



PERSONAL HISTORY

## A NEW LIFE

*Becoming a parent, ending a marriage.*

BY LESLIE JAMISON

**T**he baby and I arrived at our sublet with garbage bags full of shampoo and teething crackers, sleeves of instant oatmeal, zippered pajamas with little dangling feet. At a certain point, I'd run out of suitcases.

We had diapers patterned with drawings of scrambled eggs and bacon. *Why put breakfast on diapers?*, I might have asked, if there had been another adult in the room. There was not.

Outside, it was nineteen degrees in the sun. For the next month, we were renting this railroad one-bedroom beside a firehouse. I'd brought raspberries and a travel crib, white Christmas lights to make the dim space glow. Next door, a fireman strutted toward his engine with a chainsaw in one hand and a box

of Cheerios in the other. My baby tracked his every move. What was he doing with her cereal?

It was only when I told my divorce lawyer, "She is thirteen months old," that my voice finally broke. As it turns out, divorce lawyers keep tissues in their offices just like therapists, only not as ready to hand. "I know we've got them somewhere," she told me warily, rising from her swivel chair to search. As if to say, *We aren't surprised by your tears, but it's not our job to manage them.* If I cried for five minutes, it would cost me fifty dollars.

"Just *over* thirteen months," I added, wanting to make it seem like we'd stayed married longer than we actually had.

I was myself a "child of divorce," as they say, as if divorce were a parent.

When I was very young, I thought divorce involved a ceremony, the couple moving backward through the choreography of their wedding, starting at the altar, unclasping their hands, and then walking separately down the aisle.

The sublet was long and dark. A friend called it our birth canal. It seemed to be owned by artists; it was not made for a child. The coffee table was just a stylish slab of wood resting on cinder blocks. The biggest piece of art was a large white canvas that looked like a wall, hanging on the wall. Sometimes the firemen next door ran their chainsaws for no good reason. But what did I know? Maybe there was a reason for everything.

Our nights were full of instant ramen and clementines. My fingers smelled



like oranges all winter. Our rooms were sometimes flooded with the liquid pulsing of red emergency lights through the slatted blinds. It was flu season. One night, I woke up at four in the morning with my mouth full of sweet saliva. I stumbled to the bathroom, past the dreaming baby, and knelt in front of the toilet until dawn. When the baby woke, I crawled after her from room to room, then lay on my side on the wooden floor and watched her, sideways. I didn't have the strength to stand, but I didn't want her out of my sight. The things she put in her mouth just blew my mind. All I could do was lie beside her toys, wrapped in a gray blanket, flushed and shivering. She handed me her favorite wooden stick, the one she used to play her rainbow xylophone. She picked up a Cheerio from the floor and lifted it tenderly toward my mouth.

A year earlier, my water had broken during a blizzard. My labor went fine until it didn't. Suddenly it was two in the morning and a nurse was bending over me, saying, "I need another pair

of hands," over and over again, until there were many pairs of hands, too many pairs of hands, and they were looking for a heartbeat. Then people were running my gurney to the operating room, their voices calling out, "It's in the sixties! It's in the fifties!," and I knew they were talking about her heart.

They draped a blue tarp over the lower half of my body and tipped me backward to let the anesthesia flow faster up my torso. I remember wondering why we needed to depend on gravity like that. Hadn't science given us a better way?

After they cut her out of my abdomen, they carried her to the corner of the room. One impossibly small leg stuck out of the blanket. The anesthesiologist kept trying to take my blood pressure while my arms bucked against the gurney cuffs like tethered dogs. I didn't care about my blood pressure. My baby was small and she was purple and she was not in my arms. The whole time, I was shaking. The whole time, my husband was holding my hand. Drugs and adrenaline ran wild through

my veins. It was only once they let me hold her that I finally went still.

At night, on the postpartum ward, the Empire State Building loomed through my hospital window, its tiny yellow squares glowing beyond the roof maze of snow-dusted vents and pipes. Whenever I walked to the bathroom, my I.V. cord got tangled around its pole. A blood clot fell out of my body and landed on the tiles. It was the size of a small avocado, jiggling like jelly.

The window ledge filled up with snacks from friends: graham crackers, cashews, cheddar cheese, coconut water, oranges with tiny green leaves. Someone handed me a form to fill out: Did I want bone broth? There were suddenly flowers—big, blooming lilies, purple orchids, lavender tulips. The blue mesh hospital underwear was the only kind of underwear I could imagine wearing. The swaddled baby in her glass-walled bassinet was like a deity at the foot of my bed. Sometimes her eyes opened and the world stopped.

When my mother arrived from California, I sat there on the starched sheets

holding my baby, and my mother held me, and I cried uncontrollably, because I finally understood how much she loved me, and I could hardly stand the grace of it.

