," Jay cracked. "Especially with all that alimony I give her."

"Come sit with us," Bernice said, patting the couch.

I stood there, a deer in headlights. Do I take advantage of Jay's mom's invitation to join the gang? Or do I flee to the backyard where I can douse the robe in gasoline and set it ablaze? As choosing the latter might make me seem a tad unstable, I opted for the

sofa, where I sat for the next two hours, itching and squirming under the weight of Lauren's wardrobe.

That night while Jay slept, I went through the closet, removing everything that could possibly belong to Lauren, including a sun hat, a bathing suit, two dresses, and a really short, size-two skirt which I tried, in vain, to rip in half. Then I retrieved a large black garbage bag into which I deposited the offending articles; I would have Jay drive the bag to a dumpster as soon as he woke up. Maybe sooner.

It's not easy to wage a one-person war, especially when the other side seems immune to all of the self-doubt and alienation I was feeling. But still I waged it, the only way I know how to do things: full throttle. And so I began a campaign to hate Lauren—an effort based on three tenets: (1) She was Jay's first wife, (2) she was Bernice and Lester's first daughter-in-law, and (3) she was Nicky and Dani's first mother. Sequence was everything in this game, and I, by the virtue of being the last to arrive, was losing. The irony was that #1 didn't even appreciate her victory, didn't even seem to take any pleasure in it at all, while I suffered mightily but silently—Jay's family and the girls could never know how I felt. Receiving their pity would not count as a win.

Jay tried his best to soothe me, to reassure me that I was making inroads into his very tightly knit clan, but we both knew I was very much on the outside and that there would probably be a lengthy and painful hazing period until I would be invited in. We were both crushed by this unexpected snag. We had always assumed the hard part would be dealing with the kids.

One afternoon, when I was sitting in Bernice's living room with her, looking at photographs of various family members, we came across a picture of Jay and Lauren at their wedding. They looked untroubled and young, which, by definition, equals happiness. I took the photo in my hands and stared at the couple.

"She was a beautiful bride," Bernice said softly, and those five words sprouted poisonous barbs and pierced right through me. The pain—so shockingly physical—was searing. Paralyzed, I sat on the sofa trying to expunge Bernice's statement from my memory. The wistfulness in her voice was unmistakable and the brutality of her honesty was scarring. She missed Lauren. She didn't want a new daughter-in-law. Her grandchildren didn't need another mother. Game over.

Tears threatening to spill over from my filled eyes didn't stop me from responding. "She really was."

When I informed Jay of the afternoon's events, he considered it a last straw.

"Being a stepmother is hard enough without her making you feel like shit every time you see her," he said angrily. "I am going over there and telling her how cruel she has been."

"Don't," I pleaded. "It won't help."

"But I can't let her do this to you," he said and his own eyes welled up. "You're trying so hard. Can't she see that?"

"I guess not," I said.

"She has to understand that you are my wife. **You** are her family now."

"Maybe, but telling her that won't make it true. She has to feel it."

Jay nodded and said, “You are my family, and I adore you.” Then he did what he has done every night of our marriage: He massaged my lower back in slow concentric circles until, relaxed and soothed, I fell asleep.

After that incident, I stopped trying so forcefully to infiltrate the Asher family. Instead, I backed off and allowed our relationships to evolve over time. Occasionally, there would be another barbed statement or another awkward seating arrangement, but, for the most part, things settled down, and Jay and I learned to chuckle at Bernice’s difficulty moving with the times. Seven years into my relationship with the girls, when we were all visiting Lester and Bernice at their apartment in Florida, Danielle had been sitting on my lap, cuddling with me as we often did. When she got up to get a drink, Bernice beamed at me and said the following, which has since become one of Jay’s and my favorite inside jokes: “She really seems to like you.”

In the past two decades, I have learned not to fault Jay’s family for their initial (fifteen-year) inability to welcome me with open arms. Traditional Jewish Brooklynites, Bernice and Lester were unfamiliar with divorce, remarriage, and blending families, the complexities of which both scared and overwhelmed them. Communication was never one of Jay’s strong suits, as is reflected by his nickname³⁴, so he did not do much to prepare them or help them navigate the many tricky situations that arose. I have come now to believe that Bernice had no idea how to handle the seating arrangements at the twins’ school play—that, in her desire not to alienate the mother of her grandchildren, she made choices that made her as uncomfortable as we were. But, like the rest of us, she was in uncharted territory. How can I blame her for not knowing what to do?

³⁴ “The Sphinx.”

Time and age have also thickened my super-sensitive skin,³⁵ which has allowed me to reinterpret some of Bernice’s barbed comments. I now think that the longing I heard in her voice when she called Lauren a “beautiful bride” was not necessarily for Jay’s ex-wife, but for a time when her grandchildren didn’t come from a broken home. A time when the rules were clear-cut, and everyone’s roles made sense.

As for my role, it has become clearer over the years. Whatever hurt I felt from what I perceived as exclusion has evaporated as everyone has gotten older and I’ve found other things to obsess about.³⁶ Just this week, we celebrated Bernice’s 80th birthday over brunch at a posh Palm Beach hotel. After an unbelievably decadent meal of banana Nutella[®] crepes with fresh strawberries and real whipped cream accompanied by maple smoked bacon,³⁷ we decided to take a picture of the matriarch—who was positively glowing with happiness and pride—and her brood. I immediately volunteered to be the photographer as I was the only non-blood relative at the party. “Let me take it,” I said to Bernice. “This way, all of your children will be in it.” She turned to me then and offered the most rewarding and loving statement of our twenty-year relationship: “You *are* one of my children.” Bernice then stood up, grabbed her cane, and fetched a server to take the photo.

As for Lauren, the hate didn’t stick. It would take many years (ten? fifteen?) for me to stop finding Lauren’s possessions in various closets and drawers and stop feeling betrayed every time I did. But, eventually, rather than toss them in a box marked “Burn

³⁵ I have to put on sunblock before I use the microwave.

³⁶ Like all of these lines that have suddenly appeared all over my face and the persistent, dye-resistant white hairs that have sprouted all over my head and even down there.

³⁷ Reading this aloud, it suddenly dawns on me why I am having difficulty losing weight. New Year’s Resolution for 2013: Eat less bacon.

This,” I would launder them, fold them, and give them to the girls to bring back to their mom. I see now that I had faulted her for my lack of success gaining entrance to the Asher family; I saw her as the obstacle blocking my way when, in fact, she had nothing whatsoever to do with it. She probably wasn’t even aware of it. Until now.

One of the catalysts for my change of heart was a simple but momentous decision I made when the girls were turning thirteen and we were throwing a B’not Mitzvah party to commemorate their coming of age. I wanted the invitation to read “Please join Jay and Abbe Asher as we celebrate with joy the B’not Mitzvah of their daughters, Danielle and Nicole.” It seemed appropriate, given that the girls’ religious upbringing had been entirely our province, as was the cost of the event. But, mulling it over obsessively (sometimes that can be a good thing), I came to the realization that, while omitting Lauren from the wording might satisfy that fantasy that I was the girls’ biological mother, it would make Lauren feel bad, which would then make Nicky and Dani feel bad. And this became my test for every decision I would make regarding Lauren: how will my actions affect the girls? If I made it completely about them, the choices were easier—in fact, they often weren’t choices at all. Still, it niggled at me to have my husband’s ex-wife on the stationery for which we paid a small fortune.

“You’re putting her on the invitation?” a friend said incredulously. “But she didn’t even care if the girls had a Bat Mitzvah.”

