UGLY BABY
Nell Schwed

I can always tell my period is coming on: a low ache in the pit of my abdomen, a strange tautness that I imagine is one lone egg’s roll through my tubes, a soft tenderness in my left breast. I felt all these familiar aches and ticks and I pulled down my underwear just to check. Sometimes that’s the beauty of being home alone: the ability to pull down your pants to see if everything’s cool, or if you need to get a tampon. So I went to the bathroom and got a tampon and I sat there a moment and thought, If I were a different kind of woman I would be crying now.

I went back to the kitchen table because I liked to watch people on the sidewalk as they walked to the subway or with their kids to school and I liked knowing that I didn’t have to be them. I didn’t ever have to be like that.

When we moved in together I told my boyfriend Eli about my five-year theory for marriage and he said, You don’t already think it’s on the table? We have to talk about it? And I said, I wasn’t sure what was on or off the table, kind of like Schrödinger’s cat. You don’t know whether or not the cat is alive or dead. And he said, I can’t believe you’d compare us to a dead cat. But he didn’t seem to get it, because the cat can be both, in fact is both.

I don’t remember our first fight, but maybe I broke something, or maybe I left something behind at his old place, which wouldn’t be completely unexpected because as I helped him carry his things out to the van I kept trying to leave stuff on the sidewalk. No, someone else will need this more, I told him, why do you have this bean bag chair or Third Eye Blind poster or old copies of Consumer Reports?
Will you really miss these things when they’re gone? But the fight happened around the bed. Putting it back together. I always thought it was the trip to IKEA that really tested couples—it turns out it’s putting your bed together and one of the screws is stripped and you were never really a metal shop kind of girl, or home repair kind of girl, so you thought of something dirty when he said, the screw’s stripped, and when you laughed he started yelling.

I found a list on the internet called “Forty-Five Things Every Grown Woman Should Know,” and I wanted to know if I was a grown woman or not, so I skimmed through it: how to eat alone; how to say no; how to take a compliment. And then I looked for similar lists for men and what they’re supposed to know if they’re grown and there was just the one and at the top it said how to treat a snake bite. I didn’t know what that was supposed to mean for gender equality.

I’ve never been able to eat alone and I’ve never even seen a snake outside of zoos.

I was in this writing class once with a real misogynist. All he’d write about was his not so cleverly disguised ex-girlfriend and her possum pussy and he’d say it was satire. Our teacher would ask, so what’s this satirizing? He would only talk about how hard it was to write female characters. Once after workshop some of the other guys in the class were talking with me, telling me what a douche that guy was and they didn’t know how to shut him down. One said, Is there room in class for my anger? You know I don’t want to take up space or anything. I’m a feminist.

And then his friend was like, you know that douche is the worst. I’m a feminist too, out here supporting women, especially women writers, and I think he’s such a cunt. Yeah, they both agreed, that guy is such a cunt. I made a sour face and one of them asked me if I was all right.

Sure, I said, it’s just my cunt acting up.
Eli told me I need to work on my anger issues, so I meditate every day. I use these guided meditation podcasts—running water sounds or whale sounds or chirping bird sounds. All it really does is make me need to pee, even the chirping. And the one from this morning directed me to think of something or someone you love. Think about how it feels when you see your love and what words you would use to describe your love and now think about losing that love and how you’d feel and what words you would use to describe that loss. My mind went to Eli, because I do love him, but when I thought about how I’d feel without him, my immediate thought was that I would rather have him be dead than us broken up. But I swallowed that down because I didn’t want to be that crazy chick that men always seem to be complaining about. I didn’t stop to think about the women complaining about the crazy men in their lives because those women are probably dead.

I read once that a woman in public will always be an invitation.

I was walking home from work the other week and there was this man outside a wireless store hollering at passersby. Lady in the purple shirt, he said, come through! Miss with the tight skirt come through! You, he said gesturing towards me, You with the face looking like she about to smack somebody, have you heard of Boost Mobile? Come through! And I felt so complimented that I beamed a real big grin and thanked him. Later, I touched my face in the bathroom mirror—stretched back my cheeks, my eyelids, pulled my bottom lip to my chin—trying to find that angry face. I had never realized that I left the house with armor on, that I walked around the city so irritated.

