



Keep Me Posted

By Lisa Beazley

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Sisters Cassie and Sid Sunday have not done a bang-up job of keeping in touch. In their defense, it hasn't been easy: life veered in sharply different directions for the once-close sisters. Today, beautiful and big-hearted Sid lives an expat's life of leisure in far-off Singapore, while harried, iPhone-clutching Cassie can't seem to make it work as a wife and a mom to twin toddlers in Manhattan.

It doesn't help that Sid spurns all social media while Cassie is addicted to Facebook. So when Sid issues a challenge to reconnect the old-fashioned way—through real, handwritten letters—Cassie figures, why not?

The experiment exceeds both of their expectations, and the letters become a kind of mutual confessional that have real and soul-satisfying effects. And they just might have the power to help Cassie save her marriage, and give Sid the strength to get her life back on track.

But first, one of Cassie's infamous lapses in judgment comes back to bite her, and all of the letters wind up the one place you'd never, ever want to see them: the Internet...

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Keep Me Posted By Lisa Beazley Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #181231 in Books
- Published on: 2016-04-05
- Released on: 2016-04-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.30" h x 1.04" w x 6.30" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Keep Me Posted*

“A remarkably insightful look at motherhood and marriage and the horrible wonderful messiness of family life...An irreverent, funny, beautiful tale of learning how to say goodbye to the girl you once were and to embrace the incredible woman you've become.”—Karen White, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Spinning the Moon*

“Witty and truthful, a charming but thoroughly modern take on parenting, marriage, and sibling relations in the digital age. I tore through *Keep Me Posted*.”—Elyssa Friedland, Author of *Love and Miss Communication*

“This novel of two sisters separated by continents and time zones is a treat. Read it! And share it. You will not be disappointed!”—Deborah Rodriguez, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Kabul Beauty School* and *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*

“This debut novel is both a sharply observed comedy . . . and a thoughtful meditation on the transformative power of human connection.”—Kate Hilton, Author of *The Hole in the Middle*

“Chock-full of wit, wisdom, and the unexpected consequences of innocent choices.”—Patti Callahan Henry, Author of *The Idea of Love*

“Surprising and charming. . . . I loved every minute of this unexpected and hilarious adventure.”—Amy FitzHenry, Author of *Cold Feet*

“Readers can't help but root for Cassie Sunday, the funny, flawed, and infinitely relatable heroine of Lisa Beazley's *Keep Me Posted* . . . an engaging story that is equal parts comedy and cautionary tale.”—Melissa DeCarlo, Author of *The Art of Crash Landing*

“A devastatingly witty novel.”—Erika Mailman, Author of *Woman of Ill Fame*

“This debut brims with snarky humor, warm affection and subtle wisdom...the story captivates. The letters shared between the sisters and the glimpses into Cassie's harried life give their tale an unexpected depth...Though their story will appeal to wives and mothers, women of all ages will identify with Cassie and Sid.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“With spot-on writing, endearing characters and deliciously satisfying plotlines, *Keep Me Posted* proves a hilariously entertaining read.”—The Associated Press

“A keen-eyed, entertaining portrait of sisterhood in the age of social media...Beazley's breezy, welcoming writing style draws readers right in, and her evocation of the bond between Sid and Cassie—occasionally competitive, but never catty—rings true...Warmhearted, insightful and often funny, *Keep Me Posted* is a tribute to sisterhood, forgiveness and the power of a handwritten letter.”—Shelf Awareness

About the Author

Lisa Beazley has worked in journalism and public relations for more than fifteen years. *Keep Me Posted* is her first novel.

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Chapter 1

Later—much later—I would regret pretending to be asleep when Leo sidled up to me in bed that night. Not that it was an isolated incident; it's just that the timing stands out as an apropos kickoff to what would be the year everything went pear-shaped.

"Night, Cass," he said, coming in for a kiss. When I didn't turn toward him, he planted a soft peck behind my ear and lingered for a few seconds.

"Niii," I mumbled, my sleepy voice more indicative of my state of mind than my level of alertness. In fact, I was wide-awake and mentally scheduling my morning to somehow fit in packing and an activity to exhaust the boys before sticking them in the car for our eight-hour drive.

Sadly, I'd reached a point where when faced with the options of sex or hours of sleepless anxiety, I chose the latter. Would I like some kissing and breast caressing? Nah. I think I'll formulate snarky retorts to made-up potential insults for ten or fifteen minutes. How about an orgasm or two? No, thanks! I'm good mentally going through my inadequate wardrobe, trying to figure out what to pack for five days of holiday merrymaking with my family. Fall asleep sexually satisfied and with a grateful-and-therefore-more-likely-to-wake-up-first-with-the-kids-in-the-morning husband? I'll pass. My restless legs syndrome should be kicking in anytime now, and I'm due to be pacing and stretching in the living room.

