

## Bullets Going Through Objects in Slow Motion

ONCE AL AND I DETERMINED that the marriage was over—irreparably broken, The End, man-it’s-fucked-up-how-we’re-treating-each-other-let’s-get-off-this-roller-coaster-it’s-making-me-sick—he moved out.

That was late August.

In the days, weeks, months that followed, I got out of bed, showered, brushed my teeth, and put on clothes. Because my pets were black and I only wore black, you could not tell I was covered in animal hair. I went to my place of employment, where I deliberately spoke to my colleagues. Hello. How are you. How was your weekend? Oh, that’s nice. I smiled, I nodded, I agreed about the weather. I didn’t want anyone to know how bad I felt, so I went out of my way to behave in ways that were socially appropriate. I wanted to give the impression that I was fine and functional. But as soon as I returned to the privacy of my home, there were things I did that were not fine and functional.

I didn’t self-soothe with booze or methamphetamine or extravagant shopping or weeping or even cigarettes. (As an ex-pack-a-day-smoker, smoking was still only an urge I had, one that was especially powerful whenever I saw people on television smoking.) I didn’t plot revenge against the happy people in the world, no matter how much I hated them. Nor was I much interested in talking to my friends, even though the majority of them are chain smokers and at least moderately unhappy.

I put on my pajamas—an oversized black T-shirt Al had left behind that said ALL IN, and a pair of flannel pants that belonged to my son. The pants had Stewie from *Family Guy* printed on them, the words OBEY ME in the dialogue bubble above his head. I changed into this outfit the minute I got home (sometimes as early as 2:00 p.m.) and settled on

the couch to watch television, my laptop on my lap so I could look up answers on Wikipedia if I had questions about what I was watching. The episode of *Family Guy*, for instance, where Steven Seagal fights a group of Arctic seals got me to wondering what else Steven Seagal had been up to lately.

I also Google-imaged the following: *puppies; kittens; baby animals; cute baby animals.*

And I checked Al's e-mail. I could because I knew his password, and isn't that what married people do? Tell each other their passwords as a sign of their bond, their closeness, their level of trust and intimacy? Sharing your password is a concrete way of saying, From you, my darling, I have no secrets.

In the days, weeks, and months to come, I'd check Al's e-mail regularly, perhaps obsessively. It was never very interesting. He ordered books from Amazon. He deleted without reading the jokes his cousin Joannie forwarded to him, while Justin Ruben from MoveOn dot org kept him up to date on political concerns, and Veterans for Peace let him know what was going on with them. Our mutual friends told him they were saddened to hear of the end of Al-and-Diana.

I took a lot of comfort in Al's e-mail. I never once learned anything about what he was thinking (about me) or how he was feeling (about us), but his life, even without me in it, was one I recognized, knew, and could have predicted. Al was still doing the things Al had always done. He and I weren't talking much—we seemed beyond any kind of talk that wasn't saying the things we'd already said—but I missed him. A lot. Looking at his e-mail made me feel connected to him.

Then one day, out of the blue and for no reason at all, Al changed his password. I figured out the new one after only three tries. I knew I ought to be ashamed of myself, violating someone's privacy, showing an utter lack of respect for someone's boundaries, nebbing around where I didn't belong, and what if someday while reading his e-mail I learned something I didn't want to know? I understood all of that intellectually, but knowing what he'd choose as a password meant I still knew him, the man I'd loved for eleven years. I wasn't always able to articulate what, exactly, went kaput between us, but knowing what he'd choose as a password made me feel less disconnected from him, less alone.

ALSO AROUND THIS TIME, things changed between me and my son. We started calling each other *dude*. Especially while we were hanging out on the couch, playing Guitar Hero, and I dropped a note, which made

the boy say, Whoa! Dude! This song (“School’s Out” or “Dream On” or “Black Magic Woman”) owns you!

To which I said, Bite me, dude! or, Eat this, dude! or, Dude, take this to the pawnshop, why don’t you?

To which he said, I think you mean ‘pwnd,’ but you don’t know what that means, do you?

I insisted I did!

I do! I said. I know exactly what that means.

And later, when I looked it up on Urban Dictionary dot com, I discovered I did, sort of.

The marriage to Al had been my second; the boy was a product of my first. For eleven years, the boy and Al and I had functioned as a familial unit, two grownups and a kid. The grownups called the kid downstairs for breakfast, for lunch, for supper. The grownups prepared supper (meat, green vegetable, starch); they set the table (including a folded paper napkin); they sat down to ask about each others’ days. After supper, the kid played video games in his bedroom while the grownups watched the news, offering their opinions on the events that transpired. On weekends, the kid and his friends played video games in his bedroom while the grownups took care of small projects around the house, general upkeep, general maintenance.

