

## Grandiose Goals

I am walking to the car with my husband, Bob. We are in the parking lot of one of those gourmet natural food stores dotting the Oregon landscape. It's Saturday in Portland and, in spite of the rain, the lot is almost full and a line is forming at the Starbucks next door. An old maroon Volvo station wagon is parked next to us. Bob brings our cart to a stop and points to a faded KILL YOUR TELEVISION bumper sticker plastered to the Volvo's rear windshield.

"Don't you want one of those for your car?" he asks.

I put a bag of groceries into the trunk of our Nissan, looking around to make sure the owner of the Volvo is not within earshot.

"That car," I say matter of factly, "belongs to a zealot." I keep my voice down, thinking that maybe the owner of the car wouldn't want to be called a zealot. My husband stares at me.

"But that's what you are," he says, not bothering to keep *his* voice down. "You think our child will be an absolute moron if he watches television."

He is pointing his finger at me, which is highly annoying, and I'm about to push it away from my face if he doesn't stop. We have been married for eleven years and although we have successfully rid each other of many annoying habits, this pointing thing of his has persisted. He puts the rest of the groceries in the trunk and shuts it firmly.

"I just don't want our child to sit in front of a screen in a mindless stupor," I tell him, trying not to sound defensive. Turning into a zealot is one of my biggest fears. I think of those Hare Krishnas who hang out at the airport, passing out literature, sure in their belief that they have found the one way to God. I could be one of them.

"I just want our child to have an imagination, and a social life with real people in it," I tell him. "I want him to know those around him better than he knows the cast of *Friends*. That doesn't make me a zealot."

We are speaking about our child as if we have one. Actually we don't. I am three months pregnant, though, and we have already begun to think of ourselves as a family of three, complete with arguments about how our offspring should be raised. Bob has grown weary of the television topic, but unfortunately I never feel that I've convinced him of anything until he is completely exhausted. I throw my damp polar fleece jacket into the backseat, fasten my seatbelt, and say what I have already said at least twenty times since I found out I was pregnant.

"I just want to make sure we are all connected, that we talk. I want us to have more in common than a desire to watch reruns together on Nickelodeon. I want our discussions to be about something more important than whether or not Gilligan will get off his island."

"We'll be connected," he assures me. His voice is softer now,

gentler, the kind of voice I imagine he will use with our child. We have waited a long time to have kids, but not because I didn't think Bob would be a good father. Mostly, I was scared of screwing the whole thing up. What if I brought the next Charles Manson or Timothy McVeigh into the world?

Bob pauses to look behind him as he backs out of the parking lot. "We'll be fine," he says emphatically, "unless, of course, *you* can't stop watching television."

I turn to stare out of the window. We're on Dosch and it is a windy road, lined with the large evergreens that characterize the West Hills of Portland. Bob doesn't say anything else because he knows he's hit a nerve, he of little faith. He understands only too well that I know not only that Gilligan never gets off the island but also every ridiculous way in which he tries. Even as a kid I considered it one of the stupidest shows on television. But I watched it as much as I watched the shows I liked, simply because it was on. The theme songs for *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* are embedded in my brain, and I can name every guest character on *Batman*, from the Penguin to the Riddler. While this information might be useful in a television trivia game, it mostly proves how much I don't know, what I didn't learn, and the connections to others I never had. And that's what I don't want for our baby.

"I can stop watching TV," I say, turning to look at him.

"Without getting rid of it?" He scoffs, not taking his eyes off the road.

I remind him that the plan I've been devising does not require us to get rid of the television. The plan is to raise our child with the bare minimum of television.

"When he's little, he can watch on special occasions, like if someone is landing on the moon again, that sort of thing. Then

after he's six, he will get two hours a week. That way television won't be a forbidden fruit and he won't have to feel left out."

I don't bring up the fact that I often felt left out when I was a kid even though I watched loads of television. I haven't quite figured out that part, but I don't mention this, lest I weaken my argument.

"So the television will stay?" he says.

"We will show our child that we can exist with a television in our house, and that it is available to be used wisely."

"I see," he says blandly, and I can tell that he isn't pleased. Although he has never watched nearly as much television as I have, he doesn't want to be without it when something he likes is on. That's why we haven't ever gotten rid of it and why he has rarely complained about my excessive watching. He also knows that if I weren't watching television he might feel obligated to engage in conversation, and this would be difficult for him, as he is more self-contained than most people. Asking him to utter over two sentences at a time is like asking a short-order cook to make a soufflé every night.

"Will I at least get to watch some of the NFL play-offs?" he asks at last.

"You won't need to watch the play-offs," I say. "You'll get to watch the baby!"

He gives me a fake smile, the one he wears at parties when he is being introduced to people who sell Herbal Life for a living.

"Listen to this," I say. I pick up one of the many articles I have been collecting in order to make my point, as much to myself as to Bob. I keep them with me in the car, because Bob is my captive audience here.

"The average child will have seen 16,000 murders on TV by age eighteen. And for every hour a day that a preschooler watches television, his chance of becoming a bully in grade school increases by 9 percent!"

“Amazing,” he says, but his voice is monotone. I recite more statistics, darker and scarier ones.

“The majority of kids ages four to six would rather watch television than spend time with their fathers. That’s you!” I say, and flash the article in front of him.

“Hey, I’m driving!” He waves the article away.

We are rounding a curve and I am afraid of getting carsick if I read from the next article, so I set it aside and sum it up as best I can. “More than 60 percent of the reported cases of obesity in children are linked to excessive TV viewing. And almost half of all families eat in front of the television,” I tell him.

Bob looks restless, but I’m on a roll. “Kids don’t talk with their parents. And it’s not because they’re reading. It’s because they’re watching TV, and the more they watch, the less likely they’ll be able to read at all! In fact, children who have watched the most television between ages five and fifteen are the least likely to graduate from high school or college!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be collecting baby blankets and nursing bras?” he asks.

“This is more important,” I say. “I want you to see how television is wreaking havoc on the lives of children and how our child thankfully will be spared.”

He nods, now attempting to humor me in what he clearly sees as my latest obsession. “And you think we’re going to be able to do this without getting rid of the television?”

“Yes,” I say.

He sighs, probably mourning the play-offs he’ll be missing.