So steeped in ennui was I that doing something guaranteed to relieve stress, boost endorphins, and strengthen my marriage—all without leaving my bed—seemed like just another chore.

It's not like we were going in for lengthy acrobatic sessions. Quite the opposite, I'm afraid. The tired-parent sex between Leo and me had become what I thought of as a battle for the bottom, with one person (the winner) lying there while the other (the loser) expended minimal effort from the top. My tactics had recently moved beyond polite and passive maneuvering to actual deceit. If you think I'm exaggerating, listen to this one: I told him it was suddenly easier for me to orgasm from down there. (It wasn't.) So that caused a whole other set of problems.

When I was sure he was asleep, I retrieved the iPad from under the bed and opened the Kindle app to read some of my novel. Within a few pages, predictably, my restless legs drove me into the living room, where I could pace, still reading. There was just enough mess-free floor space to make it about three small steps, so I switched to a march-in-place move, periodically shaking out my legs. My mind wandered to Christmas, and I grabbed a pen to write the letter "S" on my hand, hoping it would remind me to pack the scarf I had bought for Leo weeks ago and stashed in a spare purse in my closet. Then, with a flash of panic, I remembered that I'd never placed my online order for the boys' gifts. My shopping cart had been filled for at least a week, yet completing a simple transaction was beyond my bandwidth: This was far more frustrating to me than my lousy sex life. With very few responsibilities other than keeping my kids alive, not being able to tick simple things off my to-do list was an endless source of chagrin.

I closed my novel and switched to Safari, then paid the rush charges to get the Batcave, Buzz and Woody

costumes, and some books and puzzles to my parents' house in Ohio by Christmas Eve.

When I checked my e-mail for my order confirmation, I had a rare treat—a message from my sister. Rare because her electronic-communication habits are those of someone twice her age: She checks her e-mail once every two weeks or so and eschews all social media. A treat because she lives in Singapore, and I hardly ever see her or talk to her—and because I adore her completely.

Cassie—

Arrived at Mom and Dad's yesterday. Loopy with jet lag. Baked cinnamon bread with Grandma Margie today—exactly what I needed to get into the Christmas spirit. Now bring me some figgy pudding! Tried to talk her out of this last-Christmas nonsense, to no avail (sniff). Can't wait to see you!!!

Love you.

—Sid

Buoyed by her cheer, I popped an Ambien and went to bed happy after all, anticipating a reunion with my dear sister.

Chapter 2

Sid and I had taken to calling it “the last Christmas” because Grandpa Joe and Grandma Margie announced that they were done hosting. They wanted their children to start taking turns holding Christmas Eve. It was getting to be too much work for them, they said. My parents and aunts and uncles had taken the news in stride, but Sid and I were in mourning; Christmas as we knew it was over.

To us, Christmas was Joe and Margie. The Old English–soap smell of their house mingling with the aroma of a roasting turkey and all the trimmings, the giant tree in their double-height foyer, the big round coffee table filled with snow globes . . . It's everything a family Christmas should be. Imagining the alternatives—fending off Aunt Faye's three rambunctious Great Danes while listening to Mannheim Steamroller on repeat; anxiously following the boys around Aunt Linda's overheated little ranch house with breakable and expensive Chihuly-esque sculptures on every surface; Mom's and Dad's utter uselessness in the kitchen—had me contemplating a trip to the Bahamas next December.

My sister and I adore Grandpa Joe and Grandma Margie. Sid is only fifteen months older than me, so we have many of the same magical memories of making cookies and paper dolls with Grandma Margie and reading—always reading—with Grandpa Joe. At his feet, we'd listen to anything. Margie's maiden name was Quinn, and my twin sons, Joey and Quinn, are named for her and Grandpa.

Something about being in their home puts everyone on their best behavior. Probably because Joe and Margie are the epitome of good behavior. You'll sometimes catch them at these gatherings, just the two of them, regaling each other with stories that can't be new, the other hanging on every word, asking questions, and then finding something kind and witty to say at the close.

Leo and I have been together only five years, but if he starts in on a story I've heard, I'll hold up my hand and go, “Yeah, yeah, I know this one. The dog dies.” But whenever I'm around Joe and Margie, I try to behave like they do—with courtesy and old-fashioned grace.

We are big on traditions. The men always get red sweaters from Margie; the women, gloves and socks. We

do a choreographed routine to “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” This last bit makes you think really hard before bringing that special someone home for the holidays. In fact, it’s rumored that my cousin Lizzy was dumped over it. One theory is that this guy took one look at her mom—my aunt Faye—doing her “lords a-leaping” with abandon, caught a glimpse of his future, and headed for the hills. It was beyond corny. But I think it’s the corny traditions that separate the interesting families from the boring ones.

