



MEN'S LIB

**To survive in
a hostile world,
guys need to
embrace girly jobs
and dirty diapers.
Why it's time
to reimagine
masculinity at work
and at home.**

BY ANDREW ROMANO AND TONY DOKOUPIL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE

99

What's the matter with men? For years, the media have delivered the direst of prognoses. Men are "in decline." Guys are getting "stiffed." The "war on boys" has begun. And so on. This summer, *The Atlantic's* Hanna Rosin went so far as to declare that "The End of Men" is upon us.

There's certainly some substance to these claims. As the U.S. economy has transitioned from brawn to brain over the past three decades, a growing number of women have gone off to work. Men's share of the labor force has declined from 70 percent in 1945 to less than 50 percent today, and in the country's biggest cities, young, single, childless women—that is, the next generation—earn 8 percent more than their male peers. Women have matched or overtaken men as a percentage of students in college and graduate school, while men have retained their lead in alcoholism, suicide, homelessness, violence, and criminality. Factor in the Great Recession, which has decimated male-heavy industries like construction and manufacturing, and it's no wonder so many deadline anthropologists are down on men. But while the state of American manhood has inspired plenty of anxious trend pieces, few observers have bothered to address the obvious question: if men are going off the rails, how do they get back on track?

Without an answer, some men have turned to old models and mores of manhood for salvation. Rutgers University anthropologist Lionel Tiger, for example, wants to reclaim "maleness as a force, as a phenomenon." Harvard government

professor Harvey Mansfield advocates action and aggression. And the term "retrosexual" has all but replaced "metrosexual" in the lifestyle sections of national magazines, which are full of stories about affluent urbanites wearing hunting garb, buying designer axes, and writing about the art of manliness on blogs with names like (ahem) the Art of Manliness. Throwback masculinity dominates other media as well, with *The Dangerous Book for Boys* (a work of dad-and-lad shtick) and *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (a *cri de coeur* for manual labor) topping reading lists, and television shows such as *Dirty Jobs*, *Ax Men*, and *Deadliest Catch* re-romanticizing soot-collared work. A rapper's saggy jeans, a hunter's concealed weapon, a suburbanite's man cave, a hipster's obsession with Don Draper: all might be seen as variations of the same coping mechanism. The impulse transcends race and class.

But suggesting that men should stick to some musty script of masculinity only perpetuates the problem. For starters, it encourages them to confront new challenges the same way they dealt with earlier upheavals: by blaming women, retreating into the woods, or burying their anxieties beneath machismo. And it does nothing to help them succeed in

school, secure sustainable jobs, or be better fathers in an economy that's rapidly outgrowing Marlboro Manliness.

The truth is, it's not how men style themselves that will make them whole again—it's what they do with their days. The riggers, welders, and boilermakers of generations past weren't wearing overalls to feel like men, as Susan Faludi, the author of books on both sexes, has pointed out. Instead, "their sense of their own manhood flowed out of their utility in a society, not the other way around," she writes. "Conceiving of masculinity as something to be"—a part to play—"turns manliness into [something] ornamental, and about as 'masculine' as fake eyelashes are inherently 'feminine.'"

Since the 1950s, the image of the American woman has gone through numerous makeovers. But masculine expectations remain the same—even as there are fewer opportunities to fulfill them. As a result, says Joan C. Williams, author of *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*, "men have a choice: either feel inadequate or get a lot more creative." What's required, then, is not a reconnection with the past but a liberation from it; not a revival of the old role but an expansion of it. The End of Men isn't nigh, nor is macho dead. But its definition should be broadened to include both Mr. T and Mr. Mom. It's time, in other words, for a New Macho: a reimagining of what men should be expected to do in the two realms, home and work, that have always determined their worth.

Of course, that's easier said than done. American culture is competitive and conservative, and there are good reasons why inner-city fathers, hedge-fund honchos, and former GM plant managers aren't taking several months off from work to care for their kids—or exploring new fields, like nursing, where few of today's men dare to tread. Most guys, in fact, don't even need rescuing—at least not yet. They're still overrepresented in business and government, earn more

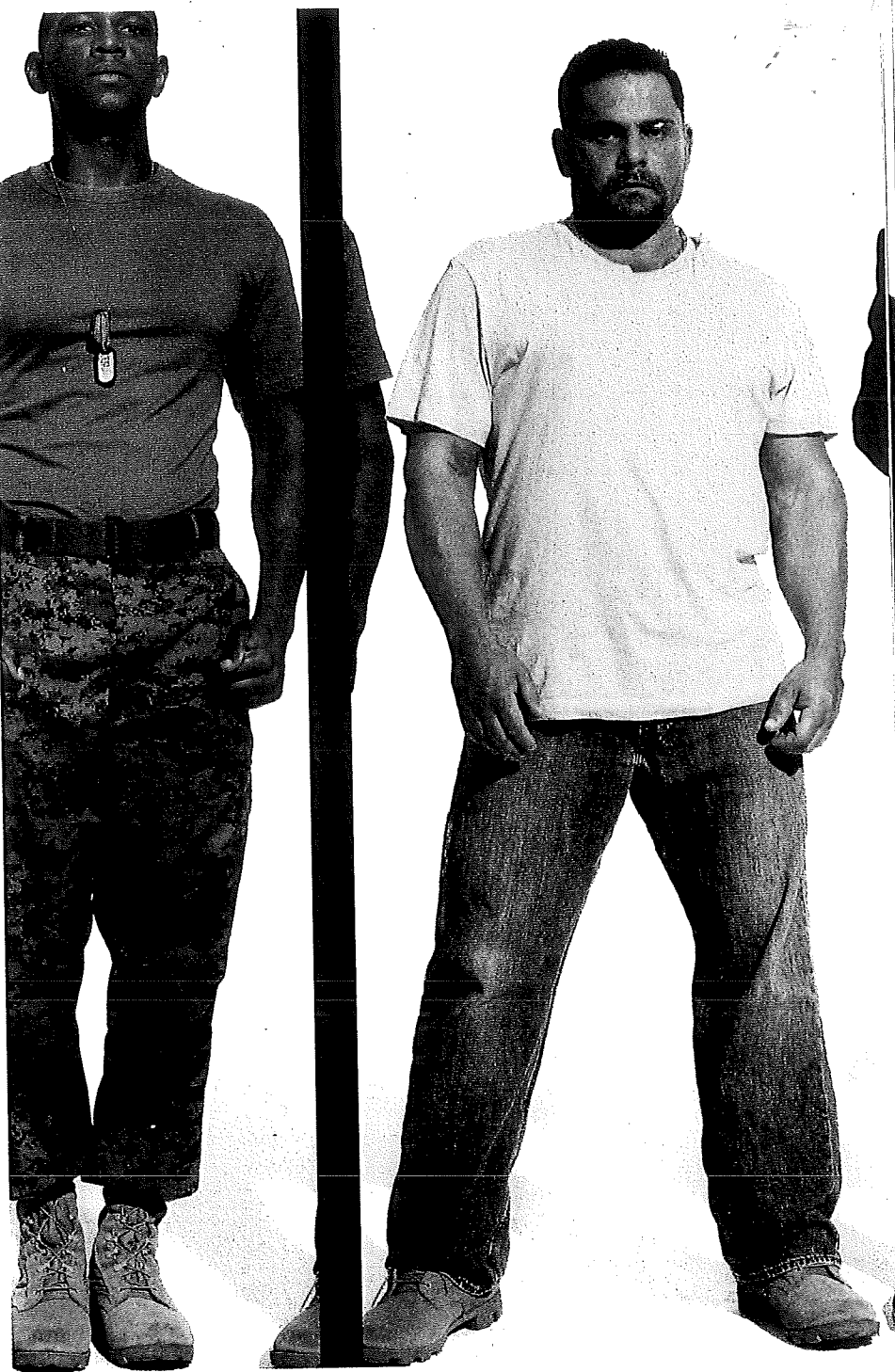
on the dollar, open bigger movies, and clean fewer dishes.

But the gender wars aren't a zero-sum game: when men lose, women and children lose, too. So as women assume positions once occupied exclusively by men, and the more "manly" sectors of the U.S. economy continue to shrink, a more capacious notion of manhood—the product of both new policies and new attitudes—is no longer a luxury. In fact, it may be exactly what's needed to keep the American male, and America itself, competitive in the 21st century.

The home is a natural place to start. As the novelist Michael Chabon discovered on a trip to the grocery store with his son, society still expects very little from fathers. "You are such a good dad," a woman told him as he waited in line to pay. "I can tell." Exactly what she could tell was a mystery to Chabon, who recounts the story in his 2009 essay collection *Manhood for Amateurs*. But clearly no woman would earn kudos for toting her kids around the frozen-foods aisle. "The handy thing about being a father," he later concludes, "is that the historic standard is so pitifully low."

The modern standards aren't much better. Despite apparent progress—young couples believe in coparenting and sharing the household chores—very little has actually changed. The average wife still does roughly double the housework of the average husband: the equivalent of two full workdays of additional chores each week. Even when the man is unemployed, the woman handles a majority of the domestic workload, and it's the same story with child care. If both parents are working, women spend 400 percent more time with the kids. Meanwhile, the number of fatherless kids in America has nearly tripled since 1960, and the percentage of men who call themselves stay-at-home dads has stalled below 3 percent. The old roles, say sociologists, are hard to shake.

