

"...characters I can relate to, who make me laugh out loud and hungry for dinner!"
MARY ALICE, co-star of Food Network's *Ace of Cakes*

life *from* scratch

a novel



Melissa Ford

Life From Scratch

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Dedication

To Grandma Sally,
my love is your commission



Life from Scratch

blogging about life one scrambled egg at a time

June Cleaver beat the crap out of me with her rolling pin.

In my dream, Martha Stewart, June Cleaver, Bree Van De Kamp, and Marion Cunningham (who they were all affectionately calling “Mrs. C”) were baking a pie together in my kitchen and arguing about the best way to pit cherries. They hadn't really noticed me lounging around by the sink until I pointed out what a waste of time it would be to pit your own cherries when there were perfectly decent ones that you could get in a can when June Cleaver turned with a maniacal gleam in her eye and started beating me on the face and shoulders with her flour-dusted rolling pin.

Just imagine what she would have done to me if I had suggested frozen pie crust.

Which brings us to my latest self-improvement project. I fear that you will all cease to believe me, that I've become like the girl who cries post-divorce-finding-myself project, but this one is for real lest I become a spinsterish, batty cat-woman without the cats that I've been fearing that I'm morphing into all year.

Unlike that stint with transcendental meditation (it wasn't my fault I couldn't concentrate. Could *you* meditate in a room while smelling the most divine marinara sauce wafting in through the air vents from the restaurant below?) or the time I mused about life as a zumba instructor or considered becoming a femivore and moving to a farm in Upstate New York so I could raise my own chickens, I'm really going to do this for longer than the typical three minutes I've dedicated to past life-improvement projects:

Rachel Goldman is going to learn how to cook.

This is the point where I publicly admit that I don't really have a lot of skills in the kitchen. What I really mean is that I don't have *any* skills in the kitchen. I can make ramen noodles like a pro, but I've never really followed a recipe (which is what happens when you don't own any cookbooks). I'm more of a jarred sauce kind of girl. I consider toasting the English muffin on a pan with making my own bread.

Before the divorce, we ate out almost every night or brought in take-out. If they offered a degree in Carryout Curry, I would have a PhD. Unfortunately, even if I am now only ordering food once a week, I quickly learned after we separated that while Hunan Chow is affordable on a lawyer-and-graphic-designer's joint salary, it's prohibitively expensive for a living-off-the-money-I-go-from-my-half-of-the-condo-while-I-find-myself budget.

So, I am going to learn how to fry an egg without breaking the yolk. And do more than boil noodles. I might even . . . gasp . . . make my own Pad Thai. And this, my friends, is how I'

finally going to find myself during my Year of Me. I can't believe I frittered away weeks of my ~~life sabbatical on ideas such as becoming a pet sitter (yes, it turns out that you have to like dogs~~ in order to walk dogs.) You live and you learn.

Okay, enough whining, it's time to get cooking. I have armed myself with cookbooks from the library, a healthy stock of wine, and my best friend, Arianna, to be my co-taster. Please stick around; I need you guys.

Chapter One

I am waiting at the bar, my soaked umbrella tucked under my seat, at a trendy sushi restaurant in Soho. It's the sort of place I used to go with my ex-husband, Adam. It's now, apparently, the place to go for the first-date-of-the-rest-of-my-life.

My stomach is in knots as I watch the door. I have vague recollections of what Rob Zuckerman looks like because he's the only man who asked for my number at the end of the local synagogue sponsored Schmooze and Booze at a Manhattan bar. In fact, he's the only man who really talked to me at all that night when I showed up fashionably late thinking that a Schmooze and Booze is like a dinner party—you look a little desperate for company if you're the first person through the door. Turns out that the early birds catch the strapping doctors and the later birds catch the worms.

But it's been that long since I've had a first date.

I sip a glass of wine, trying to keep my hope and anxiety in check. Two years of dating followed by twelve years of marriage and nine months of post-divorce wound licking means that it has been a long time since I've had to shave my legs pre-date for maximum smoothness (only up to the knee—I made a conscious decision not to shave any higher until the third date.) A long time since I've had to worry about who is going to pay or whether I have lipstick on my teeth or if my life sounds exciting enough.

I wasn't even sure if I was ready for this, but my best-friend, Arianna, gave me no choice once my life-improvement cooking project started trucking along. I called her to tell her that I had made my own pancakes, and she dropped a Freudian hint that it might be a good time to work on getting myself a man-cake. Arianna is chronically single-by-choice, insisting that she is the dating type and not the marrying type. But I, she has decided, am the marrying type who needs to move away from calling myself post-divorce and start thinking of myself as pre-marriage.

I don't really have a good reason for not going on a first date up until this point. The fact is that when you've been with one man for all of your twenties and half of your thirties, it is difficult to switch gears and start thinking about a different person's body or the smell of their aftershave or whether they like the toilet paper roll facing the wall or facing away. Which, of course, is getting ten miles ahead of myself since it's only a first date. But still.

It takes Rob Zuckerman a few seconds to notice me at the bar when he pauses at the hostess stand in the rain dripping off his expensive Burberry coat. I could do worse, I decide optimistically, for my first date-of-the-rest-of-my-life. Rob still has a full head of brown hair, an anomaly in the over-thirty-five and-unmarried crowd. He is tall and athletically built. He has good taste in clothing and even better taste in restaurants.

And to be fair, he could do worse than me. At thirty-four, I'm still carded at liquor stores, which I like to think means that I still look young and vibrant. I'm wearing my brown hair longer these days, almost to my shoulders, and my stomach is still mostly flat despite my newfound love of butter. I might not be the most striking woman in the room, but I tan well in the summer.

"Rachel!" he exclaims, finally noticing me. He comes over to my seat and we do a self-conscious dance where I don't know whether to continue sitting or stand, and he doesn't know whether to give me a kiss on the cheek or shake my hand. We compromise with an awkward half-hug with him standing and me sitting so that my head presses into his Burberry coat belt.