“I know,” I replied. “But she gets top billing anyway.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Jay argued later, exaggerating the sibilants. “Why should she get the credit?”

“Because she’s their mother. It’s one of the perks,” I responded with more certainty than I felt.

“You don’t think people will think it’s weird to have my ex on the invitation?”

“She’s not just your ex,” I said. And then, without thinking: “She’s family.” And there it was. The missing piece of the puzzle. Lauren wasn’t only Jay’s first spouse and the twins’ biological mom. She was also my wife-in-law. As was the case with my other in-laws, I hadn’t chosen her, but she was connected to me indelibly through the most important people in my life. She was, and forever would be, family.

Allow me this digression: the girls and I concocted this fabulous dish one summer that we named, due to its appearance, “Vomit Chicken.” When we served it to Jay, he gobbled it up and asked for seconds. It was truly delicious. A few weeks later, when I asked what everyone wanted for dinner, the girls, as was typical, said in stereo, “Vomit Chicken!” That night, when we ate it, somehow it had lost its appeal. In fact, although I followed our recipe to a tee, it was no longer remotely appetizing. Afterward, we all laid on the sofas feeling bloated and nauseated. Needless to say, we took Vomit Chicken out of the rotation.

As you know me so well by now, it will not surprise you that I couldn’t let the incident go. I thought about it, on and off, for a few months. How could something so utterly delectable become so revolting? Then, in a communication class I was taking in pursuit of my graduate degree, the topic turned to selective perception, and I had my answer. I again served Vomit Chicken, but this time, I called it Tahitian Chicken.³⁸ Guess what? It was a hit.

³⁸ I liked the exotic sound of it.

I am convinced the same phenomenon was at play when I renamed Lauren my wife-in-law. I am not comparing the experience of Lauren with regurgitation, but the term “ex-wife” has certain pejorative connotations whereas wife-in-law does not. Once I thought of her as kin, it became much easier to sit next to Lauren at functions, drop off and pick up the kids from her home, and even call her on the phone for advice:

“Hi Lauren. Sorry to bother you so early, but I’m having trouble getting the girls to eat breakfast before school.”

“Did you try making them tea?”

“Tea? Um. No. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Try tea.”

Incidentally, this conversation has become one of the great mysteries of my life. I would have thought Lauren was kidding, but she said it so quickly and earnestly, I did indeed make the girls tea. Which they refused to drink. They said they hated tea, and when I told them their mom had suggested it, they just looked at each other and said simultaneously, “That’s weird.”

I should point out that Lauren has no recollection of our exchange, but I do. I can still hear her short but unclipped instructions. Perhaps she was half-asleep when I called. Or, maybe she was punking me. And the girls are in on it.

Conspiracy? I’ll let you decide.

HATCHED

My morning schedule on November 24, 1997—35 weeks and 2 days into gestation—was typical for a school day:

7:00	wake up to overwhelming nausea
7:15	finish dry heaving and try to brush teeth
7:20	finish dry heaving caused by toothbrushing
7:30	wake up Nicky and Dani
7:35	make cinnamon buns and fruit bowls for the girls
7:45	finish dry heaving caused by cooking
7:50	feed cats
7:55	finish dry heaving caused by smell of cat food
8:00	take girls to school
8:30	drive home from school while violently dry heaving (caused by holding it in on the way to school)
8:45	sip four ounces of frozen lemon ice Gatorade (breakfast)
9:00	vomit four ounces of frozen lemon ice Gatorade
9:02	stagger into bed for morning nap

I was exhausted from this routine, which continued on throughout the day and night until I fell into the kind of dreamless sleep I suspect professional athletes experience after a particularly intense competition. Sleep was my only respite from the hyperemesis that had persisted throughout my pregnancy—beginning three days after I missed my period and intensifying with each surge of chemicals produced by the placenta growing inside me.

“It’s like your body is allergic to the pregnancy hormones,” my obstetrician explained when, halfway through my first trimester, I called him from the floor of my bathroom. He told me to try sipping cold Gatorade and stay in bed.

“Don’t worry about the baby,” he said reassuringly. “The fetus will take what it needs from your body.” I was reminded instantly of Remoras—suckerfish disguised as

escorts to the sharks who protect them while they, in return, steal food and make it impossible for the sharks to squeeze into tight spaces.³⁹

“Besides,” he continued, “the vomiting usually doesn’t last past the first thirteen weeks.”

At my checkup during Week 22, when Dr. B felt that IV fluids would ease the dehydration, he offered me a sheepish smile and a comforting hand squeeze. “This kind of extreme nausea rarely goes into the third trimester.”

At Week 33, during my thrice weekly IV “bolster,” he peeked his head into the room. “You’re probably upset with me right now, aren’t you?” he asked, looking at me as if I had just put my dog to sleep.

“Well, your information has not been very reliable,” I said. “But it’s the creature inhabiting my uterus who’s really on my shit list. The second he gets out of me, he is grounded!”

Speaking of unreliable information, I should tell you that we did not know the sex of the baby. Jay named him Cosmo, (after a character from *Seinfeld* who spends each episode causing trouble for every other character on the set) and the girls decided only a boy could wreak so much havoc. I, however, pictured one of those Gremlins from the 1984 film produced by Steven Spielberg living inside me: an adorable little Gizmo⁴⁰ when his sisters are cooing over my belly who morphs into a Nasty Growly

³⁹ I had lots of time for the Discovery Channel in between bouts of retching.



Source: images.google.com

Beast⁴¹ when I try to eat, sleep, or rest my body on any soft surface. Anyway, during the ultrasound, the screen—black and white, fuzzy, and 2D—revealed Cosmo attempting to shimmy up the umbilical cord, which he was straddling, thus obfuscating the one part of his body we all wanted to see. His uncooperative spirit did not go unnoticed. “Is he always going to be like that?” Nicky asked me that night. I held up a finger, lunged for the sink, and threw up four ounces of Gatorade. *Apparently so.*

We didn’t care that we had no confirmation—our family decided that Cosmo was a boy. This was absolutely imperative to our plans for living happily ever after, as (1) the girls specifically requested that we furnish them with a brother, and (2) we didn’t have a girl’s name picked out. Regarding the first point, Jay and I were very sensitive to the potential jealousy the girls might feel in response to a newborn invading their space. After all, our little family was only a few years old—we were still growing into each other and had had more than a few trying moments, the most recent of which had occurred only days ago at our local Olive Garden:

JAY: Girls, please use your fork. How many times have we talked about not eating with your fingers?

DANI: But pasta tastes better with your fingers.

JAY: Come on. That’s gross. You don’t see me and Apple eating with our fingers.

DANI: (sniffs)

ME: Do you want help?

NICKY: NO!



DANI: (sniffs louder, tears leaking into food)

JAY: Nicky, there's no reason to shout. Look at that little girl over there. See how nice she's eating? I bet Sophia⁴² doesn't eat with her fingers.

DANI: (full out sobbing) I have to go to the bathroom. (grabs Nicky's arm and yanks, causing loud clattering of dishes)

Twenty minutes then elapsed during which Jay and I wondered if (1) the girls had called a cab, and (2) eating with our fingers would make our "Tour of Italy" more palatable.⁴³

JAY: They'll be back in a minute to apologize.

ME: (shrugging) I'm not sure about that.

JAY: Are you kidding? Not only will they say they're sorry, but I bet they actually use their forks. This is how kids learn.