Back home from the hospital, during the first few weeks of my daughter's life, I lived in the gray glider by the back window. Our fridge was full of rotting aspirations: the salad-bound cucumber, now leaking brown fluid; the forgotten, softening strawberries; the marinara sauce furred with mold. It seemed like I was never doing anything besides nursing or wandering around with the baby against my chest. Life was little more than a thin stream of milk connecting my body to hers, occasionally interrupted by a peanut-butter sandwich.

Of course I'd heard babies were always waking up. But this now seemed like a joke. How did anyone get them to sleep in the first place? Every time I put the baby in her bassinet, she cried and cried. She slept only when she was being held. So my husband and I stayed up in shifts. Each day, between nursing sessions, I tried to pump enough extra milk to fill a single bottle, to enable a few hours of sleep that night. Usually I stayed up holding her till eleven or so, he was with her until two or three or four, and then I got up to hold her again until morning. Sometimes I'd wake to hear him fetching the bottle from the kitchen earlier than I'd hoped, barely past midnight, and I'd think, *No, no, no*, because it meant we were getting closer to the moment when my body would become irreplaceable again.

My mother had a two-month subplot nearby. I yearned for her arrival every morning. Her presence meant I could collapse into someone else, that I could ask—without apology, or hesitation—for the things I needed. As I nursed my daughter, my mother brought me endless glasses of water. Our three bodies composed a single hydraulic system. Every few hours, my mother put a plate on my lap, jigsawed with crackers bearing little squares of cheese, clusters of green grapes, apples fanned into slices. She said, "You need to eat." She held my baby girl against her chest and whispered in her ear, "You know how your mama loves you? That's how I love her."

My mother. After my parents split up, when I was eleven, it was just the two of us. On Sunday nights, we watched "Murder, She Wrote," eating bowls of ice cream side by side on the couch. She often solved the mystery by the second commercial break; she knew from the lost umbrella in the corner of the shot, or else from the fishy alibi that didn't check out. "Just got lucky," she'd say. It wasn't luck. It was her close attention to the details of the world, the same keen eye that kept track of every doctor's appointment, every passing comment I'd made about a school project or a tiff with a friend; she always followed up, wondered how it went. She helped me write down recipes in a little spiral-bound notebook of index cards so that I could make us dinner once a week. My economist father was on the other side of the country, or in his apartment across town, or in the sky. It was hard to keep track.

The Internet said babies needed reassurance at dusk because of their primal fear of being abandoned in the dark. "Don't worry, baby," I told the crying pajamas in my arms. "I won't abandon you in the dark." But, saying it out loud, it didn't sound like the worst idea. As I held her, I rocked back and forth, swaying left foot to right. My mother told me that her mother, raised on a farm north of Saskatoon, had called this the Saskatchewan Shuffle. But every mother knows it, that swaying. Every mother calls it something. Sometimes you will see a woman doing it instinctively, her arms empty, when she hears the crying of a stranger's baby.

She stopped crying. She slept. She woke. She cried again. She slept again. She nursed again. I kept feeding my baby. My mother kept feeding me. Months later, in couples therapy, my husband said, "The three of you were a closed world in that back room. I had no place in it."

Falling in love with my ex—I'll call him C—was not gradual. Falling in love with him was encompassing, consuming, life-expanding. It was like ripping hunks from a loaf of fresh bread and stuffing them in my mouth. In those early days, he was a man frying little disks of sausage on a hot plate in a Paris garret, a man asking me to marry him. Making me laugh so hard I slipped off our red couch. Loving the smoked tacos

we got from a tiny shack just north of California's Morro Bay. Pointing out back-yard chickens from the garage we rented behind a surfer's bachelor pad. Putting his hand on my thigh while I drank contrast fluid that tasted like bitter Gatorade, before a CT scan to find a burst ovarian cyst. Playing Kate Bush on a road trip, putting a cinnamon bear on our rental-car dashboard, because it was our mascot, our trusty guide. Our thing. We had a thousand things, like everyone. But ours were only ours. Who will find them beautiful now?

When I met C, I was thirty years old. I wasn't a child. But there was so much I didn't know. I'd never made a choice I couldn't take back. I was drowning in the revocability of my own life. I wanted the solidity of what you couldn't undo. C had lived so much more than I had. It wasn't just that I was fresh from my twenties and he was well into his forties, it was also that he had lived through a great tragedy: the protracted, terrible illness and eventual death of his first wife. He had stayed with her in the hospital after two bone-marrow transplants. He'd shaved his head when her hair started falling out. He'd tried to get her to eat when she couldn't eat. He'd struck the wall when their insurance claims were denied, not for the first time. He spoke of her with deep admiration that was textured and true. He said I would have loved her; she would have loved me. We would have been friends.

