

“Bring me on board,” Bruce says. He clasps his hands across his chest. “Appreciations, please. Three each.”

M and I have been seeing Bruce for almost two years. Money problems brought us into couple’s therapy, life on life’s terms has kept us there. I was referred to Bruce by my friend Sam who, after a series of knock-down, drag-out fights with her husband, started seeing him regularly. “He’s really gifted with men,” she told me.

Getting M to see Bruce was a hard sell; he’d rather do two hundred and four other things before going to a shrink with his wife.

I think Bruce is around sixty-five. He wears button-down shirts and pleated pants. His face is weathered, his eyes pale blue. His voice is clear and firm. Picture Mr. Rogers meets Clint Eastwood. I hardly know anything about him, other than he was once in the Marine Corps in Vietnam.

M and I are not looking at each other. I’m looking at Bruce; Bruce is looking at M.

“I don’t have any appreciations today, Bruce,” I say. The books in the shelves behind him: *Why We Love*, *Hold Me Tight*, *How to Get the Love You Want*.

“Try,” Bruce says. He smiles.

I clear my throat.

“Thank you, M, for waking up with the baby in the middle of the night and holding her until she fell back asleep.”

“That’s one,” Bruce says.

“I really appreciate that you called my mom on her birthday and talked with her for ten minutes.”

“Two,” says Bruce. He presses his fingers together, making a steeple.

We’re on the sixth floor of a grey building in the Flatiron District. In the reception area: a plastic bowl of wrapped candies and a flatscreen TV that plays staticky episodes of Batman.

More silence.

They both turn to me.

“I can’t think of anything else,” I say.

It’s taking all my willpower not to scream about the fact that he forgot to Venmo the babysitter.

The first year of marriage was sublime. We got a two bedroom in Greenpoint. Our apartment had a sliver of a patio where we kept bikes and a tiny grill. We’d cook dinner together then walk through the park for ice cream. Our framed ketubah, an illustrated image of two thinly drawn figures walking over a wooden bridge, hung above the kitchen table. We wrote it together, then translated it to Hebrew. *May we never be apart for more than ten days. * May we not spend money frivolously. * May we eat home-cooked dinners together at least three days a week.* The apartment was always

spotless. Wherever we were, we were hand in hand. Sometimes I'd fling my arm around his shoulders, half hanging off his neck while we strolled. M and M, joined as one. Like two squares of fabric, woven tight at the seams. I love you, he said. I love you more, I said back. We said it all the time.

"I've got to get back to work," he says.

Loving kindness and compassion, the root of all Buddhist sutras. Easy in principle; hell to practice. In the second year, the novelty of being newlyweds wore off. Dirty laundry piled up in the hamper. We could never keep track of our money. We paid bills late and screwed up our credit. M's traveling, which slowed when we met, picked up again. He flew to Morocco the first night of Hurricane Sandy and I was pissed. My vows about keeping the refrigerator full and the bath clean and the bed warm were total BS; I was back to being a slob in no time. We slept sprawled on opposite sides of the bed.

"M still hasn't signed the life insurance paperwork," I say. The second I say it, I regret it.

"Oh god," says M. "The list. That's why she brings me here. To assault me about the list of things I haven't done."

Sometimes therapy is the worst. The drama, the complaining, the shutdown shaggy-haired hipster Dad, the emo wife, the sage psychiatrist. All us idiots together, unpacking the psychic cotton of our childhood wounds. Studying the resurfacing of old patterns: miscommunication,

resentment, silent scorn, words, words, words, blah, blah, blah. Basically it always comes down to the same thing. Me: *Please please please tell me honestly what's going on in your mind.* M: *Nothing.*

“I brought you here to repair our marriage,” I say.

“Let’s shift gears.” Bruce turns his back to me. “M. What do you want out of this session?”

“I want us to be kind to each other,” M says. “There’s hardly any kindness between us these days.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see M nodding.

Bruce sighs.

“You two,” he says. “It’s so obvious you love each other.”

We both nod. It’s nice to hear it out loud.

Bruce’s mentor was Dr. Harville Hendrix, the creator of Imago relationship therapy. Imago is rooted in the belief that we pick our partners unconsciously, based on the traits of our parents. Kids grow up with certain requirements in order to flourish: physical safety, security, affection. When those needs go unmet, most likely, later in life, they seek out a life partner who doesn’t meet those needs, either. Fights, screams, tears, conflict ensues. According to Hendrix, we can only find our True Self by working through those core issues with our chosen mate.