One weekend in the new apartment we both decided we hated the carpeting. It was red and frayed and we were sure the people before us had
never heard of a steam cleaner, so we asked the landlord if we could rip it up. We were lucky with this landlord, because she was cool and I caught her smoking pot in the basement so I thought she thought she owed us one. We moved the furniture out of the living room, put the couch in front of the fridge because it made for easier eating. Look at this, I said, all I have to do is grab a plate and just shovel it in. And that made Eli laugh and I loved when he really let himself go. He reminded me of Julia Roberts and I was Richard Gere shutting her hands in a jewelry box. We dragged our furniture out of the living room and then started researching how exactly one removes carpeting. It turned out to be pretty easy. Except, Eli said, be wary of the bulk. The bulk, I said. Yeah, like when we roll the carpet up it’s going to get bulky and heavy and I know you don’t like to lift things. And I pinched the cup of his shoulder a little, gently, like a dog’s nipping bite to let him know, yeah, all right, I don’t like to lift things. And then I went to get beers from the fridge and he went to get pliers from the toolbox. He started cutting around the carpet and I lay in the middle of the room, stretching out like a snow angel, and trying very hard to angle the beer into my mouth so I didn’t spill anything on my shirt or dribble down my face. Eli was crawling around me and I noticed the heels of his socks were worn through so I could see the pink of his skin and I wanted very badly in that moment to sneak up behind him and tickle his feet.

You look like that wallpaper woman, I said, following him with my eyes.

What wallpaper woman?

You know—that woman from the story. Her husband locks her up because she’s all hysterical after having a baby and she’s obsessed with the wallpaper and in the end she’s crawling over his body.

So I’m hysterical, he said, and this carpet is my wallpaper.

Yes, I said, exactly. He wasn’t drinking his beer so I popped the top. Are you going to help, or are you going to just lie there drinking?

I’m commentating, I said. I’m letting you know that you’re doing everything right. He kept clipping with the pliers so I rolled over onto my belly. I wanted to ask him if he had ever thought about being a baby.
and lying on your stomach, what I hear mothers call “tummy time,” and if this is all you can see of the world how that shapes how you feel about it. Instead I started crawling behind him. I slipped my arms around his shoulders, nuzzled my chin into his neck, and breathed in. He stopped clipping. I started kissing him, trailing my tongue, lingering in the soft places, trying to catch his mouth. He seemed on the edge of being turned on, like he might want to pause this DIY-venture of making our apartment nicer to get naked, but I could feel his hesitation.

Right now, he said, right now is when you want it.

Wouldn’t it be such a shame, I said, if we never christened this carpet?

It’s disgusting, he said.

I slipped my hand under his shirt. I liked to play this game with him where I pretended I was a straight boy playing with breasts and I do the same things that they’ve done to me. I know I’ve won when he starts kissing back and drops the pliers. That was one of our good nights, fucking on half-ripped up red carpeting in our new place with the windows open and neither of us caring. We took weeks to get the carpet out because I liked looking at it and I was getting used to sitting in front of the fridge for every meal. But then he said that there was something better underneath and wouldn’t it be nicer to find out exactly what that better is. I thought that was a pretty philosophical thing to say about carpeting, but I let him have it. Now when I look in that room, even with the nice parquet floors, I miss the stark redness and the lingering stench of two naked bodies tangled and stretched on its threads.

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I went to lunch with two friends and I was the first one at the diner so I had a whole booth to myself while I waited. We had chosen this place for the free refills and the coffee-flavored ice cubes. I ordered an iced coffee and watched out the window for my friends. Time always seems to move much slower when you’re waiting for someone so I
tried to move slower and think slower and not look at my phone in that way you see people doing when they’re alone. I was trying to be that grown woman who could eat alone and I wondered what the other people in the diner thought of me, which was probably nothing at all, because as my mother used to tell me, no one is looking at you. Hey, my friend Margot said, I hope you weren’t waiting long. And then my friend Rebecca said, sorry we got caught up on the subway and then we ran into Rebecca Mann. You remember her—from that semester of all the Rebeccas? She’s doing great, I mean, she’s married and has this awesome job and a place in the Heights, but she just would not stop talking about her spinning routine, she looks great though—super toned legs, God. And Rebecca sort of rolled her eyes a little and I wondered why we were always thinking about women’s bodies and critiquing them and if there was ever any respite from that little voice inside your head.