But after the man grownup moved out, so many things about the woman grownup turned sad and stupid and not grown up at all. After Al left, dust floated, gathered, settled. Laundry accumulated. A clog in the bathroom sink meant toothpaste water drained very slowly. Pet hair drifted across the floor, and milk passed its expiration date. Like a couple of fraternity brothers, there were days when the boy and I didn’t eat vegetables, not a single one, unless you counted salsa or black olives or Ragu. Then, like sorority sisters, there were days when we ate nothing but vegetables, though we loaded them with sour cream and eight-ounce bags of shredded sharp cheddar.

That fall, the boy and I took to eating supper in front of the television. We watched what we called Our Shows: not the news, but reruns of *Friends* and *Still Standing* and *Two and a Half Men*, reruns of *Yes, Dear* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. We watched while sitting on the couch with our laptops on our laps so if we had questions about what we were watching, we could go to Wikipedia for answers. (Steven Seagal is a vegetarian but he once worked at Burger King; Steven Seagal believes in reincarnation; it’s been reported that Steven Seagal’s final words to his first wife were, “You’re crazy; I want a

divorce.”) I laughed my ass off at the silly antics, the cheesy jokes, the clichéd, predictable hijinks the Sitcom People got themselves mixed up in. It was not ironic hipster laughter. I found this shit seriously hilarious, knee-slapping until I snorted or cried, like a stoner or an insane person, and the boy rolled his eyes.

What’s the matter with you? he said. You’re so weird.

During commercials, I’d assume my Mom-Voice—grandly formal, falsetto-pitched, vaguely British; why was I talking like this? I never talked like this when Al was still here—and I’d ask the boy if he had any homework. He’d say some, but just a little, not much. Though I was skeptical, I didn’t challenge him. Because he was fourteen-going-on-fifteen, badgering him about his homework resulted in him going to his bedroom, closing the door behind him, and leaving me alone on the couch. I didn’t want that.

Because I didn’t just like our time on the couch—I loved it. I loved how he waited until a commercial to say, Oh, dude, check out this website. It’s called Cats with Hitler’s Moustache. It’s called Stuff White People Like. It’s called Kid Who Can Play the Hardest Song on Guitar Hero on Expert. It’s called Bullets Going Through Objects in Slow Motion.

Though I did find it odd that my son, who’d previously spent his life in a self-imposed exile, locked away in his hidey-hole of a bedroom, was now spending several hours a day in the company of his mother, the two of us in a race to see who could find the cutest clip of a baby puppy dog on YouTube. I was kooky and lonely and depressed, I was eating too many cookies, I’d taken to bumming cigarettes from people at work while still claiming I didn’t smoke, but I wasn’t completely without self-awareness. I had theories. I had suspicions. I Googled *Does my teenage son spend too much time with me* and came up with 33,500,000 results.

Maybe the boy thought he needed to compensate for Al’s absence—like he should be there for me. Maybe he felt sorry for me. Pity, even. Maybe I was unwittingly doing something to make my son feel like he needed to take care of me.

Maybe I was screwing him up.

I should tell him, I thought, that I was okay, fine, functional, normal; I was just like any other mother who’d failed at marriage twice before she was forty.

I asked the boy if he missed Al.

He said they sent each other text messages all the time.

I told the boy it wasn’t his fault Al moved out.

Oh my god! he wailed. But I do think it's my fault! It's all my fault! I think you should take me to Disney World and Al should buy me a pony!

Maybe he just liked playing video games on the television in the living room. The one in his bedroom was much smaller.

I never felt closer to my son than I did during that time. I mean this in the most earnest, unironic way. He was taller than me and slender-but-not-scrawny, and he was so handsome, too, with his thickly-lashed big dark eyes and his pink cheeks and floppy brown hair. He was good-looking in the way that teenage girls admire, pretty like the lead singer of a boy band. Not everything he said was interesting—in fact, a lot of it was the technical jibber-jabber of a person destined for a career in i.T.—but just the fact that he was talking to me made him fascinating. Just about anything he did was okay with me. Even on the day I handed him his midterm grades—he couldn't look them over right then as he was in the middle of playing “Barracuda” on Guitar Hero, he was even using the orange button, but he knew the news wasn't good because I said, Wow, dude, keep on like this, and you'll be going to summer school; Oh, dude, awesome that you made it through the chorus without dropping a note—I felt close to him. There was no one whose company I enjoyed more. No one else I wanted beside me on the couch. His presence made Al's absence easier.