One year when Sid and I and our seven cousins were all in our twenties, we started another tradition: boxed wine. Everyone in the cousin generation brought wine, and it had to be in a box. For years, that meant Franzia white zinfandel, which gives the worst morning-after headaches of all wines. But then better wines started coming in boxes, and it became a contest of who could find the fanciest or best or most expensive box of wine. Despite our best efforts, a box per cousin always resulted in a surplus of wine, and the half-empty containers could be found stashed throughout Joe and Margie’s house year-round.

So last Christmas, the last Christmas, I was hitting the box pretty hard. I was feeling all warm and fuzzy by the time we’d finished “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” and then Grandpa Joe announced that he had something he’d like to read to us. This wasn’t unusual. He found a way to read aloud at any gathering—usually a Molly Ivins column or a passage from Thurber or Bud Trillin, as we called Calvin (we considered him to be family friend since Joe and Margie had many years ago been at a dinner party where he was in attendance, and I had passed him on the street in New York a handful of times, even exchanging a nod once or twice). But this time he announced that he’d found a stack of letters from the early days of their marriage, while he was in the coast guard and Grandma Margie was juggling two under two at home, my dad and my aunt Faye. Sid and I exchanged a look that said, Swoon! and perched ourselves at Grandpa Joe’s feet like a couple of kids, although, of course, we were well into our thirties.

The letters did not disappoint. Grandma Margie wrote about sweet and funny and maddening things the kids were doing, the kind nurse at the hospital who would play with Faye and hold Dad while she dropped off jars of extra breast milk she had expressed for the orphans, and the hard time she was having as a Chicago girl understanding the accents of their new neighbors in Bar Harbor, Maine. Grandpa Joe wrote about the comically loud snoring of his bunkmate on the boat and how his heart leaped when he could see the lighthouse in the harbor, because it meant he would be coming home to her and the kids soon.

Enchanted by the romance of it all, I privately lamented that Leo and I had never once exchanged a letter. Why would we? We’d never been separated for any amount of time, and even if we had, there were half a dozen ways to reach him and get an immediate response. I tried to imagine my eventual progeny being anywhere near as impressed by our quotidian communication. “Get milk,” “Coming home soon? May kill the children,” and the like. It was a depressing thought and made me long for a simpler time, a time when we might not have been able to text back and forth all day long. I wondered if we’d been missing out on the sort of intimacy that could have come from simply catching up at the end of the day. By the time Leo arrived home from work each day, we’d been in near constant contact. In some ways, it made me feel close to him, always knowing where he was and what he had for lunch. But it also made it easy to spend most of our evenings busy on our respective iPhones.

Later that night, back at Mom and Dad’s, Sid and I lounged on the big brown sectional in the basement, listening to old mixtapes on an ancient, paint-splattered jam box, the container of Y+B Malbec still on tap at my side. Leo was upstairs putting the twins to bed on the floor of my old room. As extremely active three-year-olds, Quinn and Joey were so exhausted at the end of every day that if you could get them to just stop moving, they were asleep in minutes. It’s harder than it sounds. We figured out a maneuver likely used in state-run homes for troubled youths and animal shelters, where you kind of held them and pinned down every extremity at the same time. When you’re putting them to bed by yourself, as is often the case, there are a couple of ways to go. With both of them on the floor, I would lie down between them on my stomach,

looking like a frog that had splatted on the sidewalk as my left arm and leg restrained Quinn while my right arm and leg covered Joey. Singing—loudly—was the only way to keep them quiet. They each got a request. Quinn usually chose “Tomorrow” from Annie and Joey, “Show Me the Way to Go Home,” the drinking song from Jaws. (Not that they’d ever seen either movie.)

Leo was less flexible than me, so his plan was probably to slip Joey his phone while Quinn wasn’t looking to let him flip through pictures and get Quinn to sleep first and then move on to Joey. The songs they requested most from him were “Cripple Creek” and the theme from Cheers.

I was starting to feel guilty because he had been up there for nearly an hour. But we had an arrangement: He always did bedtime when we visited my family, and I did it when we visited his. Leo was the youngest of four boys in the Costa clan, so I was usually happy for a break from that frat party, but I knew he was looking forward to catching up with Sid and her son, River, too. They’d been living in Singapore for seven or eight months, and there was little chance we’d see them again before next December. Sid’s husband of two years, Adrian, hadn’t come with her and the kids. He had meetings, she told me.

“On Christmas?” I asked.

“Yeah. His meetings are in Jakarta. Unfortunately, they don’t stop everything for Christmas in a Muslim country,” she explained.

Sid’s son, River, who was seventeen, was watching A Christmas Story upstairs with my dad. Lulu, who was eight months old, slept peacefully attached to Sid’s breast. Mom was in her room fast asleep.

“Ugh! Cass! How beautiful were those letters?” Sid said. “It kills me that Lulu will never really get to experience Christmas at Joe and Margie’s.”