I collect my drink, and we follow the hostess to a seat near the window. The rain is coming down harder now, splattering the glass so it's impossible to see anything more than taxi headlights and glowing storefront signs. I play with the corner of my menu cover. With Adam, we skipped talking

until we had both had a chance to glance through the options, but Rob doesn't even crack the cover before launching into a series of get-to-know-you questions, the sort I had been rehearsing answers inside my mind all afternoon while I worked out my nervous energy by learning how to julienne carrots.

"So, Rachel," he begins, "it was so loud at the bar the other night, I missed hearing if you were actually from New York."

"I'm not," I answer, "I'm from New Jersey. But I sort of knew that I wanted to end up here after graduate school."

"Oh, where did you go to graduate school?"

"Yale," I say, hoping that this doesn't sound pretentious. "School of art for graphic design."

"That's sort of cool. So you're like an artist?"

"Like an artist," I repeat.

"I'm from here. My family still lives off Riverside Drive."

I try not to let my scorching case of real estate envy flare up. Nine months in a one-room apartment will do that to you.

"So how did you end up in New York?"

This was the question I was sort of dreading. I mean, I could lie and make it about my parents—both incredibly successful and respected lawyers—living in northern New Jersey and say they wanted me to be close to home like my siblings. My sister, Sarah, is a brain surgeon, married and living in Brooklyn with her husband, Richard, and daughter, Penelope. My brother, who could be seen by outsiders as the black sheep of the family because he never holds down a job longer than a few months, has taken his multitude of talents over the bridge as well and lives close to Park Slope. But honestly, my first impulse would have been to move as far away as possible. It's hard to be surrounded by that much greatness. It makes you allergic to failure. Sans epi-pen.

The reality is that I ended up in New York due to my ex-husband and his job. And maybe getting this fact out in the open is the best way to deal with the big "D." I wish he was staring down at the sashimi menu rather than inquisitively studying my face and cleavage.

"My ex-husband. He got a job here so we moved here after Connecticut."

"So you've been married before? Wow ... divorce ... how did that happen?"

I'm not really itching to share my whole marriage saga with the first-date-of-the-rest-of-my-life, especially not the part where I talk about how he was so in love with his career that he essentially was having an affair with his blackberry. My ex-husband, Adam, trying to make partner, spent more time at the office than he did at home, choosing contracts over contact; the job over me. Over time, it became clear that we had differing views on money, despite what he led me to believe before we walked down the aisle. I wanted to be comfortable. Adam, who came from a wealthy New York family, worked to not only keep up with the Joneses, but to pass them in owning all the good electronic toys and going on the most exclusive vacations. You could say that we had a lack of shared goals.

I glance at the laminated picture of sushi standing upright on the table, teaching customers the visual difference between the toro and maguro tuna rolls.

"Oh, you know," I shrug, "50% of the population gets it wrong the first time."

"Huh ... 50%. I didn't realize the number was that high."

"I think it's over 50%, actually," I say. "But luckily seventh marriages go the distance about 90% of the time."

"Those are good odds for the married-seven-times set. I wonder how polygamy rolls into that

statistic. I mean, if your seventh marriage is at the same time as your other six," he points out.

"I'm guessing you were never married before?" I ask.

"Nope, I love a good first date, but I've never met the right person."

I plaster a smile back on my face and take a deep breath. I wonder if it's time yet to take a break from the small talk and see what sort of maki constitutes hip in Soho. It has been so long since I've eaten at a restaurant. But Rob Zuckerman has more questions and apparently, a non-grumbling stomach.

"Where do you live in the city? Wait, you're in the city, right? Not over the bridge or anything," he jokes.

"I'm in Murray Hill."

"Do you have any roommates?" Rob asks.

"Actually, it's a studio. It's small, but it's a great neighborhood, all things considered. I mean, I'm lucky I found it. And it's close to my best friend so I can walk to her place. Where are you?"

"GramercyPark," he tells me.

My old neighborhood, and still Adam's neighborhood. My ex-husband bought me out of my share of our condo which was how I was able to take off this year from my old job designing pamphlets for the New York City Library. My intention was to find another job, but that hasn't happened and savings are dwindling down, it seems more and more likely that I'll return to making materials to accompany exhibits. I'm lucky I had the year to sit in my sweatpants and try out every self-help suggestion Oprah passed my way.

"That's a great neighborhood," I offer.

"I'm on the board at my co-op. It is crazy how many people want to move into our building. I feel like my life is one long series of making rejection phone calls. Seriously, there are people applying who have kids. And pets!"

I smile wanly again, wondering if I would make the cut in his building. Job-less, unmarried me. At least Adam was too busy with work to ever make a baby with me. And I have my allergy to cats going for me.

"So, Rachel, what do you want to get?" he asks, even though we still haven't opened the menu.

I throw open the cover and quickly scan my choices. I am hungry for everything. I want to taste their teriyaki sauce and see how they've worked yuzu into a salad dressing and sample their tempura batter. I want to sit up at the sushi bar and chat with the chef about different fillets of raw fish. And I want to be on a date with a guy who wants to hear the chef's answers too. Still, Rob Zuckerman is nice, and he's obviously smart and successful, and he has a full head of brown hair (one cannot discount that full head of hair). So I close my menu and ask him to suggest a few things since he has obviously been here before.

"Why don't we start with a bowl of edamame and an order of tatsuta-age chicken?"

"I made that this week," I exclaim, excited that he'd pick that off the menu since I was eyeing it. "I'm learning how to cook and it's actually really easy. You just marinate the chicken and then coat in potato starch before you fry it." I notice that Rob is staring at me as if I've just started reciting the recipe in Japanese. "I can't believe I've ordered it all these years when I could make it at home."