ME: (raising eyebrows and biting lower lip) I don't think that's how this will end. Just don't feel bad if they are upset with us.⁴⁴

JAY: Why would I get upset? *I* know how to use a fork. They can pitch as many fits as they want to—I'm not backing down. Someone has to stand up to them once and for all.⁴⁵

⁴² This month's special—the new girl at school—who was "super cool," dressed "like a model," and was "sooooo pretty." Every utterance from the girls began with, "Guess what Sophia did?"

⁴³ It was really Jay's Tour of Italy. I was sipping from a bottle of Gatorade.

⁴⁴ A few days earlier, when Jay, in a moment of exasperation, said "Get off the couch!" after the girls ignored his directions to wrap their wet hair in towels before lying on the new sofa cushions, both girls fled the room and slammed their bedroom door. This, in turn, resulted in Jay's kneeling outside their locked door, begging their forgiveness for being "too tough" and pleading with them to come out for ice cream sundaes and a round of kissing game (whereby Jay tackles them to the floor and kisses every millimeter of their faces).

⁴⁵ That would, from this point forward, be me.

Just then, the girls appeared, Nicky two steps in front of her sister, who was still wiping at her eyes.

“We have decided something,” Nicky proclaimed, crossing her arms in her best imitation of an angry schoolmarm. “We think...” Here she snuck a glance at her sister who nodded vigorously. “We think that if you want a child who eats perfectly—then maybe you should adopt Sophia.”

“Yeah,” said Dani, bolstered by her sister’s composure. Then, hands intertwined like the twins from *The Shining*, they turned on their heels and stalked away.

“Do you think they mean that?” Jay asked, eyes darting from mine to their receding figures. And, before I could respond, he was running after them, apologizing and promising to make it up to them.

I would be lying if I said those scenarios were few and far between. I convinced myself, however, that all families—blended or biological—experienced such turbulence. That it had nothing to do with the divorce, the remarriage, the move, the shuffling between parents’ residences that had all occurred within the last 36 months. I tried to remember my own childhood, rifling through the boxes in my mind for angst-ridden moments to analyze, but I couldn’t remember thinking my parents would like to trade me in for a better model.⁴⁶ Still, I couldn’t bear the thought that my girls were “damaged.” Besides, I was strong enough to compensate for all of it. I was (still am) in Savior Mode. I would fix *everything*.

⁴⁶ The only strife-laden memory that surfaced was the time when I called my mother a bitch and then slammed the garage door on my own big toe, which was black and nail-less for weeks thereafter. Mom tried to behave sympathetically, but the justice of the punishment—so immediate and painful—made it impossible for her to contain her glee. Not comparable, I know, but traumatic nonetheless.

We had wanted a baby very much; in fact, we would have started working on that project immediately after our wedding had we not been so concerned that the girls feel comfortable and stable in our new life together. My relationship with them was the focus of my life. To wit, I quit my lucrative job as Director of Training and Development for a Fortune 500 company where I had been employed for six years and supervised a staff of 88 in order to be completely available to the girls. I did this so quickly and so confidently that not even Jay saw how hard it was to lose what I had worked so long to build. But I knew it was the *right* thing. Children meant sacrifice. Nothing, not even my aging eggs, was going to get in the way of what was best for them. And this included producing a male sibling so they would not have to compete with another sister for our attention. They were, and always would be, daddy's little girls. That club was unequivocally closed to further membership. Essentially, it was boy or bust.

Back to November 24th: when I awoke from my morning heaving-induced stupor, I called my mother, who lived in Florida. Mom and Dad weren't big fans of New Jersey, so I hadn't seen them since I had announced my pregnancy. Not that there was much to see. I, for the first time in my adult life, had become *thin* as a result of a thirty-six pound loss since the hyperemesis set in. I suppose a diet of Jell-O and lemon ice Gatorade, with the occasional sure-to-return saltine can help anyone slim down. Especially if her body reacted to all of the above "nourishment" as if it were high doses of Ipecac. But still, hitting my goal weight (Week 29) was not the celebration I had always imagined it would be. Even Grammy, who felt Kate Moss could "take off a few," was starting to worry.

There's something about being pregnant that makes it okay to be zaftig. In fact, I was actually looking forward to having nine months of freedom when it comes to food—after all, I had fully planned to eat for at least two. And I knew no one (except Grammy) would say a word about it. It was to be the one time in my life when my belly could be shown off, and I was looking forward to my new maternity wardrobe of more fitted clothing, which, since I spent most of my days in bed and on the floor of my bathroom, hung in my closet, tagged and forlorn. So, it would not be an exaggeration to say that I felt robbed of what I had perceived to be the best part of pregnancy. My assumption that parenting was defined by forfeiture was confirmed by the unrelenting puking, so—to this day I'm not sure how I managed this—I took it in stride.

Anyway, back to Mom, who, despite her aversion to temperatures below 85 (she always asks for a jacket in my home which we keep at a balmy 75), wanted very much to be part of her almost-grandchild's life. Thus, we spoke every single morning—in between hurling sessions, and sometimes, during them. It would not be an overstatement to say that our umbilical cord is made of steel. To this day, we don't go longer than 36 hours without contact.

I looked forward to my diurnal chats with mom—she lives the life of an indoor cat (read: she gingerly nibbles at food in between naps on her sofa) so I didn't feel so bad—like when Dad told me about his 40-mile bike rides or when my girlfriend recounted her latest walk in the woods—that I had not felt the sun on my face in seven months. Typically, we talked about books, politics, and child-rearing philosophies—on all of which we were pretty much in synch. We seldom argued, and when we did, it didn't go very far:

MOM: You should try to take a walk.

ME: I really don't think that's a good idea.

MOM: It's a great idea. You'll feel better getting out of that apartment.

ME: No. I don't think I will. I'll start to dry heave the minute I open the door.

MOM: But it can't be good for the baby to be lying around all the time.

ME: You lie around all the time, and you seem to be holding up fine.

MOM: Touché.

Our conversation that day, however, went too far: it pulled me through bands of needle sharp teeth that shredded my world beyond recognition. It started off innocently enough—Mom was recalling being pregnant with me and how joyful she was during that time. I don't know exactly how it came up, but I am quite sure, like Lenny in his pleas for George's rabbit stories, that I, in my nauseated nervousness about adding another being to the mix, asked her to tell me yet again how well it all ended—how worthwhile all the difficulties turned out to be.⁴⁷ And then, as was customary every fifteen minutes or so, I felt rumblings in my upper stomach, the wave of heat climbing up my esophagus, the unstoppable force in the back of my throat.

"I gotta go, Mom," I said abruptly. "Old Faithful is about to erupt."

"Oh my poor baby. Listen, one last thing."

"Hurry," I said, feeling the saliva thicken in my mouth.

⁴⁷ I still ask her to tell me the story of my beginning, particularly when I am feeling anxious and insecure. In my world of hyper-responsibility, I often forget that I too am loved unconditionally—that I am also someone's child.

“Don’t be upset if you feel differently about the baby than you do about the girls.”

I suddenly became aware of the silence in the apartment. No dogs barking outside. No pipes running. No clocks ticking. Just the sound of my breath, quickening along with my pulse.

“What?” I wheezed.

“It’s perfectly natural to feel a special connection with your own child.”

My whole body tensed, as if hyper vigilance could prevent what was already unleashed. I no longer felt like I was going to throw up. I was all sensation—every hair on the nape of my neck, on my arms, on my legs at attention. My voice dropped an octave as I whispered huskily, “I do feel a special connection with Nicky and Dani.”

My voice was flat, the monotone belying the tsunami of emotion rising behind it. This wasn’t happening. *Not with my own mother.*

“Of course you do, sweetheart. You adore them. And they adore you. But it is different when it’s *your* child.”