I met C soon after ending a four-year relationship so gravitational that I'd felt our constant friction must be the necessary price of intensity. We'd moved back and forth between conflict and reconciliation, somehow feeling most present to each other in the passage from one state to the other. This was life under the shadow of the question mark. I spent long, agonizing hours on the phone with my mother, explaining my uncertainty to her, hoping she could help me decide. She asked, "What is your gut telling you?" But the question didn't help, because my gut told me conflicting things at once—that we were soul mates, and that we were doomed—and my gut wasn't a voice to be trusted, anyway. Recovery had taught me that. (My gut wanted a drink.)

By the time I met C, I was sick of listening to my gut; I was ready to bring

in upper management. Upper management said I was done with waffling, done with going back and forth. Upper management told me not to listen to my doubts. They were only coaxing me back into a prior version of myself.

That first summer, when we were falling in love, I spent a month teaching in Paris. C came over to stay for a few days in my attic apartment on Rue Berthollet. We bought oozing almond croissants from the curt woman at the boulangerie. We got to be the bumbling Americans, with a wary Parisian shopkeeper correcting our change. I mumbled apologies for my terrible French while C cracked a joke about being dumb Americans, and she loved him for it, for not being mealy-mouthed and pandering, but jovially owning what he was.

At a party, a wine-drunk student who knew C's backstory asked whether he'd ever imagined the impossible scenario in which he had to choose between rescuing his first wife from a burning building and . . . he gestured toward me.

Of course C gave the guy a graceful trapdoor out of the moment. This was a skill he'd learned—how to make his grief more conversationally bearable for other people. But in an odd way I appreciated that this blundering drunk guy had made something important explicit: another woman's death was nestled inside every moment between us. It was the house we lived in.

I told myself it was a sign of maturity to surrender the fantasy of being someone's only great love. But it also made me crave our reckless escalation as proof that we had a great love, too. In bed, under the sloping roof of our Paris garret, C said that we should get married. I said yes, because I was in love with him—and because I wanted my whole self to want something, no questions asked.

That fall, we went to Las Vegas for a literary festival. At this point, we'd been talking about marriage for months without telling anyone else. Late one night, we drove to the Little White Wedding Chapel, which had a drive-up window and a white steeple rising from a bright-green lawn of fake grass. A sign showed the curative names of Michael Jordan and Joan Collins with a heart between them, *married here*, as if they'd got married to each other. Anything was possible in this town.

Back at our hotel, we ordered big

juicy steaks from room service. Looking back, we even had a soft spot for the pool attendant who wouldn't let us swim after midnight—*Sorry, closing time*—because his refusal became part of our crazy Vegas wedding story. Like a surreal fever dream, the night felt like a strange portal into new ways of being. I could become a person who eloped in Las Vegas! I could become a person who didn't change my mind. This sounds ridiculous when you say it plainly, but who hasn't yearned for it? Who hasn't wanted a binding contract with the self?

I'd heard that giving birth acts as a temporary appetite suppressant for sharks so that they will not eat their own young. But I was still hungry. I longed to write. In its best moments, writing made me feel that I was touching something larger than myself. During those early days with the baby, it was hard to feel that I was contacting anything larger than myself, my home, my child—anything larger than I could see the edges of. I'd always been a creature of to-do lists and efficiency. Now I was doing little besides keeping this tiny creature alive. The rhythms of my days were simple: left breast, right breast; left breast, right breast.

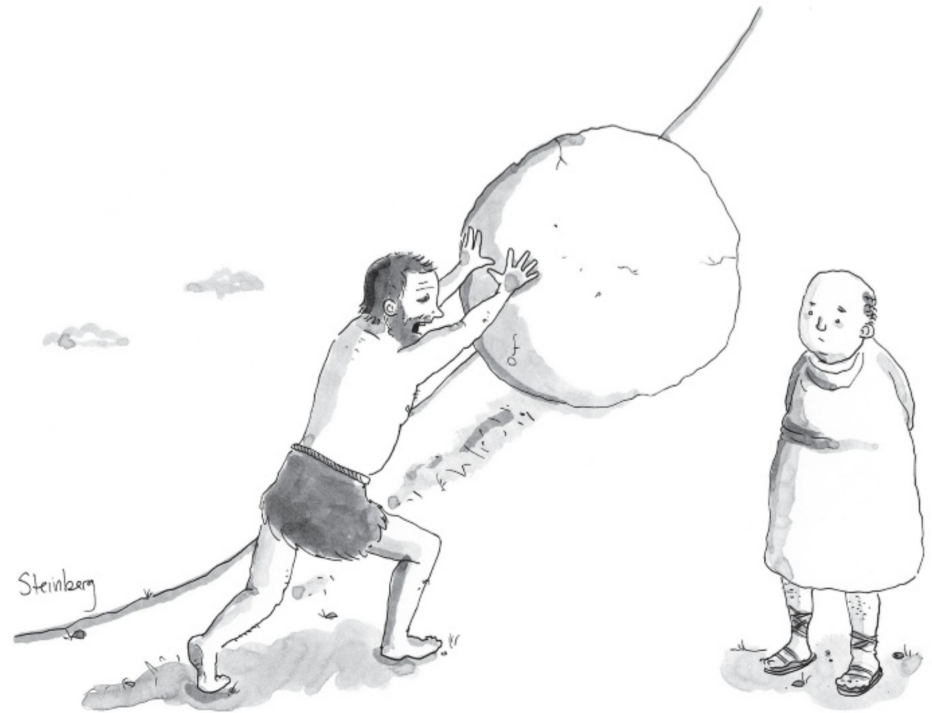
Because I could not hurl myself constantly into work and trips and teach-