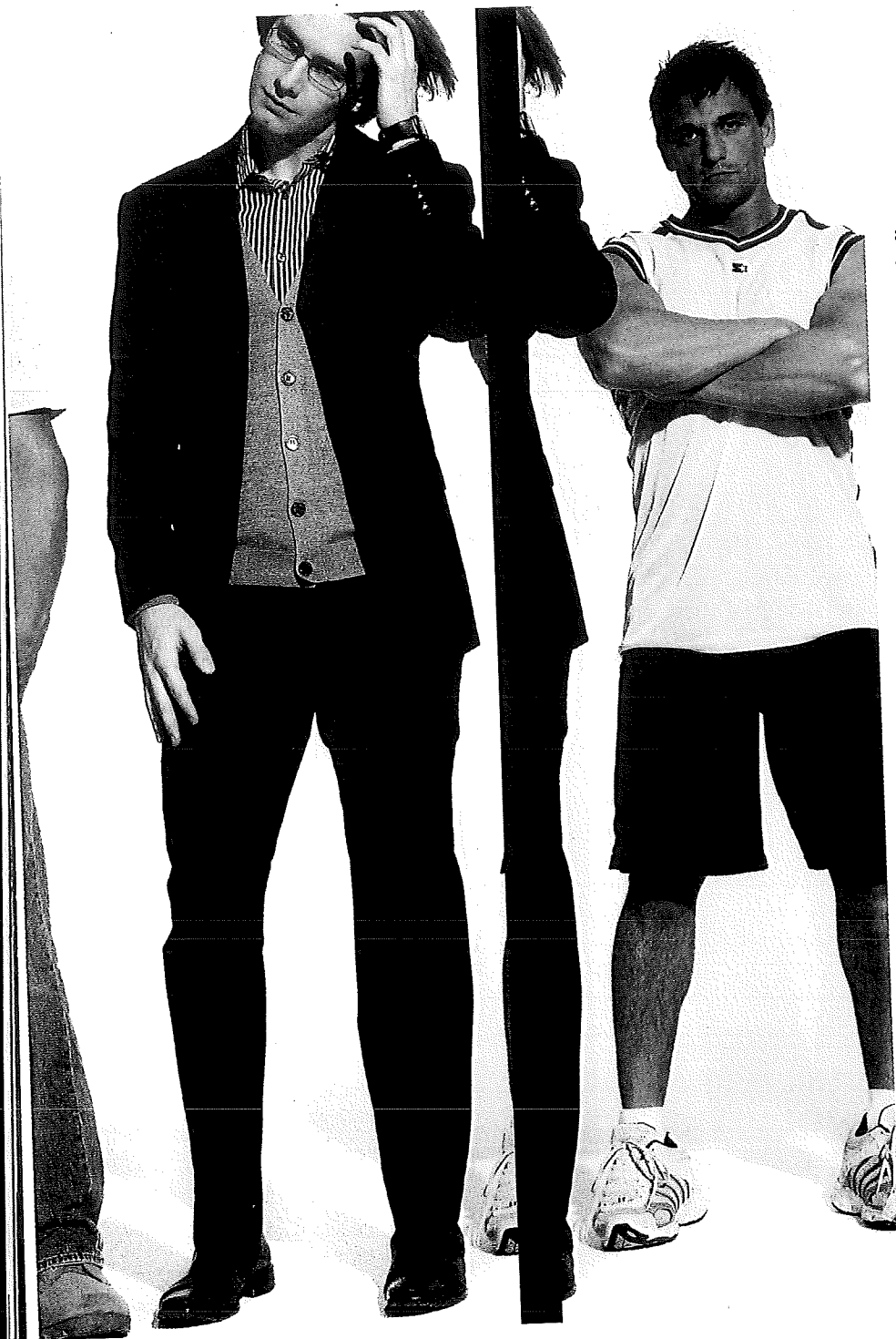
There's growing evidence, however, that they can be expanded. Consider



contemporary family life in Sweden. In the past, new parents split 390 days of paid leave however they liked—monthly, weekly, daily, and even hourly. Women used far more of it than men. But today, new fathers no longer rush back to work, leaving the mother to raise little Sven all by herself. The reason for the change? Smart public policy.

In 1995, Sweden passed a simple but

revolutionary law: couples would lose one month of leave unless the father was the one who took it. A second use-it-or-lose-it month was added in 2002, and now more than 80 percent of Swedish fathers take four months off for the birth of a new child, up from 4 percent a decade ago. And a full 41 percent of companies now formally encourage fathers to go on parental leave, up from only



2 percent in 1993. Simply put, men are expected to work less and father more.

By altering the roles of the Swedish father and the Swedish worker, Sweden's paternity-leave legislation has, in turn, rewritten the rules for Swedish men (and, by extension, women). "Swedish dads of my generation and younger have been raised to feel competent at child-rearing," writes Slate's

Nathan Hegedus, an American who experienced the system firsthand. "They simply expect to do it, just as their wives and partners expect it of them." If a man refuses time at home with the kids, he faces questions from friends, family, and, yes, other guys. Policy changes produced personal changes—and then, slowly but surely, society changed as well.

Around the world, similar shifts are already underway. In Germany, the percentage of new fathers who take a break has jumped sevenfold since the country passed its own Swedish-style law in 2007. In Japan, which recently offered dads more paid baby time, the government honors dedicated fathers by spotlighting "stars of *ikumen*," or male child rearing. And with the passage of paid-leave laws in Britain (where Prime Minister David Cameron took several weeks off to care for his infant daughter) and Australia (which is hardly a dandified nation), the U.S. is now the only wealthy country that doesn't bankroll a bonding period for either parent.

This could change sooner than you think. Recent polls show that majorities of Republicans (62 percent), Democrats (92 percent), and independents (71 percent) now support the idea of paid paternity leave. Big companies—especially those with lots of male workers, such as Texas Instruments, Sun Microsystems, and Ernst & Young—are beginning to offer at least two weeks of paid leave. New Jersey, Washington, and California have already launched programs that offer partially paid leave, and more than 20 other states are currently considering legislation—a bloc that covers almost half the working population.

It's certain to grow, too, now that next year's federal budget includes a \$10 million State Paid Leave Fund to help states launch their own programs. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which granted unpaid leave to about half the workforce, followed a similar arc before it became the law of the land in 1993: a change in public opinion led to private-sector programs, which in turn triggered state reforms, which ultimately put pressure on Washington to act. The most likely model for paid leave is an employee-funded insurance program like Social Security—which, according to Heather Boushey, an economist at the Center for American Progress, could support 12 weeks of paid leave for a measly

\$10 a month per worker. That translates to a payroll tax hike of no more than three 10ths of a percent. Even the most generous program—a full year of leave for every working parent in the country—would cost the country only \$25 billion, according to Columbia professor Jane Waldfogel, who studies work-family issues. Washington already spends four times that amount each year on fraud, waste, and abuse.

Of course, policy changes will be pointless unless attitudes change as well. In California, the first U.S. state to fund leave (six weeks of it) for both parents, only 26 percent of men seize the opportunity, compared with 73 percent of women. All told, most new fathers take off two weeks or less for a new child, no matter what. Baby time is simply not seen as masculine. The only way that perception will fade is if men who are already living double lives as dedicated professionals and parents “come out” and start writing their senators and petitioning their HR departments. The motivation is certainly there; over the last 35 years, the number of employed fathers in dual-earner families who say they suffer work-family conflict has risen from 35 percent to 59 percent, according to Joan Williams. Now it’s up to “twenty-first century dads,” as Jeremy Adam Smith argues in his recent book, *The Daddy Shift*, “to go on the offensive.”

The campaign for a New Macho shouldn’t end when men leave the house. The movie *Meet the Parents* is already 10 years old, but unfortunately, the way it deals with men and work doesn’t seem dated at all. In one classic scene, the ingénue’s banker ex-boyfriend questions her new flame (played by Ben Stiller) about his job. When it’s revealed that Stiller is a nurse, however, the banker can’t process it. The idea that a marriageable man would work as a nurse is so inconceivable that he assumes nursing is a hobby. “That’s great to give something back like that,” he says finally. “I’d love to find time to do volunteer work.”

Men can no longer afford to make such assumptions. Of the 15.3 million new jobs projected to sprout up over the next decade, the vast majority will come in fields that currently attract far more women than men. In fact, men dominate only two of the 12 job titles expected to grow the most between 2008 and 2018: construction worker and accountant. The rest, including teachers (501,000 new positions), registered nurses (582,000), home health aides (461,000), and customer-service reps (400,000), remain heavily female. All told, the social sector of the economy

POLLS SHOW THAT A MAJORITY OF VOTERS NOW SUPPORT PAID PATERNITY LEAVE.

will gain 6.9 million jobs by 2018. But unless the complexion of the workforce changes, according to a recent study by Northeastern University, a whopping 2.5 million of them will go unfilled.