Streaks of anger flashed in front of my eyes as they drifted to the 8x10 portraits of each two-year-old child on the wall—Dani in a red pinafore and white puffy sleeves, Nicky, a red bow holding her hair off her face, in a blue pinafore and white puffy sleeves. The same chipmunk cheeks and toothy smiles. My world in twin antique frames.

“Mom,” I started slowly. “Nicky and Dani are *my* children.” I was shaking, my hand rattling against the phone receiver. After years of insisting that biology did not define parenthood, after all of the mostly self-convincing that stepmoms are real

mothers, after all of the heartache that came with always irrevocably being number two, I just couldn't hear this from my own mother.

“Oh. Okay. If you say so.”

How could she not understand this? How could she not understand me?

“I'm not saying so. It *is* so,” I hissed. Somewhere in the background, I heard a car engine stall. The blue flames of my rage grew. Could she hear it? Did she know she had crossed the line?

“This is not some game, Mom. We're not playing house here. We are a real family.” *Don't make me do this. Don't make me defend myself to you.*

“Of course you are. But don't be naïve. Things will change when you have your own baby to take care of.”

Sucking in my breath, I felt a belt of pressure in my stomach. For a second I thought I might be going into labor, but then I knew it wasn't the baby that needed to get out.

“I already have my own babies to take care of,” I said, shouting. “This may be my first pregnancy, but I am not a first-time mother. I can't believe I have to tell you this!” There was a silence on the other end of the line. Then my mother's tone changed. Softened.

“It's different, Abbe. You are a wonderful mother to the girls, but...”

Don't say it. Please please don't say it.

In the ensuing silence, hot tears coursed down my face and my hands trembled as I waited for her to finish the sentence—which, she did not. I attributed this omission, not to a conscious censoring on her part, but instead to our own powerful connection

which, in its protective ferocity, roared from the depth of her being and sealed her mouth shut.

“Mom, I’m really not feeling well. Can I call you later?”

“I didn’t mean to upset you, pussycat. I only love you.”

“I know Mom. Talk to you later.”

I spent the rest of the day, until it was time to retrieve the girls from school, on the dirty white tiles of my bathroom floor, curled over the hard ball of my tummy and sobbing into the toilet.

The only way this could work—this baby, this family—was if we were a whole. No half-siblings or step-parents. One unit. I knew the statistics and had seen enough Lifetime movies to know how “blended” families usually fared. It took an incredible optimism, the mightiest leap of faith, to commit to this construction in the face of impending jealousies and conflicts that arise naturally in such situations. But the commitment had to be complete and seamless in order to overcome all of these obstacles. There could be no wavering. We had done so well! And now, after proving so many skeptics wrong, after convincing ourselves and the girls and everyone around us that we were a truly seamless family, my own mother had to be the one to introduce uncertainty.

Crying has always been a release for me—a method of emotional detoxification—so, when the well ran dry and I had nothing left to expel from my body (other than the baby), I took a shower and regrouped. I would not allow this blip of doubt to contaminate what Jay and I had created. We would triumph, whether or not my

mother believed it possible. I always fought the fiercest when I had something to prove to her.

One nice thing about having a mother who is petrified of conflict is that she will never *intentionally* bring up anything controversial. To wit, when I called her to announce that I was leaving my first husband, this was her response: “That’s too bad. Listen, can I fax you this query letter I wrote? I really need your input.” Thus, our next phone call—as I knew would be the case—did not pick up where we left off. Not only did we avoid the topic, but we behaved as if it had never even come up. It’s a particular dance we do, and we have gotten good at it over the years.

Deciding that whatever insecurities had arisen since the conversation were best dealt with by ignoring them, I chose not to share my mother’s warning with Jay—he was as invested in the fantasy family we had built as I was, and I refused to let anything crumble it for him. Why should he have to feel as awful as I did? The truth is, I needed him then—more than ever before—but, as is my often misguided way, I chose to shoulder my pain alone. I thought I was protecting him. Now I see that I wasn’t permitting him to protect me.

I tried and tried not to hear my mother’s words, but they bounced around my head like those colored lottery balls. I became distracted and irritated, which Jay graciously blamed on the end of a very trying pregnancy. Ironically, although I was trying to shield him from anguish, I ended up creating more of it by keeping everything to myself. Still, Jay treated me like a fragile queen, massaging my lower back and feet, taking care of the house, kids, and cats while working full-time, and constantly asking if

there was anything I needed. I should have told him, I know now. I should have let him take care of me.

“You know I love you more than anything,” he said to me on a regular basis. He had started saying it one month into our courtship, not the least bit bothered by the fact that I didn’t admit my feelings for him until weeks later. He was a man so ecstatically in love, it didn’t matter what I did or didn’t say. It’s difficult not to fall for someone who is so sure of your worth.

And yet Jay’s devotion couldn’t heal me. Since that conversation with my mother, the floorboards beneath me seemed in constant motion. I couldn’t seem to get my bearings or catch my breath. Every question was a quandary. Every minor snafu, a major roadblock. I had slipped off the track and was unable to recover, and even the kids noticed my grappling.

“Does Cosmo make you mad?” Nicky asked.

“No, honey. Why would you think that?”

“Because when you get your mad face, you always hold your belly.”

How astute she was! I *was* angry at Cosmo—for being an intruder, a potential homebreaker, cleverly disguised as a blessed addition to our family. And I was angry at myself, for *I* had invited this interloper, who posed a threat to everything we four had built. I had wanted him! And worse, I—who thought through ordering takeout with the same compulsive rigor as I did when choosing a life partner—hadn’t even considered these insidious possibilities.

I imagined giving birth to this angelic being who, the second he was in my arms, would alter everything. Abruptly, no one else would matter. It would be just me and Cosmo. Jay, Dani, and Nicky would be supporting actors while the baby was the star. My neglect of everyone except him would quickly repel the girls who, unable to understand how they had lost me, would retreat back to their mom, to whom they really had belonged all along. Jay would hang around for a while, hoping to catch my attention, but I wouldn't be able to take my eyes off the child with my genes. My flesh and blood.

The next week or so was one of the most difficult I can remember for many reasons, not the least of which was a new response to the ever-present nausea. I began to continuously and loudly belch, which prompted profuse and embarrassed apologies to Jay's ex, Danielle's teacher, the postman, my ob/gyn, and the bagboy at McCafferty's supermarket. Besides my body's betrayal, I also had to contend with holiday chores, which included preparing Christmas cupcakes for the girls' classes and decorating our Hanukkah bush. Then there were the preparations for Cosmo's arrival, the most memorable of which was the construction of the crib, which we decided to undertake while Nicky and Dani were at their mother's house.

Jay, determined to be the macho handyman he was not born to be, ceremoniously tossed the instructive diagrams into the Diaper Genie and proceeded to insert various screws into the many holes all along the white slats spread over the carpet. Within minutes, he had managed to erect a scaffolding of sorts, but it kept collapsing in on itself.

“We’re missing a screw somewhere,” Jay reported, hands on hips. *Yes! I agree!*
“Why don’t you hold the crib up from the inside while I figure this out.”

Too exhausted and nauseated to argue, I allowed Jay to hoist the structure over me so that I stood in its center. After an excited “Aha!” Jay shuffled some of the screws around, and the crib, miraculously, stood on its own. Fully formed, it was too heavy for Jay to lift over my head.

“You’ll have to crawl under,” he remarked, wiping sweat droplets from his brow.

“How?” I asked.

“Through the opening on the bottom.”