"So, you like to cook?" he asks, quickly recovering from my blinding enthusiasm.

"I love to cook. I just started a few months ago, but it's amazing what you can pick up from cookbooks and few Food Network shows."

"How do you find the time?" Rob asks, motioning to a waitress that we're ready to order some appetizers. "I eat out most nights or order in. I think the only thing in my refrigerator right now is ketchup and a few bottles of water."

I try not to judge since that was my life as well only a year ago. While I miss my dog-eared copy of Zagats and hunting out new restaurants, I am intensely proud of my variations on a stir-fry and the salsa I make from scratch. I blame my lack of cooking knowledge on my mother who unhelpfully taught me that “real women don’t scramble eggs.”

Women, such as my mother, who bring in a comfortable six-figure salary with their husband might not need to scramble their own eggs, but cooking for myself became a necessity when I studied my credit card bills closely. My year-long vacation from life was going to be cut awfully short unless I quickly learned how to make my own marinara. There were only so many packages of ramen noodle soup a divorcee could eat.

Rob tells the waitress our appetizer order and I slip in a request for a green tea. We both watch her walk back towards the kitchen, and I pound my brain for a topic of conversation. I had come up with so many good ideas back in my apartment. I wish I could have written them on my hand.

“Actually, I don’t even know what you do. You’re an artist?” Rob asks.

“Not exactly,” I admit. If he didn’t run screaming from the admission that I was a divorcee perhaps he’d be equally as gracious about the fact that I’m currently job-less. “I used to work as a graphic designer for the New York Public Library, and I’ll probably return to that job, but I was taking the year to find myself. That sounds very self-helpy.”

“It actually sounds sort of nice. Like an extended vacation,” Rob admits.

I nod my head, feeling a bit more confident. I write in my blog every night which sort of makes me a writer, right? Saying you’re a writer is a very New York thing to say—sort of like how anyone living in Los Angeles can get away with calling themselves an actress, and no one calls their bluff. So I tell Rob that I’m also a writer and sure enough, he just gives a small smile and says, “Have I read anything you’ve written?”

And I merely deliver the next line every wanna-be New York writer feeds their first date: “Probably not. It’s just freelance stuff.”

The fact is that I read blogs long before I wrote a blog, and honestly, say what you want to about social media, but if it weren’t for blogs, I’d probably still be trapped in my marriage. There’s something about finding someone and saying, “me too” to give you the fuel to make a similar change.

I first discovered blogs when I started Googling, “divorce laws in New York City” (always a bad sign when your Google searches include lawyer names and mediation advice.)

I started with the divorce blogs and then worked my way backwards through the sex blogs and Internet-dating blogs until I found a woman who called herself The Dating Diva on a relationship blog titled, “Before You Put on the Little Black Dress.”

She offered all sorts of dating advice, analyzing the photographs of first-date outfits that readers sent her and telling women how to know when a guy is lying to them. I never commented or sent my own questions; I just sat in our apartment every night like a heartbroken voyeur, devouring the words of other women who felt equally unhappy in their relationships.

And then one night, she was answering a question about a boyfriend who never apologized at the end of an argument even though the girlfriend was always forthcoming in admitting to her own foibles.

The Dating Diva wrote:

You can’t change someone else, cookie. You can only change yourself or the way it affects you. And if you can’t honestly change the way it affects you because you’re going with your natural reaction to his lack of contrition, you need to get yourself out of that relationship. You’re never going to be happy with who he is as a person, and shoving a square peg into a round hole has never had the good

makings for stable furniture that will stand the test of time.

When I read her words and applied them to my life, I ended up sitting at the computer and sobbing knowing bone-deep what I had to do.

I closed the Dating Diva's blog and sat there for several hours until Adam got home, thinking about whether or not our relationship could be fixed. I couldn't change his behavior and make him leave his office in order to spend more time with me, and I couldn't get past my loneliness and anger. It was better for both of us, I decided, to go our separate ways than for me to spend the next twenty years seething through every empty evening and for him to resent me.

The cockroach incident came a week after reading the Dating Diva's advice, which was the end of the end.

And soon after that, I started my own blog a few weeks after moving into my new apartment, which one night where I signed up for a free blogging account and started posting tales of all the things I was doing to try to fill my new life. I talked about trying to mooch free yoga classes from nearby gyms and self-help books I checked out of the library.

Learning how to cook finally gave me something to write about, because I had been itching to find a direction for my blog. I didn't want to write solely about my divorce because frankly, I thought about it twenty-four hours a day and could use a little break from obsessing. I couldn't write about my job because I no longer had one. I had stopped going to museums and shows because ironically, I could no longer afford them even if I had all the time in the world to attend them so a blog about Manhattan itself was out too.

The name of my blog was already *Life from Scratch*, and food became a natural extension. It turned out that writing about food was the perfect jumping board to discussing the rest of my life to me. If nothing interesting was happening, I could talk about how I learned to roast potatoes (the trick: put the cubed potatoes in a bag; splash in the olive oil, salt, rosemary, and garlic powder; and then shake to coat each potato evenly.) But I could also write about the night my best friend Arianna gave birth to her baby, Beckett, or muse about the idea of coloring my hair, and it all fit into the cozy space I created for myself, governed by my own rules.

After being so silent through the end of my marriage—I was constantly biting my tongue when I was with Adam—and with no one to talk to in the apartment when he was at work, starting the blog was like the first breath of air after breaking the water's surface while swimming. The words came out so fast and furious; I had finally found my voice again, that old friend who had disappeared over the years from disuse.

Blogging can seem a little self-indulgent; foisting your free therapy on everyone else in the world. But some of us can't afford a vacation from life *and* therapy, so free isn't half bad. Plus, the night I received my first comment was like finding life on Mars. I was this tiny voice yelling from my apartment in New York City, and someone actually *heard* me. And took the time to tell me so.

