

BabyWorld

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ONE

FIFTY-TWO WEEKS IN A YEAR

“Baby, you know I am—we are—so proud of you, but you must also know that I am so very concerned about you. Well—just look at you! You look overworked, malnourished—and, for whatever reason, anxious. Oh—I see. How is work going, dear? Do we have any inclination as to when you become the youngest partner in your firm’s history—any? The extra income would be extraordinarily useful—you know, put toward last quarter’s taxes—. Really, we could use it. We could really use—oh! That reminds me; Jessika and Anika were asking me about you. Now, just when was that? Oh, of course, it was Sunday, this past Sunday, at family dinner—. At Sunday Family Dinner! They asked: ‘Is Sinika coming over for dinner tonight, Mama? After all, it is SUNDAY FAMILY DINNER, and we haven’t seen her for ever so long, and your lawyer had her restraining order against you rescinded over a week ago’—. BUT OH NO! FORGET THE NOTION THAT SHE TAKES TIME OUT FROM HER OH-SO-BUSY SCHEDULE TO SPEND IT WITH HER—with her family—when we need you—when we need Sinika most—. When I need—. I—I am your

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mother and I think that you are—you are—just not eating enough, is all I'm saying—. I..."

Estelle's pauses were increasing in frequency and duration; Sinika remained silent, even though she was creating these opportunities to speak.

In the finite yet unbounded space between her nose and Estelle's, a ship was sailing away from Sinika, cutting across the sea of self-doubt that had flooded her mind when questioning her own awareness of The Pill Trick. *Has this become my unconscious response to mother's mania? Is it now just some Pavlovian bitch dance, mere synchronized affect, a necessary condition of our interacting? No. Not this time.*

Sinika was aware of what she was doing; she'd been aware of it pretty much right from the start. Also, shivers shot down her spine every time her mother spoke in that cutesy, prepubescent whine, so she had no choice but to put the kibosh on this utterly inaccurate imitation of her sisters.

In almost imperceptibly small arcs, she had started to rotate her head moments after her mother joined her at this table for two in Lil' Timmy's bistro, timing the apogee of this nearly invisible movement to coincide with the pauses within her mother's harangue, knowing that every moment of silence was precursory to a change in her mother's emotional state and by using subtle movements of her body she was able to regulate her mother's mania. When Estelle started speaking in that insipid, preschool voice, Sinika had let her elliptic orbit grow considerably, incorporating first her shoulders and then her waist into its rotations, and now, with her mother's emotional flux finally settling, Sinika was left gently rocking back and forth in her chair. *That's it, Estelle—good, settle down—. Wait, now she's calm, but here I am, swaying like Jonathan Reichman on the deck of his barge in high seas.*

Sinika slyly eased herself still—however, too late.

"...You know they had only begun to figure out what Aspies were all about around the time your great-grandfather first sailed to Europe,"

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muttered Estelle, the rim of the Pyrex glass containing the remnants of her favourite Brunello pressed against her bottom lip. “Childhood schizophrenia, they used to call it—how dreadful!” With a flip of her head, she drained her drink, and then held the shatterproof glass high in the air, her free hand attracting the waiter’s attention and relaying her desire for another of the same.

The restraining order was now rescinded, so these were the first drinks in weeks she was forced to watch her mother consume; although, Sinika assumed they were not Estelle’s first of the day.

Other than that baby voice, what Sinika really hated about her mother—drinking, these days, acting only as a catalyst for it—was how always, just minutes into being in each others presence, Estelle would read Sinika’s mind, take and twist whatever innocent metaphor she was silently using to reflect her emotion, and then spew it back aloud as something diseased, dated, and disregarded.

What Sinika hated most about being Estelle’s daughter: their connection felt more binding than magical. Now was the perfect time for Sinika to sever this tie. She drew a deep breath through her nose, sat forward, and opened her mouth.

“I have absolutely no idea why you would have me meet you at a place this—casual. But of course, baby, it’s close to your office. The service here is abysmal. It seems as though they have a four-and-under hiring policy—poor, little failures. Although, as I recall, the chef was the first 624 to be successful in petitioning the city to grant him a liquor licence—but that was ages ago. Maybe his business acumen declined with his age—is continuing to decline, just like everyone and all things do—down, down, and—. Well, maybe not this wine. Ha! Nonetheless, this place does remind me of a spot, more uptown, of course, that I used to go to almost every day the year before I adopted Jessika. Now, what was that place called? Whatever, it doesn’t

matter. I decided to stop modelling—the agency practically bribed me to stay—and I soon got my old job back at the astrophysics lab. We used to lunch at—. What was it called? Whatever, it doesn't matter. Was it—? No. Anyway, the point is that I—. Where was I? Oh, ya, I..."

Sinika was sitting perfectly still, her mouth still agape. Estelle rambled on, staring glassy-eyed up into the space above the one Sinika, only a moment before, had been lost in. The Pill Trick may have been a contingent cause in moderating Estelle's state; but doctor-prescribed medication combined with heavy red wine, blocking a mother from entering a daughter's mind, was the necessary cause effecting the change, Estelle now content with her own mind's contents.