And then we forgot about Rebecca Mann and started talking about how Margot and her ex-boyfriend were sleeping together again and how she thought it was possible to go from a relationship with a big R to one with a little r. There’s a difference, she said. And I couldn’t stop thinking about two Rs, one little one big, and them bumping into each other and getting into all sorts of hijinks and how that sounded like a bootleg Sesame Street episode. Then she pulled out her phone and asked if we wanted to see her sexts.

Yes, I said, sticking out my hand.

So Rebecca and I crowded around Margot’s phone, eyes greedily taking in her wild sexual fantasies: milkmaids and pirates and naughty schoolgirls—really derivative things, I thought, like isn’t there anything new?

I know it’s kind of shocking, Margot said. She was beaming a little, kind of pink in the face, like she was finally being her true self and wasn’t it so bad? Like, wasn’t she such a bad grown woman?

I shrugged and Rebecca shrugged too. It was hard to think about anything else after that, but I told them my mother had started asking about my eggs.

They both looked at me like, when did you start taking care of
chickens?

And I had to explain, no, not eggs but ovaries, and my mother wanted to know if I was going to be using those anytime soon or if I’d like some money to freeze them.

Do you want to freeze them? Margot asked. She looked a little bummed that we had moved on from her wild fantastical sex life.

I’m scared I’ll freeze the wrong ones, I said, like they’ll pick the duds and if I ever want to have children there’ll be this whole thing around unfreezing them and what if since you’ve taken them out of your body they feel unloved and they grow into sociopaths?

That would be such an interesting study, Rebecca said, pursing her lips. Like, at what point are we going to see the consequences of formerly frozen fetuses and you know, more natural, (she said “natural” with air quotes) forms of getting pregnant. It’s this whole can of worms.

They both suggested I take the money but not freeze my eggs. Do something you really want with it, they said, but what I really wanted to know was whether or not I should freeze my eggs.

Do you think we’d have an ugly baby, I asked. We were lying in bed together and Eli had nodded off—I could tell because his legs always started kicking when he slipped into dreamsleep—and I waited for him to respond. One thing I loved about him was what a light sleeper he was. I sleep like the dead, so I’m impossible to wake. It’s one of my best traits, I think. I wish I could put that on my resume, under the specialized skills section. This woman knows how to sleep, the interviewer might say, she can sleep anywhere at any time and wakes up completely refreshed.

He mumbled something as he rolled over and kicked his feet again but I couldn’t parse it exactly. What, I said, what are you saying about our potential offspring?

Why are you thinking about this now, he asked and patted my head. I imagined he was thinking, How did this woman get into my...
bed? Do you think, I said again, that we would have an ugly baby? He was awake now, turning over to look at me through squinted eyes. I called this move of his giving me the side-eye.

This reminds me of the time you bullied me into telling you what real woman I thought was attractive, he said.

I stared up at the ceiling. You know those websites where you can add two people’s pictures and it’ll show you what their child might look like?

Yes, the truest science, he said.

Well, ours looked like a nightmare. He looked like someone had punched him every day of his life, I said. I aged him and he looked worse every decade.

Let’s make an ugly baby, he said, rolling on top of me. Let’s make one right now. He started kissing my neck and he smelled like sleep and that peppermint soap he said he had stopped using because it made his balls tingle, but I knew he kept using it because it made him feel, in his words, fresh all over.

I printed a copy of our ugly child the next morning and I tacked him to the fridge. He hung there, sullen-faced and brooding, caught in the terrible timeline of his JPEG-life, until it became too much of a sick joke and Eli told me to take it down because it was frightening.

Maybe he’ll grow on us, I said. So our ugly baby stayed on the fridge, slowly papered over with wedding invitations and birth announcements and save-the-dates for shower after shower after shower. I couldn’t see him, but I always knew he was there, lurking below the surface, like that painful cystic acne I still get and know that some day it might erupt on the end of my chin or crest of my forehead and ruin my life.