ing and deadlines, I had to look more closely at the life I'd built: this husband, this marriage. It was impossible to ignore my daily desire to leave—to wander the cold streets of our neighborhood with our baby, making ceaseless, ever-widening loops away from home.

One chilly day, I took her to the conservatories of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Her bright eyes darted from the palm fronds to the latticework of shadows they made on the ground. Every surface trembled, electrified by her attention. When we got home, C was in a bad mood. Through the years of our marriage, I'd grown attuned to the sudden flare in his eyes, and the shift of molecules in the room before an eruption of anger, like the pressure drop before a storm. It was almost a relief whenever the rain came. It was better than the humidity of his unspoken temper. I wanted to tell him about the greenhouse, the ways the baby's eyes had tracked the flickering shadows. But I sensed he wasn't in the mood to hear it.

Instead, I asked about his day. He said it had been terrible. "Hope you had fun frolicking in the gardens," he snapped, his voice taut with sarcasm.

I didn't ask why his day had been bad. I'd asked this question so many



*"My dad was able to push a boulder up a hill for all eternity and earn enough to buy a freaking house."*

times before, I thought I already knew the answers: his frustration with work, or else the unspoken hurt of our distance. Which is maybe how love dies—thinking you already know the answers.

I said none of this to him, just, “Our day was great,” and let him read my tone however he wanted.

I’d always known that, if we had a child together—and I’d always wanted a child—he would be a loyal, playful, fiercely protective father to her. I never doubted it. But now that we had a baby, I felt so alone in parenting. We both did.

When my daughter was two months old, my mom went back home to Los Angeles. Over and over, I told her, “I don’t know how I could have done this without you.” This also meant, *How am I supposed to do it without you now?*

When she left, I cried uncontrollably, past all rationality—as if I were a child.

Once my mom was gone, it was mostly just me and the baby all day long. Three, four, five days a week, we walked to the Brooklyn Museum. Going to the museum was a way to saturate our endless hours with beauty. And it was warmer than spending all our time in the park.

The baby now consented to sleep in her stroller, as long as she was moving. So we never stopped. It made me think of the movie where the bus would explode if it ever slowed down. Or the way many sharks need to keep swimming to breathe. I was an art shark. I never stopped walking, except to nurse.

Sometimes I walked loops around Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party,” her massive triangular table full of settings dedicated to historical women. My favorite belonged to the typhus-stunted

astronomer who’d helped discover Uranus. Blue waves curled off the plate, as if gazing hard enough at the sky could eventually pull you off the ground.

I wanted my daughter to wake up, so she could see this art; and I wanted her to stay asleep, so I could see it—or, rather, so I could look at it without the interruption of her needs.

Chicago once said, “I also understood that I would never be able to have the career I wanted if I had children. . . . I wanted to be unencumbered.”

*Unencumbered.* That word never felt more physical to me than it did whenever I pushed the stroller down snowy streets with a shoulder bag full of diapers and wipes and—if I was really on my game—an extra onesie.

Of the female artists she knew with children, Chicago said, “Even if they did succeed, they felt guilty all the time. They felt guilty when they were in their studios. They felt guilty when they were with their children.”

Sometimes we ducked into the Egyptian rooms, pausing at the mummy mask of Bensupet, with her kohl eyes and her crossed arms. She looked exhausted by the pageantry of the afterlife. Why couldn’t you just die and be done with it?

Instead, she faced the long, messy business of rebirth. The ancient Egyptians believed that every fetus was created inside a man’s body and then transferred to the woman during sex. (Why not give men credit for the fetus—even that?) After she died, a woman had to briefly turn into a man, just long enough to create the fetus of her next self. Then she became a woman again, so that she could incubate it. Only then was she reborn into the afterlife.

