

Even After All These Years

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Growing up in the heady feminism of the seventies and thoroughly immersed – first as a child, later as a student, and finally as an instructor – in the abstract world of academia, I naturally embraced the principle of equality between the sexes. My generation of women was the one that would have it all – a full-time career, marriage, and family. I imagined arriving home from work in my business suit, swinging my briefcase just like the woman in the Enjoli perfume advertisement that played all the time in the seventies: I can bring home the bacon. Fry it up in a pan. And never, ever let you forget you're a man. Cause I'm a wo-man!" In my utopian vision of absolute equality, marriage was a partnership where husband and wife participated fifty-fifty in making love, money, and dinner.

When I met Dan in law school, it seemed to me that he perfectly fit my ideal of the liberated man. He belonged to the women's rights club and had marched on Washington for free choice. Not only was he intelligent and funny, but he possessed an emotional sensitivity that I was drawn to immediately. He listened to me when I talked to him; he didn't try to silence me like other men I'd known. On our first date, complaining about men who were intimidated by me, I finished my tirade by quoting the singer Helen Reddy: "I am woman, hear me roar." To which Dan calmly replied, "I hear you." That clinched it. I'd finally found a man who wasn't afraid to take me on in all my strength, as an equal.

I was living in Manhattan, Dan in Moscow, when we decided to get married. Over the phone and in e-mails, we discussed our mutual and separate goals, each pledging to assist in the other's personal growth and fulfillment. Dan's burning desire was to continue to live and work in Russia, a place he'd fallen in love with when he studied the language and literature in college. Mine was to be recognized as a writer. We planned to have children down the line. And, of course, I expected that I would seamlessly and effortlessly integrate wifedom, motherhood, and a career. I felt fully entitled to "have it all," another one of those advances like color TV or microwave ovens, that my generation had inherited. Never did I suspect this quest would cause me to question my fundamental belief in equality between the sexes.

The first intimation that my life might not unfold quite so smoothly arose as I prepared to give up my job as a corporate attorney and join Dan in Russia. We were desperately in love, our geographical separation almost impossible to tolerate. And yet, I began to wonder, what if I wound up like one of those fifties housewives in my mother's cautionary tales, left high and dry after giving up everything for the man she loved? A woman who raised three children while working full-time as a teacher of inner-city students, my mother had taught my sister and me to take care of ourselves financially. From her, and not my father, the classic absent-minded professor, we learned the upside of funding and IRA, the downside of front-end-loaded mutual funds. "I never want you to have to stay in a marriage for money," she'd say.

When I told Dan of my financial fears, he did his best to reassure me by opening a joint bank account in both our names and depositing his modest savings into it. Then he offered me a "writing fellowship," the funds to tide me over until I started to earn an income from my new career. The truth is, I'd never really liked the practice of law – I found it too linear and noncreative. I'd gone to law school with the sole intention of supporting myself financially while building up a writing career. But still, I accepted Dan's offer grudgingly. I had no idea then how tough it would be to make a living as a writer, but I certainly didn't intend for my husband to support me

in the long run. That kind of dependency completely contradicted my notion of equal partnership in marriage.

Moving to Moscow and marrying Dan was the most romantic thing I'd ever done, and also the scariest. I now lived in a country where I didn't speak the language or know anyone but my husband. (Contrary to what my middle name, Natasha, might imply, I am Chinese-American through and through; my mother just happened to read *War & Peace* when she was pregnant.) Dan chose our friends, arranged our social life, and made all our household arrangements. I had to rely on him to make even the simplest telephone call. Some days, I felt positively powerless.

I mourned my former status as an attorney, the recognition and respect to which I had become accustomed, along with the certainty of income. Without a bustling office to go to every morning, I felt diminished and lonely.

Obviously, I'd underestimated how much I'd miss my day job. But what choice did I have now? Every morning, as Dan trotted off to his office – by now, he was working as an investment banker – I trudged over to my desk to throw myself into my writing. Just as I'd formed an image in my mind of the successful career woman, ever-competent and ever-productive, I imagined that the successful writer churned out huge realms of manuscript pages in minutes. I had no idea of the huge gaps, the loneliness, and insecurity

between words and sentences. At each day's end, I felt unproductive and frustrated.

In my narrow paradigm of equality, a woman was equal to a man only if she was the same. If she and the man differed, then she was inferior. In New York, Dan and I had graduated from the same law school and earned almost identical salaries as attorneys. Now I couldn't keep up with him, and I felt marginalized in every way: socially, intellectually, and professionally. In fact, I could barely respond to him anymore. Before, I'd been free and uninhibited in bed; now I felt as if I were choking to death each time he climbed on top of me. When I couldn't bring home the bacon, I let him forget he was a man.

I grew angry and resentful when I found myself preparing and serving dinner or doing the laundry, or any other task that smacked similarly of fifties servitude. Luckily, domestic services were inexpensive in Moscow. We had a maid three times a week and a full-time driver for groceries and errands. Yes, I was fortunate – and not just because I didn't have to do much cleaning for a few years. Had I been truly saddled with household chores at that period in our marriage – at that point in my understanding of equality between Dan and me – I might have never stopped feeling “oppressed.”