“Television will be for us what alcohol is for Sam on *Cheers*,” I tell him. “Even though Sam used to be an alcoholic, he still chooses to work in a bar.”

“Doesn’t he own the bar?” Bob asks.

“In the first four years of the show,” I say exasperated. “Then he loses ownership when Rebecca replaces Diane. Of course, later on he regains ownership.” Bob is nodding but I can tell that he has lost interest. I raise my voice because that’s one of the things I do when someone isn’t paying enough attention to me. “We’ll prove that it’s possible to keep a television in our house without having it on all the time. It will only be available to be used wisely.”

I’m beginning to repeat myself. I realize this as I consider the plan. It really sounds so simple. I picture our little family sitting together at the dinner table, discussing what our two hours of television for the week will consist of. We might consult the TV guide together or a list of movies available on video. Our child will be cheerful and agreeable about our way of life because I, as a good mother, will have easily modeled nonaddictive behavior, sometimes even forgetting that we own a set. In addition, we will effortlessly limit computer time for him to maybe no more than thirty minutes a week. Video games will also be drastically limited, if not nonexistent.

While the concept of being without television requires a good imagination on my part, it’s not far away from Bob’s experience growing up in Arizona. Every summer he and his family went to a ranch outside of Flagstaff and spent three months of the year there without television. He and his siblings actually found ways to entertain themselves without *The Brady Bunch* and *Bewitched*. It’s one of the best parts of his childhood, he says, and one of the things that attracted me in the first place. “But what did you do in the evening?” I asked him on our first date. “We played together and we read a lot,” he said. “Oh,” I said in amazement, “you were like the Waltons and the Ingallses on *Little House on the Prairie*.”

“Well, sort of,” he said smiling, “but none of us played a musical instrument.”

I later learned that hardly anyone in his family can hold a tune either, but at least he grew up without television every summer, which is more than I can say for myself.

It is because of his own upbringing that Bob doesn't doubt his ability to be without television if he has to. He just doubts mine.

"Do you really think you can do this?" he asks me as we turn onto our street. "I mean, you haven't exactly taken care of anyone else's kids without television."

"That doesn't matter," I say, quickly brushing aside the truth. When I was in college, I wouldn't take a childcare job without television. On Friday nights I babysat for a family near campus and the evenings always revolved around TV. After watching *The Love Boat*, I would put the baby in bed just before *Dallas* came on, my favorite show at the time. Then, with the three-year-old and five-year-old on either side of me, I began to explain the last episode to them, why J.R. was sleeping with a bimbo from the office instead of his wife and why this was a bad idea. "You see, Sue Ellen has only slept with someone other than her husband once, and it was with a cute college student who was tutoring her son," I tell little Ainsley. "That was a terrible move on her part, because J.R. then planted an illegal drug called cocaine on him and got him arrested."

The strange thing is that I don't recall thinking that I was anything but a good babysitter. The children liked watching shows with me and the family never told me to restrict television viewing.

Later, when I became an aunt, I turned to Disney videos and PBS kid programs to entertain my nieces. Although the content was an improvement over my college babysitting days, the effect was the same. Even if my nieces were watching *Sesame Street*, they were still in a passive, hypnotic state that Bob and I came to depend on. We prided ourselves on being fun relatives, taking the

kids to the zoo and the park, but when we were home, we couldn't think of how else we might fill the time with them.

As we turn into our driveway, I reach into the backseat to grab my jacket.

"Things will be different because this will be our child," I tell Bob.

I believe this, too. I am like the character played by Holly Hunter in the movie *Raising Arizona*. She and her husband are about to adopt a baby (actually, steal a baby), and she tells her husband that once they become parents, they have to straighten up and fly right, or something like that. I imagine that a lot of people when they become parents are finally able to make the changes they wanted to make for years. They quit drinking or taking drugs because they know they can't be good parents if they are drunk and stoned all the time.

Unfortunately, for some other people, becoming a parent leads them to drink and take drugs more than ever before. This seems to be what happened to my mother.

"I just hope you don't become too intense about this is all," Bob says, turning to look at me for a second or two. We are sitting in the car and he has turned off the motor.

"I'm not like that," I say, trying to keep from sounding too intense.

Bob thinks I'm going to go off the deep end, as people in my family have tended to do, particularly while pregnant. He probably remembers what it was like when my sister was expecting her first child, the first of the two girls she now has, ages twelve and seven. She phoned to wake me up at six one morning for what she called an emergency family meeting at her house. We lived in Eugene a few blocks away from her at the time. I rushed over and, still without breakfast, sat waiting with her closest friends,

whom she had also awakened. She was five months pregnant and she patted her belly and spoke softly but importantly as soon as everyone had arrived.

“I believe I am carrying a girl and she will become the next Buddha,” she announced. “She will lead us into the true age of enlightenment.” She raised her hands toward the heavens. I looked around the room. No one broke into laughter, or even so much as rolled their eyes. She continued, watching her captivated audience.

“As an ascended master, this child must remain at all times unpolluted by the American diet. Therefore, I’ve decided that after she is weaned, she must eat only fruits, nuts, seeds, and sprouts. Eventually, I hope she will be able to transcend the need for food altogether and become a breatharian.” She smiled the smile of a visionary and, upon seeing the looks of confusion on some of our faces, added, “She will subsist on air alone.”

She then invited us all to become coparents, a grand design that would require each of us to spend one day a week caring for this future savior of humankind.

“She will be ours together,” she said, her eyes shining, “and her last name will be OceanMoon. As coparents, you may each give her a first name that expresses her divineness as you see it.” I smiled, glad that I had something useful to do. I would definitely choose a mainstream name, something completely different from Red Corn and Light Spirit, the names my sister liked. When I first came to Oregon, my sister, who had changed her name to Sapphire, wanted me to change mine to Emerald. She lived in a house with ten people, including two women named Diamond and Ruby. “Together we would be Diamond, Ruby, Sapphire, and Emerald,” she said.

“But I don’t want to be named after a gem,” I told her.