The coming employment gap represents a huge opportunity for working-class guys—and for the families they’re struggling to support. The problem is that men, unlike many women, still feel limited to a narrow range of acceptable masculine roles—a range that hasn’t kept pace with the changing employment landscape. As manufacturing continues to migrate overseas and underpaid immigrants continue to provide cheap manual labor, they continue to lose ground.

The current recession has only aggravated the trend. Historically, women have been far more likely than men to exit the labor force after losing their jobs. But men are now catching up, with 1.4 million shifting from “looking for work” to “stopped looking” in the last month alone. Discouraged by the dearth of “manly” work, they’ve simply given up. New high-school and college graduates have it even worse: the unemployment rate among young men is a dismal 20.5 percent—a full 3 points higher than the rate among their female peers.

It’s possible to imagine protectionist trade and immigration policies boosting blue-collar employment at the margins. But the U.S. can’t stop globalization. If male morale—and the American economy—are ever going to recover, the truth is that the next generation of Homer Simpsons will have to stop searching for outsourced manufacturing jobs and start working toward teaching, nursing, or social-service positions instead. To hasten this transition, schools that train “nurturing professionals” should launch aggressive, male-oriented advertising campaigns and male-to-male recruiting drives that stress technical expertise, career-advancement potential, and beyond-the-bedside opportunities. Community colleges ought to focus on preparing students for the social-sector jobs of the future. Certain institutions might even consider raising their admissions requirements, a tactic that has helped the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing increase its male-applicant pool by 34 percent over the past five years. And the government should fund or incentivize as many of these initiatives as it possibly can.

The shift could prove less wrenching than it sounds, once men are willing to try. Nearly two thirds of the 30 biggest growth occupations require only on-the-job training, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, saving men from the long, expensive process of returning to school. Historically,

THE AMERICAN MAN

The popular blueprint has always been rough (not to mention white, straight, and stereotypically drawn).



PRE-1776

The Gentle Patriarch. George Washington was a man of his times: an aristocratic landowner who prized honor, character, and Old World style.

1776-1830

The Heroic Artisan. Newly American men castigate Europe's foppish dandies, and fashion themselves into individualists who can lead a caravan west.



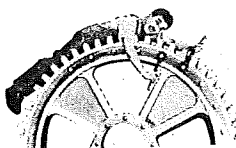
1830-90

The Self-Made Man. The new super-rich aren't landed heirs or lucky cobblers; they're merchants and industrialists, men whose stature depends on success in a competitive market.



1890-1910

The Blue-Collar Hero. Reduced to an appendage in a world of assembly lines, the Self-Made Man is lost in the gears. Still, there's pooled glory in building the country.



1910s

The Family Man. The first fatherhood movement grows out of the factory-floor malaise, as men try to "manufacture manhood" in their sons.



1920-45

The Muscle Man. As women begin their long push into the workplace, men obsess over Tarzan and physical culture.



1945-60

The Company Man. Postwar capitalism is a complete soul destroyer. But nothing seems to stick to the dapper provider in the company car.



1960-80

The Playboy. The Self-Made Man returns with a smoking jacket and Danish-modern furniture.



1980s

The Cutthroat Capitalist. Wall Street is the new corporate jungle, and Gordon Gekko leads the hunt.



1990s

The New-Age Man. Feeling displaced, men respond with a full-scale retreat: weekends in the woods to hug and shoot stumps.



PRESENT DAY

The New Macho. Yes, we've forgotten beta males like Seth Rogen, but this is about the future—which, weirdly, looks like coparent and breadwinner Brad Pitt.



token men have also had less trouble than token women breaking into a field dominated by the opposite sex—and less trouble finding a niche once they've been hired. While women in traditionally male professions suffer predictable forms of discrimination, men in women's fields actually enjoy "structural advantages" that "tend to enhance their careers"—a kind of glass conveyor belt that carries them into the "more masculine" areas they perceive to be a better fit for their talents, according to a seminal 1992 study. They become gym teachers instead of English teachers; reference librarians instead of children's librarians; ER nurses instead of pediatric nurses.

Skeptics will argue that men are "designed" for some gigs and not for others. But while no one would claim that men and women don't have their differences, women long ago proved that gender essentialism doesn't determine what kind of work they can do. Today women still serve as teachers, nurses, and social workers. But they're also CEOs, soldiers, and secretaries of state. The time has come for a similar expansion of what men can do for a living. The raw numbers show that a change is already underway; the percentage of nurses who are men has doubled over the past 25 years (to about 6 percent of the field), and there are more guys teaching elementary school than ever before. But it's not nearly enough. Mining and machinist jobs will still be available in the future—just not as many. Why wouldn't men look elsewhere for work?

Until recently, the concept of masculinity had always bent to the demands of the day. Before 1776, according to the historical sociologist Michael Kimmel, the perfect man was still a genteel patriarch, a dandified landowner steeped in the codes of the Old World. By the early 19th century that ideal had given way to the image of the heroic artisan, the rugged individualist (a farmer, a cobbler, a carpenter) who might lead

BASED ON MANHOOD IN AMERICA BY MICHAEL KIMMEL

104

a caravan west. In time, the log-cabin model was replaced by a more modern ideal: the self-made man, a restless, competitive breadwinner whose masculinity depended on success in an industrial, materialistic society.

It's clear that we've arrived at another crossroads—only today the prevailing codes of manhood have yet to adjust to the changing demands on men. We're not advocating a genderless society, a world in which men are "just like women." We're not even averse to decorative manhood, or the kind of escapism that men have turned to again and again—think Paul Bunyan, Tarzan, and

'MEN HAVE A CHOICE: EITHER FEEL INADEQUATE OR GET A LOT MORE CREATIVE.'

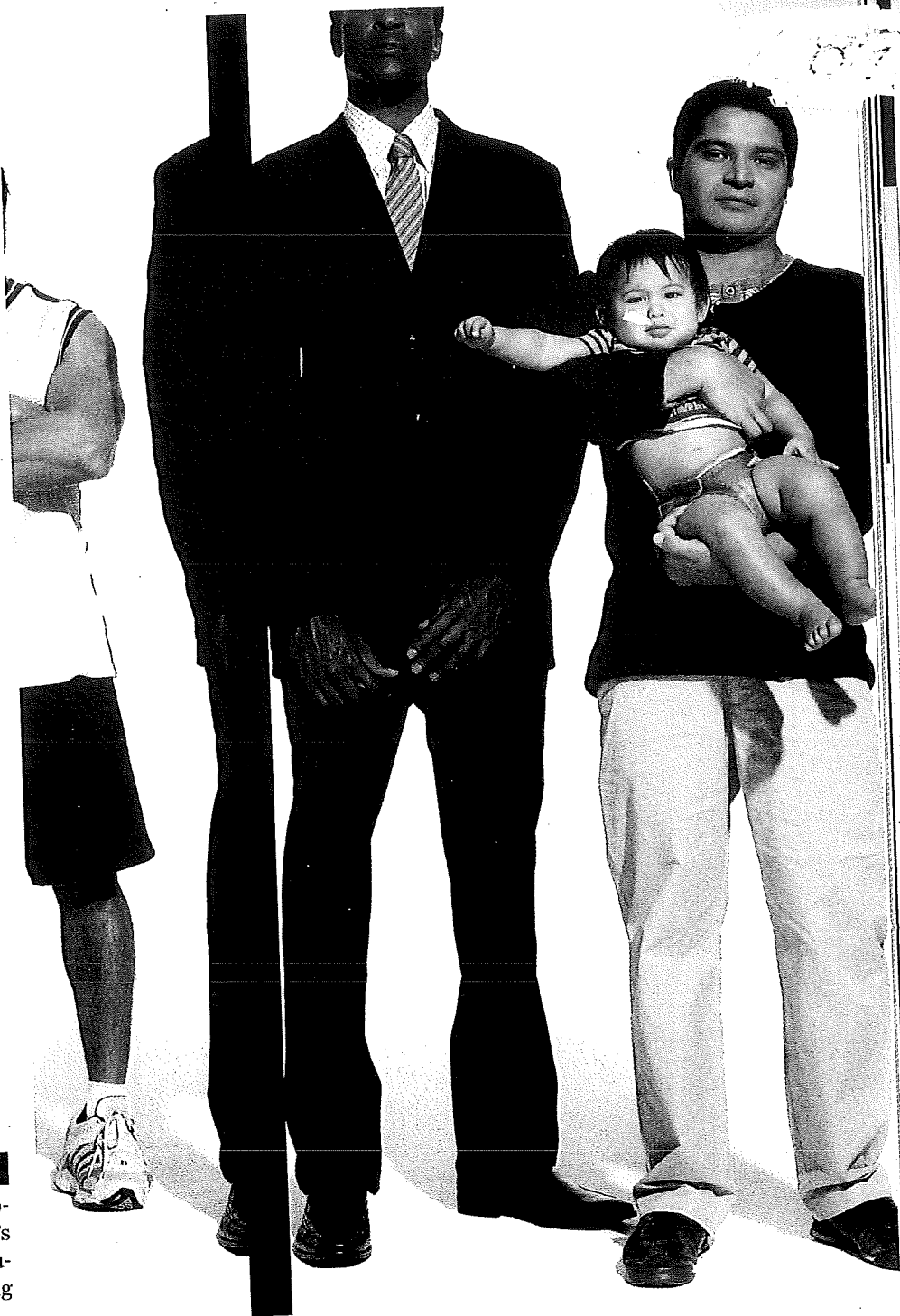
bomber jackets—when the actual substance of their lives felt light. If today's men want to be hunters, or metrosexuals, or metrosexuals dressed in hunting clothes, they should feel free.

