

[one]

More Important Things to Do

I'M PICTURING CARRIE on *Sex and the City* cross-legged on her bed in sexy boy-cut undies and a cleavage revealing push-up bra, her hair professionally disheveled, seductively sucking on a melting Popsicle. She made writing look like a must-have accessory, the quirky detail that set her apart from other women. All the years I watched that show, I thought, I could do that. I should have done that. I lived in New York City. I had sex. I had girlfriends who called me frantic in the middle of the night complaining about their Mr. Bigs not being so big. I could write witty sentences verging

on the annoying. I could work a Popsicle with the best of them. But as much as I see Carrie out of the corner of my eye as I type, I'm not Carrie. Not by a long shot. I'm married. I'm the mother of three. I live in Wisconsin. I don't own boy-cut undies and instead of baring my relationship with men and shoes, I'm baring my relationship with breast cancer.

I'll start in the middle: Winter 2006:

I'm sitting topless in the oncologist's office on Valentine's Day. Cancer is a bitch. It doesn't give a shit about holidays. Doesn't give a shit when the oncologist gently presses his thick hairy fingers near the wound above my nipple, tears burn the raw edges of my puffy eyes, dribble down my cheeks, and roll past blood-caked stitches, landing in a puddle in the space between the oncologist's cold wedding band and my warm flesh. "Still swollen," he says and I hate him. Hate that I'm swollen, hate that I'm here on Valentine's Day instead of at Victoria's Secret buying the cleavage-enhancing Miracle Bra that *Redbook* recommended for guaranteed flawless shape. Think if I'd followed their "Sizzle for Your Sweetie" advice, I would be slipping into a red dress, on my way to a romantic dinner, wouldn't be hearing the oncologist saying, "Even though the surgeon got clean margins, your risk of invasive cancer is four to five times greater than the average woman." Wouldn't be afraid to look at my flawed breast under the harsh fluorescent light.

It all began the morning of my annual mammogram a few weeks earlier in January. Over breakfast my nine-year-old son Alex and I discussed the puppy he'd been begging for, ever since the death of our dog that past Thanksgiving. Now that I'd finished my novel (about a woman who finds a lump in her breast and wonders if she's lived a meaningful life), I was ready to consider a new pet at the close of what had been a stressful, busy year—the dog dying, my husband, Mike's, slow-healing knee surgery, and our oldest daughter, Anna's, college application process. A nearly straight-A student with SAT scores comparable to my Ivy League radiologist husband's, a singer, a dancer, and a cross-country runner, and she'd been rejected early-decision by Dartmouth, his alma matter. Dartmouth had been a source of tension for us all the way back to when Mike brought me home to his mother, who was disappointed that I wasn't the blond-bobbed, Episcopalian Dartmouth grad she'd sent him to college to meet. Instead, I was a wavy-haired, curvy, Jewish, wanna-be poet who lived in the East Village and had gone to an "experimental" college (even I wondered what she could possibly make of me).

So when Anna said she didn't want to apply to Dartmouth, I said if she didn't want to, she shouldn't; and Mike said I was undermining him, turning her against *his* school and that I obviously didn't understand the whole "Ivy League thing." Our middle daughter,

Maddy—also in high school and panicked by her sister’s panic—signed up for more clubs, SAT prep, and dance team, while Alex was playing indoor soccer and basketball, both at opposite ends of town. As if that wasn’t enough, all year I’d felt pressure from my agent to send her my new manuscript.

But that morning, I dropped Alex off at school, brought the newspaper with me to my mammogram, and as I waited in the cubicle for the technician to tell me to get dressed and go home, I circled “healthy, lovable, mixed-breed pups free to good home,” and thought about how much more time I would have now that the other college applications were in the mail and my new novel was complete. I’d start back at yoga and cook more elaborate dinners and do something about the war in Iraq and global warming and match all the unmatched socks instead of stuffing them into that old bureau at the top of the stairs—when the technician peeked in and said, “We need to get a few more films.”

