

An Excuse I've Been Working On for Awhile

Joey Franklin

I put bras in the dryer and forget to refill the toilet paper, and I left the milk on the counter this morning. Again. But I ask for directions and say “I love you,” and I almost never leave hair on the soap. Which means, I suppose, I’m not entirely without hope.

I wonder about the implication that most men are just hopeless. And I wonder more about manhood in general—that infernal euphemism: asserted, displayed, defended, envied—cut off in a jealous rage.

I am haunted by the myth and misogyny of “manhood.” Phallic shadows of who I’m “supposed” to be lurk everywhere: in a greeting card I once saw with a large control panel of buttons and levers on the cover labeled “her” and a single, red on/off switch on the inside of the card labeled “him.”

In the subtle frustration of the housewife, whoever she is, who first applied the name “Better than Sex” to chocolate cake.

In the advice that my wife, Melissa, received during our engagement: “The most important phrase you need to learn,” someone told her, “is ‘Not tonight, honey. I’ve got a headache.’”

What’s more horrifying is the possibility that the stereotypes are the truest thing about me, that the haunting shadow is my own, that Lauryn Hill underestimated the problem when she doo-whopped: “Some guys are only about that thing.”

Another euphemism: *that thing*. The track of one-track minds, the slime that fills the gutter, the be-all and end-all of Freudian masculinity—think prisons, frat parties, locker rooms—the play-

grounds of unleashed libido, the proving grounds of male sexual aggression, boys being boys.

I am kept up at night by that phrase—boys will be boys—not worrying, but washing dishes. It's the reason I don't own an Xbox, that I don't watch UFC on Pay-Per-View, that I try not to turn my head when the glint in the hair of an attractive woman catches my eye. It's also the reason I remember socks when I dress my two-year-old, the reason I jump up to change so many dirty diapers, and the reason I fold the towels in thirds the way Melissa wants them folded. On the weekends, it's the reason I leave the macaroni and cheese in the box and cook chicken masala, rosemary baguettes, and ginger-orange pork with cashew and sesame asparagus; and each night at bedtime it's the reason I sing off-key lullabies to our boys in the dusky light of their bedroom.

And, no, I'm not just trying to cut down on her headaches.

Though that's definitely part of it.

And perhaps that's why I feel guilty wanting a pat on the back. That, and the fact that whatever I do around the house in the morning, after work, and on the weekends feels like little more than a shrug of the shoulders, a sheepish apology for my unavoidable maleness. At worst, the blurring of traditional gender roles only reaffirms what I'm trying to subvert. I end up merely "pitching in" around my own house, helping with "her" work, confirming my own damning dominance while incurring the down-the-nose glances of some women who find my efforts quaint, even calculating.

If Melissa is gone for the evening, some of her friends wonder what I'll eat. When I take the boys to the grocery store, old women nod pleasantly and say things like, "Looks like you have your hands full without Mom." If I bake something for a dinner party, friends raise their eyebrows. "Wow, he cooks," they say, as if I'd not only learned to roll over and shake but to fetch the newspaper and play dead. At best I'm a permanent understudy, relief pitcher, babysitter to my own kids, sous-chef, second fiddle.

A guy at work finds out Melissa stays at home all day with the boys, and he says with wide eyes, "If I were her, I'd divorce your butt."

A woman at church hears me compliment Melissa, and she

says, "When my husband says something like that, I know he wants something."

I don't.

Not exactly.

I mean, I do.

Of course I do.

But it's more complicated than *that*. As a child, I saw enough of my own dad sitting around after dinner with a newspaper to know that I would wash dishes as a married man. I saw the way my mother folded her arms across her chest and looked at my father when he wasn't paying attention. I imagine how my mom must have felt working twelve-hour days and running a house with five kids and trying to be patient with a husband who seemed always sick and between jobs. To be a good husband, I concluded, was to not make extra work for your wife.

But their situation was so different from ours. Work for my mother was never a choice; we would have starved otherwise. For Melissa and me, it's a choice we've made. But it's a choice that seems unfair, and I'm afraid of making her feel used, put out, and exploited. No matter how much I do around the house or with our kids, I still get up in the morning and go to work to sit in my cubicle, feet on my desk, a half-eaten chocolate bar beside me, an endless supply of blank Word documents to keep me busy. Meanwhile, Melissa is at home cleaning macaroni and cheese out of the carpet, fending off telemarketers, scrubbing out the sink, and finishing the dishes from one meal just in time to start cooking the next. Her only intellectual stimulus? NPR playing in the background.