The boy said, Dude, I am starving. Do we have any cookies? Do we have any frozen Cool Whip? Do we have any strawberry Toaster Strudels? Is there any brownie mix in the cupboard so I can ask you to make us some brownies?

I made the brownies, and we ate them, almost the whole pan in one go.

IT WAS JANUARY when Al changed his password again. That's also when the furnace went out. It was hard not thinking these things were connected. They seemed like a sign.

The furnace went out because Al wasn't there to tell me that furnace filters need to be replaced every so often. Because if they're not replaced, something goes wrong with the something-something, and the furnace won't work, which is a problem if you live in Minnesota where it's negative forty-seven degrees outside, and the CenterPoint Energy Guy won't come fix the furnace until between eight and noon tomorrow. It was so cold in the house we could see our breath. I held my fingers to my mouth like I was holding a cigarette and exhaled, but the boy didn't find me amusing.

You don't know about furnace filters, I told him, and I don't, either. So it's not anybody's fault.

The boy said he knew it wasn't his fault; he never thought it was.

I cranked the heat to seventy-five to compensate for the day and a half we wandered the house wearing long johns and winter coats. The boy and I were in the living room, hanging out on the couch, but we weren't watching *Our Shows* or playing *Guitar Hero*. Instead, he was playing a new video game, a first-person shooter game, which managed to be both violent and boring, and since it was a single-player game, he played while I pretended to watch, my laptop on my lap so I could Google the names of everyone I'd ever known.

Things between the boy and me were changing. He still hung out with me, but less often and for shorter amounts of time. It was because of a girl, this girl he liked, he'd gotten a girlfriend—which was, I knew, normal, healthy, and good; it was, according to research conducted by developmental psychologists, exactly what he was supposed to be doing—and that winter, when the boy wasn't with Kaitlyn, he was talking to Kaitlyn. When he wasn't talking to Kaitlyn, he was talking about her.

He spoke of her food allergies (peanuts and strawberries) and what her father did for a living (construct full and partial sets of dentures) and what Kaitlyn ate when they went to the Kwik Trip for lunch (a bean burrito). He raved about Kaitlyn's hair, naturally curly, which on Friday she straightened so he could see what she looked like with straight hair (she looked really nice). He disclosed what Kaitlyn ate for lunch on Saturday (chili) and when I remarked Dude, that girl seems to eat a lot of beans, I hope she's not gassy, dude, does she combat the gas with Beano? the boy was horrified. He couldn't believe I would say something so vulgar, so crass, so gross, about her, Kaitlyn, his girlfriend.

It's because he was falling in love. Kaitlyn was a girl made up of specific details, and falling in love meant the boy needed to learn them all, ignoring the ones he didn't like. It's what falling in love is, how falling in love works.

At first, I was casual about their relationship, the two of them hanging out on the couch, eating brownies and drinking Mountain Dew, watching *Talladega Nights* or *Jackass 2* or *Happy Gilmore* over and over while I looked for someplace to settle. The kitchen table. The dining room table. My bed. I couldn't find a place, which gave me greater insight into how out of sorts the dog felt on those days when, out of the blue and for no reason at all, I decided he wasn't allowed on the furniture.

I did wonder, though, what Kaitlyn, lovely and charming and

seemingly intelligent, saw in my son. The first time she came over was to make Christmas cookies. Hers were festive, pretty and Christmas-y, while the boy hand packed dough into the shape of a knife, then dabbed red frosting at the tip.

When he and Kaitlyn were together, the boy turned into someone I didn't recognize. He acted like an idiot, constantly talking about himself. He was a braggart, a tough guy. He liked to show off for her by reciting lists of things they knew that I didn't know: the Spanish word for "incognito," for example, and stuff about the Archduke Ferdinand. He liked to demonstrate his strength by lifting heavy objects over his head: a gallon of milk, the coffee table, the dog. He'd hide behind the door, and when Kaitlyn walked by, he pounced on her, grabbing her in a headlock until she tickled him. He'd invite her to punch his arm, as hard as she could, and when she did—a soft, girlish punch, the kind meant to convey *Oh, you!*—he collapsed to the floor and writhed in mock pain. That the boy did such hilarious things made Kaitlyn giggle her high-pitched giggle, bat frequency.

That the boy did these things made me certain they couldn't possibly be engaged in anything close to sex. He was too silly. She was too giggly. They were too gaga, too goofy. But then came the day when the boy stopped yapping about Kaitlyn and her collection of sparkly gel pens and her little brother's head cold and the new curtains her mother'd put up in the kitchen. Instead of holding Kaitlyn in a headlock, the boy lay head-to-toe with her on the couch, rubbing her feet while she rubbed his. They fell quiet when I walked through the room. Kaitlyn's shrill giggle dropped to a throaty laugh. They gazed into each other's eyes and said *Me, too*, as if love was a secret only they knew.

