

One night after sex, crown of her head in my palm, she told me she ovulates “on the early side,” and I? I don’t think, *Wow, she’s actually thinking of having my kid, of yoking herself to me like that*; I can only think of why she knows that so well. When there was supposed to have been nobody like me, ever, nobody to watch that schedule for but me. And yet, there was him, always him, the one she let fuck her that way, the way where you have to know when you ovulate.

Him touching her like that, him touching her anywhere, his flabby gut pushing up against her with no understanding of precisely how lucky he is, what an honor. It is. To be there. In her. It’s enough to voluntarily institutionalize. Or actually, no. It’s more like a pulse that spreads to my crotch—at first it seems to be the stirrings of a simple boner, but then it starts stinging somewhere a little higher up, a sensation that makes me want to punch myself repeatedly, and hard, in the stomach to make it stop.

But then she also told me that now it feels as though there’s never been anybody else but me, her history eradicated, hard-drive erased and re-booted. And I almost believe her. Because I feel exactly the same way. That’s on good days. No, I always feel exactly the same way. I just don’t *believe* her except on good days, which come every two or three days, on average.

No, to be sure, *every* day’s good with her. But I’m talking about

when *I* have good days, the kind where you can hear a one-off like “I ovulate on the early side,” and it doesn’t send you into a spiral of doubt and disbelief and terror the likes of which you’ve never experienced before. Not even as a child in those dark places.

A note I’ve been working on, it’s just a first draft:

Dear J—,

Here are some things you might consider no longer uttering in my presence (F.Y.I.: not an exhaustive list).

1. “My wedding was so much fun for everybody.”
2. “My bridesmaids wore whatever they wanted to my wedding.”
3. “My photographer friends took some really gorgeous shots at my wedding.”
4. Just pretty much don’t say anything with “my wedding” anywhere in it.
5. “I am so in love with you *right now* (my emphasis).”
6. “*Right now* I feel like I want to be with you the rest of my life (again, my italics).”
7. Just don’t tag on “right now” at the end or beginning of any sentence. If it makes you feel like you’re giving me an “out” in case I need one, I don’t. And if it makes you feel like you’re leaving yourself an out if you need one, well, don’t bother, because I’ll slit your throat before you’re able to leave me anyway (Ha ha).
8. “We took this wall down to make the kitchen bigger.”
9. “We had a family of possums living in the shed out back.”
10. “We never used to—insert any activity here—.”
11. Pretty much just don’t say anything with “we” in it. Likewise, saying “my husband”—even if at the time to which you are referring he was your husband—implies that you still have a husband.

12. “Just because someone’s a good dancer doesn’t mean he’s good in bed. *Believe me.*”

13.

He was coming to take the kids to Sea World. They like to see the bottle-nosed dolphins. The four of us were watching Tyra Banks and her primordial models on TV, folded into the couch like kin when the taxi pulled up. The dog barked and I went to the front window, watched him step out of the car, slide the door shut behind him, and then peel off a few bills to pay the slouched driver.

He was chubbier than I remembered. Bigger all around. More meat-headed, if that’s possible. The kids squealed and ran to the door, pushing the dog aside. “Daddy!”

Hugs all around. And then she hugged him too. Kissed him on the cheek—no, actually, it was practically on the lips, a brush by the lips. The corner of her lips, which are mine. Which were his. If just in name.

She giggled. *Giggled.* They embraced and he held her tight. Longer than seemed necessary. The kids beamed, momentarily transported back. Then we shook hands; I squeezed as hard as I could and still his blocky, dry-skin grip smarted. I felt like an ass, so I disappeared into the kitchen to see if the dishwasher needed unloading. Which it usually does. Yeah, I’ll do that. Garbage and recycling, too. He never did. But I will, because that’s the kind of guy I am. *Ass.*

Somewhere between the sink and the dishwasher, I dropped a coffee mug and it shattered on the tile floor. Four heads—a family of four—poked through the kitchen door to see if everything was okay. Everything was not okay. Ceramic shards seem impossibly sharper than glass. And harder to pick up.

So I gave her the note. I stuck it on the refrigerator door under a *Visit Orlando!* Shamu magnet. I think she saw it when she got home from the Y on Tuesday, but didn’t read it until later that night, after

the kids were in bed.

“You have to stop,” she said.

“You said you wanted to hear all of my feelings.”

“But this has to stop.”

“Is this the line and I’ve crossed it?”

“I don’t know about any lines, but this—”

“Which part, exactly?”