I don't mention Sapphire to Bob right now. Besides, I don't think my goal of raising our child without television is as extreme as my sister's goal was for her offspring. But my feelings about television are as powerful. I wish I could throw our set out of a ten-story building. Unfortunately, it isn't that simple for me. I recognize that the rest of the world is immersed in the medium and so my child needs at least to be aware of it. As much as I want him to be television free, I also don't want to keep him from having friends and feeling a part of his school, his neighborhood and community. I'm not sure how I'll do this.

We get out of the car and I wave to Peggy, the neighbor across the street. She's a skinny woman with four oversized kids and they all watch television. I know because last Christmas I saw her carrying a giant Scooby-Doo into her house. "It's Noah's favorite show," she said. She sounded a little apologetic about it. That's because this is a neighborhood filled with liberal, well-educated people who might have a sense that watching *Scooby-Doo* isn't the most enriching activity for their children. We've lived on this street for only a year, but as I look around me, I wonder if there is anyone raising their kids without television.

At least I'm not too old to be pregnant here. Unlike women in the suburbs and the rural areas outside Portland, where most women are married and pregnant in their early twenties, the women in our urban neighborhood often wait until they are at least thirty-five to start their families. I've been checking around and remember now to tell Bob my latest findings about our neighbor next door.

"Olivia will be forty-one when she has her baby," I tell him happily, as we carry the groceries into the house. We set the bags on the counter.

"What about Gordon?"

“He’s forty-five,” I say gleefully.

At thirty-six, we take comfort in finding parents who are older than us. Probably when our child graduates, we will take comfort in knowing that while other parents have arthritis and heart disease, we are dealing only with stronger prescriptions for our reading glasses.

At least Bob has the advantage of looking younger than he is. People think he has sandy blond hair, but he actually has red hair with so much white in it that it appears blond. His face is relatively unlined—only a year ago he was carded when he ordered a beer at a local pub. I like to think that I look really young for my age as well—but no one has asked me for my ID in about ten years.

It wasn’t just fear of having a Charles Manson that made me wait to start a family. Unlike those people who say they had no idea how much having kids would change their lives, I had an idea. And I didn’t want to resent my child because I could no longer work my way up the ladder to success and professional fulfillment. Unfortunately, I never got very far up that ladder. It might have helped if I’d ever actually worked at the same place for more than two years. And, of course, if I hadn’t watched so much television.

Besides, I always assumed I could wait until forty to have a baby. But then I watched *Oprah* and saw these women weeping about their declining fertility. I threw away our condoms and one month later I was pregnant and making plans about how to keep television from ruining our lives.

“I’m going to make enchiladas with verde sauce,” Bob tells me as I finish putting the groceries away. “Does that sound okay?” He has taken out a large casserole pan and fresh bell peppers have been put in a bowl.

“Sounds delicious!” I try to be enthusiastic about whatever he

makes. Bob is the kind of cook everyone dreams of marrying. I fell in love with him the first time I tasted the pumpkin pie he made at Thanksgiving. We met at a restaurant where we both worked. He was a chef. I waited tables. Cooking is a creative activity to him, not the chore it is to me. He loves perusing cookbooks and he is at home using words like *sauté* and *poach*. I'm more comfortable with the words *reheat* and *take out*.

I turn on the set in the family room. Finding something to watch on Saturday has always been a bit of a challenge, as I don't like to watch sports or obscure shows about fishing. Weekday television is better, but I'm now working as a teaching assistant and don't have as much time in the morning. I used to teach elementary school but the assistant position is easy to do while pregnant and it still allows me to keep my teaching certificate current. I stop on channel 49, where there is often a Saturday movie. Usually, it's pretty stupid, aimed at adolescents, something such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. But today it's *All of Me* with Lily Tomlin and Steve Martin. It's a great movie, even if the ending is silly and far-fetched. I just can't picture anyone wanting to live out the rest of her life as a horse just to avoid prison. But it's the best thing on, and I don't even care that it started twenty minutes ago.

"When exactly are you going to start this grand plan of not watching TV?" Bob asks after a few minutes. He is stirring a tomato sauce and isn't interested in the movie.

"After the baby is born," I say. "At that point, we'll watch two hours a week as planned."

"I thought we were starting right away."

"We were, but this is helping me understand more than ever that watching television is not the right thing for the baby."

Bob's right that I was planning to stop watching right away, but the way I see it is I don't really have that much time left to veg out.

I'm like one of those people who finishes every cookie in her house on New Year's Eve because she plans to start a diet the next day.

"I don't think this is such a good sign," Bob says.

"Have a little confidence," I say, not averting my eyes from the screen. Steve Martin has just discovered that Lily Tomlin is planning to carry on with her life in the body of a blond bombshell.

After the movie is over I grab a pad of paper and a pencil in hopes of reassuring Bob of my commitment.

"This is the plan," I say. "Starting tomorrow I'll watch no more than fifteen hours a week. By month seven, I'll get it down to ten hours a week. And a month before the due date, I'll watch only five hours a week," I announce proudly. "By the time the baby is born, I'll be down to two hours, the desired number."

I post the chart on the bulletin board in our study and write "We are free of TV" at the top of the chart. I've always believed in the power of positive affirmations. Dieters who put pictures of morbidly obese people on their fridge have it all wrong. Envision your goal, not your worst nightmare.

"We are free of TV," I say aloud.

Bob looks skeptical. He's not so convinced about the power of affirmations.

BOB AND I ARE ON our way to my amniocentesis appointment. I am four months pregnant and sick with worry. My doctor said that women my age have eggs that are practically ancient and the possibility that something could be wrong with the baby frightens me almost as much as the thought of losing the baby from having this procedure itself. I wish I were twenty. I am not reassured when I find that our appointment is with a Dr. Austin, who is actually a dentist. JIM AUSTIN, DMD reads the sign on his door.

We step inside and I see another pregnant woman, who is shifting uncomfortably in her seat. "We must be in the right place," I say.

"Why do you think he does this if he's a dentist?" Bob asks me.

"Well," I say irritably, "maybe one day he was in middle of jacking open someone's jaw, when he realized that he might have more fun sticking a giant needle into the uterus of a pregnant woman who has been asked to drink a quart of water and not pee for at least an hour."

"Maybe he'll give you a root canal, too, if you ask him."

I don't laugh. I look around for a television but don't see one. I pick up a *Newsweek* and remind myself that this dentist comes highly recommended and his rate of miscarriage with this procedure is phenomenally low.