“Not to worry,” she said, as she whisked me down the hall smiling, continuing the story about her grandson or granddaughter or grandsomething doing something grand. “Doctors’ wives make everybody nervous,” she said and rolled her eyes, gesturing for me to slip my arm out of my gown.

After seven films and more cubicle waiting, I folded up the want ads, picked up a magazine featuring a

young woman with inoperable lung cancer, put down the magazine, stood and counted to a hundred forward and backward. I'd had a couple of breast scares before, a core biopsy and a wide excision, both indicating cellular changes, but ultimately benign. I worried about my breasts, but still, I felt impatient with all this wasted time when I had more important things to do.

The technician poked her head back into the stall. "Dr. Evans wants to talk to you," she said. No small talk, no smile as she led me into the viewing room.

I stood next to Henry, one of my husband's radiologist partners and a friend of ours for years. I knew his wife, his children; we'd shared numerous occasions—weddings, graduations, anniversaries, funerals. As he pointed to an illuminated x-ray of my breast, all swirly white clouds and dissipating smoke plumes, a thin red arrow marking a teeny tiny cluster of white specks, he said, "See, that's what I'm concerned about. Those calcifications are new and just to be safe I think we should biopsy. . . ."

He choked and winced, looking so pained to have to tell *me* this news that I said, "This must be awkward for you."

He nodded and said, "Okay?"

And I wondered, Was he asking me my opinion? Was there a choice? Was this a trick question? Was there an answer that would make this go away?

He swallowed so loudly, I felt it in *my* throat.

“Okay,” I said, wanting to make *him* feel better.

Murmuring *okay okay okay okay* all the way down the hall, in the elevator, into the parking lot, where I stood, lost, unable to find my car, the ink from the crumpled newspaper bleeding into my hand.

[two]

Does Biopsy Mean No Puppy?

CHEST DOWN ON a padded table, head cocked sideways, right breast hanging through a peekaboo hole, one arm hooked around my matted hair, the other arm twisted pinky side out along my side, the nurse positions me from below as the clear-plastic compression paddles squish my flesh into place.

“Are you comfortable?” she asks and swabs my breast with betadine.

I’m not sure how to answer that. I’m strapped to a surgical bed by my boob. I’m expected to be still while a long thick needle excavates questionable cells. I’m

contorted. I'm scared. But none of that is her fault so I nod, the stiff sheet scratching my cheek, a little bit of drool trickling into my ear.

"First, I'm going to numb you," she says and cocks the needle into the antiseptic air, dribbling a bubble of fluid out the tip, and pierces my skin.

"Numb is good," I tell both of us.

She scootches up a chair near my head and says, "Aren't you a writer?"

I nod as Pete, another of my husband's radiology partners, approaches the table. "Are you ready?"

He isn't a close friend like Henry, who'd read my mammogram. But when I first moved to Madison, I was in a book group with his wife. One time we read a "literary erotic" novel called *Eat Me*, and we all drank too much wine and shared too much, something involving sushi and fishnets and marzipan—was that something from the book or his wife?

"Ready," I say. The worn pale-blue patient gown barely veils my rigid body, and I remember that the last time I saw Pete was at the annual holiday party and I was dancing to "Love Shack" in a tight black dress and stilettos.

"What's your book about?" the nurse asks, patting my arm as if I'm three, and I'm grateful and worried that I've engendered such tenderness.

"A woman who finds a lump in her breast," I say above the whirl of the machine. I feel pressure but no

pain, trying not to think about the needle, trying to picture my children romping on a beach, a peaceful image I've used in yoga class to pull me out of my ruminating head. I see the tide rolling in and in and in and think, Shiva, the Hindu God of regeneration, a mantra that means one thing must die for another to be born. . . .

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“Does this make my boobs look too big?” my fifteen year old middle daughter Maddy had asked, three shirts and two bras into her evening fashion show the night before. I was lying on her bed, thinking about how distorted the ceiling looked through her satin canopy, all translucent cracks and amorphous shards.