In this vision of one body doing everything, I found an echo of my own

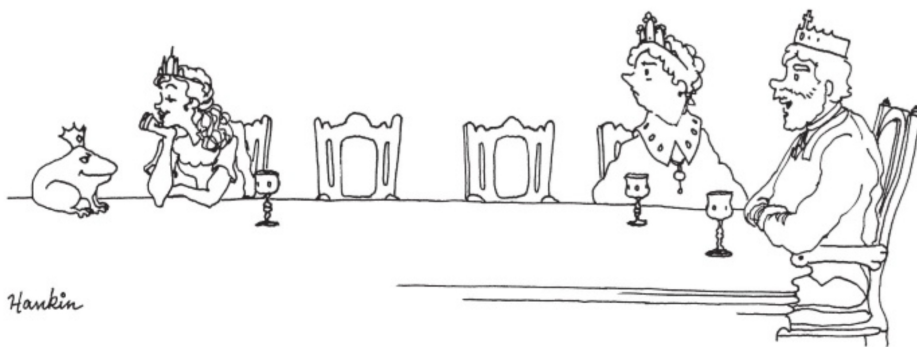
delusions of autonomy: a woman becoming a man to create the fetus, then becoming a woman again to carry it, then finally giving birth to herself. Not needing a man, but becoming one. Doing everything.

During those newborn months, I had a book coming out. I usually described it as a book about drinking and sobriety, though, honestly, it was a book about the only thing I ever wrote about: the great emptiness inside, the space I’d tried to fill with booze and sex and love and recovery and now, perhaps, with motherhood. The book was getting a lot of attention, which made me queasy—and also eager for more.

In April, I took the baby on a book tour. She was three months old. My mother came with us. Four weeks, eighteen cities. We stood at curbside baggage stands in Boston, Las Vegas, Cedar Rapids, San Francisco, Albuquerque, with our ridiculous caravan of suitcases, our bulky car seat, our portable crib. The baby in her travel stroller. The unbuckled carrier hanging loose from my waist like a second skin. Everywhere we went, I brought a handheld noise machine called a shusher. It was orange and white, and it calmed my baby down better than my own voice.

We ticked away the flights in silent rosaries. Praying she’d nap on the plane. Praying the flight attendant would let me keep her in the carrier. Praying she’d nurse on the final descent so that her ears could pop. Praying we’d remembered the shusher. Praying we could find a hardware store with the special screwdriver we needed to replace the dead batteries in the shusher. We needed that noise to survive. When my baby cried beside me in a Detroit hotel room at 4 A.M., the fourth time she’d woken up that night, I knew the four-month sleep regression had arrived. It didn’t care how many state lines we’d crossed. It found us anyway.

In restaurants all across the country, I shoved food into my mouth above her fuzzy head as she slept in her carrier beneath my chin. The receipts were headed to my publisher, and I was determined to eat everything: trumpet mushrooms slick with pepper jam, gnocchi gritty with crumbs of corn bread that fell onto her little closed eyes, her head tipped back against my chest. I was flustered and feral,



Hankin

“I like him. He reminds me of me when I was a frog.”

my teeth flecked with pesto and furred with sugar. Then I pulled down my shirt and gave these meals to her. In Los Angeles, I nursed in the attic office above a bookstore lobby. In Portland, I nursed among cardboard boxes in a stockroom. In Cambridge, I nursed in a basement kitchenette beneath the public library.

Taking my baby on tour was a way of saying, *I can be the father who goes away, and the mother who stays*. It was only because of my mother that I got to do both. She held the baby whenever I wasn't holding the baby. She made it possible for me to approximate the thing I'd always admired her for doing, crafting a self that understood work and motherhood as forces that could feed rather than starve each other.

Everywhere we nursed, everywhere I read, every time I ate, I imagined someday telling my daughter the story of these days—every stockroom cardboard box I perched on to breast-feed, every hotel-lobby chair I used to change her diaper, every night I returned from a reading to watch her body sleeping in the dark, swelling with each milky breath, dreaming its inscrutable dreams. I imagined the tour as a set of memories I was embedding inside her, like sewing jewels into the hem of a coat. But it was tiring. Sometimes I wondered whether I was asking too much of the baby, demanding that she sleep in all these strange hotel rooms so that I could prove something to myself about work and motherhood making room for each other.

Reading at the front of a bookstore one night, I glanced up and saw my mother holding the baby snug against her chest, behind the crowd. They were rocking slowly back and forth. The Saskatchewan Shuffle. For a moment, it was as if the distance between our three bodies had collapsed, as if there were nothing else in the room.

When people said, *It must be exhausting to take a newborn on a book tour*, their assumption made me feel like a liar. How could I tell anyone the truth, that it was more exhausting at home? By the time our daughter arrived, we'd already been in couples therapy for three years, most of our relationship. Once a week, we went to a basement office and I squinted at the small bar of visible sky. The harder our home life got, the more

guilty I felt for wanting to leave it. This was the same deluded faith in difficulty that made me starve myself at eighteen, running seven miles on the treadmill after eating six saltines for dinner. This same voice rose up again to say, *The harder it feels, the more necessary it must be*.