A few months after moving to Moscow, I signed a contract with a respectable publishing house for my first book, a memoir of my great aunt. My advance was generous, the wolf far from the door. I was no longer dependent on Dan's "writing fellowship." Any other budding writer would have been thrilled.

However, even after a successful publication and book tour, I kept calculating my advance in law salary terms and thinking: Once I ran through this money, then what? How would I account for myself with Dan?

I kept score this way in our marriage for years, long after the advance money had been spent and my writing income came in tiny dribbles. Dan was never aware of how inadequate I felt about my low earning power and subsequently, my success as a writer. Indeed, my husband was my greatest champion, telling me that creative work held different – and even greater – value in the world. He never lorded money over me. Still, he had strong ideas about how we should spend our earnings. For instance, he didn't want me to buy a TV or a freezer; he considered them environmentally unfriendly. But what about all his high-tech toys, his ever-growing pile of discarded electronics? If Dan's heart was as green as he claimed, why couldn't he apply the slogan "think globally and act locally" to our flat? My own heart filled with black rage when I contemplated his inconsistency, not to mention his inability to dispose of his clutter. But suffering from the illusion that I was no longer my husband's equal, I didn't always feel entitled to voice my opinion.

In the late nineties, after we'd spent over five years in Russia, the country suffered a financial crisis and we moved to San Francisco. I, for one, was happy to be back in America, where, if I didn't make as much money as my husband, I at least spoke the language as well. But Dan truly missed Russia, where he felt his work contributed to a developing democratic society. His new dot-com job lasted only six months before he stormed out during a management dispute. He would remain unemployed or, as he likes to say, "under-engaged," for nearly two years. Now, both of us were home every day. Neither of us was making much money. But for the first time in years, we were the same again.

Here, finally, was the equality I'd longed for, although not quite as I'd pictured it. It wasn't just our financial status that differed from my dream. I'd always imagined a joined-at-the-hip partnership. But now that Dan really was home all the time, I often felt as though his presence were an intrusion. Even though he left the house for interviews and workouts, it seemed as though I couldn't pursue a single strand of creative thought without his interrupting me to find this or do that.

Worse, to my surprise, we began to squabble like siblings over who would clean the kitty litter, do the laundry, and yes, wash the dishes. Since we no

longer had a domestic staff and Dan no longer had a job, I had just assumed that we would now share the housework fifty-fifty. Most night we did, in fact, cook dinner together. But we could never agree about how often other chores needed to be done, let alone who would do them, since Dan tolerated higher disorder and piles of dirty clothes that I did. The truth was, I finally realized, my liberated husband was just as terrified that he would be subsumed by domesticity as I was. Unlike me, though, he even hated discussing the division of labor; he thought we should talk about books and ideas.

But there were good days, too, one that brought us closer together instead of further apart. On such days, we would each follow our own agenda in the morning, then meet up in the afternoon for coffee, followed by a walk through the arduous hills of our Nob Hill neighborhood. Up and down we would puff, talking about whatever came into our hearts: whether to stay in San Francisco, when to have children, whether we would succeed at our careers.

Over the course of many such conversations, I started to notice how Dan's faith in himself wavered from day to day, but never his faith in me. And, I realized, I felt the same about him. He still wanted me to pursue writing; I wanted for him to feel as fulfilled as he had in Russia. And, listening to my unemployed husband struggle with his sense of self-worth, I became increasingly aware of the fallacies underlying my own. Did it really make

sense to feel ashamed when my writing didn't produce a paycheck as weighty as his? Was it reasonable to fear that I would never make a mark on the world if I had a child and no longer focused single-mindedly on my work? It didn't happen overnight, but slowly my answers to these questions began to change.

Dan and I now have a four-year-old daughter, conceived and carried during those tough years in San Francisco. This year, as we celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary, I reflected on how my understanding of equality has changed. Yes, we both initiate sex – a hallmark, or so I was brought up to believe, of an egalitarian relationship. But there's still that awkward moment after dinner, when we have to decide who does the dishes. Dan, now back in investment banking, continues to make more money than I do. And when it comes right down to it, my integration of motherhood, wifedom, and a career is not at all what I originally envisioned. For the past year and a half, my daughter and I have been based in Connecticut, where I can write, teach at two nearby universities, and raise our child close to her maternal grandparents with New England values that are dear to me. Dan has opted to make his primary home in Moscow, where he can pursue his career wholeheartedly. Juggling school holidays and our respective work schedules, we manage to spend about half the year together in one place or the other.

This very modern arrangement has its pluses and minuses for all involved. Dan misses contact with his loved ones. I often long for another adult to share in the daily responsibilities of child-raising. Our daughter benefits from exposure to two very different cultures but sometimes suffers from discontinuities in routine. We are fortunate to have the support of both sides of our family. How long we will live this way, we do not know, but for the present, it meets our needs. And in a curious way, we have finally achieved quality in our marriage: not sameness, but the comfort and security to be who we are. I will not tell my daughter that men and women are the same; I know better now. A woman will never be the same as a man, but she will always be his equal.