We wait for fifteen minutes before we are called back into a small, well-lit room, where I reluctantly lie down on the examining table. I close my eyes to avoid seeing the needle he is using. I am as still as stone, barely breathing.

"Just relax," the dentist says. I hate when men tell me to relax. I count to myself slowly.

When the needle is out, I gasp for air. I look at the dentist, checking his face for signs of distress, hoping he isn't about to launch into a talk about how a child really can live well with just one leg and limited brain capacity.

"Everything looks fine," he says. "We'll have the results in a week or so." He hands us a list of instructions. "I want you to take it easy for forty-eight hours, just as a precaution to prevent miscarriage," he says. "Don't engage in rigorous activity."

Bob is looking over the instruction sheet as we leave the office, zeroing in on the important points. "They just don't want us to have sex."

“We’ll survive,” I tell him as we leave the office, “but I’ll need funny movies, lots of them.”

I wait in the car in front of Blockbuster, keeping movement to a minimum. I’ve always been somewhat of a hypochondriac. If I read about a possible complication or side effect, I can’t help but imagine I have it. If an unknown bump appears, my first thought is cancer. Before I was married, I used to get myself checked for sexually transmittable diseases all the time.

When we get home, I slowly head upstairs and wait there while Bob moves the television set from the family room into the bedroom. I prop up pillows. Bob puts the first movie in: *Annie Hall*. An old Woody Allen movie is sure to do the trick.

I know other mothers-to-be might feel guilty lying around watching TV all weekend. If they had to stay in bed, they would still be knitting little booties or writing cards to relatives, enclosing copies of the ultrasound pictures. Or they would reread *War and Peace*. But I have one purpose and one purpose only, which is not to worry about miscarrying, and watching TV is the only way I know to avoid worrying.

One of the things I have always liked best about television is that it keeps me from thinking about or feeling anything unpleasant. If I’m sad, depressed, or anxious, I turn on the television. Afraid, nervous, bored, I turn on the set. It’s a long list of emotions and situations I have trouble with, but television is always the answer.

Up until now I’ve been successfully watching just fifteen hours a week, as planned, but some situations simply demand lots of television. After *Annie Hall* is over, I watch *Animal House*, *Tootsie*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*, one after the other.

Bob makes my favorite meals and by Sunday night I’m confident that our little one is happy where he is. I look at the ultrasound

picture. I can tell where the head is, but the rest resembles a mollusk. I'm glad my little mollusk is staying put.

A WEEK LATER the television is still in our bedroom. "Shouldn't we be getting it out of here?" Bob asks me. He's standing in the doorway. "I thought it was just supposed to be in here for two days during the amnio recovery."

I consider this, but I'm still feeling a little tense.

"We'll move it out after we hear the results from the dentist."

I'm sprawled out on the bed watching a *Mary Tyler Moore* weekend marathon on Nickelodeon. Bob shuts the door behind him. He isn't interested in joining me, even though this is a really good episode. Ted has just been offered a job as a game show host and might actually quit being a newscaster. I smile to myself, amused by this enough to keep watching even though I have already been at it for five hours, getting up only for a few snack breaks. At this point I'm vaguely aware that I need to go to the bathroom but the episode is almost over. I wait until it ends and then make a run for it before the next one starts.

I stand at the sink quickly washing my hands in a way the health department would not characterize as true hand-washing and think to myself that I knew all along that Lou would want to keep Ted as an anchor, however incompetent he is. They couldn't get rid of him because he's important for comic relief and it would be weird to bring in a replacement. When I was nine and they brought in a different husband for Samantha on *Bewitched*, it was alarming. How could Samantha pretend that this was the same old husband she'd been sleeping with for years? After a few weeks, though, I did get used to him. The same way I'm getting used to

seeing cropped pants and sport utility vehicles. You can sell a TV addict on almost anything. Why else would parents give their kids Kool-Aid?

I settle back down on the bed, pulling the comforter up to my shoulders in time to hear “Who Can Turn the World on with Her Smile” for the twelfth time today. I watch Mary throw her hat up into the air knowing, as the song tells us, she’s going to make it after all. She makes it look fun, throwing her hat up like that. I would try it sometime, if I looked good in hats. Unfortunately, my hair looks flat or misshapen if I wear any hat for more than five minutes. Besides, I spend too much of my life watching these marathons to have time to go around tossing a hat into the air. It works for Mary because she is perky and productive. I’m better at remaining in relatively the same position for up to six hours at a time, which is how long I watch this marathon before I finally click off the set.

THE DENTIST CALLS Bob at his office the next day with the amnio results. Bob calls me immediately.

“Our baby is fine and he’s a boy.”

“A boy is wonderful,” I say, and I mean it, even though I had wanted a girl. This is mostly due to my experience with my little brother, who had tended to be on the uncontrollable side. I wasn’t sure I could handle a boy like that. I mean, I handled my brother all right by beating him up until he was bigger than I was, but I didn’t think that would be a sound child-rearing strategy.

On the other hand, with a girl I’d be likely to project onto her every minute childhood misery I’d ever experienced until she crumpled under the weight of my fear and grief. She wouldn’t

survive unless she proved to be especially resilient and could say things like, “Really, Mother, I don’t mind wearing the purple top even though the other girls are wearing blue ones.”

A boy could be a good thing for me. It will be much harder for me to make assumptions about a child of the opposite gender. And Bob, as a male, will be required to take on a greater role in understanding him. By the time Bob comes home in the evening, I’m ready to embrace him and our male progeny. Bob moves the television into the bonus room, the room above our garage, which we have been using mostly for storage. The TV is now near the back of the room and there are two worn out chairs we can sit in while we watch. There really isn’t any reason to go into this room other than to watch television or retrieve a stack of old *Sunset* magazines.

This is a big step, moving the television, almost as big as getting rid of the portable, which we did last month. But the biggest change is that we can’t have cable in the bonus room, or at least not without calling someone to hook it up. This means no more USA Network, Lifetime, WGN, and TNT.

Bob is resigned.

“I’ll miss seeing the Tour de France,” he says.

“We’ll go to France,” I say.

“People smoke a lot there. You won’t like it.”