The waitress brings us our bowl of edamame, and Rob opens one shell and pops the peas into his mouth. "What do you do?" I question.

"I'm a lawyer—business law."

You know how your hair sometimes rises on your arms like a vestigial connection to cats on high alert? That was the reaction I had when Rob mentioned his job. The tiny bubble of hope I had been floating on since I first got his phone call popped somewhere over the table, and I came tumbling down into the bowl of steamed edamame.

I am *not* going to date Adam Goldman, the extended remix version, because I am never going

date another lawyer. Or a hedge fund manager—not only because they seemed to work long hours but also because I don't really know what a hedge fund is. I'm not even sure if I'd be a good match for a surgeon who could be unreachable in the operating room for ten hours at a time like my sister.

It took a failed marriage to make me realize that I had had enough of being alone. First, when I was growing up, and my parents were always off at work and then second, with Adam. I didn't need to repeat the cycle a third time.

"You must work a lot of hours," I say, cracking open an edamame.

"Oh my God, I don't get home most nights until eleven. It's murder trying to make partner."

"I bet it is," I mutter under my breath, instantly crossing Rob Zuckerman's name out of my mental palm pilot's address book. *It is also murder*, I wanted to add, *to be the wife of someone trying to make partner. It actually makes you want to commit murder, if you must know.*

"I had to cut a trip short recently to Bali and come home to work on this account," Rob went on. "I planned that trip for four months and only got to spend five hours in Bali before I came home."

I take a deep breath and nudge out of my head all the regret that I am feeling about how this is the person I'll always have to remember as my first date. It is like the Hymen Fairy giving you back your virginity and then wasting it yet again on another partner-track lawyer.

"Why don't you order us some sashimi if the waitress comes before I get back?" I tell him, trying to at least get a good restaurant meal out of this evening if nothing else.

I slide out of my chair and head towards the bathroom, giving Rob a small smile to let him know that all is well, and I'm not about to duck behind a wall and call my best friend mid-date. Except that is exactly what I do.

"I hate you," I hiss into the phone when Arianna answers.

"I hate you too," she responds. "How is it going?"

"Rob Zuckerman is a lawyer trying to make partner."

"Well that was an unfortunate choice of first date. Didn't you ask him what he did when you met him at the bar?"

"It was loud in there," I say. "I couldn't hear anything. And now I'm stuck with Rob Zuckerman being the first post-Adam date I had for the rest of my life."

"You don't have to see him again," Arianna reminded me. I could hear her washing out baby bottles in the background.

"I meant that saying: 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life.' And Rob is my first date since the divorce—the only first date I'll ever have again."

"Until the next one."

"You think I'm going to get married and divorced again?" I admonish.

"No, no, I mean that you'll have other first dates. Sweetie, calm down. Go have some kappa maki and enjoy the night. And then call me when you get home, and we'll talk about how you're never seeing him again."

"I do hate you for pushing me to do this," I say, only half kidding as I bite my lower lip and peek out at Rob Zuckerman testing out his chopsticks and dropping them accidentally on his plate.

"It was time, Rach. It was really time."

I hang up the phone and use the decorative mirror on the wall to make sure that I don't have lipstick on my teeth before returning to the table.

"Rob Zuckerman," I say brightly. "Tell me more about your five hours in Bali."



Life from Scratch

blogging about life one scrambled egg at a time

If Fernand Point, the greatest French chef of all time, wasn't dead, I'd slather him with his beloved butter and just eat him all up.

I had never heard of Fernand Point until I decided to learn how to fry an egg. Which seemed like an easy-enough dish, but since I trust myself less than a nearby diner, had never attempted it at home. Finances, of course, changed that, since even greasy spoons are a little too greasy, sliding money out of my thinning wallet.

It seems simple enough, right? Crack the egg into a hot pan and watch it sizzle. I always order my eggs over-medium because I can't handle even a speck of the whites uncooked, but I like the yellow part warm and runny. But my homecooked egg quickly turned rubbery except for a centimeter or so around the yolk; the edges were paper thin, clear and crisp. I tried to flip it, and it folded over onto itself as it unstuck from the bottom of the pan; the yolk broke, and I tossed the whole thing in the sink.

I tried this with three more eggs and different things happen: sometimes I broke the yolk as I tried to move it. Sometimes I succeeded in keeping the yolk intact, but had uncooked whites because I had crumpled the whites as I folded it over. Oh, and then I did what I should have done before I cracked a single egg—which was open the damn cookbook and read what Fernand Point wrote a hundred years ago.

Apparently, even Mr. Point knew that the simplest things were the ones that we most commonly botched. Such as cooking an egg. He made each of his apprentices slow down and fry an egg over a candle *after* they butter the pan.

I forgot the love that is butter.

Cooking spray and eggs should never mix. Sigh.

So I started over melting a pat of butter over medium heat, and when it began to foam, I turned down the heat to low and added the egg. Yes, you read that right: I turned down the heat. No sizzle. No pop. If I had been filming a cooking show, everyone would have yawned. The whites slowly, slowly, slowly cooked. And once the whites were set, I let it go a bit longer until the yellow part slowly firmed up. And then I gently flipped it over, and, low and behold, the butter helped it release, and it slid over gracefully like a ballerina sinking down into the swan pose.

Oh, and after the eggs were on the plate I realized that I had no bread in the apartment and was pissed off because you need bread to sop up all of that lovely yolk. They were, even without

bread, the best damn eggs I had ever had. Like I said, I love Fernand Point.

Eggs are delicate things. They deserve this much attention, if not more. Oh, and butter is my new best friend.

Chapter Two

Juicing the Lemon

I push my way up the street, against the steady stream of traffic that is walking across the city towards Rockefeller Plaza and the enormous tree. Christmas is the only time of year where New Yorkers slow down and walk like zombie tourists, unable to drag their eyes away from store displays and the siren song of twinkle lights. It drives me crazy when people walk slowly.