“Just Like Heaven” by the Cure was the next song on the tape that Emily Van Wey had made for me when I got my driver’s license. Instead of acknowledging what she said, I sang along and absentmindedly scrolled through Facebook on my iPhone.

“What are you always doing on that phone?” she said. I wished I had been scanning the headlines on CNN or even playing Tetris, but I let her peer over my shoulder at my Facebook feed of “Happy Holidays” status updates.

Suddenly she gave a little snort, and then, because Lulu was still sleeping on her, whispered, “You’re Facebook friends with Tommy Saronto?”

“I’m Facebook friends with half the people we went to elementary school with and pretty much everyone we went to high school with,” I said.

“Oh my God, he has five kids?”

“Yep. Clara, Ava, Ella, Will, and Tommy Jr.” I felt a little embarrassed that I knew my sister’s eighth-grade boyfriend’s kids’ names.

But she had moved on. “Whoa, look at Tara Lockshin.”

“Yeah. Those boobs are new.”

“She’s so tan. Where does she live?”

“Over near Bowman Mall.”

“How do you know all of this?” Sid looked genuinely shocked.

“I don’t know. It just kind of seeps in. I mean, when I need a break from the kids, I scroll through Facebook and, you know . . .” I trailed off, hoping to move on. Our quality time was turning into a junior high school reunion, and I didn’t want to share my sister with all of these people.

But Sid—dinosaur that she was, without a Facebook account or even an idea of what Twitter or Instagram or Pinterest were—was thoroughly entertained by my knowledge of these people’s lives. To her, I was the novelty act. She turned it into a game, and I, being quite tipsy, played along.

“All right. Hannah Canary. Go.”

“Radiologist. Daughter named Devina. Loves Jesus.”

“Correct,” she said in a game-show-host voice, scrolling down. “Becky Applebee.”

“She’s on the Colorado Springs city council. Married to an architect. Has triplets. One of them is . . . um . . . diabetic!” I shouted a little too triumphantly.

I nailed a few more, and then Sid said, “Okay, Cassie. You are starting to scare me. This is not healthy.”

“Oh, everyone does it. You’re, like, the only one who’s not on Facebook.”

“Well, according to River, Facebook is for old people . . . Oh dear, what happened to Jamie Walton?”

“No idea. He was such a sweet little boy.”

Sid is about three notches kinder than me, and around her I sometimes rein in my darker humor. But I could have shared some real zingers on the topic of Jamie Walton, our childhood next-door neighbor, whose profile picture was him, shirtless, draped in ammo.

Actually, Sid and I shared the same basic outlook on many things, but we differed in demeanor so much that we could say the same exact thing to a person and leave them with wildly different impressions. The two summers we waited tables together at Don Pablo’s Mexican Restaurant really brought those differences into focus. I turned out to have a real gift for it—multitasking, food and drink, and pleasing people being among my strong suits. But Sid’s other gifts meant that she made more in tips every night. I would be killing it in my section, turning table after table of satisfied diner, and look over to see her squatting down next to a booth, chatting away like she was out with old friends while the other tables in her section sat with empty chip baskets or margarita glasses. I tried to cover for her, refilling waters or salsas and running her food as often as I could. But any frustration her customers were feeling evaporated as soon as she returned her attention to them. The way she always touches you when she talks to you or looks you right in the eye and smiles like you’re sharing a secret—those things turned out to be worth about sixty extra bucks a night.

Handing me back my phone, she said the thing that got me: “You probably know more about these strangers than you know about me.”

“That’s not true!” I immediately shot back while simultaneously wondering if she was right. “Hey, if you’re feeling left out, just get yourself on Facebook.”

“Nah,” she said, gazing down at Lulu. “It’s not my thing.”

I felt annoyed with myself for not being cool enough to be above the whole thing and blurted out, “I can’t stop looking at it! I don’t like to get behind. It’s like a sickness.”

She just giggled.

Then, in an effort to get her to see my side of things, I tried, “But occasionally there is a little gem . . . like . . .” I scrolled through my newsfeed, looking for something witty or astute with which to impress her, but all I found were generic holiday wishes and photos of kids I didn’t know.

“Oh, never mind,” I said, tossing my phone onto the table.

In my defense, it had been a rough year. After months of layoffs and salary reductions, the magazine where I’d worked for seven years had finally folded just before the holidays the year before. Leo and I had decided that with the magazine industry the way it was, and with child-care costs the way they were, I’d stay home with the boys, just until the economy recovered. I figured I could pick up freelance writing assignments to keep myself in the game and bring in some money, and eventually, find another job. But I hadn’t so much as sent a single work-related e-mail, attended a networking event, or even updated my LinkedIn profile since the day late last year I brought home that cardboard box of desk accouterments. Likewise, the urban planning, architecture, and real estate news that used to occupy much of my headspace went completely disregarded. Since my Twitter identity was so connected to my job as managing editor of *City Green* magazine, I gave that up too. But Facebook was still there for me, a sort of bridge between my old and new lives.