She just stared at me, lips loosely parted like they might slide right off her face, like they look right before we kiss when she’s on her side. Or when she’s bat-shit mad at me.

She flicked on the TV (*Idol*) and kept reading (*The Atlantic*)—and wouldn’t even glance in my direction, her expression chilly and placid. She might as well have been pondering her stock portfolio. If she had one. The TV was on mute while some stunningly average guy with terrible facial hair looked like he was orgasming into the mic—and he was in the top three. The top three most talented people in the country. I wanted to change the channel, but she seemed intent upon retaining possession of the remote. In fact, she’s a terror on the remote; it’s one of those things I just relinquish. So I sat there willing her to look at me and wondering what might be on the Discovery Channel or Animal Planet. Maybe some jumbo animals on a savanna somewhere, clicking teeth. Or male polar bears on a floe, fighting over who gets to stick what where.

Okay, I didn’t give her the note. But I wanted to. What she was telling me to stop was “the face.” Purportedly there’s a face I pull when she’s on the phone with him, making arrangements about the kids. She says I look like somebody getting chemo. Or a close relative of somebody getting chemo. I just don’t understand why she has to be *so fucking nice*, her voice trilling and everything out of her mouth *so goddam accommodating*.

*It’s for the kids.* The kids! Of course, anything for the kids!

Like I don’t know. I go three measured rounds over the merits of

wearing shoes outside, wage war against nasty hair-tangles, am up at all hours with projectile vomiting or harrowing nightmares... Shit, I'd still want her if she had as many kids as that wacked Mormon family on The Learning Channel. I'd help raise a fucking litter of rabid *badgers* if they were her progeny. Dinners, lunch boxes, Saturday morning pancakes with chocolate chips and raspberries. Hugs. Bicycle tires. More hugs. Homework. Target. I'll do that. It's my family. Our family. It was the last thing I wanted, and now I couldn't manage without it, can't envision a version of my life without it—would scrap for them with everything I have. Would happily serve a sentence for first-degree murdering anybody who laid a hand on any of them—even if that meant sharing a cozy eight-by-twelve with an amorous roommate nicknamed “The Duke” for the rest of my natural life.

And yet: a few times a year (more or less), this guy swoops down, and *Snap*, back to Nuclearville. With a layover in Crazytown. Shoes, hair, food, sleep—*who cares* when Daddy's around? Lose a kid for a couple hours? Hey, it was only a couple hours, and anyway, there's always another where the first one came from. Most years, he doesn't even remember their birthdays.

No matter, though, because they'll never be mine. And worse, I'll never have been through it with her, never made that monumental yet also entirely effortless nod to bring them into the world together in the first place. He'll never know how lucky he is for that either. Those years with her and them. I'll happily begrudge him that until the day I die, or he does—and try desperately not to do the same to her in the process. As if I'm capable of such bigness. Which I'm not.

As if on cue, my familiar refrain pops out, because I am essentially powerless over it: *If he was so terribly mediocre, then why did you marry him? And why did you stay with him? Why do you still defend him? And my personal favorite: Why did you fuck him, even up until and through the end? And afterwards, if it was so bad? Compared to this, with me. You didn't know. Neither did I. If I had one wish, it'd be for a time machine. For us all. A time machine and some spermicide.*

I slept in the guest room that night. And the night after in one of the kids' bunks, because she'd climbed into ours in the middle of the night with a tummy ache and stayed. It was quite possibly the "Why did you fuck him?" part that earned me two nights in the solitary-bed clink. Or the spermicide.

If jealousy's so bad, why does it feel so good? Not one's own jealousy, of course—because that just feels like shit, crawling the sidewalk bloody-kneed, pleading, *Somebody please sock me twice and pulverize both cheekbones*—but when you know somebody else bothers to care where you've put your dick, who you've touched and who touched you, when and for how long, and how it felt and precisely how it was different from this now? That's one of the best feelings in the world. She's been like that one time I can think of. And that one time sustains me now like a promise, like engagement rings appease some people, I suppose.

I tried Googling "Does jealousy serve an evolutionary purpose?" but was derailed by the first suggested (and obviously more common), search phrase that popped up in auto-fill: "Does jealousy mean love?"

Beware of a jealous partner, especially a jealous boyfriend. Jealousy happens because of insecurity and self-loathing on the part of a person who has a terrible fear of being abandoned. This negative emotion is a result of someone, probably from a dysfunctional background, experiencing rejection, verbal abuse, and maybe familial neglect as a child. These heartbreaking experiences can really hurt a sensitive child while growing up, and so this translates into insecurity and low self-esteem as an adult. Not only that, but as an adult they can in turn become self-centered and believe that deep down they are unlovable.