One of the sly reveals of couples therapy was that each way I found our marriage difficult—which I'd imagined as my own specialized arenas of suffering—seemed to have its corollary, like a lost twin, in C's experience. I felt as if I were always walking on eggshells; so did he. "Each of you is working so hard in your own separate corners," our therapist said. "Both of you feel like you are doing everything."

At the time, I was disappointed. I wanted her to confirm my belief that I was actually the one doing everything. But even then I could see that she was right. We were both doing a lot. This was the essential bait and switch of couples therapy. I went to get my narratives confirmed, and instead they were dislodged.

The idea that we both felt so many of the same painful things didn't help me believe that the marriage was more possible to save. It became harder and harder to convince myself that our good months in the beginning mattered more than all the friction that followed. It seemed like the good place we were trying to get back to was just a small sliver of what we were.

The first time I taught a class after my daughter's birth, it was a weekend workshop in Denver. She was six months old. C stayed with her in our hotel room down the block. We hadn't started her on formula yet and had no frozen milk away from home. So we were on the clock. We had to time my fifteen-minute class break just right.

At the beginning of class, I told my students, "My baby's just down the street," as if I were confessing some exotic medical condition they all needed to be aware of. They just nodded and smiled. Many were mothers. They knew the deal.

Before the workshop, I'd been afraid I'd be distracted the whole time I was teaching—my mind levitating above my

body and slowly skulking back to my daughter. But, in fact, something more like the opposite happened. I felt intensely, almost ferociously present. My students were too committed, too full of desire, for me not to be right there with them: the marine from Florida writing about the laundry facility on his base in Iraq, soldiers bringing in their blood-stained uniforms; a woman with full-sleeve tattoos writing about trying to explain her depression to her

Japanese lover; and an Australian mother who kept insisting that her postpartum depression wasn't interesting, even though those were the two paragraphs that people kept pointing to and saying, *Write more of this*.

It felt like I was growing larger, gaining layers, just by spending time with these students. Maybe I

could bring some of that largeness back to my daughter, could mother her as a woman who contained the residue of all these strangers. This thought was like a stoned epiphany from college, except I hadn't been stoned in more than a decade.

When my phone buzzed with the third text from my husband, *She really needs to nurse*, I called our break early and ran, breasts hard and heavy as stones, my flip-flops slapping against the hot asphalt. I began to feel the dizzying vertigo of role-switching, draining and propulsive at once, flicking back and forth between selves: *I'm a teacher. I'm tits. I'm a teacher. I'm tits*.

How many plane flights did I take with her that first year? Thirty? Forty? It was hard to know whether I brought her everywhere because I constantly craved her presence or because I wanted to keep living as if she didn't exist at all. Every work itinerary was like a hall pass in school: a reading, an event, a college visit. Part of me was always looking for reasons to be away. The tides might tell themselves stories about why they're rushing in and out, but it's ultimately the moon that's in charge.

At a reading in Toronto, I was interviewed on a stage directly across from the room where a publicist was watching my baby. The walls were glass. They blocked the noise but not my view. It



was like watching a silent movie in which another woman was actually the mother of my child.

At first, my daughter was happily slamming her fists against a wooden conference table, but then she started to get fussy. *Put her in the carrier*, I thought. The woman picked her up and started bouncing her around the room. *Nope*, I thought. *You gotta use the carrier*. My daughter started crying. But the glass was thick! I couldn't hear a thing. It was as if someone had pressed the Mute button on her. The woman picked up the carrier, clearly confused by it. *You have to clasp the buckle around your waist before you do the shoulder straps*, I thought. The woman interviewing me asked a question about how I excavated profundity from banality. *No, the big buckle*, I thought, watching the woman in the glass room try to put my daughter in the carrier before she had the waistband fully cinched. I had to force myself to look away, and when I looked back my daughter was settled in the carrier. She looked peaceful.

It was hard to say which stung more: watching the silent movie in which she was unhappy about being mothered by another woman, or the one in which it was going just fine.

That fall, I returned to my teaching job. Though I felt a certain pressure to tell people I hated going back to work, in truth it felt sturdy and *right* to start teaching again. It felt good to wear something besides the same frayed pair of jeggings I'd been wearing for months, with flannel shirts that were easy to unbutton for nursing.

Each morning, I brought two bags on the subway. One was packed with teaching supplies—my laptop, my printed lessons for a seminar called *Writing the Body*—and the other was full of pumping supplies: flanges, tubes, plastic pouches, plastic bottles, and the hard-shelled yellow engine of the pump itself, which purred contentedly until I cranked it up to the highest setting and it started to wheeze like a little old man, pawing at my nipples with his plastic flange-hands.