Without my commute time to read the Times, I rarely knew what was going on in the world. Even our *New York One* time in the morning had given way to *Sesame Street*. Before I knew it, Facebook and the odd *Colbert Report* became my main sources of news.

On the occasion that I did catch a few minutes of real news, there was hardly any context for me, and so I became uninterested. After a while, the only world events that resonated with me were unspeakable tragedies (like school shootings or child abductions), celebrity marriages or divorces, and weather phenomena.

I could foresee a future in which my role as a full-time mother contextualized the world, where topics like poverty, education, food, and gun control could be made more real when viewed through my mom eyes. But despite my substantial efforts to land this job, I’d undertaken my occupation as a full-time mother somewhat reluctantly and couldn’t quite bring myself to rally around the mommy causes de jour.

So maybe I got a little carried away, but Facebook was the one thing I found that distracted me from my daily grind just enough to keep me sane.

Lulu stirred, and Sid stood up and started swaying with her to “Here’s Where the Story Ends” by the Sundays, which, because our last name was Sunday, was on every high school mixtape anyone ever made for us. I sipped my wine and stared at my sister, thinking that it was like we were the same person but she had been dipped in some kind of effervescent fluid.

Lulu was sleeping by the end of the song, and Sid carefully lowered her next to me on the musty couch. When she looked up and met my eyes, she wore a satisfied grin, like she had just figured something out. Then she said—slowly, definitively—“I’ve got it. Let’s be pen pals.”

It wasn’t really a question, but she perched herself on the edge of the couch next to me, awaiting an answer. Having continued to imbibe at a steady clip since we’d come down to the basement, I was drunk enough that I had to close an eye to see just one of her. She handed me her glass of water, taking my wine for herself

now, and I drank the water as she laid out the plan she'd formulated during the Sundays song.

"It's perfect. It's been impossible to talk on the phone with me in Singapore. Let's not even e-mail. Just the letters. Maybe when we're old we'll read some out loud to our grandkids—how cool would that be?" Switching to a singsong voice, then, "I think we have a new tra-di-tion."

Sid is like a female Bill Clinton. I say that with the authority of someone who once met him. One of the things about growing up in Ohio is that you have plenty of opportunities to meet presidential candidates. He was jogging with his Secret Service guys at the park where Sid and I walked our neighbor's dog for twenty dollars every Saturday morning. The dog, a golden retriever named Thumper, led us over to a small mutt among a cluster of people taking pictures. We knew he was there, because we had to go through a security checkpoint on our way into the park, but we weren't expecting to have an impromptu chat with him. Yet suddenly, there he was, leaning down and patting Thumper's head and saying something about him being a "beautiful animal," cameras clicking all around us. I can't remember much about anything else he said, but I do remember feeling like we were friends—like he'd be all, "Of course I do! How have you been?" if I ever called him up and said, "Remember me from the park outside of Columbus, Ohio? I had the golden retriever?" I felt he saw me—really saw me, even though Sid was standing right next to me, which typically rendered me invisible—and I wanted to say the right thing to let him know I was cool. He said something about "young people" being our country's most important asset, and he nodded right at me, like I was our country's most important asset. I felt sparkly and important for days afterward.

Sid has a similar effect on people. I've seen it hundreds of times. When people were around her, you could feel them yearning to lock in the friendship. There was this photo booth at the mall, and in middle school, if anyone was within forty feet of Sid and that booth, they would persuade her to go get pictures taken together, so they could tape the strip of black-and-white images up in their locker or on their mirror at home as proof of their friendship.

In high school, her turns of phrase and affectations became part of the common vernacular. She used to do this thing when someone paid her a compliment, where she'd kind of comically, kind of sweetly, kind of ironically say, "Ooooh, kitten," and suddenly everyone was saying, "Ooooh, kitten," all the time.

People assumed I was jealous of her, or that I felt inferior, and I suppose in some ways I did, but it did little to affect my feelings toward Sid. When people would patronizingly suggest this as a foregone conclusion of me being me and her being her, I would direct any negative feelings at them, not my sister.

Through it all, Sid and I were always best friends. We laughed over nonsense and had deep conversations about life. We fantasized about the future—what kind of men we'd marry, how many kids we'd have, where we'd live (next door to each other, with a circular connecting driveway). More accurately, I fantasized about the future for both of us, narrating detailed plans while she humored me, occasionally interjecting that she didn't want a blueprint for her life, that she hoped her future held things that couldn't possibly be imagined by a thirteen-year-old.

"Okay," I said to her. "I'll write to you," and then rested my head against the back of the couch and closed my eyes.