M says when he walks into the apartment, I hardly ever look up to greet him. I say it kills me when he leaves his ice cream carton on the couch overnight.

M was crazy when I met him. In between jobs, riddled with anxiety and insomnia, he spent the whole springtime convinced he was about to die. A week before our first date, he collapsed on the Williamsburg Bridge. He thought it was a heart attack. A passing cab rushed him to the emergency room. Turns out it was a panic attack. “I’m falling apart,” he told me the first time we met for tea, and I loved it. The guy I was dating, scared his heart was literally broken. The whole thing felt like a poem. M’s broken heart and me, the girl who would fix it.

“Your grandfather was suffering from a broken heart when we met.” I pictured telling our grandchildren one day. “He was scared. I was scared, too. But then we saved each other.”

That’s where our story started. With the fear. Both of us. Terrified of being left behind. Most of our friends were married by then. They had kids, mortgages. On our first date we walked by a bar, saw a guy sitting by himself in front of a beer.

M said, “I’m terrified of becoming that person.”

“Me too,” I said.

And how he dazzled me. He was a hardcore rock guitarist, a piano prodigy. A history nerd who could recite

statistics about every war and president while fixing a car engine or baking a pie. He was buds with all the kids on his block in Brooklyn; the bodega on the corner named a sandwich after him. Had never once raised his voice to his mom. He didn't give a fuck about fashion. He was *that* guy. The one who would help you move your couch, feed your cat when you left town. Every summer, he invited all his friends to his parents' house in Maine for a lobster bake.

How was your day? Tell me everything. Leave nothing out. He would say that at the start of every date, the second I got into the car. Before I even had time to put on my seatbelt. *Tell me everything.*

Scared of being alone. Of being torn and raw. All cold bones, no skin. Sutra, suture: they share a root. To sew. To join together.

Love is a verb.

A leap of faith.

I took it with M the day we said: *I do.*

He made me feel safe.

The opposite of faith: fear.

What we're trying to outrun. The two of us, together.

Our third date: we were eating steak frites at Jules Bistro on Eighth Street. I asked how many siblings he had. "There's four of us," M said. "I have an older brother and sister and a younger brother. I'm the lower middle."

“Lower middle!” I screamed out, my mouth full of fries.
“I’m the middle, too. This will never work!”

But it did work. For a while. He became my boyfriend. Then he became my husband. We loved together. We lived together. Happily Ever After.

“I’m getting my tooth pulled next week, Bruce.” M is talking into his hands. “I can’t stop thinking about how weird it is, a permanent piece of my body getting yanked out for good.”

Bruce looks at him, sort of blankly.

“He’s trying to tell you that he’s dying, Bruce.” I sigh, roll my eyes. “That’s his thing. Any day now, he’s just going to drop dead. First his tooth falls out, then his heart stops.”

“I must have missed that,” Bruce says. “I don’t think that’s what he’s saying. M, do you think you’re dying?”

Silence. Then, for the first time all day, M smiles, a small one. His eyes meet mine.

“Absolutely.”

I smile back.

Of course I know. I’m his wife. My husband, the hypochondriac. I know what he’s thinking.

Oh, M. The man I married. Out of all them. His hair that sticks up in six different directions, sports-obsessed, early riser, hates olives, loves almonds, former Boy Scout, all-state varsity lacrosse champion, crazy free spirit, loses everything, his ragged, restless soul, eats half a pint of cookie dough ice

cream every night. Wears his high school T-shirts to work. OCD about keeping the countertop clean. Loves books about sailing and the Civil War. In college he spent the night in jail for stealing a brass rhinoceros while tripping on acid. Adorable, brilliant, bizarre. The most calm person I know. Kicks ass at work, but can't keep track of the car keys. My friend Tara says I married him because he was the complete opposite of my dad: super mellow, never mean, bad with money. But now those same traits are driving me mad.

The time I said I was craving my mom's baked apples and when I came home from work he was wearing an apron and making them.

When he rolled off the bed while reaching for a book and said: "That was a real wang dang doodle," and we laughed about it for days.

When I sat across from him and cried at the Thai dive bar in Big Sky, Montana, on New Year's Eve.

When we were driving in a whiteout in Colorado. So much snow M couldn't see the road. He was steering based off the GPS screen. Howard Stern on the radio. I was eating pretzels, crinkling my hand in the bag. Had no idea how hard he was concentrating. M snapped. *You need to stop eating those NOW.* We didn't talk for the next three hours.