One evening, sitting on the couch after the boys had fallen asleep, Melissa turned to me and said something like, "My sister sings. My mother sews. You write. But what do I do?" We sat for a moment looking at each other. She continued: "Sometimes I feel like I don't know who I am." And so this is it. The heart of the problem—the reality that we must live with if we continue like this—is that any success of my own will come at the sacrifice of Melissa's interests and aspirations; every free minute for me is a minute stolen from her. Continue as we are, and I will progress in my career and she will stay at home, her world melding into a long blur of Sesame Street mornings, peanut butter and jelly after-

noons, and Oprah rerun evenings, sprinkled occasionally with visits to the supermarket and the pediatrician's office and the thrift store.

What can we do?

She could go to work. Though she says she doesn't want to. And since we don't want to put our kids in daycare, one of us has to stay at home.

I could do what my friend Matt has done.

Matt's wife, Linda, just started her third year as a Ph.D. candidate. Matt stays at home, does much of the cooking, the cleaning, and the grocery shopping, and homeschools their two boys while Linda teaches composition courses and works overload hours for the department. They both seem at ease with the situation. Matt relishes the time he gets with their boys, and Linda enjoys the community and recognition that come with academia. And I know a half-dozen other couples doing the same thing—modern dads, comfortable in their rejection of traditional gender roles, sensitive to millennia of sexism that have given them an unfair advantage over their wives, and liberated women free to explore and succeed in their chosen careers. At least that's what it looks like to me. I don't know if Matt pulls his hair out some mornings, wondering if the four walls of his home aren't closing in on his personality. And surely there are days when Linda would rather pitch her books out the window and head home to be with her boys than stand in front of another class of bored freshmen.

But it seems to me that their situation just reverses our own—one spouse acquiescing to the other. I'm frantic for some kind of middle ground where every dish I wash and diaper I change doesn't turn into an apology for being male, where I can buy Melissa flowers and rub her feet without feeling as if I'm buttering her up, where everyone gets some of what they want and the kids still get what they need. I don't think Linda feels guilty when she leaves in the morning, and I don't think she should. I don't think either of us should. The reality is that, if someone is to be at home with the children, it seems there *is* no middle ground.

So why do I still worry about it?

Because of my grandfather.

My mother shook her head at my father, but she raised her voice about my grandfather, her own father. He worked in metal and wood, yoke and plow, paint and gravel. Up before the sun, out before breakfast, and home after dark, he was, to my mother, the ideal male, the type of man she wishes she had married. In addition to working full time, running a small farm on the side, and leading a small Mormon congregation in Idaho, he took the time to teach my mother how to run a chainsaw, train dogs, repair fences, and dig ditches. Grandma cooked and canned and sewed and brooded over the children and, the way my mother describes it, waited every night to embrace my grandfather when he came through the door. The divisions of labor were simple, clear, and deep. There was no middle ground. There didn't need to be.

But I still wonder about a middle ground. This is not Idaho and the year is not 1950. I am not my grandfather and Melissa is not my grandmother.

So what if we both worked? Passed our boys back and forth? Hired some help?

My friend Jill, a Ph.D. candidate and young mother, once asked me what I do for childcare and then stopped herself. "Oh, I forgot about your wife," she said, not angry, but exasperated, not at me, but at her situation. She and her grad-student husband, Christian, pay top dollar for childcare and constantly juggle their own coursework with the needs of their eighteen-month-old daughter. Standing in the hall with an armful of books, bag over her shoulder, and a note from her babysitter in her hand, she furrows her brow. "I want a wife," she says, and sighs. "Where can I get a wife?"

Liz and Christian, Linda and Matt, Melissa and I—we're all approaching the questions of marriage and division of labor differently, and that may be the end of it. Regardless of the specter of social expectation and tradition, what works for Jill and Christian will work for Jill and Christian, and what works for Linda and Matt will work for Linda and Matt, and what works for Melissa and me will—

—well—

—it will continue making me feel guilty, and keep me chopping vegetables, vacuuming the living room, folding laundry, and

bringing her flowers for “no reason at all.” And when people ask, “What does your wife do?” I will never add “just” to “stays home with the kids.”