So Sinika, raising her dangling chin, with impunity let distraction direct her attention to others in the bistro, for Estelle was going to be bathing in nostalgia, effectively oblivious to her surroundings, for a span of time in direct relation to the measure of her current dosage, the strength of the grape, and the number of units of each consumed prior to their meeting.

Sinika felt conflicted; she agreed with her mother: service at Lil' Timmy's had become awful over the past year. However, Timmy was not to be entirely blamed for this lapse. His bistro, like all other restaurants, stores, buildings, parks, or any other public places on Toronto's mainland, was open to all ages; constitutionally, he was required to be an equal-opportunity employer. *I come here too often. It's all Suzy's fault. She's such a distraction. I should tell her that I have to start focusing more on work, start focusing more on—oh! What is this?* Sinika sneered.

Unsuccessfully hiding his toddle, the waiter was bouncing between tables, barely balancing his little tray, though it was capable of holding only two appetizers or one entrée at a time; three tall drinks, now attempted, was right out. From his tantrum-impending demeanour and shit-pungent odour, Sinika, as an officer of the court, was technically obliged to report this

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infraction to the authorities; he had had neither a break nor a change for far too long. *Forget about this being criminal; it's pathetic, just like everyone and all things: in decline? No. We are doomed: this city, this world, all, doomed.* Searching for the waiter's octoworker, Sinika scanned the room and verified her brooding thesis.

There was an old woman who, sitting in a corner booth close to the Wash-and-Change rooms, was patiently waiting for her husband, who was completely derelict in his diaper-changing duties, to end his shift and get paid (in cash) so that they may be fed tonight and maybe tomorrow. *So, where is he?*

Positioned to keep an eye on the door, a tall man was casually leaning against the bar, using a newspaper to obscure his grey-bearded face further. Sinika, having noticed him noticing her when she came in, now read him as suspect. His newspaper's headline read: "UASA LOWERS DRAFT TO 624! For Canucks, it's back to saying Twelve-Year-Old..."

Sinika wondered how the protesting mobs in the European Community were going to respond to this news—likewise, how those in other national groupings throughout the world, too poor to have or morally opposed to having SMARTED children, were going to react to this. *What will Jonathan Reichman have to say on this?*

The tall man lowered his paper, as a woman who almost could have been Estelle's twin entered. Though she was half his age, they greeted as colleagues. She handed him a thick manuscript. Laughing, as they began discussing it, they periodically turned toward Sinika as if she had something to do with it. This feeling of being observed, of being the passive object of critical discussion, unsettled her, but she dismissed her hypervigilance as narcissism. *They don't know me, nor I them.*

To see over her mother's left shoulder, Sinika shifted in her chair. She spotted an intern from her work; he was knoodling with his wife at a candle-

lit, corner table. They seemed content, swimming in each other's eyes, breaking their loving gaze only when he took sips of his cheap, light, Yankee beer or she from her expensive SMARTED-boosting drink.

Inferring that they must be celebrating their Eve of SMinjection, Sinika noted the young woman's tummy, the small protrusion both concealed and revealed by a tight-fitting sports skin. *Now you display your deepest love and commitment; wait four-and-a-half more months, then see.* She wagered on their sentiment changing if non-smarted offspring were born and nine months of dreaming of an economically stress-free life was followed by a nineteen-year nightmare of financial burden.

As she righted herself in her chair and faced her babbling mother, Sinika's annoyance intensified. *Even if they have one, there's no guarantee they'll stay married forever; the current divorce rates are 86% on the first marriage, 75% on the second, and still 57% by the third, regardless of the economic stability produced by the addition of a SMARTED kid. And the chance of having one is only one in ten, maybe a few percentage points higher these days. I used to think Mom and Dad would have forever firmly remained in that fourteen percent...*

The negative projections she was thrusting upon the young couple, the tall man and his pretty companion, and the old woman were creating cognitive dissonance within Sinika, making her feel uncomfortable within her skin. In her chair, she frenetically twisted around, trying to locate the waiter's octoworker. *Where is this guy?*

"Stop fidgeting," Estelle commanded, as any mother of a restless child does, regardless of either's age; "that's just for babies," she denoted, the lilt in her voice fading away from disappointment and falling into jealousy.

Sinika was unable to tell if Estelle was longing to be a baby again or if she was wishing this of her. *Leave it; drink my drink; stay calm—.* *No! What is her problem? How old does she think I am? How old does she think she is? Fuck her!*

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“Yes, Mother, you’re right,” Sinika gurgled through her straw as she drained her drink; “and I am most certainly no longer a baby,” she added, sucking up the remnants of her pink milk, her first of the day, and these words the only ones spoken to Estelle, other than hello, since she had sat down.

“Excellent! So, you’ve decided to join the conversation. Now, what would my brightest, my youngest, my dearest, like to talk about, eh?”

Looking lovingly into her daughter’s eyes, Estelle reached across the table and gingerly made contact with her daughter’s forearm; Sinika cringed as though she had just been sneezed upon.