I stared at the space to which he was referring. It was approximately 18 inches from carpet to slat.

“I’m not gonna fit.”

“Sure you will. Commando crawl.”

“Commando crawl?”

“Yes. On your stomach. Like an alligator.”

Commando crawl? Was he insane?

“Um, honey. I can’t crawl on my stomach right now.”

“Just suck it in. You’ll fit. You’re so thin now.”

“Jay, I can’t suck it in. That bulge is not a beer belly. It’s a six-pound child!”

“Well then how are you gonna get out of there?”

The ensuing discussion involved a lot of shrieking and burping amidst Jay's insistence that he would never be able to rebuild the crib if he were to, as I suggested, "tear it the fuck apart."

The hardest part of those last days of my pregnancy was trying to enjoy and participate in all of the excitement generated by the twins, who were counting the seconds until the baby's due date, while I wrestled with my mother's words. My anger had morphed into an oppressive dread, which permeated my thoughts and left behind a murky grey sludge. I staggered around in a frightened funk, anticipating an apocalypse while pretending to be overcome with enthusiasm. The net effect, I imagine, was a hybrid of Tigger and Eeyore, simultaneously bouncing and groaning in bipolar agitation. Dr. B told Jay and the kids that Moms can get a little crazy right before the baby comes, so, ever supportive and empathetic, they not only accepted my behavior but encouraged me to "be as crazy as I felt like being."

"You have carte blanche, sweetie," Jay announced at dinner. "Anything you need." This was followed immediately by the girls' eager echoes: "Anything you need, Apple."

I need everything to stay as it is. I need us to stay a family.

When I allowed myself to think about what my mother mercifully omitted, that Nicky and Dani already have a mother—a real one who gave birth to them and who is very much part of their lives, the fear that there might be some truth to my mother's prophecy was paralyzing. I had not considered that a new baby could be anything but an addition—that it was possible for this new life to take anything away from the girls. It

had always been a win/win proposition; it was something we all had wanted.⁴⁸ But now, toward the end of my 36th week, it all seemed an irreparable mistake—one that would cause real damage—and there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it. Like Icarus, I had flown too close to the sun, and I would pay—we all would pay—for my arrogance.

On the second Friday in December, Jay suggested we all get out of the house for what might very well be my “last outing.” We decided to see *The Little Mermaid* at the local movie theatre and, if my nausea permitted, have an ice cream cone on the way home. Still churning inside, I agreed to the outing. I was determined to treasure every sacred moment with my girls. And there were two during this particular film.

First, when the mermaid protagonist was singing her solo, Danielle leaned into me and whispered, “Daddy thinks you look just like Ariel. And I do too.” There are no words to capture the delight I experienced at that moment. Ariel, let me start by saying, is unequivocally beautiful (and thin), and she has the voice of an angel. She represents pure goodness and kindness and sincerity.⁴⁹ Being compared with her is like being called a sweeter, prettier Shania Twain. Supremely touched by Dani’s ability to overlook my huge stomach and swollen feet in her assessment of my appearance, my heart literally leapt with gratitude for this gift—the only time during my pregnancy I ever felt beautiful.

⁴⁸ Right after our wedding, the girls made a sign that said WE WANT A BROTHER and paraded around the house, as if protesting our lack of procreative activity. And each time they returned from a weekend with their mom, they asked if I was pregnant yet. I began to feel a slight performance anxiety, particularly when they weren’t with us, as if we better get on with this business of baby making. It reminded me of my father’s voice: “This room better be clean by the time I get home or you will have some explaining to do.”

⁴⁹ She is also a cartoon, but I don’t think that changes anything.

The second moment occurred when Sebastian, the clever crustacean, burst into a lively rendition of “Under the Sea,” one of the girls’ (and my) favorite tunes. With its infectious island steel drums and catchy Caribbean lyrics, it is difficult to resist tapping your feet in time, which I suddenly realized was happening inside my body.

“Girls,” I said, grabbing their hands and pressing them against me, “Cosmo is dancing too.”

“Wow!” they said in unison. And then one of them—I’m really not positive which one and to make a mistake here would cause some serious trouble—bent over and planted a kiss on my tummy. “I love you Cosmo,” she said softly. “You’re going to be the best brother.”

Without question, that was the best moment of my pregnancy, for, in that simple action, my sweet daughter brought back the dream that had all but disintegrated after the phone call—that we were meant to be a fivesome and that I was already a mom. I pressed my lips to my child’s warm head, still resting against the hump of her dancing sibling, and breathed, “Thank you.”

At nine o’clock on Sunday night, December 21, as I vacuumed the living room carpet, I became aware of a lifting sensation and then a marvelous lightness, like I could, if I so chose, become airborne.

“Jay!” I shouted.

“What is it?” he said, leaning over the balcony above.

“I’m in labor.”

“You are?” he said, scurrying down the stairs, two at a time. “Did you feel a contraction?”

“Nope.”

“Then how do you know you’re in labor?”

“I’m not nauseated.”

“Not at all?”

“Not in the slightest. Actually, I’m hungry.” We both stared at each other, incredulous. After all, I hadn’t eaten solid food in more than eight months.

“Are you sure?” Jay asked. “Maybe you have gas.”

“Of course I have gas,” I said, burping as proof. “But I’m also hungry. Starving, in fact. Do we have any pizza in the freezer?”

“You hate pizza. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you eat pizza.”

“Are you going to preheat the oven, or do I have to do it?”

“Shouldn’t we call the doctor or something?”

“Jay,” I said with forced equanimity. “I am about to be in unbelievably excruciating pain that will end only when I manage to shoot something the size of a watermelon out of a hole the size of a raisin. My understanding is that first births can take up to 24 hours; if this is the case, then I believe we still have a little time for me to eat several thousand calories so I will have the energy to do what is required of me. Now are you going to make me some pizza or not?”

And so, I ate three pieces of Domino’s thin crust Veggie Delite while Jay called my parents and his parents and Lauren (it was her weekend with the kids) and his boss. Dr. B felt that, since the contractions hadn’t yet started, I should try to get some sleep

and come into the office first thing in the morning. I celebrated by eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia.

"You hate fruit in your ice cream," Jay said as I moaned over my spoon.

"It's delicious," I said, smacking my lips.

"You are going to throw all that up."

"It will have been worth it," I said, as I stuck my face into the carton.

Although I did not toss up my feast, I had difficulty sleeping due to the horrible Tums aftertaste, the gargantuan mountain of baby crushing my bladder, and my mother's words, back for one last haunt. In the morning, the contractions began in earnest, and my appetite, as well as my confidence, had been curbed. After visiting Dr. B in the office, he sent us to the hospital to get settled while he finished up. He would meet us there at seven or so that evening, and the party would commence. Thus far, the pain was just a lot of intermittent cramping—like a really lousy period—so I was in decent spirits. Besides, the nausea was gone.

I will spare you, in case you are on the fence about whether or not to give birth, the details of the next five hours. Suffice it to say that Dr. B got on my shit list real quick when he inserted something sharp inside me to "help" my water break, and then invited my prayer that the fleas of a thousand camels infest his armpits when he prescribed a Pitocin drip to "move the contractions along." That is not what Pitocin does. What Pitocin does is introduce such agony to your body that you will do *anything* to stop it, including shove out a baby in ten pushes with no epidural.

Jay's activities, during those hours, were far more worthy of mention. First, when I sent him for ice chips (no food or drink is allowed for laboring moms), he got lost. Not a little lost. A lot lost. A full hour lost. When he finally returned, he had no satisfying explanation, except for the foil-wrapped sandwich he was carrying.