Chapter 3

By the time I got back to New York, I already had a letter. It stuck out like a sore thumb among the catalogs and junk waiting for me in my little mailbox. I tore it open immediately, thinking, So we're really doing this.

And that's exactly what the letter said:

We're Really Doing This!! No backing out!! xoxo

—Sid

My guess was that she had penned it Christmas Eve night after I'd passed out on the couch, since it was written in a faded purple Magic Marker on a torn-out page of notebook paper, both items easily found in Mom and Dad's basement.

Sid's loopy and childlike writing always made me feel tender toward her. Soft and wide and squishy, it evoked Mylar balloons, cookie cakes, and boy-band crushes. Dumb girl handwriting. It's okay; I can say this because Sid is not dumb. She was a National Merit Scholar and has never in her life been on the losing team in a game of Trivial Pursuit. She does possess a certain innocence that no amount of intelligence or hard knocks will erode; that's what I see when I look at her bubbly scrawl.

That's all it took to catapult me from lukewarm to enthusiastic about our experiment in communication. I wanted to run inside and write to her that, yes, I was on board. We were really doing this. But I knew it would be hours before I could grab a second alone. Instead, I wrangled the twins up the stairs to our second-floor walk-up while Leo returned the rental car to the lot around the corner. Our mountain of luggage sat inside the foyer of our building. Leo would take the car seats to our basement storage locker and bring the luggage up after he returned the car. Our neighborhood and building were relatively safe, but leaving all of this loot in the hallway was still a risk and just one of the many inconveniences we suffered for the privilege of living in Manhattan's West Village.

When I found out I was having twins, one of my first instincts was to panic about whether we'd have to move from our beloved apartment. Leo thought yes. I convinced him that we could stay. "Much larger families live in much smaller spaces in other parts of the world," I remember saying, feeling smugly proud of my worldly outlook—picturing families of seven on the African plain huddled in a grass hut and how we'd be more like them than a family of four living in a McMansion in, say, suburban Houston. Or how every story I can remember reading in this Immigrant Women's literature course in college seemed to mention there being only one bed for the entire family. We weren't like ordinary Americans, needing their ridiculously large houses, raping the earth with fertilized lawns and central air. No, we would take only what we need. We were New Yorkers, I told him; we could handle this. How evolved, how drunk on my own superior lifestyle I felt.

I regret it at least four or five times a day. Say, for example, when I'm coming home with the boys and the dinner and the dry cleaning, and Quinn has a stage-five meltdown on the front stoop because I again refused to patronize the Mister Softee ice cream truck that followed us home from the park like a fucking stalker. (I'm sorry, but that Mister Softee driver has caused more family strife than a Vegas bachelor party.) And then I forget I'd promised Joey that he'd be the one to stick the magnetic key fob into the sensor on the outside door, and his meltdown begins. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for the general angst of the moment to be escalated by one of the boys pooping in their pants or falling down and beginning to bleed. In these situations, I think about how I've made my life so much more difficult than it needs to be. I surmise that I'd be a happier, calmer, and better-groomed person if I lived in one of those suburban McMansions where the boys had space to run around and I had a kitchen with room for more than two days' worth of food and the counter space and appliances required to prepare it.

Add to that the publicness of it all. Can no moment of childhood ugliness happen in private? Why is it that some meticulously dressed gay man who lives in my building—one of the same guys I used to chat with about politics and restaurants while doing laundry or sorting recycling—seems to appear at the most

shameful mommy moments, wincing past me, no doubt silently congratulating himself on the bullet he dodged by not having easy access to an ovary, and making me feel like a pox on our perfect neighborhood. *Don't you remember? I'm one of you!* I want to yell. Or, *I almost didn't have kids! I didn't know it was going to be so hard!*

But there's no "almost" about twin three-year-old boys, no blending in or quick and quiet entries. My only chance at getting them into the building smoothly is if one of Mrs. Tannenbaum's white pugs—the friendly one, hopefully—is hanging around the first-floor hallway. If the boys made enough noise, Mrs. T. would appear with a small dog biscuit and break it in two for them to give to Mitzi. "Thank you," I'd say to her as if she'd just fortified me for the long journey ahead. It's one flight—eighteen steps with a landing halfway—and we're home. It's not unusual for it to take fifteen minutes.

The apartment itself is lovely. The perfect place if you are childless, or maybe if you have anything other than twin boys who are between the ages of zero and three. It's technically a one-bedroom with a study, which was our combination closet and office until we turned it into the boys' room. The whole place is eight hundred square feet—about the size of the back porch in the house I grew up in.