Rats. We said it all the time if something went wrong.
Rats!

We tried to do the twenty-one day Goop detox together but only made it to day three.

Our seventh date: he was driving an Aston Martin down Bleecker Street. It was April, late Saturday night. The windows were down, the streets were flooded with people. I said, *I feel sorry for everyone who is not us*. He said, *So do I*.

The press junket in Miami. The first trip we took together out of NYC; I showed up to the airport in overalls and a black bra. We talked about Shel Silverstein while we were boarding the flight. At dinner M whispered to me what an Irish goodbye was, then headed up to the room first. We had sex for the first time. The next morning, we walked down to the beach while the sun rose. I wore a blue dress. The sky was pink.

“You have to remember that each one of you is doing your best,” Bruce says while we’re putting our coats on.

The walk to the elevator is always awkward. But there is tenderness between us now. Talk is so hard; thank God for Bruce. In a few hours, we’ll meet at home, put our two kids to bed. Our apartment is a mess. Bills, baby bottles, blankets, prescriptions, pacifiers. Most nights, after the kids go to sleep, we’ll escape into separate rooms and stare into our phones. This is how it goes: feed kids, close doors, power the screens, numb mind, shut down, turn off, go the fuck to sleep. Two people, two doors, two separate lives. The irony: all those years spent in search of one person to pass the time with, and we’re still spending it alone.

Sometimes we get a babysitter. We'll see a movie, then walk hand in hand down Bedford, sharing a donut.

Care. It's not a word you think of much, especially when it comes to love. I never thought of it until recently. Love and care. Sounds so geriatric. Ew. Care. I can take care of myself, thank you very much.

But these days, I think about it all the time.

I freaked out the first time I needed to take care of M. The summer before the wedding, he had an operation on his shoulder. I drove him home from surgery down the FDR, while he whimpered in the passenger seat. That night I had to hook up this awkward high-tech ice pack apparatus that the surgeon prescribed, while he moaned on the couch, pale and smelling of hospital. The whole thing made me feel bad, but I didn't know why. The next day I went to the beach and left him alone in the apartment. He was sitting in the dark when I got back.

"I can't believe you left," he slurred, his voice slow from Vicodin.

"I didn't know you wanted me to stay." I was standing in the doorway, holding my sandy bikini. "I wouldn't have known what to do if I did."

Love Hurts. We used to sing it together. In our second bedroom where we jammed all our books, an old TV, two

desks, two busted Craigslist club chairs. I was Emmylou Harris; M was Gram Parsons It's such a beautiful duet; so unironic that's it almost embarrassing. *Love hurts, love scars, love wounds, and mars . . .*

Lust. I want to fuck your brains out.

Desire. I long for you when I'm not with you.

Obsession. I can't stop thinking about you.

I have a recurring fantasy about leaving my husband for this rich photographer who's famous for his fashion campaigns of models in ghosted landscapes. He owns a big vegetable farm upstate. Sometimes I google him at work. Before bed, I imagine our life together. A vivid blur of hot sex, Met galas, summers in Tuscany.

Intimacy. *Let's get cozy under the covers and tell secrets.*

But I don't want to take care of the photographer. I don't want to swab Betadine on his stitches, dab his damp forehead with a cold cloth.

No.

I want him to fuck me black and blue in the back of the bar.

Everyone says you fall in love but I don't agree. Love comes later. You fall into attraction, obsession, lust, desire. You fall into the best version of yourself: the funniest, the skinniest, the smartest. Your legs are shaved, your pussy's waxed, your roots fresh. The table is set: vintage linens, fine china, silver candlesticks. The dress is crisp, pressed, never

been worn. Flowers are red, fresh, fragrant. The feast has been prepared and placed before you. My god, the food looks good.

These days, I can take care of M with my eyes closed. Doesn't phase me. Chicken soup, ginger tea, oregano oil, blanket, warm bath, thick socks, a snuggle. *There, there.* I place two acetaminophen on the nightstand, a kiss on his cheek.

Sometimes, though, I wonder: who's going to take care of me?

I saw the photographer once at a party. He was taller than I remembered, tan, had just returned from some artists' retreat in Palm Springs. Definitely a vibe between us. We talked about meditation, he asked if I believed in God. Stubble on his face, huge hands, eyes pale blue. His breath close and hot.

And then there's love.

Love.

