

Domestic Bliss

By Carly Norton

“So, when are you going to start giving me some grandbabies?” my boyfriend Zac’s mom asked us (*me*) over dinner one night when we still lived in our hometown. She said this with a laugh, but her eager eyes and the inflection in her voice insinuated she was only half-kidding. I was 19 years old. Zac and I had not even been dating for a full year yet. “You know,” she continued, “both Melissa and I got pregnant at 19 and had our first babies at 20. It’s on you to keep up the family tradition!” She laughed again, and the momentary silence that followed hung painfully in the air. Finally, at a complete loss for words, I broke out into a loud, nervous laughter with what was most certainly undertones of mania. His mom looked across the dinner table at me with the first of many inquisitive smiles that would follow throughout our relationship; disappointment growing a little bit each year that we continued our life together with no answer to her question.

“Look, you can watch my contractions!” Zac’s sister, Melissa, exclaimed as she pointed to the screen beside her, the white lines forming oddly shaped mountains across a black background. “I had the epidural, so I can’t feel anything. Should be a piece of cake,” she beamed, throwing her head back in a light, anticipatory laughter. The excitement in the busy hospital room was palpable; nurses and their clipboards filed in and out as Zac’s family eagerly awaited the arrival of Melissa’s third child. As I stood in

the midst of the action, black and white spots slowly crept across my line of vision and the bones seemed to disappear from my limbs. I blinked slowly, trying to stay steady on my Jell-O limbs. Their happy family banter drifted into white noise as I tensely watched the white and black computerized mountains form steep new peaks across the screen.

“Carly, are you okay? You look a bit pale.” Zac’s mom’s voice snapped me back into reality. She looked at me, eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“Oh no, I’m good! I’m just going to run to the washroom, I’ll be right back.” I smiled in what I’m sure resembled more of a grimace as I headed out of the room into the hallway of the Grande Prairie hospital maternity ward. I had barely made it two strides toward the safe haven of the hospital bathroom when suddenly I heard murderous screams bellow from down the hall. I instinctively slumped against the wall outside Melissa’s room, and my body slid to the ground. A nurse walking by, evidently unfazed by the murder happening on her watch, paused and looked at me, sternly.

“Are you okay?” It was more of a demand than a question. “Put your head between your knees right now. I think you might faint.”

After the baby was born, Zac’s mom brought the tiny, swaddled bundle of joy out to us in the hospital waiting room. Zac, now an uncle for the third time, was a natural at the whole baby-thing. He smiled and cooed as he walked around the room rocking his new niece, Makenna. As I watched him, I became acutely aware that this was one of those times women refer to when they joke that their “ovaries ached.” I knew I was supposed to look at Zac, handsome as ever, comfortable and happy holding this new

baby and feel some sort of yearning or excitement for the day he would possibly hold *our* baby. My ovaries felt nothing. I was sweating and glad to be wearing black to disguise it. Once Zac held his new niece, I could sense the expectancy – it was supposed to be my turn. I sat stiffly in a chair the way children do when given babies to hold and awkwardly put out my arms. Though I'm sure now it was imagined, I could have sworn I felt his entire family hold their breath as Zac passed me the fragile newborn. I practiced my grimace-smile as a room full of expectant eyes stared down at me.

As my and Zac's relationship progressed over the years, friends around us started to live out the small-town dream: get married, buy a house, get pregnant. Mom would stay at home and look after the children, maybe run a multi-level-marketing scheme on the side, while Dad worked to fulfill his fatherly duty as the breadwinner. All over social media, everywhere I looked, someone was flashing a diamond ring or shooting pink or blue smoke out of some orifice. The expectant questions didn't just come directed at us from Zac's mother – everyone in a small town demands to know when you are going to take the next step, it becomes a go-to topic of conversation. I didn't have an answer, nor did I care to find one, but I began to worry that Zac might be feeling the pressure differently than I was. Unsure how to broach the subject cautiously, I resorted to my direct, albeit often intimidating, manner of questioning.

“Zac, you would never propose without talking to me first, *right?*” Like the nurse in the hospital – this was demand, not a question. “You wouldn't surprise me with something like that? I don't want to, but honestly, I would have no fear in saying no. I'm

serious. Please. *Do not put us through that.*” Zac looked at my ominous face, paused questioningly, and then broke into his charming, naturally wide smile, shaking his head in amusement.

“Don’t you think I know you well enough by now?”

We had been together for four years, but our life in Grande Prairie felt like it came to a stand-still in my early 20s. I felt a deep yearning, but it wasn’t to be a wife or a mother. I wanted to quit my job in finance and go back to school for something I felt passionate about. I wanted to move to a bigger city. I needed a change. My yearning was to get out before the small-town dream got me.

“Zac, I want to move. You can come with me or not, but I cannot stay here.”

