

# WE SMILED AND NODDED

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Say you are at a really great time and place in your life.

Say you're actually making money as an actress—not a lot, but enough to rent the room in the house in Salinas with two other young actress-types where you all spend mornings in pajamas, drinking peach tea and throwing the *I Ching*. Enough money to have the futon on the floor, posters of Greece and Ireland on the walls; enough for the shared pizza dinners, bottles of cheap wine, the laughter and longing, the flirts and trysts and intrigues after the curtain falls at the theatre each night.

Say you're sleeping with, if not exactly dating, a professional clown who lives in San Francisco. Professional clowns being what they are, he is funny and strong, handsome and off-handedly kind, if not exceptionally honest or responsible. Or particularly interested in some long-term, committed relationship with you. But the sleeping-together is good; even if the sheets often hold memories of other women, even if his lesbian roommates roll their eyes and murmur at your presence in the flat; and it is the sleeping-together you're after, isn't it, the sex, not the promise of some long-term, committed relationship? Yes, of course it is.

Say you get the female lead in the next play at the repertory theatre where you are working: Shakespeare's wife, the long-suffering Anne Hathaway, the woman who bore the great playwright three children only to be left in his will the "second-best bed." Say also that you get the phone call, the certified letter, the offer to attend the National Theatre Conservatory: a graduate acting program directed by the vaunted actor Tony Church, founding member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Say you finally know you are on your way to the career you have dreamed of as a serious actor, directly en route to the fame, the films, the fun.

Say you miss a period. And you miss another.

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You finally steel yourself and slink through a grocery store, locate and purchase a pregnancy test, wait until the first morning pee. The pinkly positive strip proclaims you are a little pregnant. You believe this could just possibly be a mistake, so you go to the house tucked away down some back alley, and partake of a free pregnancy test you saw advertised in the local paper. There are small crosses on the walls and pamphlets on wooden tables in the rooms. This is where the nice lady with a gray bun and ridiculous little round glasses gives you the exact same damn strip, and you pee and it's the exact same damn result. She asks you, so very kindly, what your plans are.

There is no thought, no hesitation.

Well. Perhaps there had been some thought during those two months of no menstruating. During the time when you opened up the acceptance letter to the NTC and started learning your lines for *A Cry of Players*, maybe there was a teensy bit of cogitation back then, the sort of *what if* thinking that happens late, late at night when it's far past the appropriate hour to call either your best friend or the San Francisco clown.

To the gray-bunned, bespectacled kindly lady, there is no hesitation at all. But, she asks, have you considered adoption? There are so many, many people who want a baby, and you're a beautiful girl, and what you're planning to do is a sin, it's a sin to take a life, don't you know that?

You flee away down the alley, furious and humiliated; belatedly realizing what that "free" pregnancy test meant. Free to pee on a strip in order to receive freely given advice and condemnation for what is, the last time you checked, a *free choice*, one guaranteed by the Supreme Court, thank-you-God-and-Roe and all the women who went before.

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And then what.

Then you go to the beach and walk and walk and walk. It would be nice to say you think while you walk, but you don't. Your mind has vacated the premises as far as you can tell; it has taken off for parts unknown, is missing in action, away, with a "Closed for the Season" sign left behind.

And yet this is not entirely accurate, is it? It is not "not thinking" you do. It is more you engage in an avoidance of thinking the one thought that is so huge it could crush you. As if thought had weight or heft and could damage you just by proximity. So, you think about anything else. You choose, for the moment, Thought-Lite. You wonder if your new Patagonia Stand Up shorts make your butt look good; you consider whether you'd like to go a matinee movie or spend the extra money for an evening show. You remember: Hey, I need to get the oil checked in my car.

And as the days go by, it's even more accurate to say you engage not in thought-lite, nor even in non-thought that is light and quiet and healing like meditation might be, but rather fall into a not-thinking that is a blank fugue state. A not-thinking where the brain shuts down unpleasantly, freezes, really, and there you are alone in Denny's after an evening rehearsal, staring at the shimmering haze on top of the worst cup of coffee you've ever tasted, the slow thud of your heart shoving at the left side of your chest as if some hard fist is punching you repeatedly from inside your body, punishing you.

This is not-thinking as self-protection: shut-down, shut-out, shut-UP those thoughts of the thing, the possibility, no—call it what it actually is—the *child* growing inside your body as you don't think, as your mind is frozen but your body is doing and doing and doing: running the beach, washing the car, cleaning your room, or eating box after box of Kraft macaroni and cheese, more for the greasy comfort of the food in your mouth than for anything else.

There is something to be said for the not-thinking, truth be told. Something to be said for letting the body move without excessive reflection to mar its perfect, athletic symmetry. Of course that is exactly what got you into this delicate state, isn't it? Not a great deal of excessive reflection back two months ago in the sheets that smelled of perfumes not your own, under the man who never met your eyes, around the time you were ovulating.

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You begin to have the most fantastic dreams. Your body is in full baby-making mode, apparently, because all you want to do is sleep. And eat. Your breasts hurt tremendously, too. Other than that, every part of you (except your mind) is absolutely content to be pregnant, for there is not one whit of sickness to mar your days, no pimping of the face and chest, nor any particular crabbiness, all of which were symptoms that plagued your sisters during their pregnancies.