That night I missed watching David Letterman in bed, but as I fell asleep I pictured our little boy sleeping next to us. I saw myself reaching out to hold him, no remote in sight. This boy will matter to us, and he will know it.

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### The Final Push

A lot of people don't really know how much television kids watch. You ask a mother or father about it and they'll typically say something like, "The children hardly ever watch. We're all just too busy."

But when I became a school teacher, I started giving the kids surveys about their TV viewing. The answers the kids gave were quite different from what their parents led me to believe.

"First I watch *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *The Nanny*, and *Full House* after school," a fifth grader revealed to me. "Then I have to do my homework, but I get to watch *Family Ties* and *Seinfeld* while my mom makes dinner. Then if my homework is done, we watch *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune* until my favorite programs are on."

"How many of those do you watch?" I asked, my tone friendly and nonjudgmental.

"Well, it depends on what day it is. On Wednesday, I have four programs in a row that I watch. If it's Monday, I usually play video games until I have to go to bed. On Saturday, I always watch cartoons."

The mother of this same child told me, “He watches a few educational shows. That’s all.”

It hardly seemed right to reprimand her, though, when I had spent the last week showing her child and his classmates four hours of films. If she had asked me if I thought this was a bit excessive, I would have shown her the school-approved catalog in which I had found them all and told her, “These are educational films.”

Showing films was the only way I could cope as a teacher, which is another reason I decided to work as a teaching assistant this year instead of being a full-time teacher. I work a few blocks from home. And this job gives me an opportunity to continue my surveys.

I used to think I was prying until I listened to the teacher next door to me at the school where I used to teach. He was a divorced man in his forties, handsome in a disheveled sort of way. He liked to flirt with the female teachers, who outnumbered the male teachers there six to one.

“How many of your parents sleep together in the same bed?” I heard him ask his fifth-grade class once. I moved closer to his door to listen. My class was watching a film on the Revolutionary War, so I had to strain to hear him. “That’s not too many,” he said, and I assumed he was counting hands. Then he began talking about the sleeping customs in other cultures. A clever way, I thought, to find out how many moms might be ripe for sleeping with him.

Well, I can be indirect, too. Today I’m asking the fourth graders in my reading group to make a plan for completing their chapter books.

“You’ll need to finish reading the book by Monday,” I say.

“We won’t have time,” Evan complains.

“Let’s see if I can help you make the time,” I say. I whip out a pad of paper, write down the kids’ names, and proceed to question

them about their television habits. I pull out a television schedule, too, in case they need to refer to it.

“Just list the programs or videos that you watch in the columns here, and you can put video games in this column,” I tell the group. “Then add up the minutes or hours on this side,” I say.

“But what if we sometimes fall asleep with it on so we don’t really know how much we watch?” Joe asks. “I always watch *Married . . . with Children* on the TV in my room.”

“Does it count if my mom is the one watching and I only look at it for a few minutes, like when there was a show about transsexuals?”

“I saw that, too,” Mark pipes in. “Wasn’t it cool when they showed the before and after pictures?”

Brian, a freckled child who watches at least thirty hours a week, prefers to turn his survey into a paper airplane. We talk about how much time they will actually have for doing their homework if they can simply eliminate a few programs.

“It’s not that easy,” Lenny says.

“Of course it isn’t,” I say, wondering if I will forgo watching *Friends* tonight.

I tuck the surveys into my bag to tabulate the results later.

Emma is the winner with one show a week. She is a bright little girl with curly black hair and dark brown skin. She is liked by her peers and her two best friends, Elizabeth and Shauna. “I have an art room,” she says. “Elizabeth comes over and we make things together.”

Emma’s parents are soft-spoken and friendly. I scrutinize their appearance, their mannerisms, their speech. This is what intelligent parents are like, I tell myself. They are giving me the strength to uphold my convictions. Emma is not ostracized by her peers because she spends more time making collages than watching

*Rugrats*. She is helping me stay on course, and I'm giving myself time to get there, to make this drastic change in my life. I remind myself of this as I head home in time to watch *Matlock*.

AS MONTH SEVEN rolls around, I look unmistakably pregnant. No one is afraid to comment on it and everyone does. Yesterday a stranger put her hand on my belly.

I look at my schedule and realize I'll have to cut out five more TV hours. I'm hoping Bob will forget about the schedule. I'm tempted to take it off the bulletin board.

"You'll just have to pick a program and stop watching it," he says when he comes home and finds me watching *Wheel of Fortune*.

"That's not the way it works," I tell him. He doesn't understand. I watch when I need to watch no matter what is on. If I'm going to quit, I'll have to learn how to deal with not watching even when I feel the need.

I glance at the stack of child-rearing books beside me that I haven't read. There's still time, I tell myself. At least I make time for exercise. I walk every day up into the hills high above our house. My legs are strong, my belly massive. I will watch ten hours a week now, I affirm to the hills in the distance. I will take good care of you, I tell my baby.

EVERYONE AT WORK gives me a shower the last week of the school year.

"When are you planning to come back?"

"I don't know," I say.

I don't tell them that I'm not coming back. Not to teaching, not to working for anyone else for a long time, if I can help it. But

I don't want to offend anyone, women and men who would never consider quitting their jobs to be at home with their kids, and parents who would quit if only they could afford it. I think of the women who were raised by mothers who stayed at home and hated it, moms who took out their anger on their kids, who didn't have money and a profession of their own, who resented their husbands and raised daughters who vowed never to be like their mothers.

Then there are those like me who felt the other way didn't work out very well either. My mother went back to work a week after I was born. "It was either that or get fired," she said. She was a political science professor back in the days when pregnancy in the workplace was an anomaly and paid maternity leave wasn't an option. She knew plenty of moms who stayed home and ended up living on Valium. Which way is right? I have no idea.

By staying home with my baby, I'll be putting myself to a difficult test when it comes to television. I've always dealt with my unscheduled time the same way, by watching TV. It's the way I handle isolation, and however poor of a tool it has been, it is familiar.

*My time will be my own until this baby arrives,* I think to myself as I pack up on my last day of school.