In class, I spoke to my students about breaking open the anecdotal stories we all told ourselves and others about our lives. You have to uproot the cock-

tail-party story, I said, in order to get at the more complicated version lurking beneath it: the nostalgia under the anger, the fear beneath the ambition. I didn't want their breakups summarized, I wanted specifics—wanted them stress-eating cookies as big as their palms, their fingers smelling like iron after leaning against an ex's rusty fire escape.

It felt almost like drag, going to work and becoming a better incarnation of myself for my students: generous, enthusiastic, always giving them the benefit of the doubt. I knew I wasn't offering these things to C anymore, that I was hardening myself in order to summon the resolve to leave.

After class, I pumped at the desk in my shared office and then washed the supplies in the tiny sink of our two-stall communal bathroom. A line always formed behind me, students who were running late for class. "I'm so sorry," I told them, and sometimes just let them cut in to wash their hands among the clutter of my milk-streaked instruments. Once I was done, I shook off everything, little droplets flying everywhere, then tore off a small Nordic forest's worth of paper towels, and cradled all the wet supplies in my arms like an unruly baby made of ten different pieces. Back in my office, I covered my desk with the paper towels and held conferences with students as the plastic parts dried between us. This was hardly professional, but there wasn't a clear alternative in sight.

That term, a very nice male professor was scheduled to occupy our shared office during the hour following my three-hour workshop. This was just when I most needed to pump.

For a few weeks, I tried using another office, but after a colleague walked in on me with my shirt off and the plastic flanges heaving against my bare chest, I decided to ask the male professor if he'd be willing to use another office for that hour. *Whatever you do*, I told myself before I approached him, *don't apologize*.

When I finally stopped him in the hallway, I started by saying, "I'm so sorry." Then I asked if I could use our office to pump.

He frowned slightly, taking in the request, then his features settled into a genial, accommodating smile. "It's

tricky, right?" he said. "We're all in the same boat."

I was quiet for a moment. Which boat did he mean?

"We're all dealing with this office shortage," he said. "We're all trying to make the best of it."

I wanted to say, *Yes, but I'm making the best of it with my breast pump*. Instead, I said, "It would really mean a lot to me." As if it were a personal favor. When I knew it wasn't my fault, or his fault. It was the institution's fault, making women run around begging for the basic things their bodies needed.

He was quite gracious about it, and I was grateful. But I was suspicious of my gratitude, which seemed like the product of a system that makes it difficult for mothers to work, and then asks them to feel thankful every time it's made incrementally less difficult. I tried to imagine being a student looking for space to pump, or an adjunct teacher worried about getting asked back. Or a maintenance worker. Which is to say, we aren't all in the same boat.

Still, it made me smile to conjure an image of this impossible boat: men and women alike hooked up to breast pumps all day long, tits out in the sun, squinting against the salt breeze, fortifying themselves with granola bars, pumping and pumping away.

A month later, I took the baby to a college reading, at the invitation of an old friend who was now a professor. Back in our college days I'd had a crush on this friend. There was a night we kissed, though I was so drunk I couldn't exactly remember. What I did remember was slow dancing on a sticky wooden floor, and how the straps of my dress kept falling down and he kept gently pulling them up again. The following morning, I woke up wondering what would happen next, because I was a daydreamer and in my daydreams many things had already happened between us. But nothing happened next. Or, rather, this happened next: we were friends for twenty years; we were never together; I married someone else. Being an adult meant watching many possible versions of yourself whittle into just one.

On this trip, my friend picked us up—me and the baby—from our retro

motor lodge on a hill. It was raining, and our room stank faintly of urine from a trash bin full of wet diapers. There was also a burnt smell from the hair dryer blowing on my sopping canvas sneakers. My friend took us to a museum, and when I nursed in its elegant restaurant—my daughter smearing pasta sauce across the crisp white napkins with her tiny fingers—it almost felt like squandering an opportunity, that during all these years he'd seen my breasts only when I was nursing or drunk.

