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“I Would Never Let My Wife Do That”: The Stories We Tell to Stay Afloat

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Dissatisfaction

My husband and I grew up at opposite ends of the smallest state in the nation. Rhode Island can be an insular place, one that many of its residents don't leave. It's a small-town mentality taken state-wide, one large experiment of seven degrees of separation. As wide-eyed high school sweethearts, Matt and I ventured as far as Boston for college, then graduated and settled into a Boston suburb less than an hour's drive from both my parents and my in-laws.

From the outside, I imagine it looked like we were living the suburban American dream. Married a bit over two years, Matt and I enjoyed our life together. I spent my days in a colorful 4th grade classroom reading and writing with precocious kids on the verge of middle school, across the hall from a mentor teacher who was like my second mother. I was in a great district with the kind of job that I could hold for the next thirty years. Matt was moving up the corporate ladder in a Fortune 500 company. We rented a cute apartment with a backyard, an easy drive north to our friends in Boston or south to our family in Rhode Island. On Saturdays, Matt went golfing and I'd hit Target and get a pedicure, or we'd catch my nephew's baseball game. Some sunny Sunday mornings when the mood struck us, we'd visit open houses and talk about buying a place. Everything was comfortable. We were happy.

Except.

Except for the nagging feeling that something wasn't right. It started out small enough that I could ignore it — a bad day, a rough month. But across several years, my sense of claustrophobia grew and grew until it took over. I felt like I was suffocating. I looked around and realized I didn't want to buy a house and have a baby. I didn't want to welcome another crop of 4th graders every year until my current crop was middle-aged. It felt selfish, but I wanted...more.

But, as much as I knew that I wanted something else, I wasn't really sure what that something else might be. What else was I qualified to do? I was finishing a master's degree that would allow me to become a reading specialist, but that seemed like a different version of the same story. Administration seemed like too much budgeting and facilities management, and seven years into teaching, it felt too late to choose a different career and start over. So, when my advisor in my master's program suggested a doctoral program, I was surprised. When he suggested that I could attend a top-tier institution, I was shocked. I'd always been a good student, and I genuinely loved learning, but academia was for older gentlemen with tweed jackets and suede elbow patches, or for scientists who loved labs and spreadsheets. No one in my family or circle of friends had pursued that path, and I had never considered it a space that was open to me.

Still, my advisor was encouraging and he coached me through the application process. When Matt and I talked it over, he echoed my advisor's confidence. While my main concern remained whether or not I could even get in to these programs, Matt's main concern was the finances of it all, which we couldn't seem to get any straight answers about. After our initial research, we decided to test the waters. I applied to exactly three schools, all in northeastern cities where we already had friends or family. I imagined it as a way of calling my advisor's bluff, and, after the rejections rolled in and proved that academia wasn't for me, I could readjust my expectations or look for another path forward. Imposter syndrome is real, friends.

The first sign that things might not be quite as straightforward as I'd imagined came when I sat down with my advisor towards the end of the application process. I assumed he might have some last-minute feedback on my essay or tips on recommendation letters. When he began asking about my husband, I was taken aback. *Was my marriage strong?* His question rebounded around my brain as he explained that doctoral programs often lead to divorce (see Barnes, this volume). *His* doctoral program had led to *his* divorce. I stammered some version of my condolences. "I don't mean to scare you, but it's really hard on a marriage. Divorce happens more than you'd think," he said, "You should take that into consideration as you make your decisions over the next few months." Still imagining there would be no decision to make, I wasn't *too* concerned. But the question stuck with me. And when two acceptance letters arrived, that question demanded an answer.

Permission

Thankfully, I married a man who treated me as a partner and supported my ambitions. He analyzed the pros and cons of each program with me, gave me pep talks when I thought I couldn't possibly hold my own academically, and figured out our budget when we decided. At work, he negotiated to spend two days a week in the office in Massachusetts, and work the rest of the week from our new home. Together, we decided to pick up and move our lives to New York City. We talked through every choice along the way, as a team. That's not to say there weren't arguments and anxiety and tears (there were plenty), but we felt as though we were making thoughtful, responsible decisions. We would quickly learn, however, that not everyone agreed with our assessment.

Most of the initial pushback came from Matt's colleagues. When he explained our plans to move, some asked invasive questions about our plans for a family. Others asked equally

invasive questions about our finances, openly calculating the expected “return on investment” for my education and finding it wanting. But the responses that surprised me most had to do with permission.

One colleague, upon hearing our plans, looked Matt in the eyes and said, “Man, that’s crazy. I would never let my wife do that.”

Matt met this man’s gaze and replied, “Well, I guess you haven’t met my wife. I don’t *let* her do anything.”

In a way, that story became our identity. That moment, those phrases, became our mantra as we slogged through the challenges of relocating — packing, apartment hunting, the mountains of paperwork required for a New York City rental agreement — and the process of figuring out what our lives in the city would look like once we got there. We’d retell the story to each other to prove that we were the ones in on the joke, brave enough to venture out and disrupt the status quo. We were the ones who didn’t need permission to live our lives as we chose. That story became armor we didn’t even know we would need for the battles yet to come.