A few flakes of snow drift in the air, as if they're unsure whether or not they have permission to land. If I didn't need cake flour this badly as well as have to give Arianna back the purse that I borrowed for my date with Rob Zuckerman, I would never step outside my apartment during prime weekday shopping hours. Within three blocks, my knees are already bruised from getting thwacked by tourists' shopping bags.

I buzz the front desk at Arianna's apartment building and step into the warm lobby, unwrapping my scarf as I make my way across the marble flooring. Her building always smells like too much perfume, as if they have washed the floors in Shalimar, and it's much older than mine. It has a delightfully creepy, Red-rum feel to the place.

Someone has wedged a plastic Santa from a Happy Meal into the ashtray by the elevator bay, and it stares at me with a frozen smile while I wait for the lift beside a mother and her preschool-aged child.

"I ate toilet paper," he whispers to me, apropos of nothing.

"Honestly, Henry!" his mother exclaims, rolling her eyes as if telling a stranger that he has eaten toilet paper is the last straw. She yanks his hand to lead him into the open elevator, and he remains silent the rest of the ride until I get off on Arianna's floor.

The truth is that I want a little boy who eats toilet paper. Food would obviously be better, but I take toilet paper if push came to shove.

Arianna is breathtakingly lovely, dressed more for the front row of Stella McCarthy's next runway show rather than an outing to Zabar's on the Upper West Side. Arianna is a finisher for a major fashion designer. She doesn't design anything or cut the patterns, but she does all of the hand-stitching and bead work. The designer's staff is thrilled to have her work out of her apartment rather than give her space in their crowded loft. So she has set up her life to be a full-time mother to Beckett as well as a full-time seamstress. She is currently wearing three inch kitten slides paired with a pair of expensive-looking designer jeans she probably got as a free sample from a friend in the industry. She kisses me on the cheek while she lets me into the apartment, taking her purse out of my hands.

"It's terrible out there," I warn. "Swarms of tourists, all carrying shopping bags. Seriously, even the last one of them."

She shrugs a baby Bjorn over her shoulders and loads Beckett into it so he's facing outward, his matching jean-clad legs dangling in front of her. She yanks a stocking cap over his head, blindly tying the strings underneath his chin, which is sticky with drool that he has dragged out of his mouth via his hand. She puts on her own coat—a delicious, soft, moss-green pea coat, hand-sewn for her by one of her designer friends. I spend a lot of time coveting her wardrobe.

“I know Christmas isn’t supposed to be a big deal if you’re Jewish,” I tell her as we step out of her apartment, and she locks her door. “I mean, the biggest thing I have to do that day is order Chinese food. But every single commercial is about what your husband is going to buy you.”

“Diamonds,” Arianna agrees.

“Or sitting on your Stainmaster carpet and opening Christmas morning gifts with your husband. Or buying a new car with your husband. This whole first-Christmas-after-the-divorce thing is making me very depressed. Television commercials are like downers.”

“Imagine how single, Christian people feel,” she says, motioning to herself.

“But you have Beckett,” I point out. “You’re not really alone in the true sense of the word. Like Adam,” I add dramatically, throwing open the front door of her building and streaming back onto the sidewalk to join the sea of shoppers making a pilgrimage to the subway stop.

“Seriously, you cannot borrow my feeling-sorry-for-myself holiday. You can have Valentine’s Day,” Arianna offers.

Beckett squeals in agreement and points at the traffic lights. “Let’s just walk the four blocks to 7th,” I tell her as I wind my scarf around my neck again, the flakes of snow still cautiously testing the air.

Adam and I meant to have children. At least, we discussed having children before we were married, and it was a base understanding between us. When the time felt right, we would ditch the birth control and have two kids and live happily ever after. But the problem was that the time was never right.

For instance, it turns out to have a child, one has to have sex.

It really makes me cringe to admit this, but Adam and I only had sex a handful of times during the final year of our marriage. Maybe five. First and foremost, he came home so late every night that he practically turned into a stranger; and I couldn’t roll around in bed with him as if nothing were wrong.

The other thing is that I started over-thinking whether or not we’d make good parents. I had grown up with parents who were barely around, and it sort of sucked to be their child. My parents never attended dance performances or piano recitals, and they would have missed my high school graduation due to a business trip if I hadn’t gotten my favorite teacher to persuade them otherwise. My parents loved me intensely, but I wouldn’t have called them *great* parents, and I seemed doomed to repeat their mistakes, since I had no other example to follow.

Plus, Adam and I hit a point where I didn’t want to have children with *him*. I didn’t want to become what would essentially be a single parent, though it was hard to admit that to my friend Arianna, who *is* a single parent by choice. But even she’ll tell you that if she could have found the right partner, she wouldn’t have gone about parenting alone. Still, she has always had a much stronger calling towards parenthood and, as my mother puts it, “grabs life by its balls.”

The woman who grabs life by its balls pushes her way down the subway stairs and jiggles herself gracefully through the turnstile, carefully lifting Beckett’s legs so they clear the bar. We wait for the train next to a large group of high school students all dragging suitcases behind them.

Arianna shocked the hell out of me three years ago when she asked if I could bring her home from a doctor’s appointment, and I ended up meeting her at a fertility clinic. “What is this?” I asked, as if I was living off-the-grid in the wilderness and had never heard of in vitro fertilization.

“I’m doing intrauterine inseminations,” she told me. “With donor sperm.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked dumbly.

“To get pregnant,” she said impatiently, sitting down gingerly on a bench in the clinic lobby, as she was scared the sperm would swim out of her body on the taxi ride back to her apartment.

“I mean, why are you trying to get pregnant?” I tried again.