But they need to be more than that, too. On the surface, the New Macho is a paradox, a path to masculinity paved with girly jobs and dirty diapers. Dig a little deeper, however, and it begins to make a lot of sense—not just for men but for everyone. If men embraced parental leave, women would be spared the stigma of the "mommy track"—and the professional penalties (like lower pay) that come along with it. If men

were involved fathers, more kids might stay in school, steer clear of crime, and avoid poverty as adults. And if the country achieved gender parity in the workplace—an optimal balance of fully employed men and women—the gross domestic product would grow by as much as 9 percent, according to a recent study by the World Economic Forum.

Ultimately, the New Macho boils

down to a simple principle: in a changing world, men should do whatever it takes to contribute their fair share at home and at work, and schools, policy-makers, and employers should do whatever they can to help them. After all, what's more masculine: being a strong, silent, unemployed absentee father, or actually fulfilling your half of the bargain as a breadwinner and a dad? □



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Flux: Women at Work,
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Half-Changed World.
NY, Anchor, 2000.

Chapter 1

Anything Is Possible

ERIN WILSON KICKS OFF her sensible low-heeled pumps and stretches her legs. At twenty-four, Erin is a junior account manager at a large New York City advertising agency in whose conference room we are sitting. She has jaw-length wheat-colored hair, which she absently tucks behind her ears whenever she starts a thought, and is dressed conservatively in a short-sleeved yellow sweater, a dark pleated skirt, and nylons. She is one of five young women—including a social worker, a budding playwright, a finance associate, and an administrative assistant in an architecture firm—who have agreed to meet me here tonight for an evening of frank conversation and soggy deli sandwiches. She leans back in her chair as she speaks, expanding into the space around her as if to physically illustrate her point: that she, like many young women today, feels her potential is limitless. "When my mother graduated from college, the only careers that she thought were available to her were teaching, nursing, and maybe being a flight attendant," she explains. "For me the world is totally open. If I want to run a company, I can do that. If I want to stay home, I can do that. If I want to work in a corporation, if I want to be an entrepreneur—I can do anything that I want to do."

Jennifer Lyle, twenty-five, au courant in a beige sundress and small oval glasses, her blond hair long on the top and shaved up the back, bobs her head in agreement. "My mom has told me, 'God, you are so independent. I would never have done what you've done at

your age.' I've lived in Europe, I moved to New York. She went from college straight to getting married to my father. She interviewed for a job once, and when they asked her what her biggest accomplishment was, she said, 'raising my three children.' There are just more options for us now."

My Mother Is Not Myself

Daughters are notoriously unreliable narrators of their mothers' lives, but their beliefs about the previous generation of women—and in particular its deficiencies—are the backdrop against which they measure their own greater expectations. If their mothers were thwarted by circumstance (although, the truth is, Erin's mother went back to graduate school when Erin was thirteen and became a successful architect), today's young women feel redeemed by possibility. Feminism has been passed down to them as an ethic of personal potential. They were weaned on the mantra "you can be anything you want to be." "My parents told me I could be president of the United States," said a twenty-seven-year-old district attorney in Chicago. "My parents always said I could do whatever the hell I wanted to do," proclaimed a twenty-five-year-old website designer in San Francisco. They graduated from college feeling entitled to the same opportunities as their male classmates. Nothing about their lives felt predetermined; marriage and motherhood seemed one among a menu of options rather than inevitabilities. Even the most conservative among them expects to take advantage of this period of unencumbered time, until recently enjoyed solely by men, in which to live independently, explore career opportunities, enjoy friends and lovers, establish the self.

But talk a little longer, cut a little deeper, and these same confident young women express something else too—an anxiety about the consequences of their new freedom. A few days after my conversation with Erin and Jennifer, I sit across town in another conference room, of a publishing house, with a different group of twentysome-

thing women. All are ambitious, have come to the City to pursue their chosen careers. Leslie Elder, twenty-nine, who works in finance, wears a business suit and carries a briefcase. Claire Ricci, twenty-eight, an assistant editor at the publishing company, has accessorized her outfit with ice blue nail polish and eye shadow to match. Like Erin and Jennifer, these young women believe that the essential difference between their mothers' generation and theirs is the wide range of "choices" they have. "But it's kind of a double-edged sword," says Abbey Green, twenty-six, who recently moved here from Houston to work in sales. "The good thing about being able to do anything is that you can, but you could also be overwhelmed by the buffet style. There's so much to choose from that you could be totally paralyzed by it."

"Yes!" exclaims Claire. "I've got this absolute phobia about looking back and thinking, 'Shit, I picked the wrong one.' Like, I don't want to be married now, I don't want to have a baby now, but I don't want to be eight years down the road thinking, *I blew it! I had every choice in the world, I could've done anything, been anyone, gone anywhere, and somehow I still managed to be thirty-six going 'I didn't get what I wanted!'*"

"You know," says Leslie, "sometimes I wonder if we'd be happier living in a society where there weren't so many choices."

Among young women like these I found a longing, not so much for an oppressive past as for a guide to a murky future, a road map to contemporary female life. They may have more opportunity in terms of self-expression, lifestyle, and financial gain than women of any previous era. They may have never known a time when it was legal to discriminate against women in education and employment or illegal to get an abortion. In college at least half of their classmates were female; for those who have gone on to law school, medical school, or for graduate degrees in such fields as journalism and psychology, the same is true. Yet, beneath their boundless optimism lies a sneaking suspicion that the rhetoric of "choices" is in part a con job, disguising impossible dilemmas as matters of personal preference. As these young women look forward, they see "choices" threat-

107

ening to morph into cruel trade-offs: double binds, which, along with their own subtly dual expectations have already influenced their decisions regarding ambition, sex, love, marriage, and motherhood—and could ultimately trap them in the narrow roles they're expected to escape.

Talking Gloria Steinem, Thinking Carol Brady

If for previous generations the "feminine mystique" surrounding marriage and motherhood was the trap, the solution for today's young women—and the object lesson drilled into their heads—is financial independence, or, as Erin Wilson puts it, "The message I got was be able to support yourself no matter what." Like "you can be anything you want to be," "financial independence" is an appealing buzz phrase but oddly only half absorbed. Many of the young women I interviewed thought of economic self-sufficiency as precisely that: supporting themselves, not a family, which is a peculiar blind spot in a world where dual-earner couples and single mothers are now the norm. They spoke of the work world primarily as a means to identity, to self-fulfillment and avoiding the predestined fate of women in earlier generations. Salary and economic advancement were often secondary—I wondered how, over time, that would affect their progress in the workplace.

According to sociologist Anne Machung, who interviewed seniors on six college campuses about their expectations for career and family, young women and young men typically perceive their career paths differently. Machung found that men, for the most part, considered work as a way to earn money. They were more likely than women to pursue fields that would lead to well-paying jobs, were more conscious of entry level salaries, and were more likely to have specific titles and job structures in mind as they approached graduation.

Women, meanwhile, saw work more as a vehicle of personal satisfaction. They, too, planned ambitious careers (although they

tended to be hazier about specifics, such as salary), but, unlike the men, they reflexively factored inequality into their futures: They assumed that they would move in and out of the workforce and that family responsibilities would limit both their advancement and earning potential—but not their husbands'. Seven out of ten said, once married, they expected their spouses' jobs to take priority. So, well before they enter the adult world (and, perhaps, long before they'd entered college) young women were making decisions that would virtually assure that their careers would be secondary to men's and that their incomes would be lower—decisions that would, in the future, profoundly affect both their options and their leverage in organizing their family lives. They would be able to support themselves, but, truly, only themselves. As Machung wrote, they were "talking 'career,' but thinking, 'job.'"

"IT'S BEEN ON my mind a lot lately that I should be more successful than I am," says Lauren Miller, who grimaces each time she's reminded that her thirtieth birthday is next month. Lauren is chatting over pizza with two friends in San Francisco's South of Market district. Hers is an artsy, socially conscious group: Lauren works as an editor for an on-line magazine. Melody Yun, twenty-nine, dressed in a leather jacket and black bell bottoms, is a fund-raiser for a nonprofit organization. Becky Schumacher, thirty-one, is an independent filmmaker who just quit her day job to finish a documentary on body image that she's been filming for five years. Lauren and Melody are single; Becky lives with her boyfriend. "Recently I went back east for a family reunion," Lauren continues. "I looked around the room and noticed all my male cousins and my brothers have really good jobs and really good salaries. And none of the women do. There's one cousin, we were born six weeks apart. He has a condo in Boston, he's made it financially. I started wondering, 'What is it?' Because we grew up with the same kind of parents, very similar in their mind-set. And I realized that all the men had *envisioned* themselves in those places. I think I took my career less seriously. In the back of my mind

108

I was thinking, 'I can't get too high up, I can't have too much responsibility, because then what happens if I want to take a couple years off and have kids?'