THE NEXT DAY I wake up at ten o'clock and linger in bed. I'm getting used to sleeping on my side, and in spite of my needing to make a snack at three a.m., I slept pretty well. I consider watching some of my favorite morning shows, *AM Northwest* or *Family Feud*, shows I've been missing because of work.

Instead I steer myself away from the bonus room and make breakfast. I'm halfway through cooking oatmeal when the phone rings. It's Bob, calling from work.

“My parents are coming. They want to buy us what we need for the baby.”

I drop the spoon I’m using to stir my oatmeal.

“When?” I ask.

“Next week!”

I forget about the television schedule, along with the parenting books I’d hoped to read, knowing that as the days of this pregnancy dwindle away, I’ll be getting the house ready for my in-laws and then going on a frantic buying spree with them when they arrive.

Bob’s parents are good at buying us things, and luckily, I’m good at receiving. “Oh, no, you shouldn’t have” is not a phrase that has ever rolled off my tongue. After having spent too many hours of my childhood wandering through warehouses with my mother picking out smoke-damaged clothing and being told “That’s too expensive,” it was a welcome relief to meet Bob’s parents and hear the words “Of course, you can have that. Have two! Have as many as you want.”

I feel a childlike glee whenever we’re with them. Even if we aren’t intending to shop, I need only to mention an item that might be fun to have and that’s all it takes to change the direction for our day.

The first time they came for a visit, I saw a giant terra-cotta pot of geraniums outside a restaurant downtown and commented that it might be nice to have something like that for our patio at home. Before I knew what was happening, we were at the nursery loading up the trunk and backseat with enough terra-cotta pots and flowers to fill five patios. On the way home, we passed a health club, and I mentioned that Bob and I really ought to be getting more exercise. Thirty minutes later, we had five-year memberships there. And that was when Bob and I were only living together.

When we became engaged, they took us to look at china patterns and silverware. They wanted to be sure we registered for real silver. The only silver I knew growing up was hocked by my brother when he was sixteen.

“If you don’t get all of the settings, we’ll buy you the rest,” Bob’s dad said. With this in mind, I was as excited as a child at Christmas. We sat down with a bridal registration clerk and listened to her helpful suggestions. “You might want to get matching linen napkins with that stoneware.” I felt like I was on *Let’s Make a Deal*. Surely, I could go for door number three and get the grand prize? Why just ask for napkins and casserole pans when we could be getting the things we really need for our home?

“What about patio furniture?” I asked. “Could we ask for patio furniture?”

“Why not ask for a couch and loveseat, too?” Bob asked in a sarcastic tone.

“Can we ask for that, too?” I ignored Bob’s fingers digging into the side of my leg. I guess he wasn’t comfortable with my ostentatious display of greed.

BY NOW I’M a seasoned shopper. Bob is wary when we arrive at Baby Depot with his parents.

“We don’t need to let them buy everything, you know,” he whispers to me as we get out of the car.

I nod and attempt to look sincere. Then I join his parents, leaving Bob to push the cart behind us. Bob’s parents are in their sixties and are still able to keep up with me. I quickly pick out a changing table, some cotton T-shirts with little snaps, and a stroller, which takes another thirty minutes to learn to open and close. I consider telling Bob’s parents that we really won’t need a crib, and

that our doctor thinks it's fine for the baby to sleep with us, but I decide to say nothing.

I figure I'll set up a nursery and then when people come over, they'll assume that our baby sleeps there. They'll be glad that we aren't like those weirdoes they might have heard about who think that it's okay to sleep with babies.

It's the same way with the television. I want to be able to say, "Yes, we have a television in our house. You see, we're just like you."

We throw some changing table pads and a baby backpack into the cart, a front pack and a car seat into a second cart.

"Here are the bottles," Bob's mother says.

"Thanks, but I'll only need them if I decide to pump," I say nervously. "I plan to breastfeed for a long time, at least a year or two. That's what my doctor recommends." I'm making a point of mentioning my doctor so she will sound like the extremist instead of me. The truth is that my doctor is as much of a zealot about breastfeeding as I am about being TV-free. She nursed her last child for two and a half years. I'm used to seeing babies on television raised on Evenflo, so I was shocked when she told me that she nursed that long.

Fortunately my mother-in-law doesn't look shocked. She just nods and listens politely. I've always liked that about Bob's mother. I could tell her that Bob and I are planning to raise our child in a nudist colony and she would smile and nod.

My father-in-law on the other hand has already walked away. Hearing the word *breastfeed* was difficult enough for him, but discussion of breast pumps and nursing toddlers put him over the edge. He comes back a few minutes later with a large baby swing, something he can comfortably discuss with me.

"This one has three settings," he says.

I smile. If my doctor is right, my baby is going to like my breasts a lot more than that swing.

WHEN I WAS in elementary school, I played a game with my brother and sister. The game was designed to find out what each of us was willing to do if the price was right. “Would you take off all of your clothes and run down to Collins Street if I gave you a million dollars?”

“Yes, I would. Definitely!” I said. We all agreed.

“Would you be willing to stay locked up in a tower with only crackers to eat for a week if you were given two million dollars?” my sister asked.

“No,” my brother answered, but I hesitated.

“Would I be allowed to have television?” I asked. “Because if I was locked up alone and living on crackers, I could survive if I had a television on the whole time.”

And so it was that much of my life I did have it on. By the time I was in elementary school, I had the TV schedule memorized. Television was a stronger influence on me than either of my parents, although my dad didn’t have much of a chance to influence me since he died when I was five and a half.

“I WON’T BE USING drugs for my labor and delivery, if I can help it,” I tell Peggy, my neighbor across the street. Her straight black hair is pulled back with a rubber band. I am entering the ninth month.

“Well, I felt the same way, but then I changed my mind when it felt as if a Mack truck was slamming into my back.”

But I was there when my cousin gave birth. She demanded

that labor be induced, and then received one intervention after another, until she could only lie there stuck on the hospital bed trying to push her baby out. Finally, the doctor used a vacuum device to suck the baby out of her.

I talk to Bob about my plan to deliver naturally and remind him that my sister did it that way.

“I was there for Trillium’s birth. Sapphire did it at home without any drugs.”

“You said she smoked pot during the entire labor.”