~~“To have a baby, idiot. Listen, we’re in our thirties. Your fertility doesn’t exist forever. I want to be a parent. If I can do it this way, great. If I have to go about it another way, fine. The only thing I cannot accept is never having a child at all.”~~

Which, like women synchronizing their periods, made me start thinking of the world in terms of babies and fertility too. I spent the next two years helping Arianna conceive and carry a child, which became increasingly bitter towards Adam, who was not filling me with his very inexpensive, readily available seed. There I was, watching my friend shell out tens of thousands of dollars to become a mother while I technically could become a mother for free, but didn’t know if I’d even make a good one.

After two miscarriages, three fresh IVF transfers, four frozen IVF transfers, several months of daily Lovenox injections, a premature delivery, and a NICU stay, Arianna had Beckett, so named after the author of the most famous Godot of all times. Beckett may have been her own personal Godot, but the delay in his arrival only meant that she had built up more love for him than any one person could possibly need in their lifetime.

We jump off the train at the 79th Street station, dodging the Upper West Side nannies returning their charges from play dates and students coming home from school with oversized packs strapped to their backs like studious camels. 79th Street feels, if possible, ten degrees cooler than the packed sidewalks in Midtown. Of course, Zales has been decorated for Christmas with the requisite boughs of holly hanging over the enormous sign announcing the store’s Christmas sale and window displays of heart-shaped sparkling jewelry. Arianna rolls her eyes and Beckett gurgles and slaps the fabric of the baby carrier.

We forgo bagels at H&H, and instead push our way into the throng of shoppers clogging the narrow aisles of Zabar’s. We travel up here usually once a month so Arianna can get the pickles she likes and stock up on their cream cheese spreads and coffee beans. We hit the dairy aisle first, dropping containers of Greek yogurt and crème fraîche into our basket.

“Zabar’s makes me hungry,” Arianna announces as we pass the smoked fish counter. I cannot think of anything more unappetizing than fish that has been pulverized into a spread.

“Seriously? Smoked fish? What are you, a seventy-year-old man? I understand if you said that back at the cheese counter. Did you see the fresh pasta that was on sale? Tri-color capelletti?”

“Their smoked sable is incredible. Not that I need to spend twenty bucks on smoked fish at the moment, but if they were giving out free samples, I’d stand in line for hours.”

“Beckett would love that,” I comment.

I duck past a woman reading the label on a jar of lemon curd and make my way toward the baking supplies. We stand in front of the empty space in the baking section, where cake flour would normally be stocked next to the enormous jars of active yeast and the Dutch-milled cocoa.

“Do you think the world is trying to tell me something?” I ask, shifting around bags of cornmeal and gluten-free rice flour.

“What do you mean?” Arianna asked, adding vanilla to her own basket.

“When everything is going wrong—when your husband is choosing the office over you, and you’re somewhat newly divorced, and you only have a few more months left in your savings account before you need to go back to designing pamphlets, and every store is not stocking cake flour even though you already went out to New Jersey to retrieve the stupid angel food cake pan you were given for your wedding—do you think that is the universe telling you what you should expect after you die? Is that forewarning that I am heading to hell?”

“Oh, sweetie, of course you’re going to hell. That’s where all self-pitying drama queens go. Only Arianna can get away with teasing me while I’m down. She holds up a bag of whole wheat flour and I shake my head.

“I can’t use that to make my angel food cake. It has to be cake flour.”

“So drop the idea of the cake, and you’ll make it some other time.”

“What other time?” I admonish. “I’ve had the pan for months now, and I still haven’t used it. It’s mocking me. It’s whispering to me every night that while I may have gotten quite good at flipping over fried eggs, I will never master the art of baking.”

Cake flour—not fancy cream cheese spreads—was the *whole point* of this trek to the Upper West Side.

A few weeks into learning how to cook, I took the train out to New Jersey with two empty, rolling suitcases, and I went down into my parent’s basement to retrieve all of my unused wedding gifts—gifts to celebrate my now-defunct marriage.

When Adam and I were engaged, I registered for cookware like all good brides in New York, even though I didn’t know how to use a roasting pan or colander. I mean, how do you admit that fact to your friends and family who are so keen to buy new brides cookware? It’s practically written in the Wedding Bible: Thou shall buy brides either cookware or lingerie for their shower.

So I unwrapped box after box of beautiful William Sonoma silver pots and pans and Le Creuset enamel and silicone spatula bouquets and properly oohed and aaahed about each gift, all the while knowing that they probably would never be used. I would have loved to have thrown Martha Stewart inspired dinner parties with linens matching the centerpieces, but emptying a pre-cooked chicken purchased in Chelsea Market into a roasting pan seems like cheating. And though Martha went to jail for some type of stock debacle, I could not see her being down with that type of cheating and sullyin her good housekeeping name.

I considered just admitting that the entire idea of learning my way around the kitchen filled me with exhaustion and ask instead for other gifts—maybe lifetime memberships to various city museums or a subscription to the American Ballet Theatre. But my non-cooking mother encouraged me to register for the cookware because people loved to buy it, imagining the couple hunkering down to some warm soup in the middle of their first winter together. She also helped me repack it in boxes after the guests departed and labeled the outside of each William Sonoma box with a black sharpie. My mother is, if nothing else, practical.

She took all the boxes back to her New Jersey basement under the guise that we shouldn’t use up our precious New York storage space on wedding items. I think my mother was a tad fearful that I might ignore all the beliefs she drilled in my head as a teenager if I had access to those gorgeous pots and pans in my kitchen.

According to my mother, suggesting that women cook dinner rather than order in from a local restaurant is the first step in returning all of the liberties women have obtained in the last fifty years. I might as well declare myself Amish and go sew my own clothing and can green beans from my own garden. “You don’t knit your own sweaters, Rachel,” my mother was fond of saying. “So why do you want to cook your own meals? Let Diane Von Furstenberg make your tops and let Hunan Chow make your dinner. You have more important things to do than housework, and it’s just food.”