We were sitting on the couch one night—no longer in front of the fridge, but back in its place in the living room—and Eli was darning his underwear, because that is the kind of man he is, while he interrogated me about our nonexistent children. I didn’t say I didn’t want them, I tried to clarify, I said I don’t know.

Not knowing is essentially the same as not wanting them.
You’re only sure because you don’t have to do it.

What do you mean I don’t have to do it? I have to do it. His fingers slipped and the needle pierced his thumb—Ah, he said, flicking his wrist, goddamn it.

What part of it do you have to do? Please, enlighten me as to what part of the process you do.

I mean you can’t make a baby without me—humans haven’t mastered asexual reproduction, at least not yet. He stared at his thumb for traces of blood, then stuck it in his mouth anyway.

You basically squirt and fall asleep for nine months. Let’s watch some videos, you’ll see how fun the birthing process is. You know women shit on the table, right? And sometimes you tear so badly they have to sew your vagina and your asshole back together. It’s never the same down there, I said, my voice going husky.

Come here, Eli said. He set his darned underwear down and pulled me onto his lap. He hadn’t shaved in a week and his beard scratched my neck. I shrieked, squirming across his legs. How do you know it’s not loose now?

Fuck you, I said. I keep it tight. He wiggled his fingers down my stomach, snapped the elastics of my sweatpants, of my underwear, rough and searching. Hey, I said, where you going with those?

He rubbed his face harder against my neck, left me with a burn I’d see for two days after, the faint shadow of red against my skin. Don’t, I said, I’m not in the mood. He ignored me. Touched my vagina. Hey, I said, I mean it. It was like my voice was someone else’s—coming out of the deepest part of my belly, loud and vibrating. He jerked his hand away like I’d scalded him. I said don’t, I said, and you touched me anyway.

Calm down, he said, it was just a joke.

I got up from the couch and I stood there a moment and I tried really hard not to start crying because I am always doing that awful thing where really you are so angry that you start crying and you can’t get the words out anymore. And the other person thinks they have one on you because you’ve completely collapsed into hysteria. But really it’s too hard to get the words out of your mouth and into someone else’s
head. For me the only antidote is slamming a door. So I went to our bedroom and I slammed the door, slammed it slammed it slammed it slammed it. I just kept slamming the door open and closed, open and closed. You don’t listen to me, I told him later, you’re not hearing me.

I went to the doctor for my yearly physical and she asked when I had last seen a gynecologist.

I don’t know, I said, I can’t even remember my last period.

My doctor shook her head and said, Make an appointment. I like my doctor—she’s a bit older than I am, in her mid-thirties and she doesn’t have her driver’s license either. We joked about this at our first appointment—How do you know you’re a real New Yorker, I asked her. You have to ask which one’s the gas. Anyway, she was really maternal so when she said to get a check-up I listened. It made me worried that maybe I was pregnant and I hadn’t been making such good choices, as my mother would say, the past few months, so it’d be good to know and then decide what to do about it. It’s not like Eli and I used the rhythm method, played womb-roulette, but condoms and the occasional pull-out weren’t exactly foolproof. I patted my belly and pretended the whole way home that there was a baby in there, an ugly baby, our ugly baby, and I creeped down the sidewalk and didn’t step on a single crack. When I got home I watched hours of YouTube videos of how mothers had told their partners about their pregnancies: buns in ovens, pee tests wrapped in red bows, Number One Dad mugs, Number One Mom shirts, pink and blue balloons. I watched home births and water births and thought about asking our landlord for a bathroom remodel. I also Googled the closest abortion clinic to our apartment and the expected cost based on how pregnant I might be. I wasn’t a Girl Scout, but I like to be prepared.

Methods used to predict a pregnancy: peeing on bags of wheat or barley, drinking honey and water to distend a stomach, an onion in the
vagina, peeing on a key, piss prophets, mice, frogs, rabbits, blood tests, good old Clearblue or First Response. Methods used to induce abortion: drinking lye, swallowing acid, douching with chili peppers, coat hangers, blowing air into the uterus, squatting over a pot of boiling onions, pulling out a tooth, binding the waist, kneading the abdomen, beating the stomach with a baseball bat, spending the night in the snow, applying electric shocks to the thighs and groin, jumping off the roof.