“MY brightest, MY youngest—what happened to OUR, Mother? You know, OUR brightest, OUR youngest. OUR, Mother, OUR means—”

“The hour is when the little hand is on the number and the big hand is pointing straight up. Or is it the other way around? Which is it, Sinika? You must be able to tell me—what with all the time you lawyers bill.”

“Stop it, Mother; just stop it!” Sinika stood, breaking away from Estelle’s clutch and then wiping her hand against her skirt. “Do you really want to talk, get caught up? Okay. First: I don’t know where you heard the rumour that a partnership at ELP is being offered, but it’s just that, a rumour, so I can’t say when there will be more money coming in. Second: just because your therapist’s authority supersedes mine, don’t think that I won’t have an appeal through the courts by the end of tomorrow; so you can tell my sisters that I love them both very much, but they should not expect me for Sunday FAMILY Dinner anytime soon. Third: as of next week—so, mark it on your calendar, September twenty-eighth—we have to start using the term twelve-year-old, not 624, because the Yanks are adamant about not sending their children to war, and we surely don’t want to upset them now, do we? However, when otherwise referring to children please

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don't use years, use weeks. If you don't, you're not just being insulting, but technically, you're breaking the law. And fourth: —."

With no intention of creating dramatic effect, Sinika hesitated, giving herself time to muster enough strength to say exactly what she felt her mother needed to hear.

"Oh dear, look at that. Your shoelace is undone," Estelle said, pointing to the floor. "You want me to tie it for you?" she asked, not only for the sake of the comedic opportunity presented, but also for deflection, fearing her daughter may say what she herself already knew.

Sinika was empowered by her mother's obviousness.

"And fourth, Mother," she said, resolved not to look at her shoes, "you are aware that you alluded to Dad only once at the beginning of this conversation. You really want to talk? Well then, let's talk about the separation; how is all that going for you, eh? Talked with Daddy lately? — Well?"

For what seemed, to Sinika, to be the two-hundredth time this past year, tears pooled in her mother's eyes. Estelle, parting her lips, let out a little sigh but then turned her head away. Sinika, too, turned away, ashamed for having crossed the boundary between familial familiarity and inter-generational impropriety, and doing so in such a childish and spiteful way.

"Mother—Mom—I didn't mean to say—. I mean, Dr. Mann asked me to—. Well, I am just saying, we can meet—but not when you are so—."

Struggling to intersect her emotion with her intent, Sinika closed the angle that had formed between them, and Estelle, too, turned back, but both of them ended up looking into the void between the corner of the table and the floor beneath it.

"Sinika, if you want me to talk about the—separation—" Estelle quietly offered, barely breaking the silence, "—about why I am no longer with your

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father—that is, if you think you are ready to know—then I—I must tell you—that he—well, he—”

“WILL ANYONE WITH ANY CONCERN FOR THINGS DECENT, PLEASE, CHANGE ME?” the little waiter pleaded, dropping his tray and then his ass, along with its packaged contents, to the floor; he cried just as hard and loud now as when he had flunked out of the SMprogram after only one hundred and forty-two weeks.

Lil’ Timmy emerged from the sweltering confines of his kitchen, his one hundred and twenty kilogram presence dominant over all others in the front room, and with a thunderous bellow he requested order in his house, which made the little waiter, who was lying on his back with his feet in the air, cry only louder. The young couple, the tall man and his colleague, and most of the other patrons simultaneously motioned for their bills, and Timmy became frazzled, trying to attend to everyone at once.

Despite exemplifying her previous conjecture, the whole scene made Sinika, so closely associated with it, feel weak, small, immature—and pathetic.

“I’m sorry. Meeting here was a mistake, and I—I think I should just go. Goodbye, Mother.”

Sinika snatched her briefcase and shiny, yellow raincoat, threw down a hundred dollars worth of plastic coins on the table, and walked toward the exit as fast as her 495-week-old legs could carry her, fighting to keep her composure.

“Don’t leave like this,” Estelle begged, then warned, “you shouldn’t, you can’t, be out by yourself. It’s past curfew.” Sinika kept moving. “We can share a cab! We’re going the same way! Baby, please!”

“I can walk, Mother,” Sinika yelled, stopping and turning at the exit. “You of all people should know! Was it not you who taught me to do so—when I WAS a baby?”

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She threw her body against the door and fell out of the bistro and onto the street.

As the door slowly shut, Estelle straightened herself, both in her chair and in her demeanour, preparing to beg pardon from those who had just witnessed the latest Reichman family spectacle; however, everyone still present was dolefully attending the previously offered floorshow.

After demanding to know where his waiter's octoworker was, Timmy had changed his tune, his escalating fury diffusing to apologetic consolation when the ancient woman explained to him the reason behind the absence of her recently departed husband. Timmy was now cradling the distraught widow under his burly right arm—the old woman supporting the sobbing waiter under her spindly right wing—and the three disappeared into one of the WCs.

Turning back toward the door, through its glass, Estelle watched as her daughter ran away from her; Sinika, heading toward the lake, faded in and out of sight half a dozen times, passing through spotlights the streetlamps formed on the sidewalk and the spaces of almost complete darkness in between; she rounded a corner, completely vanishing.

Estelle lowered her head and cried for what was more than the two-hundredth time this past year.