Except that, unlike her, in the few months leading up to the trek out to New Jersey to pick up my kitchenware, I really didn’t have more important things to do.

It’s not like Adam and I literally *never* ate a meal at home. We had cereal for breakfast, and I wa

fantastic at boiling up ramen noodles. But once I crossed the threshold of three or more ingredients once the directions weren't written on the outside of a package, I sort of tossed the idea of preparing the meal back on the figurative shelf.

Through most of our marriage, I didn't think Adam cared. He liked my mother's spirit and complimented her when she ordered Thanksgiving dinner from his favorite caterer. And *he* certainly wasn't doing any cooking since he rarely got home before 11 p.m. But it was a throwaway thought I spat out during one of our final conversations while we waited for our lawyers to divvy up our possessions that gave me pause.

"You've never been supportive," he said.

I couldn't think of a way I could have been *more* supportive of his work at the office unless I offered to deliver his subpoenas. So that left showing support of him at home, which conjured up images of wifely duties I should have been performing instead of watching television. Of meals unprepared and shirts un-ironed and all of the things my mother had drilled into my head *not* to do for a man.

It's not as if his own socialite mother ever slowed down from her busy schedule to toss a few steaks onto the grill for Adam's family so I'm not sure where the domestic desires stemmed—certainly not from childhood. But learning to cook became a way to recreate myself—something I had never done before. I'd defy my mother's brainwashing and Adam's unspoken accusations about not being homey enough with one, single act.

So New Jersey was where my cookware rested until several months following my divorce, when I went to collect it so I could scramble my own damn eggs.

After we had coffee and bagels, my mother asked why I had brought two deflated suitcases with me. There was a fearful tone to her voice, as if she was bracing herself for me to request moving back into my childhood bedroom.

"I'm just going to take back some of my old wedding gifts to New York. The stuff in the basement," I said.

On second thought, moving back into my bedroom seemed more sane. My mother had been holding her breath for several weeks as I talked about redefining myself with a new career. I think she secretly hoped that I would announce that it was law school for me after all.

"Are you talking about the cookware?" my mother questioned. "Your father and I were talking about donating that stuff. Give it to a family who needs it."

"I need it," I told her.

"I really don't understand why you're bothering with that." She couldn't even bring herself to call it *cooking*. She left dishes in the sink where my father would get to them later. It was one of the tradeoffs between his love of the earth as an environmental lawyer and her insistence on rejecting any tasks deemed "housework" as an escapee from the 1950s and overworked immigration lawyer. If they weren't going to choke the landfills with paper plates and plastic forks, Dad was going to have to take care of the dishes. My mother did not touch dish soap.

"I'm bothering with it because I can't afford to eat out every night anymore," I explained as I started following her towards her office.

I wanted to add something snide like, "I'm not a big fancy lawyer like you," except I knew that would only take us into a discussion on how I could *be* a big fancy lawyer like her if I only applied myself. In her world, 35-years-old was not too old to return to the classroom and get a new degree.

I went into the basement by myself and filled my bags with salad spinners and frying pans and tinfoil saucier pots. I left behind the tagine, knowing that certain cookware was out of my element. At last

minute, I threw a tube pan into the mix—an angel food cake pan that came with a recipe card called ~~The Anniversary Cake, to be eaten on the first anniversary.~~ I crumpled up the card and tucked the bakeware into my bag.

The Cuisinart and the standing mixer were too bulky and heavy to fit in the bags. But I wanted them. I stomped back upstairs, dragging one of my suitcases behind me. I found my father in the kitchen at the sink, scrubbing a dish before he turned the water back on.

“Any chance you could drive me back into the city?” I wheezed. I motioned to the suitcase. “I have a lot of stuff I want to bring back.”

“Oh, cupcake, I’m working on a brief right now.”

“It’s Saturday,” I pointed out. “You’re washing dishes.”

“After this, I mean. I’m working on a brief this afternoon and then your mother and I are going out with the Perlman’s.”

Just as I didn’t know how to say it to Adam, I didn’t know how to remind my father that I am just as important as a brief. That I’m part of that environment he protects—a living, breathing human. Instead I accepted his apologetic shoulder shrug and walked through the house to find my mother. She was sitting in front of the computer, reading the *New York Times* both on the screen and in paper form simultaneously.

“You have to go online to see the comments,” she explained.

“Why not read it all online?” I asked.

“I can’t stand the computer. I need to hold my newspaper. Smell the news.”

“You would think Dad would have convinced you to cancel your subscription by now,” I said. “Chopping down trees. Bad for the environment.”

“I recycle,” she insisted. “Are you heading out, pumpkin?”

“Actually, I was going to ask you to drive me into the city. I have so much stuff to take back and it can’t really fit it all into the bags. It’s really heavy.”

“I can’t, honey. After I finish the *Times*, I’m getting back to work.”

“And then you have the Perlman’s,” I finished for her.

“Right, the Perlman’s,” she agreed, relieved that I wasn’t pushing the issue.

“Can I borrow your car?” I finally pleaded. “I’ll drive into the city and then drive back and take the train back in.”

“I don’t see why not,” my mother told me. “As long as you’re back before we leave for the Perlman’s.” She beamed at me as if she was so proud of my self-sufficiency. One needed to be self-sufficient when surrounded by those who treasured paper over people.

That was months ago, but I hadn’t been brave enough to attempt angel food cake until recently. And, of course, once I decided to try making it, cake flour disappeared off of every shelf in New York City. This was not the first store I had traveled to in search of baking ingredients.

I lean against the wall and take out my phone, opening Twitter so I can complain about Zabar’s lack of flour choices.

“I think it is merely a strange coincidence, this city-wide disappearance of cake flour,” Arianna admits, nuzzling the top of Beckett’s head. He twists around to try to grab the ends of her honey-colored hair.

“Blech!” he exclaims in Beckettese.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I tell him, hitting send.