Check, check, check, check and *check!*

When he brought them back from Sea World, she asked him to stay for dinner. More like, dinner was obviously ready, and he shrugged his steer-like shoulders, and then she politely, reflexively inquired, “You have plans for dinner?” and the kids hollered, “Stay, will you stay? Please?” and then there were five place-settings instead of four.

Across the table the children looked sunburned but seemingly content to have the three of us in the same room together. Their eyes darted among us, taking temperatures. Not much on the conversation front, the mouth-breather chewed in a way that seemed specifically aimed at driving me insane. There at my own table, which used to be his. Like everything else.

I downshifted and tried to focus on all the adrenalized chatter about dolphins and cotton candy, but soon the kids’ eyes were at half-mast, and whinging set in. They kissed Dad good-bye, and I volunteered to take them up to bed because the Prince wasn’t finished eating yet—and was “just plain *wrecked* from the amusement park.” After several tickle jags, dramatic hugs, and repeated reassurances that nobody was going to come in and kill us during the night, Clutter-style, I returned to the table just in time for: “We had spring rolls like this at our wedding, didn’t we?” He glanced up at her and smiled, mouth closed. She looked at me. I sat back down and looked at my plate. “Yeah, they were just like this,” he continued, popping the end of the last roll in his mouth.

“Really, dude?”

“Okay—” she interrupted, just as I was seriously thinking about adding, *You had your chance. Prick.*

“Well, I guess I should get to the airport then,” he said, exhaling loudly and pushing his chair back from the table, scraping up the wood floor beneath it.

“Just tell me how long I’m going to have to pay for that one,” she

asked, after a couple hours of my trademarked silence tinged with an undercurrent of rage.

“*What?*” I asked, wholly unconvincingly. So she turned over and went to sleep, that gorgeous angle of her shoulder—and the lovely freckles thereon—daring me to keep it up.

I didn’t sleep. It’s almost worse when you know you’re free to say and do anything, that you don’t have to watch your words and mind those egg shells all the time. That she’s not a leaver, nor a punisher. What a novelty. Ultimately I don’t know what to do with it though, because of course there’s always the possibility that she lied, that she will leave, if you go too far. That she is like all the others, who insist they don’t mind when they really do.

Date rape not an option, I just lay there listening to her breathe and watching the headlights dart and stretch across the room every few minutes. I started outlining talking points in my head for the next morning, but somewhere between indirectly disparaging her past choices (*that* again), and promising I’d never be party to making the same mistakes with her, (reason number #137 not to get married: the absurdity of standing up there and saying “forever” again if you already did once before, and it didn’t work the first time), I lost interest in building any case.

I could smell her skin. A scent so intimate and warm and just plain her that I wouldn’t ever be so impertinent as to try to describe it. The smell conjured all of our sex for me then, defying everybody’s well-intentioned warnings that our fucking would slow to a semi-respectable hum, and then, eventually, be more of a couple-times-a-month thing. If that. My hand inched under the waistband of my boxers as my rules and points continued dissipating, and I was seized by the image of that one afternoon when the kids were at the museum with the babysitter, the house cool and empty. We’d fucked for something like four or five hours straight. Everywhere except the side room where the banquette is too skinny to accommodate the both of us. Nor the downstairs half-bathroom. Also too



small, and the sink too precariously attached to the wall. But pretty much everywhere else.

And this one look she gave me when I had her up against the stairs, her hair spidered across her neck in sweat. Daring me to take what she was offering. If I really wanted it. I'm sure my eyes were hollering *YES, yes to all of it*, and I felt more seen in that moment than I'd perhaps ever been. By anybody—including myself. So I wrapped my hand around her neck and squeezed until she looked away, then came. Hard. I could feel it, which made me squeeze even harder, and then come, too.

The recollection rendered my hands down my shorts an entirely inadequate substitution, so I just lay there still. For hours watching her one bare shoulder rise and fall. I didn't think I'd slept, but when I realized it was day I turned over and felt she was gone. Forever, I assumed. That flicker of panic every time my palm hits sheets in lieu of flesh. But she was just taking the kids to school and getting on with her day, with her life. So I took a piss and headed into the kitchen, where a note was stuck on the refrigerator door:

Your jealousy is an impotent rage, and it drives me crazy sometimes, even if I also completely understand it. Because more often than I admit, I am paralyzed by thoughts of you with other girls, some I can visualize precisely, the choreography of it, while others are just nameless, faceless, dark-haired blurs with the benefit of your amazing hands all over them. But I'm starting to think that these feelings neither of us has experienced before just might have a purpose, and they're not so impotent after all. You're protecting something of utmost value, something you don't even know yet... I'm pregnant. That's what I was trying to bring up last week when we talked about my cycle, you asshole. You don't want to marry me, I get it, and I sure as hell don't want to start all over with another fucking baby, but there it is. I've told you over and over in so many

ways how different this is, how my marriage was a joke, and if I could've had those same kids with you I would've—in one afternoon you offer them more than their father did in years. And I'll have this one, too (if you don't mind my tits ending up somewhere around my stomach). So you have a couple choices here, it seems to me. You either lean into that future with me now, and hope it obliterates the past. Or, you don't. But just let me know though, either way, and preferably sooner rather than later, if you know what I mean. —J

I stood there and read the note a few more times, gulping directly from the orange juice carton until it splashed out either side of my mouth and onto my chest. I could certainly buy most of what she wrote, but the part about paralysis was a bit of a stretch. I don't think I'd ever seen her break a sweat, much less one over me.

Because I'm unlovable, self-loathing, and self-centered.

So I got on the horn and called Planned Parenthood to ask how much abortions cost (it ranges, but not more than \$900). Then I called City Hall and asked how much getting married costs (\$88.50, but if you take the state-sanctioned "Marriage Preparation Course," it turns out to be about half that). "So what kind of stuff do they teach you in that class?" I asked the clerk.

He chuckled. I waited. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Hold up. I think I got some of those pamphlets somewhere around here."

On hold listening to an instrumental version of a Celine Dion tune, I prepared in my head a cost-benefit analysis of abortion vs. marriage. Was there even a question? Unless you pro-rate the cost of marriage over a lifetime, of course.

The clerk clicked back on the line. "So it says here there's like, some conflict management and resolution stuff, improving couples' communication," he mumbled. "Man and wife: Can you ever agree?"

*it says. You want to hear more, or you want me to find out where you can sign up?"*

"No, I'm good," I said, "thanks."

After I hung up the phone, I went over to my desk, flipped open my check book, and wrote a check for a thousand dollars, then stuck it to the fridge with a magnet, right over her note.

No I didn't. Actually, I picked up the phone and called my mother and asked her to FedEx me my grandmother's old wedding ring, which was taken from her at Buchenwald but magically returned to her decades later by a well-meaning and reformed ex-Nazi SS officer. No, that didn't really happen either; we just told Nana that when she got Alzheimer's.

Okay, in actuality, what I *really* did is went up on Engagementringsxpress.com and bought the most expensive diamond solitaire ring I could find, because that would prove how much I loved her, A.K.A. how jealous I was. No, that's also not it. I actually went on Craigslist and found the first conflict diamond I could and e-mailed the seller that I was his buyer. (Not that kind of conflict—rather, the kind where the guy popped the question but his girl shot him down, so he was left with nothing but his hubris—and a non-returnable, cursed ring.)

No, I didn't do that either.

Despite what you might read on the internet or see on Dr. Phil, in this case jealousy indicated that indeed I loved, and even though I may just be the most unlovable motherfucker in the world, she is likely the most loveable, and as Paula Abdul said, "Opposites attract." And so what I really in fact, in all honesty, did after getting that note was pick up the phone and call my girl. And when she didn't answer her cell, I swallowed the requisite ensuing panic that she was gone forever, and tried calling again. And when she still didn't pick up, I went to the refrigerator and read the note again, and took another few swigs of orange juice. Then I got on my cell and texted:

i don't have anything to show for it right now nothing to put on your finger--nor might i ever have something like that to give. But i want to be with you for the rest of my life whatever that means and

Then I hit my 160-character text body limit, so I continued in a new one:

i just realized that it's easier for me to deal with the idea that you might not really be mine that you might go away, than to deal with the notion that you really are mine. i have abandonment issu

Yes, I'm one of those assholes who sends long texts like they're e-mail messages, with no regard for whether or not the recipient has an unlimited texting plan:

es duh, but oh man is it easy to spill my guts in a text and get all sentimental too, but i would like to raise all of our kids with you and whether that's just two or three or way more like the Duggars, i

'm all in and i have never felt such optimism or freedom in my life which is strange in that i've also never felt so completely and utterly and most importantly willingly tethered to someone eve

r and i'll try to express maybe 25% less jealousy, then 50% less, then maybe 75 but i probably will never get to not expressing it. but anyway please come home, because we're out of oj and daddy mis

And then I heard the car in the driveway. 