"What's that?" I snapped.

"Turkey on rye."

"Are you kidding?"

"You know I eat when I get nervous."

And eat he did. It seemed every time I glanced Jayward, he was chewing something. M&M's. Cheese and crackers. Cookies. Another turkey sandwich. It was infuriating, especially since my hunger had returned in full force.

Besides stuffing his face at every possible opportunity, Jay passed the hours watching *Seinfeld* reruns, which he found uproarious. As I writhed through my contractions, I would suddenly hear Jay exclaim, "Honey it's the one about the close talker!" or "I love the puffy shirt!" The video camera, which was supposed to be Jay's responsibility, lay at the foot of my bed, partially covered in a sweaty hospital gown which I had torn from my body in a fit of claustrophobia. After my water was broken for me several hours earlier, Jay did attempt to capture some footage for posterity.

"Honey, how does it feel to be having a baby?" he prompted in a singsong voice from behind the camera.

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "That's the dumbest question I've ever heard."

"Mommy's a little cranky," Jay said into the microphone. "It's hard to tell, but she is very excited about your appearance, Cosmo."

I offered a contrite half-smile and then got hit by another contraction.

“That looks painful,” Jay said.

“You’re not really videotaping this, are you?”

“I thought you said you wanted to document this for the girls.”

We had talked at length about whether or not the girls should be at the hospital during my labor and had concluded that, given the remote but possible chance that something could go horribly wrong, they would stay at their mother’s until the baby was pronounced healthy. Nicky and Dani were very unhappy with our decision—I believe the exact quote was “NOT FAIR!”—but, in a rare show of solidarity in the face of twinly opposition, Jay and I stuck to our guns. Besides, we didn’t have anyone to supervise them while I was actually giving birth, and, although their mom and I had a more than amicable relationship, I was unwilling to have her cut my baby’s umbilical cord.

Nineteen plus hours into labor, I was relieved that we had made the right choice. It was close to midnight, and I, red-faced and drenched, looked like I had spent the day crawling around in the desert. My eyes glued to the monitor showing Cosmo’s heartbeat, I tried to stop the flood of anxiety that coursed through me with each electrifying contraction. *Please let this turn out okay.* I turned to the table at my bedside and reached for the framed photo of me, Cheshire cat grinning in between Nicky and Dani, each kissing a cheek. My arms are encircling their waists and holding them tight to my side, letting the photographer and everyone else know that these kids are *mine*. Closing my eyes, I flashed back to last week, when the orthodontist had casually remarked to the girls, “I can certainly see where you get your beautiful red hair.” The

comment had made me smile, and I winked at the girls whose response was to giggle and throw their arms around me. I peered at my husband, engrossed in sitcom antics, utterly oblivious to the tempest in my head and in my body, and was grateful for his laughter. Grateful that he didn't try to hold me and comfort me when I felt like I couldn't get enough air. Grateful that he didn't want to enact some romantic script during this harrowing moment and grateful that I wouldn't have to rebuff his efforts.

And then, just then, I knew prep-time was over. There would be five of us for the rest of our lives, for better or for whatever my mother had predicted. It was time to push.

Jay, still crunching a potato chip, grabbed the camera.

"No Racquel shots!" I shrieked, referring to Jay's best friend's wife, who, the first time I met her, insisted on screening her daughter's birth which, judging from the footage, must have been shot from a camera mounted on the obstetrician's forehead.⁵⁰

"Don't worry—I'm only getting the baby," Jay replied.

"Here's the head!" Dr. B announced.

"It's not possible to only get the baby," I yelled. "It's attached!"

"We'll edit," Jay said to me⁵¹ and to Dr. B, "Are you sure you should be pulling so hard?"⁵² And then, the pièce de résistance: "I see balls!"

An hour later, when Jay was wandering the halls, I had a little private time with my son. I stared into the wide-open eyes of this stranger who had lived inside me and

⁵⁰ I will never again doubt Freud's notion of *vagina dentata*.

⁵¹ We did.

⁵² Thankfully, Dr. B is a very patient man, or Jay would have, for the second time in as many births, been thrown out of the delivery room.

here was my first thought: I have given birth to a salamander. My second thought was that the girls were going to be disappointed if he didn't get cuter.⁵³ My third thought was that my love for the amphibian in my arms *was* different than my love for Nicky and Dani. Our histories were irrevocably braided, with nearly five years of shared memories and heartaches whereas Cosmo and I had just begun. He was a stranger to me—a stranger with my genes—and suddenly I found myself laughing nervously. Who would this child turn out to be? Would he be as sweet and loving as his sisters? Would I feel the same way about him as I did about them? Could I really love three people that much? Overwhelmed, I handed the baby to the nurse and asked for my husband.

“He went to get something to eat,” she said.

“I'm back,” he said from behind her. “Can I take him?”

“Sure,” she said, swapping a swaddled Cosmo for a paper bag, which I can only guess contained another turkey sandwich. “I'll leave you three alone.”

As soon as she left, Jay and the baby sidled in next to me in the hospital bed. Cosmo was wide awake and alert, staring at his parents intently. I, on the other hand, was spent.

“It's one way, you know,” I said to Jay.

“What is?”

“We love him, but he doesn't love us. Not yet, anyway.”

“Do you need anything?” Jay whispered in my ear, and I knew in that moment that my mother had underestimated my ability to love. Perhaps she couldn't manage that depth of emotion for anyone other than her own babies. I guess many people can't.

⁵³ He did.

But I could feel my heart expanding with each of Cosmo's little hiccups, and I had the sensation of bottomlessness. I would have plenty of love for all three of my children and the man who fathered them. And for any other kids who happened to come along.

“Yes,” I said. “Bring me my girls.”

GETTING TO MEMOIR

“Tricia grabbed the pinstriped dishtowel from its hook over the sink and tried to wipe away the expanding Sumatra pool slowly creeping across the kitchen table from where she rescued two crisp white envelopes addressed to Richard with several names, presumably of lawyers, embossed in the upper left corner. A large formal invitation with almost illegible calligraphy still sat in the puddle of brown liquid. Tricia plucked it out of the caffeinated tributary and dabbed at it, hoping the spill hadn’t soaked through to the RSVP card.”

It was with this first paragraph of my first novel—written entirely in flashbacks—that I endeavored to prove to Professor Schwartz that I was a skilled enough writer to merit entrance to his fiction workshop as a non-degree student in the Spring term of 2004. A brave choice it was, considering what I now understand about Professor Schwartz’s sensibilities concerning retrospective techniques and that the coffee description ended sometime on page 7 (although allusions to the spill could be found as late in the text as page 143). I attributed Professor Schwartz’s ensuing invitation to join his class and his warm enthusiasm for my work as a sign of my lucrative future as an award-winning novelist although, after spending several semesters under his tutelage, I now believe he must have thought my book was a wry, self-deprecating commentary on the writing process. When I submitted the next two chapters of the novel for critique, however, it became clear that my descriptions were earnest, my flashbacks were decidedly unsubversive, and that uncontained coffee was

indeed the principal conflict faced by my protagonist for the first third of the book. I can only imagine Professor Schwartz's scowl when he discovered how he had been duped.

But there I was, in his office, demanding that he (1) autograph my copy of his book, (2) decipher for me the contents of his book, and (3) offer me some writing advice.

"Well," he began. "I would start by moving away from the obvious." Peering down at his book, the least obvious reading material I had ever encountered, I confessed, "I don't think I can write like that."