Initiation

I entered into my first semester as a doctoral student with a great deal of privilege and support. I was able to attend school full-time, to focus on classes and my fellowship, while my husband commuted across hours and states, back and forth each week. So, I also entered that semester with a great deal of guilt. Transitioning from working full-time to taking out loans and asking my partner to make such sacrifices felt awful. I feared that I wouldn’t (or couldn’t) make it through the first year of doctoral work, which culminated in a make-it-or-break it exam. The potent combination of guilt and fear made that first year a caffeine-fueled blur of anxiety.

The state of that first year was epitomized by our Tuesday evenings. Matt would drive back from Boston after work on Tuesdays. I had six hours of classes, stacked back to back until 9:00 p.m., on Tuesday nights. (*“Won’t it be nice to get all of those classes done at once?”* my precious, naïve former self had thought.) Matt and I would meet up in our new neighborhood, exhausted and cranky, and attempt to find a parking space that would not earn us another ticket. It was the perfect recipe for a screaming match. Every. Single. Week. I began to understand what my advisor had been talking about.

Of course, Tuesday nights being alright for fighting was not the only issue that arose. While I was able to build a new social network in the city through my classes and roles at the university, Matt was spending half of his week in another state, and the rest separated from his previous social circle without many opportunities to build a new one. We also juggled new distributions of the chores and errands that made up daily life. I couldn’t carry groceries back from the store by myself, let alone find the time to plan and cook dinners every night, as I had done before our move. Matt was out-of-state for part of the week, leaving me to manage laundry, bill paying, the post office, or whatever else came up on those days. Who dealt with the landlord? Who dealt with the cockroaches? New responsibilities and old ones began to overwhelm us. It felt like our life in New York was temporary, a test we needed to pass until life could return to “normal.” We were barely keeping our heads above water, and the doubt crept in.

Performance

In the midst of our practical concerns, we overlooked some of the larger issues that animated our struggles. Not only were we grappling with the challenges of orienting to newly divided responsibilities and a new city, we were also grappling with our gender roles. Despite our story about standing up to sexist coworkers, we had never really escaped the patriarchy.

Specifically, the role of a trailing spouse, or the spouse who relocates for his or her life partner's career, is typically cast as female (Cooke, 2001, 419). While men's work is historically viewed as important enough to uproot a family for, women's professional roles have not been valued in the same way. When a woman relocates for her male partner, the hegemonic gendered notion remains that her work is in their new home (Bailey and Cooke, 1998, 101). The care work traditionally taken on by women is portable, able to be done wherever the home (and/or children) might be. When we sought out resources for trailing spouses, we found blogs and articles like, "Fighting the Expat Blues: 5 Tips for Expat Wives Abroad" (Reilly, ND) or the writer of "Memoirs of a Trailing Spouse," who bemoaned, "few ever think of the frazzled...mom (commonly known as the trailing or accompanying spouse) with toddlers in tow, left to fend for themselves in a foreign land and foreign language, while her husband goes off to long days at the office or on extended business trips" (Wilcox, 2013). None of it seemed to fit our experience.

Matt's coping mechanism was to try to play a "tough guy" role. He tried to roll with the punches, to pretend that he liked living in a big city and that he could handle the stress of his weekly commute. He didn't want to admit how much he disliked work, particularly now that he was the sole breadwinner. How could he look for a new job when we needed his paycheck to make rent? With a social network at home that had proven it didn't understand our choices, and no new social network built up, whom could he have admitted his struggles to?

At the time, though, I was unaware that my husband was having difficulty adjusting. This was partly because he was trying to hide it, and partly because I was too busy drowning in my own concerns. Judgement of my choices was both implicit and explicit, both self-imposed and inflicted in the careless remarks of family members, Matt's co-workers, or even strangers. According to Bolton (2000), the "third shift" consists of the self-doubt and anxiety a woman can

feel about the way she handles her conflicting obligations, following her “first shift” at work and “second shift” at home. My guilt grew each time we needed to order takeout, the dishes went undone, or we ran out of something I “should” have remembered to pick up at the store. I felt selfish taking the time I needed to camp out in the library, reading and writing and thinking, when I “should” have been working, cooking, or cleaning. I felt even more selfish moving away from my aging parents and hearing about my father’s dialysis or my niece and nephew’s soccer games from several states away. Even our UPS delivery guy shook his head disapprovingly when he asked what *exactly* it was I was going to school for and laughed when I told him how long it would take.

My perceived failings in my “second shift” at home and the self-doubt of my “third shift” placed extra pressure on my “first shift”: school. The anxiety inherent in the competition and intensity of doctoral work was a sea that sometimes threatened to drown me but always surrounded me, battering me with wave after wave. Afraid that each opportunity offered to me might be the last, I said yes to everything. Guilt over my decreased financial contribution coupled with my undying need to prove my intellectual competence made each individual decision seem easy. Yet, it quickly became clear that my (arguably gendered) inability to say no and my desire to please were liabilities. I took on too much. I began placing other obligations, such meeting with students well beyond my TA office hours or taking the subway to distant schools no one else wanted to travel to for coaching or supervision, ahead of moving my own work forward. Worse, I began to burn myself out. By the end of my second year, I started to consider the possibility that I might not finish.