During my pregnancy, I nested like some kind of crazed Martha Stewart protégé, intent on delivering on the promises made in my hard-fought campaign to keep the apartment. Determined to be right about how easy and wonderful life in our little apartment would be, I transformed our abode into the ultimate small but cleverly designed family home. It was even featured on ApartmentTherapy.com as "Cassie & Leo's Dreamy Oasis." Our dove-gray walls and white Eames rocker, the chandelier and half-sized travel cribs we painted the same midnight blue, handsomely awaited the arrival of their tenants, who were markedly less impressed than the dozens of ApartmentTherapy readers, who commented on our brilliant storage solutions and sophisticated color palette.

There are some upsides to living in our tiny apartment, including needing only twenty minutes and five or six baby wipes to clean it. But when I see my boys slithering off our supertall bed, running four steps to the sofa, jumping on that, then repeating the loop over and over, I can't help but think of a pair of puppies forced to live in a small pen.

Leo grew up with a bunch of brothers, but I only had my sister. My earliest memories of playing include coloring and dressing up dolls, and I guess I pictured the boys doing slightly more masculine versions of that. I did not foresee constant wrestling or the compulsion to run and jump and knock things over that is programmed into their DNA.

When I was pregnant, the market was booming and we could have sold our place for a nice profit. Now we'd have to take a loss to sell it, so I didn't feel like it was worth it to admit to Leo I was wrong about staying, to let on how frustrating I found my day-to-day life and that I held the apartment responsible.

Still, I loved our street. Someone once told me that Morton Street is the most photographed street in New York. I have no idea if that's true, but at certain times of day, it is breathtaking. In a city of straight lines and rectangles, Morton is one of the few with a bend, which allows the street to reveal itself slowly. With its low trees and stately town houses, it's quintessential downtown. Also, it's magically quiet. The crowds of *Sex and the City* tourists that can ruin Charles or Perry streets on a Saturday morning seem worlds away, though they are only a few blocks over.

It seemed unfair—impossible, even—that these two things I loved so much—my kids and my apartment—didn't go together at all. I wanted to sit them all down and say, "Can't you all just try to get along, for my sake?"

Upstairs, I stuck Sid's letter into a book under my bed and helped the boys negotiate the bathroom. I didn't need to open my refrigerator to know that we had nothing to eat. Still, I was poking through its contents in search of the source of an awful stench when Leo returned from his second trip up the stairs with our luggage.

"Blech. This has got to go," I said, plunking the loosely wrapped morsel of soft stinky cheese into the trash and tying it up.

"Fair enough," he said, grabbing the trash from me. "Hudson?"

"Yeah, let's go. I'm starved," I said, and began herding the boys back out the door.

The Hudson Diner wasn't known for its food, but it was right around the corner and never crowded, so we could usually get a big booth by the window. There was something about that place that had a calming effect on the boys. Maybe it was the smell of gravy, the dim orange fluorescent lighting, the geriatric crowd, or the giant pile of individually wrapped saltine crackers the humorless waitress always plunked in front of them as soon as we arrived, but this was the only restaurant where we could eat an entire meal and not have to apologize to a half-dozen different people on the way out.

While the boys munched on saltines, I took out a pack of baby wipes and asked Joey if I could give his car a wash. He never went anywhere without clutching a little matchbox car. Sometimes I worried that his left hand would be permanently deformed into a little claw, and at night while he slept I'd pry his sweet little fingers away from the silver vehicle and massage his palm.

With the car scrubbed, I reached across the table and wiped the boys' hands clean one by one while Leo set up a windy sugar packet racetrack on the table. I cleaned my phone with a new wipe and then scrolled through Christmas pictures. "Hey, Joey, nice camera work," I said when I got to the million shots he'd snapped at Joe and Margie's. "Oh bud, I love this one!" It was a shot of Sid and me sitting on the sofa, my head resting on her shoulder and both of us beaming in the completely unguarded way you do when a child asks you to smile. I posted it to Facebook and captioned it, "Good to be home but missing this gorgeous gal already."

It was such a nice shot that I cropped it and brightened it and made it my profile picture. By the time the food arrived, I'd accumulated forty-some likes and nearly as many comments from old friends who hadn't seen Sid in many years—virtually or otherwise.

I had to put my phone away when Joey spilled his water, and I spent the rest of dinner preoccupied by the logistics of getting letters from here to Singapore. How long would it take? What kind of stamps would I need? Oh crap, would I have to go to the post office? That in itself could be a deal breaker.

That night, after the boys were in bed, I got out the stepladder and rifled through the tiny cupboard above the refrigerator. Behind a ziplock bag containing our tax returns from the last five years, I found the dust-coated shoe box of old postcards, thank-you notes, and the set of yellowing monogrammed stationery Mom gave me when I graduated college.

Leo turned on the TV and lay on the floor groaning about his back being sore from sitting in the car all day. As the IT director for a chain of gyms, he spends his days crisscrossing Manhattan on his bike to fix one computer issue or another at the gym's eight different locations, so sitting for long periods was unusual for him.