"Well, I never expected to get married or have kids," says Melody, "I still don't. But that idea of entitlement"—she pauses, her brow furrowing—"I really feel like men have this innate belief that things are going to happen for them, and that gives them confidence, and then things *do* happen for them."

"It's like guys have some 'thing' we don't have," Becky adds. It's not that she has ever felt overtly discriminated against, she says, she just has a sense that men get better mentoring, develop a stronger sense of vision about the future.

Lauren sighs, pushing her pizza crusts around her plate. "I know what you mean," she agrees, "but I end up feeling kind of sorry for men too. I mean, we think *we're* so pressured. They have to become something and make all this money, and they just accept that and do it. At least we've allowed ourselves self-expression. We could choose careers that are meaningful to us. We didn't have to choose based on money."

"But I wonder," Becky counters, "if your only pressure is to satisfy for your own interests, is that enough to push you to the kind of success that knowing you'll have to provide for a family might?"

Listening to these young women, I remembered debating my own career choice in the years after graduating college: My two older brothers, who are both talented writers and musicians, had already become lawyers, probably not a profession they would have chosen if they hadn't believed they would be providing most of their families' incomes one day. My parents pushed them firmly in that direction, but when I refused to take the LSATs, saying I was going to be a writer, they let it go. I knew the latitude wasn't based so much on faith in my talent as on a kind of sexism: I could pursue passion rather than prudence, freedom rather than responsibility, because I was female, because, like Machung's college seniors, my parents believed my income would be secondary and that writing was the sort of thing you could do part-time after you had children. If I'd stopped to examine

it, I suspect I would've found that deep down I operated under the same assumptions. Fifteen years later my brothers earn more money than I do, but, as it turns out, my income is just as integral to my family's economic survival. Yet I enjoy my work more. So, which path was wiser? Going for the money or going for the heart?

Meaningful Work vs. Getting Paid

Even women who believe they've made their decisions may change their minds after facing the realities of the workplace. In college Jennifer Lyle and Erin Wilson believed that entering a highly paid male-dominated profession was the ultimate expression of women's new opportunities. Erin majored in women's studies with an emphasis on gender dynamics in corporate life. Jennifer majored in finance so she'd have some credibility on the job market. Both joined investment banking firms after graduation, but their capitalist-meets-feminist mind-set didn't prepare them for the isolation and hostility they found when they got there. "It wasn't like anything obvious was said, but there were all these little things that made you feel uncomfortable," says Jennifer. "The men would all go golfing together, or they'd all go out to lunch and never ask us. And you had this feeling that you couldn't speak out in meetings, like your opinions wouldn't be respected."

Jennifer lasted two years. Erin quit within six months. "There were five women bankers in my firm," she says. "Everyone else was a secretary. And I was like, 'I am going to be a role model, and I'm going to work my way up and change the system.' I felt like I got smacked in the face. I had no idea how hard it would be. I had to really examine why I was doing it. You've got to work in a business like that because you actually enjoy the work, not because you want to make it better for women coming up or to prove to men that you can be just as good."

"I'm a strong woman," Jennifer adds. "I could play along with

109

the boys. But I felt like I was giving up so much of myself. I decided I can make more of a difference at a battered women's shelter than I would in a corporation."

Young women who try out and subsequently reject elite professions described the atmosphere as too soul-corroding to endure, requiring them to put on a false self each morning along with their business suits, a self they felt was essentially male. Anthropologist Patricia McBroom calls it "putting on the mask."² Whether they walked away from such jobs, like Erin and Jennifer, or remained committed to pushing their way to the upper tiers, they felt that the only way to make it was to compromise their personal lives. "If you look up and you see what is going on at the top, the female executives are thrice divorced," says Mira Brodie, twenty-six, a junior executive at a Fortune 500 company who was part of Erin's and Jennifer's interview group. "Some have never been married. They have no children." She shrugs. "You have to be aware of that going in. Then you can choose to get on the track or you choose not to."

Mira's assessment of the corporate world is pretty accurate: Although the statistics are slippery—studies based on job title alone are more sanguine than those based on salary—top-ranking women executives are significantly more likely than other women to be divorced, widowed, never married, and childless (ninety-five percent of men in one survey, by contrast, were married with children, and three quarters had stay-at-home wives).³ The women I spoke with seem to accept the stark terms of female success among the elite as a matter of "choices," but how liberating is it, really, to work under the same gray flannel constraints as men—without even the comfort and satisfaction of a home life?

Some young women react to this bind with an abrupt about-face in attitude. One pregnant twenty-five-year-old investment analyst in New York, for instance, was about to quit her job. To her, staying at home with a child feels like a rebellion, an assertion of femininity in the face of women who, she believes, have sacrificed too much for their careers. "The senior women at my bank are very disappointed in me," she says. "These are very hard-core women

who are still single and I think they're bitter toward people like me who fall off the beautiful career track that they've laid out for us."

Young women may dream of power, prestige, and financial security, but often, like Jennifer, they feel more authentic pursuing the helping professions: "meaningful" careers such as social work or teaching, which allow them to incorporate values traditionally ascribed to women. Yet, women who enter those fields—or "glamour" jobs such as publishing and working in the arts—often trade away status and money. Claire Ricci, who was among the women I spoke with in the publishing house conference room in Manhattan, earns \$22,000 as an assistant editor, which, in New York City, barely allows her to pay the rent; she's taken a second job, as a paralegal, to make ends meet. "I always thought I would be totally capable of taking care of myself, that I would never need any extra income from the hubby side. But the fact that I've chosen *this* profession—whoo!"—she laughs—"how do I think I'm going to do that? Anyone can see the numbers are not working out. This was not part of my plan: I was supposed to maintain my independence and never need a husband."

Across the country in San Francisco, Melody Yun, a fundraiser for a nonprofit foundation, is also reevaluating. "All my friends who were doing cool work are suddenly going back to get their MBAs," she says, "I'm beginning to wonder if I should too." Melody says she was adamant about doing socially responsible work when she graduated college, but now she's looking ahead, realizing the limits of the lifestyle she's chosen. "At my salary, I'll never be able to do certain things, like buy a house, and that's frightening. But it's also confusing: Doing good work has been such a big part of who I am, and now I find that maybe it's not so important. It leaves me scrambling for something else to make up my identity."

Young women who enter male-defined fields worry about alienation; those who enter traditionally female domains fret about financial dependence. Both groups of women wonder about the impact of their current professional choices on their future personal lives, and those concerns gnaw at their aspirations. They were asking questions that would resurface powerfully, later, among women

110

who were ten or twenty years their senior: about the unique costs to women of ambition and power; about how hard they were willing to push—and how much they expected to sacrifice—to make change; about potential alternatives to conventional paths; about the definition of professional success and their freedom, really, to pursue it.

The Pleasure Gap

"Okay," I say, smiling at the five women assembled in the publishing company conference room. We've talked about their mothers, their jobs, their hopes. "Let's talk about sex." For the first time in three hours, the group falls silent. I can hear the buzz of the fluorescent lights and the sound of the janitor banging wastebaskets down the hall. The women look around at one another. I wait, curious to hear how the mix of entitlement and confusion they feel in their professional lives plays out in the realm of the intimate. Do they feel as confident in pursuing their desires as they do their ambitions? Can they bring their new assertiveness into the bedroom, and if not, why not?

Abbey Green, a tall, wispy woman with a pixie haircut, breaks the silence. "Well," she says, "I think the most important thing in sex is to ask for what you want—but most of the women I know still can't do it."

"I can't," admits Tracy, a twenty-seven-year-old publicist who moved to New York from Virginia two years ago. "I can't ask for what I want. And if we're being honest here, I don't even always make men wear condoms. . . ."

"Me neither," interrupts Leslie. "And the next day I think, 'I can't believe I did it.' We're talking a smart, educated woman. I know better."

Tracy nods in Leslie's direction. "I call it lack of confrontation skills," she says. "You just let it go because it's easier. And it's not just about sex, it affects other parts of my life, like asking for a raise or whatever; anything where you have to ask for what you want."

Just as they recognize their right to equality in the workplace

but can't always achieve it, young women like Tracy and Leslie feel an entitlement to sexual pleasure on which they can't convince themselves to act. It's the dirty little secret of a generation: They had sex earlier than their mothers did, have had more partners and are more likely to initiate encounters, yet more experience and freer license haven't necessarily translated into greater enjoyment. Most young women are profoundly alienated from their bodies at sexual initiation; they're rarely privy to adequate information, and less than half have masturbated.⁴ The women I met had often rushed into intercourse in their early teens, not out of desire, but to unburden themselves of virginity, to dispel the mystery, to be the first among their friends to "do it." Whatever gauzy, Fabio-induced fantasies they had about the first time were usually numbed out with drugs or alcohol; the reality was, at best, disappointing, at worst, coerced or forced. According to a 1994 National Opinion Research Center poll, a full quarter of American women did not want to have sex the first time,⁵ and writer Karen Bouris found that only a handful of the rest enjoyed it.⁶ "At fourteen you were too young to get any pleasure out of sex," remembers a twenty-five-year-old law student in Philadelphia. "It wasn't going to be the beautiful extension of your relationship that you have with your fourteen-year-old-boyfriend. It was just about being cool, like drinking and smoking."