“Try the green shirt with the *other* bra,” I answered.

Maddy and I often had these boob conversations because although she was blond and blue-eyed like Mike, she was built like me, small but busty, and she knew that I knew how hard it was to find the right clothes—too fitted and you looked like a sexpot, too baggy and you looked matronly. We had hard figures to dress, hard figures to rationalize.

“I can hear you,” my older, less busty daughter Anna shouted from her room.

“Your breasts look great in everything,” I said to Maddy, the word “breasts” clinging to the back of my throat. The only time I'd felt entirely comfortable with

my breasts was when I was nursing. Otherwise, I'd always had a love/hate relationship with them. The first time Jake Jabowitz felt me up in eighth grade, I thought I loved him, until I found out he told all the other boys I had great tits. But on my daughters, I saw them differently. Perfect sculptures, round and soft and firm and healthy. My stomach flipped.

"That is such a bitch thing for you to say," Anna said to me as she stormed into the room, her large green eyes piercing mine.

I gasped into my fist. Willing myself not to say anything I would regret. Mike and I had decided we'd tell the girls about the procedure later that night, together, and downplay it, and not tell Alex at all. No need to burden them.

"Do you have any idea what a pain in the ass these things are?" Maddy said. "Mom knows."

My face grew too hot as I told myself, Be mature and restrained. "That wasn't meant as a slight to you," I sat up and said as slowly as possible to Anna. "You look great in everything, too. You both do. You're young and beautiful, you have your whole lives in front of you for chrissakes, what the hell are you complaining about? And don't swear at me," I screamed, tears blurring everything.

"What? What's wrong with you?" Anna said.

"Nothing. Nothing. Noth. . . ." My throat catching

in the middle of the third “nothing.” “I’m having a b . . . b . . . b . . . ” I said, the consonant stuck on my lips.

“A baby?” Anna said.

“A biopsy.” The word coming out too loud, too aggressively, making it sound more ominous than I wanted it to.

“*Another* one?” Maddy said.

“What does biopsy mean?” Alex poked his wide-eyed, freckled face in from the hallway.

Shit, why did he have to hear that? “It means. . . .” I hadn’t meant to have this conversation. How had this happened? And what *did* it mean? “It means. . . .” He’d go to a friend’s house after school tomorrow and I’d watch *Oprah* to recover; and we’d order in pizza for dinner and if all went well, that would be it, everything back to normal. And if not, my defective breast might be the most memorable legacy I would leave my children.

“Does it mean no puppy?” he asked, so gently, he must have known I needed help articulating and I wondered, What kind of mother would allow this, any of this, to happen?



Another whirl of the machine reminds me of the table, of me on the table, of life cycles spinning in opposite directions simultaneously. My children’s coming-of-age, my aging. I glance at the needle penetrating my yellowed

boob and hope biopsy doesn't mean I'll be a burden before they have blossomed.

"Clamp," the nurse warns as Pete shoots a metal staple into my breast.

I shudder at the noise, the clutch of internal force, the fact that I know it's marked so the surgeon can find the spot if it's cancerous. "That's two," I say. "I hope I don't set off any metal detectors."

"You're a good sport," Pete says as he unleashes my body from the paddles.

No, I'm not. Not a good sport, not mature enough to handle this. I want out before the stakes get any higher. I want to turn back the clock. I want to reread *Eat Me*. I want to dance to "Love Shack" in a too-tight dress. I want to call Jake Jabowitz and ask him if he still thinks I have great tits.

"So, what happens to the woman in the novel?" the nurse interrupts my thoughts, wrapping my chest in loose layers of sterile gauze.

"She's, she's, she's. . . ." I want to say "fine," but I'd left her fate ambiguous, thinking that was the more interesting choice. And now I wonder why I hadn't worked that out, because *I* want to know what happens to the woman, as I tie my frayed blue gown around me, slide off the biopsy table, my paper slippers landing on the cold linoleum with a jarring thud.