“Well, she did it without the *usual* drugs. And she didn’t smoke anything the last few hours,” I tell him in her defense. I don’t like it when he insults her. No one has the right to do that but me. Besides, with or without pot, my sister proved to be hearty enough at giving birth, although at a certain point, both she and my cousin wanted to give up. “I don’t want to do this anymore,” they both had pleaded. They wanted to change the channel and, from what I’ve seen, birth isn’t like that. The only way out of the pain is to go through it.

Besides, if I want to raise my child without the numbing effects of television, handling the rigors of childbirth without drugs feels like a good place to start. *Spoken like a real zealot*, Bob would say.

My doctor believes in me. She had her own babies at home even though she delivers other people’s babies in the hospital. I’m feeling confident as I enter the final phase. It’s the next twenty years that scare me: the actual raising of this child.

It is August and almost ninety degrees in Portland. Bob takes me to the coast. There’s a small pool at the rustic hotel where we’re staying. I’m possessed with a strange desire to do flips in the pool the way I did when I was at Girl Scout camp and our troop did a water ballet performance.

I swim out into the eight-foot depth, doing the breaststroke, my large belly no longer a heavy weight beneath me. I quickly curl my head under, bending at the waist while keeping my legs perfectly straight. I may be pregnant, but I execute a perfect flip, and it thrills me that I can still perform this way in the water. No one else is around to applaud, no camp counselor or sister scouts. Maybe if someone had been there they would have told me that pregnant women aren't supposed to be turning somersaults in the water. But I'm alone with my baby and it's on the second front curl that he makes his presence known. I feel him turn. He does his own little flip. I am stunned. I quickly do the flip again hoping he will flip back over, but I can tell that he's found a new position. I try the flip again and again, but he's apparently staying this way.

Bob is waiting in the room. I don't look at him. I say nothing. I am too worried, too mad at myself to speak. I open the cabinet where the television has been hiding.

"What are you doing?"

I channel surf, not answering him. *The Terminator* is on. It will do. I sink onto the carpet, still unable to tell Bob what has happened.

"What's the matter?"

I'm sitting cross-legged on the carpet, and there is a heaviness that wasn't there before. My baby is sitting up straight. His head is up like mine. Maybe his legs are crossed, too.

"I'll tell you later," I say. Arnold Schwarzenegger has entered the police station.

I try to concentrate on the death and mayhem.

Bob stalks out of the room. I don't want him to leave, but I don't have the energy to ask him to stay.

When he finally comes back, the movie is almost over.

"Are you okay?"

“Not really,” I say, and then I tell him, my voice shaking as I try to explain what happened. By the time I finish, Arnold Schwarzenegger is reborn from a pile of scrap metal.

Bob calls the doctor’s office and the nurse tells us to come back into town.

“Someone will see us tomorrow,” he says. “Maybe you’re mistaken.”

“Maybe,” I say. But I know I’m not mistaken. I know he has turned.

I watch *Ellen* and *X-Files*, but nothing helps. I’m supposed to be down to five hours a week, but Bob doesn’t say anything.

The next morning we drive back to Portland. My ankles begin to swell in the ninety-five-degree weather. The air conditioner can’t seem to muster the strength it needs to do the job. I know the feeling.

“YOU’RE RIGHT,” THE NURSE practitioner says. “He’s breech.”

We are staring at the ultrasound picture and I can actually see what she’s looking at. “Come back the day after tomorrow to see Dr. Hapfield. Maybe she can get him to turn. He isn’t due for three more weeks.”

I fall asleep on the carpet that night in the bonus room watching *Manhattan*. I don’t wake up until nine a.m. As I make my way to the bathroom, water spurts out of me.

“Maybe you’ve just peed in your pants,” the nurse says when I call her.

“I didn’t pee in my pants. I’m not even wearing pants,” I tell her. I’m holding a towel under my crotch because so much water is gushing out of me.

I call Bob's office and ask to have his meeting interrupted.

"The baby is coming," I say dramatically to his secretary, hoping she's picturing me in the later stages of labor. "Bob needs to come home now!"

The doctor on call confirms that the baby is still breech and tells me I will need a cesarean section. She looks at me cheerfully. "You can check into the hospital and have your baby in your arms in a couple of hours." She says this as if I'm about to get a new puppy. I am speechless. She's not my real doctor and I'm not ready to have this baby in two hours. I haven't started reading the baby books or watched the videotape on breastfeeding that the midwife brought to the class that I missed! My real doctor, Dr. Hapfield, is at home with her own babies today, but she meets us fifteen minutes after we call her.

"You might not have to have a cesarean if you go to OHSU."

"Isn't that the place where the medical students experiment on you?" I ask.

"The students are supervised by Dr. Lin, and he's one of the best," she says.

I think of my mother always wanting me to go to the beauty college to save money. "The students can cut your hair just fine," she would say. "Cyndi works there." Cyndi was one of our neighbors and her hair looked like straw.

"It's not what we planned," I tell Bob.

"It's the only place with a doctor willing to do a vaginal delivery for a first-time mother with a breech baby," he says.

We check in twenty minutes later.

"You'll have to have an X-ray, but if everything looks all right you can deliver him naturally," my doctor had said.

I don't want the X-ray, but the alternative seems worse.

The midwife arrives a few hours later at the hospital. She is

a busty hippie with three children of her own at home. She has brought coffee with her and a scone from Starbucks.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m having menstrual cramps,” I tell her.

“You’re in labor,” she says.

I consider this. If this is labor, then it’s more annoying than anything else. I was prepared for deep pain and drama, not this crampy feeling that makes me want to pull the pink and purple flower out of the midwife’s hair. Mostly, though, I’m irritable because I must push this baby out bottom first.

We are moved to a dingy room overlooking a Dumpster where I’m free to move around. My doctor has called ahead and talked with Dr. Lin, the supposed expert here whom I’ve never met, but who will be delivering the baby. He comes in a few minutes later. He has short black hair and unlined skin, but he’s probably at least forty, considering his level of expertise.

“I understand you don’t want an epidural or an episiotomy,” he says. “I want you to know that delivering a breech baby makes it difficult.”

“Have you ever delivered a breech without an epidural and an episiotomy?” my husband asks.

“Never with a first-time mother.”

“Well, I’m not really a first-time mother,” I say.