The sex was incredible, that road trip sublime, but now the hormone high, along with mega amounts of adrenaline, cortisol, and serotonin, has subsided. You are back to life as you know it. The difference now is you're in a relationship. But you haven't had time to get your hair done. You didn't get your raise. You are cranky, bloated and bursting out of your skinny jeans. He's stressed at work. His dick can't get hard. One night, he forgets to pick up Swiffer pads and you stop speaking for a week. You've eaten the feast and the dishes are piled high in the sink. The dress is wrinkled, stained, and

you're so sick of wearing it, but it's the only dress you have, so you do. The flowers, no longer fresh, have dried, drained of color and smell rotten. It was all so wonderful, but now it's a mess. The ripe and rabid lust, the sleek and saucy intimacy, the slutty little coquette called desire, must now coexist together with the sweet, meek and humble little thing called love. The practice of being with another person again and again and again. You fuck, you fight, you file a joint tax return, but you can't run.

Love. It's a verb. A thing you make a choice to keep doing. Again and again and again.

Another thing I remember. At some point in the conversation, the photographer started to sound dumb and he was boring me and I was like: *I wish I was talking to M.*

We all get torn apart. But then you get stitched back together, shown your way to the door. You stand, you hope, you wait. For a boy to help guide you down the road. Take your bag, hold your hand. It gets dark and cold on the long walk home.

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Bruce has asked each of us to make a list of actions we want the other person to take.

“Things that will make you feel cared for,” he says. “It’s the small things that make a big difference.” He says that

when his wife rubs his feet, he feels some sort of primal tenderness that takes him back to childhood. Grosses me out to think of Bruce's feet, but I get it.

This is what's on my list.

I want you to make me black tea each morning.

I want you to read in bed with me three times a week.

Once a week I want you to actually read to me.

I want us to have a proper Sunday dinner together with candles. And a roast chicken.

Please make an effort to wipe away any stray hairs from the sink and toilet seat.

Tell me I'm beautiful.

Let me pick the movie.

I want you to open the car door for me.

For us to meditate together.

Keep the batteries in the box marked batteries and the tape in the box marked tape.

I want you to walk me to the subway and hold my hand on the way.

Please be vulnerable. Let me see you.

Even though you were not raised Jewish, I need you to celebrate and host the High Holidays.

Please oversee a monthly Excel spreadsheet that details our overhead and financial projections.

This is what's on M's list.

Please just be kind.

Last March, during the C-section birth of my second daughter, M sat by my side in the operating room, while, beneath a curtain drawn over the bottom part of my numb body, my obstetrician cut deep into my abdomen. It had been a hard winter. We'd been fighting a lot. Work was hard, my mom got sick, and the weather—with its brutal blanket of dark cold—had become its own kind of sinister character in our shared story. Fresh starts are rare the older you get and I was really counting on this one—that this child, our new baby, would bring with her a little bit of a new beginning. Hope. We needed some.

It was 12:16 in the afternoon and M had been tasked with the job of DJ'ing the surgery—a mix of our favorites. Neil Young, Lucinda Williams, Bob Dylan. Outside the window of the operating room, the snow was coming down like crazy. We drove to the hospital through a whiteout, ice on the windshield. The night before, I took a break from packing my hospital bag and stood at the window to watch M build a snowman with our daughter, Sunny. I felt full of gratitude and peace. At the home we'd built together. And how far I'd come—how far we'd come—so much life behind us, so much life ahead.

A Nick Cave song came on then. “Rock of Gibraltar,” the same song M serenaded me with at our wedding. *Let me say this to you * I’ll be steadfast and true * And my love will never falter * The sea would crash about us * The waves would lash about us * I’ll be your rock of Gibraltar.*

Then, for some reason, Spotify sputtered and died.

And the room, aside from the *snip-snip-snip* of surgical instruments, went silent.

“Sssh,” said M. He put his hand on my cheek.

In a few minutes the doctor would tug my baby Caroline—pink and screaming and slick with blood—out of my belly. Then she’d stitch me back together. Two halves, once again, made whole. I’d spend the next three days in the hospital. M at my side. Holding my hand, feeding me soup, rubbing salve on my scar. And then we’d go home. Brush our teeth side by side. Hug our kids, climb in bed. From day to day. From sun to moon. In pain and in joy, in sickness and in health, from life to death, *I do, I do, I do*. This is how you heal. You break, you breathe, you mend. You break again.

“Sing for me, Mike,” I said, and he did.