Those two could make a person feel nervous.

I'd been talking to my son about sex since he was four—over a decade of talk! He'd been educated, apprised, counseled—but still. I worried. Please don't get that girl *el preganante*, I said, and he corrected me, informing me that "pregnant" in Spanish is "*embarazada*."

Those two could also make a person feel lonely, a kind of yearning, something restless and agitated and electric. They were so young! So beautiful! So brand new! The boy thought I didn't know anything about falling in love, being in love, but I did! I remembered love, its secrets, its bliss, the small sweet noise of a handful of pebbles against a bedroom window, the pining, the longing, the metal taste of a kiss received through a window screen, the footprint I left on the passenger side window of a boyfriend's car. In the days before caller ID, the half

ring of the telephone in the middle of the night meant, They won't let us talk but they can't stop me from thinking about you.

I also remembered falling in love with Al. He was a man made up of specific details, and I'd been determined to learn them all. Being in love meant I could predict with great accuracy how Al would respond to any given situation. If we got separated in Walmart, I knew I could find him in Sporting Goods, where they keep the fishing lures. If we went to Perkins, and he was in the bathroom when the waitress came to take our order, I knew to get him the pot roast and a cup of coffee. If the jukebox offered Patsy Cline, he played Patsy Cline. I knew he was thumbs up on the Indigo Girls' song "Closer to Fine" and adamantly opposed to "American Pie," whether recorded by Don McLean or Madonna. When Al was playing with the dog, and the dog's ear flipped back, I waited for Al to say, Ooohh, you're nekkie! Let me fix your ear so you're not so naked! because that's what Al always said when the dog's ear flipped back. It was fun learning those things and comforting knowing them. I was really good at it.

I was also good at ignoring the details I didn't like until I became really, really bad at it.

The boy came home from the movies, the mall, from Kaitlyn's house smelling like spring flowers, a young girl's perfume, Kaitlyn. When I moved to kiss him goodnight, he turned his face from mine. You smell like cigarettes, he said. Have you been smoking?—and though I'd taken to buying a pack or two every few days, I denied it. I asked the boy did he want to watch *Our Shows* with me, did he want to play gin rummy with me or Scrabble or Monopoly or Battleship, did he want me to watch him play violently boring video games. Do you want me to bake you some brownies? I asked. He said not now, maybe later. Then he went to his room where, from behind a closed door, he murmured into the telephone—there was still more to say to the girl he'd been talking to all day—and I hung out on the couch. I Googled myself. I checked my MySpace page, my Facebook page, my e-mail and my other e-mail. I Googled Al. I checked Al's e-mail.

I checked Al's e-mail only to discover that he, out of the blue and for no reason at all, had changed his password again, and no matter what combination of pet name, street name, name of elementary school, mother's maiden name, and last four digits of Social Security number I tried, his new one was something I couldn't figure out. Not even Googling the phrase *My husband changed his password* and seeing 5,780,000 results made me feel less alone.

IN FEBRUARY, THE BOY WANTED to buy a Valentine's Day present for Kaitlyn. I took him to Kohl's, to the jewelry section, where he examined twenty-seven thousand pairs of earrings before picking out the pair that to him said "Kaitlyn." They were pink stones set in silver, the perfect earrings for a pretty girl, a sweet girl, the girl with whom, according to his MySpace status, he was "in a relationship." Here, he said, thrusting the earrings and a twenty dollar bill at me. You pay for them. He didn't want to be seen standing at the Kohl's register exchanging money for a pair of silver and pink earrings. He said that would make him feel awkward.

Of course, I told him. That would make you feel very *embarazada!*

He said not really.

There's no way, I thought. I know this boy, and he is definitely not doing any kind of sexual hanky panky. I felt sure of it.

So I wasn't prepared for the moment when I flung open the door to his bedroom—Knock, knock! I said, still cheerful, still ignorant—and there he was, and Kaitlyn, too, on the bed, Kaitlyn supine and the boy prone. They were completely clothed, they were only kissing, but between them—passion.