"I'm not suggesting that you do. I'm just saying that you have to let the reader do some of the work. Also, fewer words."

My final submission in that workshop was a short story in which I tried to make my descriptions minimalist and the events more ambiguous. (In fact, as I reread it now, I'm not entirely sure how the piece ends.) Schwartz loved it. The class loved it. A few people clapped. I was on my way.

I shelved *Tricia and the Stain* and set to work on a collection of short stories which I would workshop for three quarters of the MFA program. Each of these pieces followed the formula I had developed in Professor Schwartz's workshop: parsimonious descriptions (although occasionally, a phrase like "shards of soporific percolation" or "linens enveloping her like the graceful wings of a swan" would manage to get on the page) and very ambiguous endings. My work overall was well received by my colleagues and teachers. I got a couple of stories published. One even won an Honorable Mention in a contest. The Pulitzer was just around the corner. I could feel it.

Only I couldn't. Even as my work achieved some modicum of success (defined as acceptance by my peers and instructors), it was excruciatingly laborious. When I was writing *Tricia*, I couldn't wait to get to the computer every day. And, as overwritten and two-dimensional as ~~some~~ much of my writing was, it flowed out of me. Not so with my new short stories. My characters were difficult, and each sentence—even the dialogue—was a struggle. I wrote and rewrote and rewrote again. I dreaded sitting at the computer. Writing, for the first time in my life, had become hard. Not surprisingly, I started to find excuses not to sit at the computer. I began to dream of becoming a camel trainer, a team mascot, an ophthalmologist. Anything that didn't involve writing.

Then, I reread the books I most loved—*Child of My Heart* by Alice McDermott, *Lolita* by Nabokov, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner, *Barn Blind* by Jane Smiley, *Atonement* by Ian McEwan—all of which contained rich, wordy descriptions and relatively straightforward plotlines. Surely, to have created characters so alive that I could hear them breathing as I ingested their stories, these authors must have felt something for them. I, on the other hand, felt little toward my invented beings. They were items to be manipulated and revised and improved.

"I'm trying so hard," I told my closest friend Maggie. "I never miss a class. I read everything suggested. I do all the exercises. I even meditate."

"What does meditating have to do with it?"

"I don't know, but Barbara Kingsolver does it. And so does Anne Lamott."

"If Barbara Kingsolver ate haggis regularly, would you do that too?" Maggie quipped.

"No. But if Jayne Ann Phillips did, I would."

And that was the honest-to-God truth. I would have done anything to write like Jayne Anne Phillips, whose elegant and searing “Home” always always gets me right in the gut:

I imagine my mother at twenty-three; her black hair, her dark eyes, her olive skin and that red lipstick. She is growing lines of tension in her mouth. Her teeth press into her lower lip as she lifts the woman in the bed. The woman weighs no more than a child. She has a smell. My mother fights it continually; bathing her, changing her sheets, carrying her to the bathroom so the smell can be contained and flushed away. My mother will try to protect them both. At night she sleeps in the room on a cot. She struggles awake feeling something press down on her and suck her breath: the smell. When my grandmother can no longer move, my mother fights it alone. (10)

“Do you think I could ever write like her?” I asked Maggie. A stupid question, I know, but sometimes we have to ask them anyway.

“No, sweetie,” she said tenderly.

“Alice Hoffman?” I asked, wounded.

Maggie shook her head, her lower lip protruding in empathy.

“Elizabeth Berg?”

Maggie said nothing.

“Not even Elizabeth Berg?” I yelped.

“Your fiction is fine,” Maggie said slowly, like she was translating the words from another language. “More than fine. It’s even good sometimes. But it—I can’t explain it—it feels heavy.”

“Heavy? You mean dramatic?”

“No. More like weighed down.”

“Well I like to write about weighty subjects.”

“No. The subjects aren’t weighty. The writing is.”

And she was, as usual, one hundred percent on the money. My fiction writing was weighed down. It was trapped in the rubble of my supreme efforts to make it “literary.” It was bogged down in a voice that was not only inconsistent, but also not my own. It had a few shining moments, but, overall, was comprised of “shards of soporific percolation” (Greenberg, “Las Vegas” 1). No wonder reading it was so exhausting. I felt relieved, like a long-time sufferer from some mysterious affliction who, after seeing several specialists and enduring painful and invasive tests, finally had a concrete diagnosis. As difficult as it was to hear it, at least I understood why I had fallen out of love with my work.

“Remember that essay you wrote for *Mademoiselle*?”

“The one where I’m trying to get a tan?”

“Yeah!” Maggie said excitedly. “That’s what you should be writing.”

“I should be writing for a defunct health and beauty magazine?” I said, offended.

“No. You should be writing about you.”

Nancy Davidoff Kelton, my first writing instructor, who led a class of six aspiring authors in her Manhattan apartment on Wednesday evenings, used to say, “Write from your gut.” This was her way of saying that writing is about showing who you are. Novelists like Toni Morrison, Alice McDermott, and Jayne Anne Phillips write fiction from their guts. I do not. I write fiction from my brain. Which is why my vocabulary is expansive and my grammar, impeccable, yet my characters are stilted and my writing is heavy. It is heavy because it is suffused with self-consciousness and self-importance and the need to control. When I write personal narrative, however, my brain relinquishes its power and allows another part to take over—the part that has nothing to prove. The part that spends a good amount of her time laughing at the ridiculous things I’ve done in the name of literary achievement.

I began my memoir at once, fueled by Maggie’s encouragement and by the luxury of a whole summer off. Once again, I found myself leaping out of bed to get to my computer. Some days, I had to give myself a page limit, or I would have written from dawn to dusk. Whatever magic writing had conjured for me in earlier years had returned, and my faith in my vocation was restored. I would write my truth about the things that mattered to me, and I would no longer need to rely on a formula to get the job done.

When I finished with the first fifty pages, I emailed them to a dear friend who had graduated from the MFA program several years ago and whose beautiful fiction and poetry has always inspired me.

“It’s funny,” she said when I asked her, several weeks later, what she thought.

“And?” I said, my hopes and dreams standing nakedly before her.

“It’s really funny.”

“But is it any good?”

“Well—she started, looking up as if to capture just the right level of diplomacy.

“Just tell me,” I said.

“It’s a bit overwritten. And the characters aren’t very fleshed out.”

“But the characters are real—they’re me and my family.”

“Well, my love,” she said patting me with genuine creative empathy, “then you and your family are a bunch of cartoons. But *really* funny cartoons.”

Dejected, I went home to sulk. After everything I had learned in the program, after all of the constructive criticism and all of the examples I had read, how could my writing still be plagued by the same elementary flaws? I stared at the stacks of legal briefs I had to edit for my day job as Communication Director for an Intellectual Property law firm. Those amendments were anything but pithy, but nobody seemed to find that problematic. I could rewrite one particularly loquacious lawyer’s forty-page argument in three paragraphs. Or, I allowed my mind to continue, I could rewrite my memoir in three paragraphs...