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I want to disengage from my biology. I want to divorce my womb from the moon and the tides and whatever other bullshit they say commands a body. I think about the Greeks and their roving uteruses and imagine that that doesn’t seem so bad, or so far off from what it feels like. Aretaeus called it a wandering womb, an animal within an animal, roaming across the body’s planes, a female fluid seeking other like fluids. I touched my thighs, my hips, each breast, the base of my throat, and swore I could feel its beastly pulse. Sometimes I imagine what a biological clock might look like. I’m not any kind of artist, but I think it’s probably pink and tubular and vaguely, if not overtly, reminiscent of fallopian tubes, like those terrible balloon animals clowns are always passing out. Also, there’s certainly a sad face once it gets to a high number, but I think that goes without saying.

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I kept the appointment with the gynecologist, but I called them beforehand. I want my tubes tied, I said. I want you to knot them up. And the woman on the phone said, You better come in and talk to the doctor about that. You sound young, Miss, you might change your mind. You’ll find a nice man someday and want to start a family. Why don’t you come in and talk about it with the doctor. We’ll get you fixed up. Which I thought was a funny way to end the call because she wasn’t going to fix me up, in fact she was actively trying to get me to reconsider.
You’re still young, the doctor said. That clock isn’t quite ticking till you’re thirty-five.

But I’m here to stop it, I said, I’m here to get rid of it. Why can’t you just snip my tubes or make knots or cut it all out of me and fix me up real good?

You’ll change your mind, the doctor said, they always do.

I fumed on the papery white sheet, legs spread, defiantly I thought. Give me the next best thing, I said.

I told Margot about the IUD and she asked how bad it felt going in. I said it felt like someone scratching the underside of my belly button and she said, Fuck that sounds awful. But what I should have said was, Sure, maybe, but now I’m like a man. I don’t ever have to think about getting pregnant.

The first time we had sex after that, Eli claimed he could feel the strings and that it hurt. You’re like that girl with teeth in her vagina, he said.

It’s like you have a hymen now too, I said. And I remembered this gym teacher I had from high school, one who coached basketball and also taught health, and how he let us submit anonymous questions when we reached the sex unit and mine was: Does the first time really hurt? And this man, halfway bald and red-faced, said, How should I know? It was great for me.

Our last night together we cooked steak and fried onions. I made a spinach salad because I knew Eli would ask me to anyway, though I always put too much mustard in the vinaigrette. I’m not the kind of person who puts ketchup on their steak—a sign of psychopathy, I think—but I like hot sauce. Eli preferred A1.

It’s too rare, Eli said, cutting into his meat. He grew up on well-done steaks, hunks so blackened they were indistinguishable from charcoal.
It’s fine, I said, it’s perfectly done. That’s how you want it.

It’s not how I take it, Eli said. He cut off another piece, squinted at it, then put it back on his plate. Mine needs more time, he said. He went back to the stove, cooked his steak until it was gray, all gristle and weeping. I watched him and sat there at the table eating. I kept pouring more hot sauce on my plate, taking smaller and smaller bites until I was mostly just spooning hot sauce into my mouth, waiting until it was so hot and burning that my head would go all sweaty, tongue stinging, and then that would be the only thing I’d feel, that aching, almost pleasurable pain.’

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He left me the bed, which still wobbled when I tossed around in it. He left me our ugly baby printout, but he took the invite to Susie Sussman’s baby shower. He left me three cans of that special beer we had picked up in Maine that one weekend. We had visited his father and gone fishing and I had gotten the tackle stuck in my thumb. I remember it only because Eli had been so quick to stick my bleeding finger in his mouth and I couldn’t decide if I was completely repelled or slightly turned on. But he took the couch—heaved it out of the apartment with a friend, maybe two, and when I came home I could see the scratches in the floor from where they had dragged it, where they’d given up, the couch too heavy to hold for so long.