The women I spoke with who reported a positive early experience had usually made a conscious decision to have sex, generally within a trusted relationship.⁷ Jaws dropped among a group of medical students in Philadelphia when one announced that she'd had her first orgasm with a partner at sixteen ("he was Swedish," she explained half apologetically). But for most, the incentive was precise—either from the boys they dated or from girlfriends—a need to feel wanted, fear of abandonment, or the rush of power they felt in evoking male desire. And even when it was disappointing, they went right on doing it. "I had sex for five years before one of my girlfriends told me it could feel good," recalls a twenty-seven-year-old teacher in San Francisco who lost her virginity at fifteen. "Before that sex just felt compulsory, I was doing it for the guy."

After a series of group interviews in eight cities, I began to realize that the awkwardness generated by my questions about sex was not simply about modesty: It was also a reflection of insecurity, confusion, even pain. By the time they were in their mid-twenties, most of the women I met had been sexually active for a decade; it wasn't easy to admit that they were still grappling with basic issues of sexual self-determination, especially after they'd spoken with such authority about their choices and opportunities in other areas of their lives. Yet, according to sociologist Marcia Douglass and anthropologist Lisa Douglass (authors of the aptly titled *Are We Having Fun Yet?*), less than a third of women experience orgasm regularly in sexual encounters, while seventy-five percent of men do.⁸ That pleasure gap says something profound about women's deepest feelings of legitimacy, the license to, as Abbey puts it, "ask for what you want," and expect to get it. Will a woman who suppresses her needs during sex be able to assert them in other realms of her life? Can someone who sacrifices her own satisfaction because, as Tracy says, "it's just easier," form truly equal relationships outside the bedroom? Germaine Greer once wrote that women's freedom is contingent on a positive definition of female sexuality.⁹ By that measure, not nearly as much has changed for young women as they would like to believe.

When young women had taken control of their sexual pleasure—whether in a relationship or outside one—they saw it as part of a larger quest for autonomy. Abbey Green, in New York, talks about "working really hard" to get to know her body. "It's absolutely key to esteem issues for me," she says. "If you're comfortable with your body, you're comfortable with yourself. If you feel like you deserve all this pleasure in bed, you start to feel like you deserve it other places too." A few weeks later, Melissa, thirty, a blond, fresh-scrubbed lawyer from South Dakota, echoes that sentiment. "My aunt is a sex researcher," she says. "When I was twenty, she sent me a vibrator for my birthday. That really broadened my horizons. I've developed a really healthy respect for female orgasm: It makes me feel more control in the rest of my life to feel that control and pleasure in my body. But I do wish my aunt hadn't waited. I wish she

would've told me at sixteen, 'This is your G-spot. It's okay to masturbate. You should learn how to feel good during sex. It's an important part of being a woman.' " As I continued my interviews, I thought a lot about Melissa and her aunt. I wondered what it would've been like for these young women if as teenagers they'd had someone older with whom to talk honestly about sex. For that matter, I wondered what it would be like for them now.

Is "We" the End of "Me"?

"I have trouble having both a career and a boyfriend," says Julie Ruback, twenty-five. Julie is a recent transplant to Los Angeles from Seattle, a solid, pragmatic woman with short, brown hair and large dark eyes. She is sitting in a friend's kitchen with several other women, none of whom grew up in L.A., all of whom are the young, single, career-oriented sort that tends to migrate to big cities during or after college. Tania, twenty-six, whose hennaed hair is the color of a cherry lollipop, is in the MBA program at UCLA. Meghan, twenty-seven, an actress, is tall and blond with fashionably nerdy black-framed glasses. Earlier in their conversation Julie said she would like to be a successful television producer, get married, and have a child all in just under five years, by the time she's thirty. For the moment, however, a career and a boyfriend would suffice. The trouble is, the two seem mutually exclusive. "My goal right now is to learn how to do my work and then to be in a relationship," she says, "to get that whole balance thing going. So far it hasn't worked very well."

Establishing "balance" in a relationship—learning to be involved without submerging oneself, to pursue goals unrelated to love without sacrificing it—is the first challenge young women face on their way to the bigger negotiations of marriage and motherhood. They may be told they have unlimited potential, but they've also been trained from an early age to put male needs and desires before their own. Some women described their relationships as a home base

of acceptance from which to venture out and explore the self. Others felt decidedly mixed. Even as they sought out the euphoria of love and connection, they spoke repeatedly of their fear of "losing themselves," of being unable, in a relationship, to hang on to the authentic, autonomous woman who knows what she wants and is willing to pursue it. Those who had big dreams for their careers, especially, feared that relationships with men would leech their personal power and distract them from other goals. As professionals, they felt strong and independent. In romance, they felt vulnerable to relationships that undermined their strength. As Tania puts it, a boyfriend could "knock you off your center."

"It's like you wrap yourself around a guy," she says, pretending to drape her arms around a man, lean her head on his shoulder, and look up adoringly while the other women laugh in recognition. She lets her arms drop to her sides. "Then all your energy goes into how he feels about you, why he hasn't called, when you're going to sleep with him, blah, blah, blah. And you lose track of what you want to do with your own life, where you're going. A lot of my friends have gotten sucked into very obsessive thoughts about guys that have led them in the wrong direction."

"I have to admit though," she adds, picking at a glitter-polished fingernail, "if I had to pick the super career or the super relationship by age thirty, I'd pick the super relationship."

I ask her why she thinks she'd have to choose. She sighs. "I don't know," she says, "but it feels that way. You know rationally it's not true, and yet it's there."

"Well, I definitely have that problem with balance," Meghan declares. "I kind of see relationships as all or nothing, and if I'm involved with someone, I'm really involved. Otherwise, what's the point?" Meghan's career is important to her though, so, to get some traction in it, she says she's made a categorical decision to avoid relationships entirely. At first she describes this as a luxury, an opportunity to focus completely on herself. "I can't even fathom having a relationship right now, and I love that," she enthuses. "I love what I'm doing and I really believe in my work. I cherish the time to my-

self. So I'm not questioning it." Yet in the very next sentence, that's exactly what she does. "But I do wonder," she continues. "I'm missing my tenth high school reunion this year and a friend's wedding back east. I wonder if ten years from now I'm going to be missing my kid's field day. I mean, if I even get to that point."

The other women nod sympathetically. "It's weird," Meghan adds. "I feel like I'm making decisions now, even though they're on a minor level, that maybe in ten years will be . . ." She trails off, the energy draining from her voice. "Sometimes," she concludes, "it just feels like there's a lot more at stake than it appears."

What's "at stake," Meghan implies, is the possibility that she'll pay for her current priorities later on with a stunted personal life. Like Tania, she suspects that the "super career" could preclude the "super relationship," that ambition and romance are incompatible: One requires the assertion of self and one encourages the suppression of it. Not only can't Meghan integrate both, she doesn't feel she has enough time to try. The fallout for women like her is a constant second-guessing of priorities: How can they confidently pursue either a career or a relationship in a satisfying way?

Listening to Meghan, I remembered a conversation I'd had a month earlier with Jodi, a twenty-nine-year-old paralegal in Minneapolis who had just begun dating after a self-imposed three-year hiatus. "I wanted to get my act together, to figure out why I would lose myself in relationships," she'd told me over beers in her apartment. Jodi was sitting cross-legged on her futon couch. She had wide blue eyes, a nimbus of long, curly hair, and was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. "I would just set aside what was important to me, the things I normally do, to do what was important to whoever my boyfriend was. I would go out because they wanted to go out. I would have sex because they wanted to have sex. And I felt guilty about it, because I was cheating them as well as myself."

I asked what three years of solitude had taught her. "I don't know," she moaned, grinning sheepishly. "I guess it was important to have their approval, but why? Why did I feel that by speaking up and saying what I wanted I would damage my relationships?" Jodi con-

113

sidered her own question briefly, then shrugged. "Maybe I'm afraid that I'm too independent. Or maybe I'm not independent enough." She broke off again, leaned her head back on the couch, and stared at the ceiling. "Maybe I'm just too picky and I'm going to end up alone," she continued more to herself than to me, "and I don't want to be alone."

Marriage Panic

Of the dueling fears expressed by young women—"losing" oneself versus being by oneself—the fear of being "alone" (that is, without a male partner) was by far the more potent, particularly as they rounded the bend toward thirty. That may be a residual effect of the now-debunked "man shortage" of the 1980s.¹⁰ Or it may be a contemporary spin on what psychologist Daniel Levinson called the "thirty transition": an urgent need to reassess one's life that is a natural part of adult development.¹¹ While both men and women experience thirty as a turning point, only women channel it into a panic about marriage. (Levinson, incidentally, found that women who take a more conventional route, focusing on relationships over career, were just as likely to feel off track at thirty: Unfulfilled in their domestic roles, they were searching for something to fill the void.¹²)

Since the early 1980s, the age of first marriage for both women and men has been rising rapidly,¹³ and a poll in *Jane* magazine found that eighty-two percent of readers believed a woman "doesn't need to get married or have kids to live a full and rewarding life."¹⁴ That sounds like progress, and every woman I spoke with agreed—but only in theory. When I ask the young, ambitious women I meet in the New York publishing firm—the ones who'd been so vocal about their myriad possibilities—how they would feel about being unmarried at forty, they look horrified.