But you dream. Boy, howdy, do you dream. Great, epic, Technicolor dreams of boggling duration and depth. There is one that comes again, and again. You are walking out in an African savanna, the grass gold around your waist, heat shimmering and dancing in waves around you. There is a lone baobab tree in the distance. You are content to walk at a leisurely pace towards the inviting tree, hoping for a little shade, but out of nowhere comes an elephant. It is huge. It is angry. It flings up its trunk and tail and starts to trot towards you, the ground shaking under its thick legs. Its little eyes are red with rage, and you try to run-run-run for the baobab, but its shade and safety recede away from you, and you wake up, sweating and panting.

You tell your Ethiopian housemate about this dream. She is dark and slim and wears her hair bound in colorful clothes. She is, she says, fourteenth in line to the Ethiopian crown, and you have no reason not to believe her. She is also, she says, a witch. All the women of her line are; it is common knowledge. You have no reason to disbelieve this, either.

You tell your actress-princess-witch housemate about your dream. She looks at you and cocks her head. Have you ever seen an elephant, she asks. You say, well, sure, in a zoo when I was little. I fed it a peanut and it wrapped its trunk around my wrist. My mom took a picture. I loved that elephant. I like elephants, you insist, your voice rising. Why is it chasing me in my dream?

She looks right into your eyes and you have a nervous moment of wondering if elephants, in Ethiopian dream-interpretation, are an immediate indication of pregnancy in the dreamer. You have not told anyone you are pregnant.

Elephants are very scary, she says. Elephants in real life—wild, unpredictable ones—they are terrifying.

Well. No shit.

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Say you are not a total asshole. Not a complete loser. Not a woman who would simply run right off to the abortionist without a thought or worry in her head. Abortion as birth control, that sort of person. You are a college-educated woman, twenty-two years old, gainfully employed (and yes, being an actress is gainful employment, despite what your father thinks). You are a grown-up. Sort of.

So the days go by, and you finally begin to think. Your mind makes a reluctant reappearance in your life, and you ponder the pros and cons of having a baby at this tender age. Twenty-two, in your book, seems ridiculously young. Immature. Unreliable. You ponder single-mom-dom. You imagine carting a kid around.

You call the clown, but he is off touring in Europe, one of his lesbian housemates informs you—didn't he tell you? You get off the phone. You're pretty sure he had told you he was going off on a clown tour in Europe. So he didn't call to say goodbye. It was cool. He didn't owe you anything.

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In rehearsal, you work with an adorable seven-year-old girl whose honey hair, blue eyes and high cheekbones match your own. She plays your daughter, and you cuddle this girl during breaks, and play hide-and-go-seek with her. You hold her hand, even when you're not on stage. Her mother, a proud stage-parent, tells you how wonderful you are with kids. You—in an amazing moment of either deep self-knowledge or utter self-deception—say, yeah, I'd like to have kids someday.

The afternoon rehearsals are killers. It is then when you most want to sleep deeply, and one afternoon, about two and a half months into your pregnancy, you stagger home to your futon during the lunch break and crash into a knocked-up stupor.

Again, you dream.

You walk down a country road. The sun shines warm on your head. The grass is green; there are flowers in the fields. You walk and walk, and come to a fork in the road. You stop, and breathe lightly. The air is cool and clean, the sky is blue. It is a beautiful day.

You turn your head to the right. Standing there, about twenty feet away, is a small girl-child. She smiles at you.

You turn your head to the left. A *sinistra* it is called in Italian, which should be a hint but isn't. On the left-hand road is everything you have ever wanted from your life: fame, primarily. Great fortune. Acknowledgement. A huge career as an actress. Hollywood and an Oscar.

You look back at the girl. It is right at this moment your waking/sleeping self finally reaches a clear decision. You say *I'm so sorry* to your daughter, and she—in what you later come to think of as a remarkable and loving moment—smiles directly into your eyes and nods at you. She turns and walks away, down the road. You glance towards the left-hand road,

the road where your future lies, and when you look back, she and her road are gone.

You slide deep into the first dreamless sleep you've had in weeks. When at last you arise from your slumbering, you pause on the way out the door to make a quick phone call. You barely hear the screen door slap shut behind you as you run down the street to make the next rehearsal. You slide back onstage and into your life.

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In the future you will wonder at the clarity of that last pregnant dream. The future you chose will be marked not by overwhelming success as an actor but rather by numerous and substantial failures, both personal and professional. It will contain years of wanting to end your life, which will have nothing to do with having had an abortion and everything to do with your desperate desire to be celebrated and seen; a hunger that would leave you half-dead and starved for the right kind of nourishment. It will hold decades of therapy. A *sinistra*, indeed.

You will tell yourself, as you move around the country in a restless peregrination of hopes and hopes dashed, you made the dream up. You will say, "Oh, wasn't *that* convenient?" You will insist you were indeed a complete asshole. You will try on the idea of being a murderer, and reject it. You will try on the idea of making a huge mistake—and reject that also.

Say you will eventually find yourself in other really great times and places. You will grow rhubarb in a small mountain town, and learn to skate ski. You will chase squirrels from your bird feeders, sing with a local choir, volunteer to read to kids at a nearby elementary school. There will be laughter, world travel, and deep art with the right guy, a physicist-engineer-photographer who will be about as far from a professional clown as you could imagine. You will be seen and loved enough.

Say you will be a tremendous dog-mom to a trio of Rottweilers who will teach you more about forgiveness than any Christian study ever will, more about being joyful in the present moment than any amount of meditation, and as much about good parenting as you are probably capable of absorbing.

You will return to the dream of the forked road again and again but you will never truly disbelieve its veracity. You will, at your deepest and most private center, never doubt you saw your daughter that day; and when you had made your best choice she gave you the staggering gift of grace.