Bob stares at me, wondering what little secret I have hidden from him for all these years. I smile.

“It’s a past life thing,” I say. “I’ve had babies in my other lifetimes. That’s why it feels so familiar to me.”

Dr. Lin gives me a pained look, the kind of look people give my sister when she tells them why she will never let her children’s hair be cut. It’s a break in the energy flow, she says.

“I’ll check back with you,” Dr. Lin says.

“Past lives?” Bob says when the doctor is out of sight.

“At least I have a sense of humor,” I say, but I’m not laughing. The midwife comes back in.

“They’re going to leave you alone for a while, and it’s going to be a while,” she says as she crosses the room to turn on the television. I see Daryl Hannah half naked roaming through the woods in *The Clan of the Cave Bear*. I always wanted to see this movie, but right now, as the contractions are getting more intense, I feel angry that the midwife didn’t even ask me if I wanted to watch television.

“Turn it off,” I bark at her.

“I just thought it might help,” she says.

“Well, it doesn’t,” I say, and I’m surprised to hear myself say it. Here I am in pain stuck in this drab room and a movie I’ve always wanted to see is on. Daryl Hannah is crouching beside a boulder. I’ve been told that her legs are unshaven in this movie, a Hollywood first, but I don’t care at the moment and this fact alone I find astonishing. Maybe it’s a sign. *We will be TV-free*, I tell myself before the next contraction starts.

The midwife turns off the set. I don’t like her very much right now. She’s probably a TV addict, used to delivering babies with *Home Improvement* on in the background.

LABOR GOES SLOWER than I expected it would, at least in the beginning. When I finally reach six centimeters, I find that it’s best to grip Bob around the shoulders as hard as I can with each contraction.

“Why don’t you try gripping this instead,” the midwife says, pointing to an orange vinyl chair. “I think you’re hurting Bob.”

I glare at her and move away from the chair. I’m starting to

despise her. “Bob’s feelings aren’t exactly my number one priority right now,” I tell her. I grip him harder with the next contraction and she winces. I glare at her again and she goes away.

Good riddance as far as I’m concerned. Let her go to another room to stare at Daryl Hannah’s unshaven legs. I grip Bob again. He doesn’t complain. Then, as the contractions become more intense, I instinctively press my short hospital gown against my crotch, hoping to keep any of my bodily fluids from dripping onto the floor. I shudder each time I do this, and I’m taken by surprise, the same kind of surprise I experienced when I was nine and I climbed up and down the metal poles on the grade school playground. I press again with the next contraction and it happens again. So little is required, and it happens over and over.

I lose track of the time as each contraction brings another orgasm, and with each orgasm I know I am getting closer and closer to having my baby. Who needs a big-screen TV? I doubt Daryl Hannah can have this many orgasms in an hour.

Bob and I get in the shower together before another nurse can come in to check on me again. I kiss him forcefully after so many orgasms and so much pain. Natural childbirth is not for the prissy.

When we come out of the bathroom, the midwife checks me again.

“You’re fully dilated. They’re going to want to move you to the operating room now.”

I don’t like that they call it the operating room.

At ten centimeters, I’m ready to push the baby out in the way that feels natural for me, squatting like the South American women I saw in the childbirth film my sister gave me. But my baby is breech and therefore considered high risk and I’m at a

learning hospital. They don't want me to do this myself. I'm told I must lie flat on my back while twelve student doctors file in to stare at my vagina.

Unfortunately, as soon as I am on my back, I lose the urge to push. I feel almost nothing.

I look up at the midwife.

"It's up to you now to push anyway, when we tell you, whether you feel like it or not." I look around at the faces of the young men and women with their scrubs, ready to don masks. They're kids really, kids who have probably never been in this room with a woman who wasn't drugged and made ready for surgery.

I will myself to push, but it doesn't seem to be enough.

"Try again when I tell you," the midwife says.

I stare at the doctor leaning over me. I look at the clock and know that time is running out. They will C-section me. That's what they do here. They warned me. I will have a big ugly scar and will have to lie around convalescing for weeks.

What about my past lives? What about all the body memory stuff? Where is my ancestral help when I need it? The problem is that I'm holding back. It's because I'm scared, but not of having a baby. I'm scared of becoming a mother once he's here. That's why I started doing flips in the water. That's why he turned. That's why I can't get him out now. I'm still not ready. He wasn't due for three more weeks. I didn't get a chance to read all those books about how to raise the perfect child or pick another name for him besides Casey. I didn't even get a chance to get used to being without television.

I want to explain to the doctor that I'm holding back because I'm having a boy and it terrifies me. I look into his eyes. They are dark brown and piercing. He meets my gaze and I know he is not

thinking about his next game of golf the way other doctors do. He is thinking about me and this baby. I clutch his arm.

“Did you have a good relationship with your mother?” I ask him.

He looks surprised but his gaze remains steady. “I had a great relationship with my mother,” he says matter of factly. “I still do. We get along well.”

I let go of his arm and take a deep breath as I let his words sink in. He gets along well with his mother. That means that he probably never sold her belongings without her permission or used her house for a methamphetamine lab the way my brother did with our mother. He probably moved away from home before he was twenty-eight, too, and not because he had to go to prison.

I close my eyes and take another deep breath. “Come on, Casey,” I say. “It’s time to come out.”

I push with all of my strength and courage, knowing that when this baby comes out, he might tear me open, but I’m getting him out because we’re going to make it. We’re going to be okay together. And we won’t need Daryl Hannah or *Sesame Street* to do it.

CASEY ARRIVES AT 7:05 in the morning, blue eyed with delicate blond hair that is sticking straight up. I can barely contain my joy. He is perfect and I know it absolutely. I stroke his tender back and long to hold him forever, but no sooner do I feel him against my chest than he is whisked away from me. Another horde of student doctors poke and prod him before they finally give him back to me an hour later, declaring us both to be fine. He latches on to my breast perfectly and nurses as though his life depended on it, and I believe it does.

We stare at each other, love at first sight, and as they wheel me down the hall, I am still looking into his eyes. I look away only for a second when we enter my room, long enough to catch a glimpse of *The Price Is Right* on the set that my roommate is watching. But it doesn't interest me in the slightest because I already have my prize.