Days passed, and we muddled our way through. I would start crying in the middle of otherwise quotidian conversations. Matt’s temper flared up over seemingly trivial things. We

began drinking with dinner each night, something we hadn't done before the move; some nights we started drinking even earlier. We worried and wallowed and raged in seemingly equal parts.

Of course, looking back now, it seems like a case study out of a textbook. The patriarchy, imposter syndrome, social isolation, depression and anxiety each played their stereotypical parts. In that first year, though, I didn't have the vocabulary to name them. No one else in my cohort seemed to be struggling, and I didn't want to be the one to bring it up. I thought it was just me. Just us. *Was my marriage strong?*

Revision

I wish I could identify a turning point, one event that turned things around. Instead, it was a more gradual realization that we couldn't stay so miserable. And for anything to change, we had to take action. So, in moments a bit too raw and personal to recount here, we began to confess our fears and unhappiness to one another, and began trusting that we could help each other through them. Once we were honest with each other, it was easier to be honest with ourselves about what we needed. The most crucial first step was that, with the help of our doctors, we pursued therapy and medication for the mental health issues we faced. Accepting that help didn't come naturally to either of us, and we had to experiment and give ourselves time to figure out what we could each be comfortable with. We started reading books on communication, mindfulness, anxiety, vulnerability, and happiness, tweeting and emailing articles back and forth or reading passages aloud to each other. We explored our "love languages" and Myers-Briggs types, dove headfirst into Brené Brown books about having the courage to be vulnerable, and tried the Marie Kondo method and meditation. Our attempts were haphazard at first, but we gradually developed more purpose as learned what resonated for us, what worked, and what didn't. We learned vocabulary to name what we felt and why, and

increased our awareness of the discourses that circulated in and around us. We tried to accumulate all the tools we could, individually and together, to pull ourselves out of the water and onto solid ground again.

It was slow, meandering progress. Luckily, both of us stuck it out and did the work. Some of it was together, and some of it was independent. First, we landed on lasting solutions with our doctors; I stuck with medication for my anxiety, and Matt stuck with therapy for his depression. Then, we could address more practical matters. We got rid of the car and moved to a new apartment. Matt found a new job that he hated, then another new one he loves. We named my third year in the doctoral program “The Year of No,” and I worked on being more intentional with my time; after the year was over, I was ready to defend my dissertation proposal. I had to learn to say no to things other people wanted me to do in order to say yes to my own work.

In short, Matt and I were able to re-narrate our New York City academia experience by centering ourselves as agentive actors in the story (Johnston, 2004). As Clandinin and Connelly (1990) argue, “humans are storytelling organisms, who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (2). From a narrative perspective, we had to see that our story could be rewritten, and that we were the ones who needed to begin revising it. We also had to see each other (and ourselves) as multifaceted, fluid characters. Despite our now seven years of marriage and sixteen years together, or perhaps because of it, we are not the same people we once were. Our identities have shifted and multiplied, conflicting and constantly becoming (Moje and Luke, 2009). The city, the distance from our families, the new jobs and new experiences challenged and changed us. We had to make space in our relationship for that change. We had to relearn each other and ourselves — an academic and a trailing spouse, a yogi and a runner, introverts, New Yorkers. It’s this work that we took on together, and continue to take on, that ultimately allows me to answer the

question my advisor posed years ago: yes, my marriage is strong. Maybe it wasn't, really, back when he posed the question. But we've built it that way, choice by choice.

Continuation

This story — my story — might seem like a linear victory narrative, but I assure you that it is not. It's a constructed representation that follows the purposeful path of a story arc, ingrained as it is as a way to make coherence from the chaos of life. But this story is very much still being written. Beginning year five of my doctoral program, I'm trying to persist to graduation and avoid the dreaded A.B.D. label. There is, again, mounting pressure to start a family. I've mainly avoided the questions over the past few years, but graduation will also mean a resurgent interest in my uterus. Matt still doesn't like New York City, and I fall more in love with it each day. I feel a ticking countdown clock on my time here and sometimes cry in the midst of conversations about leaving. Our "Two-Body Problem" remains. As Wolf-Wendel, Twonbly, and Rice (2004) argue, the difficulty of two professional life partners obtaining jobs in the same location (or a reasonable commuting distance from one another) often forces a "no-win" situation: either one individual may be forced to abandon a career for the other, or the relationship may falter due to the distance between the spouses' jobs. Consequently, Matt and I still aren't sure how to decide where to go next. Do we move for my career again? Is it Matt's turn to choose a place he'd like to live? Can we afford to wait here until I get a "real" job? Will I ever pay back my loans?

It's messy. It's been messy, and it will continue to be messy. What matters, I think, is admitting to the mess and letting others see it. It's uncomfortable, but it's the only way we're not in the mess alone. It's hard, but it's the only way we know that our messes are not unique. It's complicated, but it's the only way we can break down our isolation and be in this together. I

don't have all the answers, but I have my story, and I'd like to help create spaces where more of us can share our stories with one another.

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