"That's just not an option," Leslie says with a little frisson.

"Do we have to have this conversation?" Tracy says, grimacing. "I don't want to think about it."

Abbey goes so far as to rap her knuckles against the table. "God forbid," she says, shaking her head. "God forbid."

At first the eagerness of most young women to wed surprised me. Roughly half of those I interviewed had seen their parents divorce; some had so many half siblings, stepsiblings and former stepsiblings that they had to draw explanatory diagrams, and most of the rest described their parents' marriages as unhappy. Their own relationships with men had also often proved disappointing. Still, they hadn't lost faith in the idea of good marriages, and they fully expected their own unions to last. Even women whose parents had divorced dismissed the possibility for themselves: They believed that because they would wed later, had more experience with relationships, and were better judges of character, they would do better. "I have no doubts for two reasons," says Lauren in San Francisco, whose parents split up when she was in ninth grade. "One is, I've seen many examples of really good marriages: friends, my brother, my cousin. And the other is I know myself and how I relate to people. I think marriage would suit me very well."

"You know, you all talk about marriage like it's for life," points out Tania, surrounded by friends in Los Angeles. "But, honestly, everyone, well not everyone, but fifty percent of people, get divorced. So how permanent an idea is it, really? I know for me, I'd like it to be, but"—she waggles her hand in the air and squints into the middle distance—"I do have some sort of vague life plan involving, perhaps, two husbands." The other women were quick to disagree—"I feel like once you make that decision, you're in," says Meghan as the others nod. "I'd rather not get married than think about getting divorced." I found myself intrigued by Tania's suggestion, though, even if it was made mostly in jest. Maybe she was right; clinging to the happily-ever-after ideal may keep women from imagining more realistic (and potentially more joyful) alternatives.

That's not to say that young women were dewy-eyed about what, over the long haul, marriage would provide. As psychologist Lillian Rubin has observed, today's young people approach marriage with a unique combination of inflated expectations and utter cyni-

114

cism.¹⁵ Often, the women I spoke with careened between those extremes. "Ultimately, marriage is a choice," proclaims Julie. "It's unrealistic to expect that you'll look at your husband after twenty years and say 'You are the most fabulous person.'"

"That's what I want!" says Tania, waving a hand in the air. "I want fabulous!"

Julie rolls her eyes. "What you can expect after twenty years," she continued, "is respect. You respect that person, and you like them and, hopefully, you love them. But I don't think you can say 'this is a fabulous person' after twenty years, because there is no fabulous." It's hard to imagine that either woman's vision can be sustained: One relies on romantic illusion, the other seems joyless, reducing marriage to an endurance contest.

Often, for the women I spoke with, marriage seemed a means to an end: They wanted children, and virtually all of them thought single motherhood was too hard. Even the notion of marriage as an economic necessity, which feminism aimed to obliterate, endures, particularly among those who were in female-dominated professions. "When I was young I didn't want to be married," says a twenty-seven-year-old event planner in Minneapolis. "Maybe it was because of my parents' divorce: I was afraid my husband would leave me. But now I think it would not only be nice to have somebody to share my life with, it would be nice to have two incomes. It would make my life much easier financially. It would be nice to be able to buy a house. Maybe it's stupid, but I don't think I'd like doing that on my own."

That last comment may reveal the main reason that the dream of a lifelong marriage persists: It promises a hedge against isolation, an anchor of intimacy in a confusing world. The fear of being "alone," which one might have expected these independent-minded young women to have conquered, seems to have, instead, intensified, in part because they often live thousands of miles from home. Rather than developing solid multigenerational communities that might broaden their conception of satisfying relationships, they live among an ever-shifting constellation of friends and roommates who move

away without warning or pair off and leave them behind. Marriage rather than a romantic proposition may be a way to ensure an ally, someone with whom to establish roots. "For a long time, my network of friends made up for not having a relationship," says one woman in San Francisco. "We all moved in together after college and adhered to this communalism idea. But now it's like, 'Well, sorry, I'm getting married! Bye-bye!' It changes things. It creates a division among your friends where there didn't used to be one. I never wanted to get married myself, and I'd like to be more satisfied than I actually am with being single. And I used to be more sincerely satisfied. But now I feel pressures I never thought I'd feel: that I should be in a relationship, and what's wrong with me if I'm not. Things that I never questioned before. I never thought I'd feel this way. It's frightening."

"I Want to Have Kids; I Just Don't Want Them in My Life"

Nowhere do the potential trade-offs between individual growth and its cost weigh on young women more heavily or make them feel more precarious in their choices than when the conversation turns to motherhood. Jennifer, the twenty-four-year-old social worker in New York, sums it up when she says with no hint of irony, "I want to have kids, I just don't want them in my life."

Nearly all the young women I spoke with believed that having a child "too soon" would be a disaster: It would cut short their quest for identity and destroy their career prospects. "Having a baby before you reach the vice-president level is death," explained a twenty-six-year-old advertising account executive in Chicago. Over and over young women cite their social and physiological freedom to defer motherhood as the essential difference between their generation and their mothers', the key to realizing their personal potential. Still, although the ability to control their fertility has been transformative for women, it hasn't freed them from reproductive pressure.

115

Young women—nearly all of whom say they want to have children—still feel held hostage, but now, instead of by accidental pregnancy, it's by the fear that they will wait "too long." But the line between what they describe as "too soon" and "too late" is very fine indeed; walking it is made more perilous by a constant flow of distorted information which, once again, intensifies as they close in on thirty (it is no accident that that's the age women are most likely to enter therapy).¹⁶ "I feel a lot of pressure about not having kids too late," says Julie in Los Angeles, who is twenty-six and single. "And my mother is Miss Be-Sure-to-Have-a-Baby-Before-You're-Thirty, Because-That's-When-You-Get-Too-Old-and-If-You-Can't-Have-a-Child-You'll-Be-So-Devastated. It makes me furious when she says that, but then, I also sometimes think she's right."

A few weeks later, over drinks at her friend's apartment in Minneapolis, a twenty-nine-year-old legal secretary confides, "It freaks me out to read that if you don't have a baby by the time you're thirty-five, you have this big chance of getting cancer." Later still, in the New York publishing company conference room, Leslie Elder, also twenty-nine, confesses that she burst into tears over an *Atlantic Monthly* article that warned that women's fertility declines in their thirties. And in San Francisco, Melody Yun, who is also twenty-nine and said repeatedly that she didn't even want to have children, was nonetheless shaken by an article in *Harper's*: "It was written by this guy whose wife didn't want to have kids, then she changed her mind at thirty-nine," she says. "It was all about what they went through to have a child. I never would've thought an article like that would've affected me. But I read it and thought, 'Wow. That could be me in ten years.'"

"I know what you mean," says Lauren, who is on the cusp of thirty. "It's like our bodies are punishing us for our choices."

Like the "man shortage" of the 1980s, the current panic induced by the "fertility crisis" seems designed to drive straight to young women's biggest fears: that the price of freedom is isolation, that a woman who doesn't give in to conventional roles by the Big Three-O will be denied. While the man shortage was a sham, this

new assault is not as easily dismissed: A third of women over thirty-five will have difficulty conceiving.¹⁷ Even so, infertility, let alone cancer, is not as inevitable as young women have been led to believe (and, in reality, the male partner is as likely to be the cause). Despite the fact that more people are seeking treatment, infertility rates have actually dropped since the 1980s, indicating that couples are anticipating problems they may not have. Meanwhile, the only group among which infertility has jumped is women in their twenties who have unprotected sex and, unknowingly, contract chlamydia or genital warts.¹⁸ Perhaps, then, instead of wringing their hands over how their age and professional choices affect childbearing, young women should focus on their own reluctance to demand that their lovers wear condoms and their inability to articulate their needs.

Some of the young women said that they would rather not have children at all than wait until they were thirty-five. Considering that none of them was married and all were between twenty-four and thirty-one years old, the pressure they were under was extreme—so extreme that it left no time to think through whether motherhood was really for them. "I'll tell you what that pressure makes me feel," says Melody, who had said she didn't want children. "I feel like I have to meet someone now, because you want to date for a couple of years before you get engaged, and then you don't want to just get married and have babies right away, you want to have a married life first. So, suddenly every date counts, and you think, 'I can't waste time with you because you're not a keeper.' I say I don't want to have kids, but that's because I know I still can. I have that option. But I feel like I'd better decide damned soon, because I won't have it much longer."

Becky nods. "I wouldn't have children after thirty-five," she says. I point out that she is already thirty-one. "Thank you for reminding me," she replies acidly, and begins ticking off her to-do list on her fingers. "That means I need to finish the documentary I'm working on, make my first feature film, and produce another feature film within three years." She folds her arms across her chest. "That's the kind of pressure it puts me under."

