

HOW IT IS

I

On every third day, the baby is happy and angelic and I have a swell of contentment that lasts for sixty seconds exactly. Then I go to wipe my other son's rectum. If it's a good day, I am also invited to inspect and praise the size of his poop. "Good job, Buddy." As if he is doing nuclear physics or repairing jet engines. "Wow, that's a big one!" And I clap for him and give him one M&M. When he leaves the bathroom, I reach into the medicine cabinet and fish out all of the brown M&M's and eat them. He hates the browns anyway, and I hate breakfast. I hate eggs. I hate oatmeal. I lie to my children and feed them breakfast with "Mmmm, doesn't that look good?" and similar deceitful murmurs.

I am a big liar. That is how it is. This is who I am now.

At 9:30 am, after Sesame Street, Sammy looks up at me, all determined and wise. His hair is smashed like trodden grass on one side. I should brush it. He says, "Mom, I know that Big Bird isn't real. He's a robot like in Star Wars."

I nod. "Sort of," I say, and he frowns.

"No, not sort of, Mom." He stomps off to slam a monster truck into the side of the couch.

I have to admire his determination. He is sure of his world. He knows I am not the expert in these matters: robots and spaceships and vehicles. I don't even know how many pistons are in our minivan. His Dad does, and good for him. He doesn't have to lie about oatmeal. That's the way things are for him.

And for me, things are good. I saw a boy in the grocery store yesterday in a chair designed to hold him upright. He drooled. His mother wiped his face. He was at least nine and would never grow up.

Look at my healthy boys. Look at my fine, sturdy, historically accurate brick house. Look at the nasturtiums out front. My husband James and the boys planted them for me. I am loved. My family plants flowers for me.

II

This is how it was: Wake up at seven to sound of young, agile husband banging drawers shut and blowing his nose. Stumble to shower. Dry hair and spray into all-day submission. Pick a suit: grey windowpane plaid or navy herringbone. Struggle into pantyhose. Start sweating when hose run because toenails are like claws that should have been clipped days ago. Find another pair of hose.

Smear on enough foundation to cover freckles because I don't need to look so damn young. I am a corporate lawyer at Wall, Winters and Flippin. I wear shoes that hurt my feet but make me taller. In all of this, the makeup and heels, I am trying to rise up to

the level of my big brain, to look successful, self-actualized and balanced. I have been tested. I am very intelligent. I have endured law school. I am an achiever.

At work the day doesn't unfold so much as SLOWLY, unroll before me. Endless. I try not to fight it, the suffocating nature of time. For what is my life but this? What else did I work for? Scanning case books, drafting motions, carefully slicing an opponent with my words: *Mr. Frances, did you mean to say that you intentionally breached the contract, or that you were simply too ignorant to understand your obligations? Well? My client will not tolerate your patently unethical behavior. Are we understood?*

I am very well-compensated. I wear expensive leather shoes and have my suits tailored just so. Old friends from college are impressed by my job, the big, fancy firm, my shoes and my new car. When I travel, I stay in the best hotels and only sometimes cry into the Egyptian cotton sheeting, frankly white and slippery soft.

One day, I come home and cry so much that my husband snaps. He passes through the usual stages of mock concern, mild annoyance, futile hope that I will soon stop, and then on to sheer panic. What the hell is wrong? How can he help me? How?

It becomes clear to him, and I want to believe too, that I should leave my job. We will start a family. This is what we always planned. My dear, engineer husband has fixed me. "Good job, Buddy." As if he was saving the planet from Global Warming or curing cancer.

But this is how he loves me.

III

Now I am here in suburbia with my sons, tow-headed and fiery with purpose. I can not slice anyone with my words, and I wouldn't want to. I'm very gentle now. I can't even believe I ever wore panty hose in ninety-degree weather. My husband still believes he fixed things.

But as I said, I am a big liar. For the tenth time in as many years, I have fallen, as if held aloft on my back by a cold wind, thick air, unable to regain my footing. Every day is a struggle inside the blackness of my mind, a swirling, foggy force, unwelcome and tenuous. I sit in Dr. Wang's office and tell her about how I cried into a diaper (a clean one) yesterday and for the whole afternoon I couldn't get the smell of Pampers off my face.

She smiles. "Has it always been like this?" She asks, blandly, as if the question is not as large and sharp as it is.

"I feel like I'm lying to everyone," I say.

"And this is unacceptable to you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's something," says Dr. Wang and we both laugh as if she's known me forever. "Do you want to get better?" She takes out her prescription pad and holds it with her fragile, thin hands.

"But . . ." Fear comes cold and prickly. "But what if this is just how things are? What if this is what it's like to be me?"

She leans forward and squints. “What if it’s not? What if you’ve been so busy surviving the way things always have been to consider: Your life could be more than mere survival. What about that?”

I want to scream at her: “Don’t fucking set me up. I still have babies to feed and bottoms to wipe.” But instead I hold out my hand for her edict, the white paper, the answer, because this is what I do. I listen. I hope I am not only acting to please her, giving her a turn at fixing me. But if not, I will have to accept that I am irretrievably broken. I may never be able to appreciate the beauty of my life, the obvious and humiliating good fortune.

What will my husband say? Will I tell him?

Will I say that I am big liar, and thereby try on truth for size, feel its squeeze? I am at war with my own, supposedly magnificent brain. Will I confess that this is, indeed, how it has always been?

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