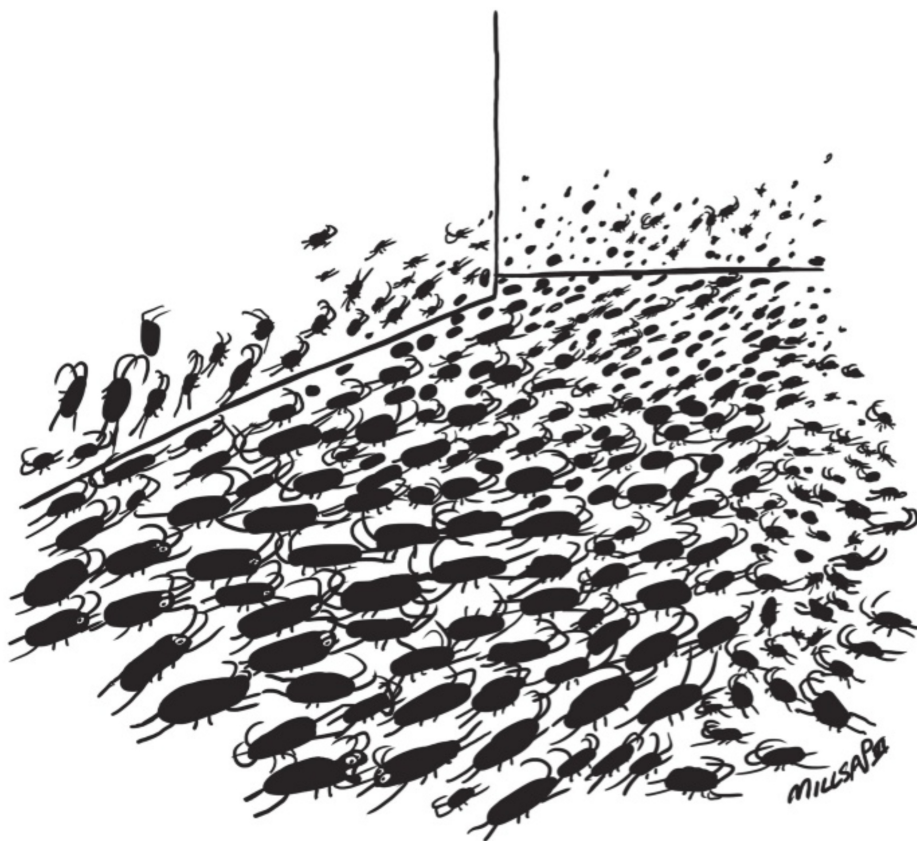
On the stairs outside the museum, a woman stopped us to say we had a beautiful son, a beautiful family. At the time, we joked about how much she'd got wrong in a single sentence. But in the dark hotel room that night, with my daughter sleeping beside me, it ached when I let myself glimpse, just for a moment, that alternative reality she'd seen—the possibility of another life.

Every day that fall, I asked myself some permutation of the same questions. Did honoring my vows mean figuring out how to make a home with C's anger? What did I owe his pain? What did I owe my daughter? When I told myself she would get better versions of both her parents if we did not live together, was I simply telling myself a story that would justify the choice I already wanted to make?

While I was pregnant—and before that, when we were trying—I'd hoped that having a baby would force us to find a better iteration of our relationship. But it seemed to be doing almost the opposite: clarifying my sense that this home was not the home I wanted her to know. In therapy, I started saying this to C, trying to let him know how far away from him I'd got, rather than keeping it to myself.

During a conversation years earlier, when I was already unhappy enough to consider leaving, I told my friend Harriet that I was worried about the harm I would cause if I left. She told me I was right to worry. I would cause harm. She also told me no one moves through this world without causing harm. I'd wanted her to say, *Don't be crazy! You won't cause any harm!* Or, at least, *You're in so much pain, you deserve to cause harm!*

But she hadn't said either of those things. What she said instead was neither condemnation nor absolution. It



*“How many of us make an infestation?”*

was just this: You have to claim responsibility for the harm you cause. You have to believe it's necessary.

That winter, I was one of the officiants at my friend Colleen's wedding, at a lodge in the Canadian Rockies. C did not come, which was a bittersweet relief. I wouldn't have known how to sit beside him and listen to other people declare their faith in a shared life.

In the previous months, I'd had many conversations with Colleen about her vows. Traditional vows said, *Till death do us part*, but she wanted to promise something closer to this: *I will do everything I possibly can to keep creating a version of this marriage that will work.* As we talked about her vows, I remembered my own—kept asking myself, *How do you know when a marriage is no longer possible to save?*

Talking about wedding vows was like donning a hair shirt. Some inner voice—or was it his?—shamed me, over and over again. Don't get married if you don't mean it. Don't get married if you are only capable of meaning something for a week, a month, a year, five years.

Up in the mountains, I ran out of baby-food pouches the day before the ceremony. So I walked into town to buy more, the baby snug against me in her carrier, bundled in an eggplant-purple snowsuit, swivelling her head like an owl to look at all the snowy trees. On the walk back, she cried because her cheeks were red and burning from the cold. Why hadn't I packed more pouches? Every time something went wrong, it was only my fault. I wanted a life that was ninety per cent thinking about the complexities of consciousness, and just ten per cent buying pouches of purée. But this was not the life I'd signed up for.

At the ceremony, I gave a speech to the assembled crowd. *Marriage is not just about continuing but reinventing. Always being at the brink of something new.* Delivering this ode, I felt like a fraud. I had reached the end of reinventing. A voice inside me said, *You are a liar. You have not done enough.* A week later, I would tell C—in our basement therapy—that I was done. At that wedding in the mountains, the words I'd offered as a homily had been an elegy hidden in plain sight. ♦