Hands down, that was the most difficult writing exercise I have ever undertaken. It took me the rest of the summer to write my *CliffsNotes*, but, when I was finished, I understood, finally, shockingly, how less can be more. With a new, pared-down perspective, I felt invigorated and challenged. Then, I began again. All was going swimmingly until I got to page 6:

“By the way, this particular interaction dynamic—illustrated best by the scenario in which I am coaxed to go, let’s say, tandem sky diving (or any other activity

which, without the aid of double-digit milligrams of Valium, I would less likely choose than the root canal sans anesthesia) and then, informed, as I am shoved into the ether at fifteen thousand feet, that Jay will not be jumping with me after all but, instead, will most likely be waiting for me on the firm, likely to pulverize bones and organs if one's parachute were to fail, ground below all the while not videotaping his life mate's feat or even watching the episode through binoculars with held breath, but instead, napping under the shade of a nearby tree—turns out to be a leitmotif in our relationship. Indeed Jay's premature departure in the hallway of his parents' home is the first and most benign of many such exits, and, I now understand, this is not surprising. If you can tamp down the adrenaline for a moment or two in those early days of libidinous intoxication, you will see a more polite version of your future interaction patterns. So pay attention in between those three hour dinners and all-night caresses. The chasm between making small talk with your future father-in-law and driving your recently-introduced (read: one week prior), six-year-old, not-yet-step children two hours to spend the weekend at their grandparents' beach house under your sole supervision while their father's band plays in New York City is easily leapt" (Greenberg, *Vomit* 6).

Rereading this overwritten, under-fleshed paragraph was disheartening—I had fallen back into my old ways. I obviously needed a 12-step program or some kind of intervention or I was clearly doomed to a life of relapse. In a crazed desperation, I dug through piles of writing, syllabi, report cards (some mine, some my kids'), a lawsuit labeled "Nannygate," and rejected medical claims until I finally extracted my first fully-realized work of fiction entitled *The Elephant Who Didn't Know How*. The story begins with my strength—dialogue: "Father said, 'Let's go for a walk'" (1). Not too wordy.

Straight to the point. Immediately engaging. By page three, the conflict, which is not superficial, is already introduced. The baby elephant's insecurity and desire to conquer his fear are palpable as is the father's need to ignore those feelings in order to teach his offspring independence and competence. Yet, Daddy Elephant is not one-dimensional. The fact that he jumps in and saves his child from drowning shows that, although a militant subscriber to the philosophy of "baptism by fire," he is unwilling to let his child meet an untimely death, even if it means Baby Elephant is not destined to be a good swimmer. Only nine laminated pages long, the story is satisfying and complete (although the themes present in the book brought back a disturbing recollection of a childhood incident that forever left me unwilling to stand near the edge of any body of water when my dad was nearby).

So, at the onset of my writing career, I had produced economical sentences and well-rounded characters. Where had I gone wrong?

At this point, I decided that turning myself loose with a cursor blinking just after "Chapter One" might be counterproductive. I needed a new mechanism—a way to rein myself in before phrases like "oblong obeisance" found themselves on the page. Katha Pollitt, a journalist who writes for *The Nation* and whose title *Virginity or Death* ranks in my top ten cleverest collections of all times, suggested I write in essay form. "I do that," she said, "because I don't trust myself not to go on and on and on. The essay has a prescribed way of getting to the truth—it creates a nice arc and then wraps everything up with a bit of insight. You don't have to worry about having infinite pages to spill your guts" (Pollitt). Her most recent collection, *Learning to Drive*, was a wonderful example of humor, insight, and word economy. And it was a template for my own

memoir. How unorthodox, I, who shuddered every time a writing professor encouraged “experimental” work, thought gleefully. A memoir in essays. So out of the box! I looked at the stack of books which had served as my guides to writing memoir threatening to topple off my desk: *Her Last Death* by Susanna Sonnenberg, *Memory Palace* by Mira Bartok, *Tiger, Tiger* by Margaux Fragoso, *Half a Life* by Darin Strauss, *Delivering Doctor Amelia* by Dan Shapiro, *Beautiful Boy* by David Sheff, *Loose Girl* by Kerry Cohen, *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls, *Name All the Animals* by Alison Smith, *Lucky* by Alice Sebold, *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson, *Journey From the Land of No* by Roya Hakakian, and *Slow Motion* by Dani Shapiro. Flipping through their pages, I noted they were all relatively traditional, chronological, chaptered memoirs—exactly what I had been trying to write. And failing. Perhaps Katha’s advice was worthy of exploration.

It turns out that the idea for a memoir in essays is not so unconventional after all. In fact, just in the last few months, I have read twelve books that I would characterize as such, including *My Misspent Youth* by Meghan Daum, *I Was Told There’d Be Cake* by Sloane Crosley, *Comfort* by Ann Hood, *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris, and *I Remember Nothing* by Nora Ephron. The publishers of these books called them “Essay Collections,” but they are also true stories from the authors’ lives connected thematically and through shared characters who are/were real people. In other words, memoir.

Judith Barrington, in her book *Writing the Memoir*, defines it as “a story from a life.” (22). “It makes no pretense,” she goes on to say, “of replicating a whole life” (22). The essay collections I was reading did just that. When I was struggling with my first

drafts of *Blended*, I conceived it as one linear story from one point in time to another. The book was to span two decades; for an overwriter, this means several eighteen-wheelers filled to the brim with reams of paper. And that's just for the Preface. My new conception of *Blended*—as a collection of connected essays—allowed me to pick and choose the most relevant and interesting stories from my life as a stepmom. I didn't have to report every detail, as was my default modus operandi. I could, instead, use the 15-20 page essay as a vehicle and then weave them together—just as the aforementioned authors appeared to have done. Thus, I created boundaries for myself and, once again, the writing began to flow. Ironically, once I had finished the essays, it became difficult to differentiate them from chapters. As such, my original title (*Blended: A Memoir in Essays*) is now simply *Blended: A Memoir*. As far as the label “essay” or “chapter” goes, I'll let my publisher⁵⁴ decide.

Lee Gutkind and Hattie Fletcher wrote that the current “memoir craze” is not a remarkable trend given our steadily increasing preference for technology rather than human contact. “Neuropsychologists are discovering that the impulse for story is likely hard-wired into our brains. The less we talk to one another, the more our personal narratives will seek other ways to emerge, finding voice in the genre of memory” (99). I wholeheartedly agree with their assertion. More than ever, I find myself interested in everyone's stories. Unlike many of my peers, I don't find the Internet to be a gratifying place to interact. I find it difficult to seek solace and solidarity through avatars and emoticons. I am a face-to-face kind of girl. I like conversation—the sound of the voice, its pitch, rate, tone, and cadence. I love the human face with its twitches and muscular

⁵⁴ I don't have one, but I said it three times with my eyes closed while lighting a pink-striped birthday candle at my Nora Ephron shrine, so it has to come true.

reveals. I delight in the dance of our eyes—how they harden and soften and change colors like a mood ring. Writing a memoir (or personal essays), for me, is an ongoing conversation with my reader who, ideally, would be having coffee with me while I regaled him/her with my adventures and struggles, but, given the limitations of time and distance, would have to settle for my written account. It's the communication part of it that drives me, and this is why Maggie was so right in encouraging me to tell my stories.

My friend Alex, who received his MFA from Iowa, once emailed me a three-part essay he had written on the disadvantages of pursuing the degree. Most of what he said I had heard before: that too much emphasis is placed on pleasing professors, that there is a certain style of writing that always seems to be privileged to the detriment of all others, and that even well-managed workshops can corrupt the creative process. To a certain extent, I did experience each of these in my many years as an MFA student. As I emerge from the program, however, I realize that these obstacles are what forced me to find my voice—that through trying to be what I was not, I learned what I am. Perhaps, for some more confident, self-aware writers, this experience would have been an expensive and frustrating exercise. But for me, it was absolutely necessary. I applied to the MFA program with the goal of becoming an elegant and searing novelist, but, in the end, I find myself striving to be a funny and affecting memoirist. And I can't think of a more lofty ambition, for, as Anne Lamott once wrote, "When writers make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again" (237).

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