We walk back out into the damp, cold afternoon, which is slowly bleeding into evening. I can see

my breath in the air, and Arianna fusses with Beckett's hat, tying the strings underneath his chin again. He swings his little legs against her stomach as he hangs from his carrier. They're always together. A unit.

Even though he was created with sperm that came from an anonymous donor, it seems as if all of Beckett's features come straight from Arianna. Her narrow, blue eyes; her stick-straight blond hair that looks like it benefited from some obscure Japanese straightening treatment; and her thin, straight nose have all shown up in miniature on Beckett. They share the same smile down to matching dimples on their left cheek.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. I nominated you for a blogging award," she says as we walk down the subway steps, trying hard not to knock our bulging shopping bags into the other riders.

Arianna knows how much the blog has grown on me, how much pride I take in the relationship I've built through the site or the comments I get on my posts. I turn my head slightly so she can't see my huge, slightly-embarrassed grin.

"Er . . . what sort of a blogging award?"

"I don't know. It's called 'the Bloscars.' I saw a post about it on one of the fashion blogs I read. I nominated you in the food category."

"Well, there's no way I can win," I tell her. "I mean, my blog is about frying eggs, not making soufflés. Probably one of those big-name bloggers will win. *Pioneer Woman Cooks* or *Smitten Kitchen*. People who can really cook and have a million readers."

"You have a million readers," Arianna insists.

"I have like twenty readers. Maybe thirty."

"How do you know?" Arianna says.

"Comments! I get twenty to thirty comments on a post."

"Maybe you have more people reading and not commenting. Haven't you ever read a blog and not commented?"

Er . . . like *The Dating Diva*? But that was because I thought I had nothing to say. Or I thought I had a lot to say and had no clue how to say it. I hadn't found my voice again; but now that I have, I expect that everyone who reads me probably comments at least once.

"Anyway, Rachel, you have *loyal* readers. They love that you share all the stuff about your divorce and love life," she hurriedly adds.

"One date with Rob Zuckerman does not constitute a love life," I sigh, stepping onto the subway platform, bypassing a woman mumbling to herself.

"Give it time," Arianna promises.

That night, I Google the Bloscars and immediately see hundreds of thousands of hits including the main site. I scroll through the categories and see Arianna's nomination for my site, under Food Bloggers. Seeing my blog name makes my heart start pounding, and I cover my mouth to hide my smile even though I'm alone in the apartment.

There is a small box next to her nomination that you can check in order to show your agreement with the nomination—the point, of course, is to help the award-givers separate the wheat from the chaff. Blogs that receive more nominations probably deserve a second look. After I click it, it informs me that I am the sixteenth person to nominate the site. There is no additional information on who the other fifteen are or where they came from.

I am about to shoot off an email to Arianna when someone knocks on the door. I instantly know it is my brother, Ethan. He is the only person I know who would rather hang around outside waiting for

someone to give him access inside rather than use the buzzer. It all goes back to his love of shocking me.

I open the door, and God bless the asshole, he has arrived with a bag of cake flour. “You bitched about it on Twitter that you couldn’t find any. I brought this one over from Brooklyn.” I hug him, crushing the flour against his shirt.

“My angel food cake!” I exclaim, taking the bag out of his hands. He shrugs his shoulders and starts rummaging through my refrigerator for leftovers. No one in my family can cook.

These are the things you should probably know about my brother. He is thirty-two going on sixteen. He has the self-righteous indignation of a teenager coupled with the irresponsibility of a first-year, pot-saturated college student. And he is brilliant—smarter than my brain-surgeon sister and her lawyer parents combined.

He is, as these types always are, redeemed by his quick, wide smile which divulges the sweetness and thoughtfulness with which he conducts our relationship. Take, for instance, the time he returned to my old apartment to pick up all of my books when I didn’t feel like facing Adam. He carried those boxes up and down three flights of stairs for seventeen consecutive trips. That is love; that is redemption.

For the time being, he is a photographer. I say, “for the time being,” because this career was preceded by stints as a carpenter, a first-month medical student, a dishwasher, doorman, and amusement-park mascot, and it will be followed by something equally unusual such as being someone’s butler. He’s smart, but he’s bored easily and doesn’t think it is remarkable that he can add seven-digit figures in his head instantaneously. I think he gives my mother more stress than I do. At least they can write me off as a talentless failure; with Ethan, they need to contend with wasted brilliance.

Just to be clear, when I say “photographer,” I mean that he is wholly unpaid and working on a coffeetable book featuring photos he’s taking at Starbucks and Mudtrucks in Manhattan. *A coffeetable book about coffee spilled on tables*. Which means that until it sells—which it probably won’t—he never has any money. Our parents cut him off a long time ago. He doesn’t ask me for cash because he knows I’m trying to eke out my savings to last for a year. Instead he bothers our sister for rent money and comes over to my apartment to raid my refrigerator.

Feeding Ethan is the closest thing I have to a stint in mothering.

“I have some salsa and chips. I made the salsa myself,” I tell him, taking the chips off the top of the refrigerator.

“Is it any good?” he asks, bringing the bowl towards his face to sniff at the tomatoes.

“No, Ethan, it’s terrible, so I saved it and offered it to you.”

“I had an idea today. Do you know what you need?” Ethan asks me. “You need to have a dinner party. You’ve never had a dinner party.”

“Adam and I had dinner parties,” I say defensively.

“You had other couples over and ordered in from somewhere. It’s not the same thing. Look at all the things you can make now. Eggs. You could make fried eggs for everyone. Or salsa. You need to socialize. You’re spending too much time communicating with people online. People you can’t see. People who may actually be a sixty-year-old man in Kansas pretending to be a thirty-something coed in Vermont.”

“I like my online friends,” I insist.

“I know you hate it when people tell you what you need to do, but seriously, you need to socialize and show off your newfound skill to people who have the ability to taste your creations. Everyone will

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