Among women who have entered fields that remain male-

116

defined, the stress is especially acute. After her disastrous foray into investment banking, Erin, in New York, says she was determined to pick a profession that would be conducive both to high achievement and motherhood. Her own mother hadn't pursued a career until Erin was a teenager, so she wasn't much of a guide. "She never really talked to me about how hard it would be to balance everything," Erin explains. "To be honest, I don't think she knew. She was a teacher before she got married. Then she stayed home with us for thirteen years, and *then* she started her career. It was different for her."

If her mother couldn't advise her, Erin figured, she'd find someone who could. So, for six months she conducted informational interviews with female executives in New York about their career choices. It was, she says, a disheartening experience. She ended up feeling that, sure, she could "be anything"—she could pursue the same opportunities as men—as long as she didn't have children. "My plan was, I was going to cruise right to the top," she says, "and I'd be so successful that they would make an exception for me. They would let me keep my job three days a week and let me have this balance. But I found out that is not reality. So I have this feeling of, 'Oh, my God, do I have to make a choice? Why can't I have both things?' I see the women at my advertising agency who have made it. They are not having kids until they are forty, or they have a full-time nanny. More and more I see women just leave. And I wonder, how am I going to be able to accept staying home, spending time with the kids, and not making it to that next level? Is that going to be good enough for me?"

What About the Men?

Young women like to talk about an ideal world. In an ideal world they could be anything they wanted to be without being limited by sex. In an ideal world their husbands would be eternally and unconditionally loving and nurturing. And in an ideal world childcare

would be a joint responsibility. "It would be like, 'I'll pick them up today you pick them up tomorrow,'" says a twenty-seven-year-old nurse in Minneapolis. "In an ideal world everything would be shared." When pressed for details about how they imagine childcare working on this decidedly nonideal planet, however, women revealed that they expected—and often even wanted—the responsibility to fall squarely on themselves. Often, in a single interview, the same woman expressed contradictory ideas about how she anticipated combining providing for her children and nurturing. "I liked having my mom at home," said a twenty-eight-year-old social worker, also in Minneapolis. "I'd want to be home too when I have kids." An hour later, though, she mused, "If I didn't work, I'd go crazy. If I had to stay home with kids, I don't know what would happen to me." And later still she said, "Being the breadwinner would be way too much pressure. I'd rather be the one staying home."

Other women, particularly those with high career aspirations, hoped that by the time they have children, the problem will magically disappear. "With the modem and the fax machine, there's no real reason you need to spend eight hours in the office," says Claire Ricci, the twenty-eight-year-old assistant editor in New York. "So there's this glimmer of hope that I'm going to be able to work at home and not have to completely take a step back and say, 'Okay, I'm going to be on the B team of editors instead of the A team, because I want to be a mother. I have my fingers crossed.'"

The idea that "balance" is specifically a woman's problem is even reinforced by those purporting to offer solutions. In Philadelphia, a second-year medical student gathers five friends in her living room for me to interview. They are all agonizing over how to get through their residencies and establish their practices while simultaneously trying to find a loving man and start a family. More to the point, they resent that their male classmates aren't twisting from the same rope. Just before our interview, they'd attended an event, which some of them had organized, designed to help them: a panel in which women in different specialties discussed how they'd met the challenge of mixing work and family. "How many men came

117

to the session?" I ask. They look blank. "Did they have their own panel in which male doctors advised them on how to be good fathers and good physicians?" I continue, "Or don't they expect to have to be both?"

As it turned out, not only didn't it occur to the organizers of the panels to include their male classmates—"They wouldn't have shown up anyway," one says—the women didn't really want them to attend. In the end, they believe that it is their role to make personal sacrifices for their families despite the fact that men want children just as much.¹⁹ "I feel like a big hypocrite for saying this," admits Shay Thomas, a twenty-four-year-old African American woman with a heart-shaped face surrounded by dozens of tiny braids. "I say I'm pissed off that the men aren't thinking about it, but the truth is, I don't imagine my husband going through the same struggles, thinking about working part-time and all. I think of it as being my choice."

Gayle, twenty-five, who plans on being an obstetrician, agrees: She wants her husband to "help" with childrearing but doesn't really expect him to be an equal partner; let alone a primary caretaker. "I don't want anyone taking care of my child but me," she says. "It might be wrong for me to feel this way and it might be something that society has done, but at that panel there was a woman surgeon who really put herself first, before her children, and I looked down on her for that. I thought that she was not being a good mother. Whether that's wrong or whether it's right, I don't know. But that's how I felt."

"Well, I want a guy to be grappling with those issues too," says Ruth, a twenty-six-year-old Dominican woman who was a second-year student. "I want someone who will acknowledge that we are both going to have to make sacrifices and cut down on hours if we have a child. And it's hard, because a lot of men aren't like that. Or if they are, people think they're less than a man because they aren't ambitious. It's just so frustrating: We want to be able to pursue our careers, but then we look down on the men who say, 'Well, you go do your thing, and I'd like to stay home.'"

Ruth is right: Despite their contemporary career ambitions,

for most women I talked to, traditional motherhood—in which they are the primary caretaker—remained central to their core conception of self. In her interviews with a racially diverse group of women in their twenties, sociologist Kim DaCosta found that the traditional mother's role has actually supplanted marriage as a source of romantic fantasy for many young single women. Instead of the disparity between the ideal and the actual that they anticipated in their relationships with men, women expected motherhood to be exactly as they imagined it: a source of self-nurturance, permanence, and unconditional love—all the things they doubted they could, in reality, find with a man. Very few mentioned the difficulties that can arise in relationships with children. Some even saw traditional motherhood as a form of "feminist self-sacrifice," imbuing it with qualities of independence and self-reliance, which, taken to their extreme, would make it a solo pursuit. By envisioning motherhood as such a powerful extension of the self, however, young women risk damage to their relationships with their future husbands and children, as well as to their own financial well-being.²⁰

Most of the women I spoke with had developed a kind of amalgam of old and new expectations, a hybrid that even they knew was insupportable, if not downright hypocritical. "What I was going to say in jest, but what I sometimes feel, which scares me, is that there is a lot of validity to what your mother says, 'You have to marry a doctor,'" says Melody Yun. "If I want to have kids, the reality is I have to find someone who will support me and be the one who works. Or maybe I'd do something half time, or dabble in whatever I find fulfilling, but I don't think a career will be my priority. I know that sounds very retro because you'd expect me to say, 'Oh, it will be a complete partnership and he'll invest as much in childrearing as I will.' I do have certain expectations for that, but I don't have very high expectations of my potential to be a major breadwinner. In my field I won't command a high salary." Melody pauses and grins sheepishly. "In my most idealized vision," she says, "we'd have an equal partnership where he brings home all the money and also does half the childrearing."

118

In their professional lives, their personal lives, and their dreams of the future, young women face a series of interlocking dilemmas, a dizzying combination of external obstacles and internal contradictions that push them simultaneously toward autonomy and dependence, modernity and tradition—that leaves them hovering in a state of flux. They are encouraged toward economic self-sufficiency yet are subtly pressured to “choose” lower paying, more flexible professions that would accommodate conventional motherhood. They learn from a young age to be assertive professionally yet not to express their desires in their relationships with men. They hold out an ideal of shared parenting but anticipate inequality. As Ann Machung has observed, it appears that beneath their New Woman personae, today's young women may largely be replicating their mothers' lives.²¹

While the pressures young women experienced were similar, the way they responded to them could be very different. To truly understand the conflicts that young women face, I needed to go deeper into everyday life to see how individuals negotiated today's set of choices and paradoxes. I chose three women I'd met in the groups on whom to focus further. Mira Brodie, the associate in Finance at a Fortune 500 company, is at one end of the spectrum, willing to defer or relinquish a personal life for professional success. Abbey Green, a sales rep for a comic book company, puts her faith in women's traditional strengths as the key to advancement. Shay Thomas, a medical student, is engaged in a double negotiation, as a woman and an African American in an elite profession. As they set their courses into adulthood, all three women are framing questions about feminine identity, ambition, and relationships; and, in their own ways, all three are seeking the answers.

Chapter 2

The High-Potential Female

MIRA BRODIE TALKS ABOUT corporate America as if it were a geographical place. And in that parallel country she has been officially designated a “high-potential female.” “I was actually called that to my face,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I was like, ‘Oh, great! An HPF’—it makes me sound like a calculator.” Which, if one's definition includes a person who engages in calculation, who plots how she and other women can ride that HPF status to the upper tiers of the company, pretty much fits.

At twenty-six, Mira is tall and athletic with black hair that grazes her jaw, light golden skin (inherited from her Indian mother), and a smattering of freckles (the legacy of her Scottish father). Her face is classic: high cheekbones, aquiline nose, full lips. When she meets me at her office, the New York headquarters of an insurance and financial services conglomerate, she's wearing a casual tweed pants suit, the result of a newly relaxed dress code. “When I first got here, although women could, technically, wear pants, it was not recommended, career-wise,” she says. Also frowned upon were obvious makeup and long hair. Mira points to her head. “There are rules in corporate America. You have to have corporate hair.”

On the way back to her desk, Mira stops to chat with a colleague whom she describes as her “office spouse”—“you know,” she explains, “the person you complain to about work and have lunch with and pick hair off his clothes without asking.” She sweeps by her secretary and into her office, a glorified cubicle in the company's

119