Oh! Hullo! I said in the vaguely British Mom-Voice. I said it again, quickly—Hullo!—and then turned away. And because I couldn't figure out what to do next, I scurried to the kitchen, filling a pitcher and watering the two fig trees I hadn't watered since Al left. They were his fig trees—Heckle and Jeckle, he called them—and though he'd had them a long time, years before we'd met, when he moved out he left them behind. Maybe he didn't have a sunny spot for them in his new place. Maybe he figured he'd come get them someday. Maybe he didn't want them anymore or forgot he'd ever had them. I'd forgotten I had them and the consequence was that they were dying, their leaves shriveled and withered and brown and scattered across the floor. It seemed like a sign.

I decided I needed help. So I went to see a psychotherapist who specialized in adolescent boys, because I wanted advice on how to raise a teenage son. What were the ways I was screwing up? What were the things I could do better? But after hearing my story, the psychotherapist, for some reason and out of the blue, didn't want to talk about the boy. He wanted to talk about me.

I knew I was depressed. I knew I spent too much time hanging out on the couch. Agoraphobia was seeming more and more like a perfectly acceptable alternative lifestyle, and I knew that wasn't good. But I didn't want the psychotherapist to tell me what to do because I already knew what to do—get a grip, get a life, get over it. I wanted the psychotherapist to tell me *how* to get a grip, get a life, get over it.

He told me I could start by not over-analyzing everything, not over-thinking everything, not over-intellectualizing everything. Not everything can be researched, he said. Not everything means something. I told him I thought that was a really interesting idea, and asked if he could give me something to read about that, some studies, say, or maybe some research published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Maybe there was a credible website or two I could look at. When he said no, that was his point, I needed to stop looking for answers, I needed to stop looking for reasons, I needed to accept that sometimes things happen, all I could think of was how much I wanted to call Al and tell him the advice I got from going to psychotherapy was pretty much the same as the message in the Indigo Girls' song "Closer to Fine" (especially the part about the less you seek a source for some derivative, the closer you are to fine). It seemed like a sign. It made me want to Google the Indigo Girls to see what else they'd been up to lately.

Instead, I gave a clairvoyant eighty dollars and asked him to take a peek into my future and tell me what he saw. He didn't see Al in it, he said, but he saw my son. He told me that the boy has a lazy intellect but that he'd shape up and do well in college. The boy is practical, he said, and he'll do everything right. He'll have the right job, marry the right girl, they'll have a few kids, and I will be the weird grandmother swooping in to disrupt all the logical rightness. You know he thinks you're crazy, right? the clairvoyant said.

When the boy and Kaitlyn decided their romance was over—irreparably broken, The End, man-it's-fucked-up-how-we're-treating-each-other-let's-get-off-this-roller-coaster-it's-making-me-sick—they broke up, and even though they attended the same school and sat through the same classes and had the same friends, they never spoke to each other again. Maybe it was because they were too young. Maybe one of them got fickle; maybe they both did. Maybe they got to the place in their relationship where they could no longer ignore the details they didn't like.

The boy was in his room, sitting on the chair near his desk, staring at the floor the night I tried to talk to him about the mysteries of love, the perils of being in love, what happens when love ends. I didn't tell him what to do because I had no idea what to do. I did tell him that sometimes, something happens to the something-something, and the furnace quits working, and you didn't know, so it's really not anybody's fault, you know? He let me hold him like I hadn't held him since he was a very small child, and when I told him this is the worst it will ever

hurt, it will never hurt like this again, we both knew I was well-meaning but full of shit.

A few days later, the boy would catch me smoking in the living room, on the couch, a bottle of Febreze in one hand, Camel Light in the other. I thought he was tucked away in his room for the night. I thought I could get away with it. As soon as I heard him creaking down the steps, I tried to crush the cigarette, hide the ashtray, and spray Febreze all at once. The boy just shook his head.

I'm sorry, I told him. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I told him I won't do it again, I won't smoke in the house, I'll go outside, I'll quit smoking, I swear!

The boy patted me on the shoulder. It's cold outside, he said. Like he understood these things. Like he understood something about me, had some insight I didn't have.

We hung out together on the couch watching *Our Shows*, laptops on our laps, and while he changed the status on his MySpace page from "in a relationship" to "single," I Googled what I was feeling: *heartbroken* and *broken hearted* and *can you die from a broken heart* and *stress cardiomyopathy*. There were millions of results but not one told me anything useful. When the boy's cell phone buzzed, letting him know he had a new text message, he flipped it open, typed a response, then flipped it closed. A minute later, it buzzed again, and after the boy replied, it buzzed again. Was it Al? I wondered. Were the boy and Al sending each other text messages? Were they having a conversation right in front of me that I wasn't included in, that I couldn't contribute to or be a part of? What were they saying? The not-knowing was making me crazy—I wanted to know, I needed to know, I had to know—but I didn't let myself ask. It took everything I had.