It often felt like I was missing some sort of innate gene that I, as a woman, should have had, but I came by my aversions naturally. My parents weren’t married. The institution of marriage baffled them, and they had no problem telling us this from an early age. I lost track of how many weddings my parents RSVP’d that our family “regrettably, had other commitments that day and would not be able to attend.” My mother told my high school boyfriend and I that if we ever considered marriage, she would pay for us to go on any pseudo-honeymoon trip we wanted, anywhere in the world, as long as we promised to never sign the marriage paperwork or have a wedding. *God, just save all of us the hassle.* She laughed herself into hysterics when I told her about my near-fainting episode in the hospital and shook her head, wide-eyed, anytime I brought up Zac’s mom’s inquiries about when I would “give them grandbabies.”

“Honey, you come by it honestly. After I had your sister, I was so mortified to go out in public and be seen walking a stroller – *me, with a baby* – that I honestly considered covering my face so no one would recognize me. God forbid.”

My mom, a second-wave feminist, eventually quit running her businesses and replaced them with the many other full-time jobs that we lumped together, ungratefully, under the label “Mom.” She chauffeured us to and from sports, filled up every free inch of her day planner with lists and appointments, made sure that she arranged her day to meet us when we got off the school bus, and had the house clean with dinner on the table every night by 6:00 PM when my dad would waltz through the door. One day, over my pre-ballet snack at our kitchen island, the late-afternoon sun beamed through the windows as I told her about a writing assignment that I had done that day in elementary school. The assignment required me to describe our nuclear-family roles – hers, I mentioned nonchalantly, I had described as a “housewife.” She abruptly halted what she was doing and turned slowly to face me, her head cocking angrily to one side.

“What did you just say?” she demanded. “A housewife? Is that what you think I am?” I sensed immediately that I had said something gravely wrong. My mother’s naturally relaxed demeanor broke as her face morphed between expressions of shock, horror, and rage. She struggled to maintain composure as she awaited my response. My eyes widened and my entire body stiffened, slowly inching my torso backward off the stool as if I could distance myself from her accusing eyes. “A housewife?” she demanded again. “That’s what you told your teacher I do? That’s what you THINK I do all day?”

She didn't wait for my response this time, instead stomping into the office next to our kitchen. I could hear the rummaging and slamming of the desk drawers. She returned with an overflowing file folder labeled: "Brenda." That file, and my mother, exploded on the kitchen island. Hands planted down on the spread pages, she began. "Over the span of fifteen years I ran three separate businesses. Once I had you three and could no longer keep up with my businesses *and* be the mother that I wanted to be for you – the mother *I* never had – I went back to school for my social work degree until that too, became too much with three children," her voice increasingly escalated. "I volunteer at The Women's Shelter. I am the project coordinator for the Safe and Caring Communities Project. I am the president of the non-profit board who runs your entire dance studio. That aside, do you have any idea what it takes to *just* be a mother? Do you have any idea how many thankless "jobs" I do in a day?" she paused; the eye of the storm. "I am not just a "housewife"," emphasis in finger-quotes, she looked me directly in the eye, "and I have *never* been a goddamn housewife."

I sat in silence, stunned.

During my first year of college, the year after we relocated, I came home one day to the basement suite I shared with Zac in Kelowna. As usual, I began our evening routine of starting dinner in the kitchen while telling him excitedly about my day – my mind exploding with terms like heteropatriarchy, hegemony, and intersectionality. I was taking my first Gender Studies class and it was blowing my mind. There was no way to describe it other than I felt a fire in my belly I hadn't even known existed. Something

about this class just *clicked*— it was giving me a new way to make sense of the world; sense of myself. Zac listened to me ramble on as he watched television in the adjacent living room.

“Anyways... I think I have a crush on a girl in my class? Tonja. I don’t know,” I mused lightheartedly as I chopped vegetables. “She’s like... intense, but hot. You know? She makes me almost... *nervous*? I like, get butterflies around her. It’s the weirdest thing.” I shook my head, laughing out loud.

“Mmhmmmm?” Zac’s distracted voice droned from the dark living room, barely audible over the sports announcer.

The relationship Zac and I built a foundation on in Grande Prairie never seemed to come together in quite the same way once we moved to Kelowna. We slowly drifted in different directions and it became clear that things between us were shifting. My life with Zac was simple – I knew how to tick the domestic, happy-girlfriend boxes. I was good at it. I provided unending emotional support. I kept up on sports stats I didn’t care about, and threw a mean Superbowl party. I planned, organized, cooked, and cleaned. I settled easily into a role I thought I was supposed to play. But gradually, as I found my footing in this new city and felt a change within myself and the direction of my life, it began to feel as if I were playing some odd, adult-version of the children’s game, “House.” *Could I do this forever? Was I happy? What was missing?* After five and a half years together, we heartbreakingly called it quits.

Two years after our breakup, I sat across from Zac over dinner in a dimly lit restaurant. Having long since accepted that the many reasons behind our separation were neither a fault of mine nor his, we were devoted to maintaining our earnest friendship.

“Well, I wanted you to hear this from me first rather than through the grapevine,” I began, the nine ounces of red wine having calmed my nerves only slightly. “I’m dating someone,” I paused anxiously, “her name is Tonja.” We sat in an unusual silence as I searched his expressionless face in the flickering candlelight and waited for his reaction. Finally, Zac’s face broke into a gentle and questioning grin as he shook his head.

“What do you want me to say? Am I supposed to act surprised?”