I halfheartedly offered a back rub and surveyed the dozen or so dull pencils and freebie pens jammed into the

jar on the desk in the foyer. The pencil jar was like a microcosm of my wardrobe, I thought: overstuffed with uninspiring items, most of them with no shot of being chosen.

Selfishly relieved that Leo responded, “That’s all right” to my offer, I settled in on the sofa, using a fat September Vogue as my lap desk, a clicker pen from a Realtor in Pennsylvania in hand, and froze. I couldn’t think of how to begin. I’d withdrawn only a single sheet of stationery and an envelope from the box, so I had to get this right if I didn’t want to get out the stepladder again. But even without the logistical concerns, I just didn’t know what to say. If asked, I would definitely have described Sid and me as close, but that moment of paralysis brought home the reality that many years had passed since we’d exchanged real intimacies. She was right, I thought, with a wave of sadness: I did know more about those people on Facebook than I did about her.

I promised myself that that was going to change this year. My letter had to be a good kickoff. I didn’t want to set the tone for a year of vague updates and pleasantries. I wanted this thing to be real and meaningful.

But first, an important thing to know about Sid: She was nineteen and single when she had River. I’ll tell you the story because having an unplanned baby at that age really changes a person.

It was the summer of 1994, and I had just graduated from high school. Sid was home from her first year at Ohio University, where I was to join her in the fall. She had declared a perfectly-Sid-like double major in biology and poetry and thrown herself wholeheartedly into the pervasive counterculture in Athens, Ohio: that of the latter-day hippie.

In mid-June, Gretchen Steele and I tagged along with Sid and her boyfriend, Kenny Fisher, to a Grateful Dead show at Buckeye Lake in Columbus. Gretchen and I were not Dead fans—we listened to 311 and Sublime and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. But it sounded like a fun way to spend a summer weekend, and I’d do anything to hang out with Sid.

To people in Sid’s old crowd, you just have to say Buckeye Lake ’94, and they know that it was pouring rain and that the band did a whole set of rain songs and an unending jam that made me wish I had split that tab of LSD with Sid, so I didn’t have to stand there swaying like a moron for twenty minutes while everyone around me went into some kind of reverential trance. At some point during the nine-hour preshow party in the fields around the stage, Sid and Kenny disappeared into his tent and accidentally made a baby.

Kenny sold marijuana and nitrous oxide balloons out of the back of his van. This makes him sound like a real loser, but forget everything you may have heard about drug dealers or single guys with conversion vans. Kenny was kind and funny and smart—at least that’s how he seemed to my seventeen-year-old self. He was huge—six foot four and muscular except for his soft beer belly. He wore loose-fitting tank tops and board shorts, and had an animal skull tattooed on his tanned biceps. With his wraparound reflective sunglasses, fanny pack (essentially a drug dealer’s briefcase), and New Balance running shoes, he affected a sort of trend-resistant, devil-may-care attitude. Again, he sounds awful on paper, but in the alternate universe of the jam-band circuit, he was definitely the “cool guy.” Something about his scratchy deep voice, bright blue eyes, sunburned face, dazzling smile, and infectious laugh drew people to him. Sid and Kenny were kind of this power couple in that whole world. Gorgeous and uninhibited, their non-dreadlocked hair and pleasant smell set them apart from many of their peers.

Have I mentioned yet that Sid is a beauty? I know that’s what everyone wants to know: what we look like. We look a lot alike—thin, average height, honey-colored hair, olive skin, dark eyes, big bright smiles—except she is strikingly beautiful in the way of movie stars and wealthy socialites and I am just barely above average in the way of plain girls everywhere. Our mom is part Native American and our dad is half Greek, so we looked vaguely exotic among the blondes and redheads of our childhood. And while our

features are mostly the same, Sid's were put together just right. It's like she was carefully molded by an artist and I was the knockoff, hastily put together in a sweatshop to look like her. At certain angles and in some pictures, we look nearly identical. But on second glance, you notice that my eyebrows hover where hers lift, my nose hooks where hers dips, my skin blotches where hers glows, and my teeth suffice where hers dazzle.

On the upside, I am extremely photogenic. But every time someone tells me this, what I hear is, "You look much better in photos." Or, "It's disappointing that you don't look more like your sister." It's probably for the best I'd never tried online dating. If I'm being honest, it's part of the reason I was such a big Facebooker. As long as I never actually run into any of my ex-boyfriends, they are going to think they really missed out.

Being the less attractive sister, and I suppose a tad superficial, I spent a lot of time in my formative years thinking about physical beauty—what constitutes it, what it makes possible, how it influences one's personality. I've determined that the hair-skin-teeth trifecta is the most important of all. If you have that covered, you can have a big nose or a weak chin or small eyes (but not all of those, obviously!) and still be considered beautiful. This is the kind of deep stuff I thought about endlessly between the ages of about fifteen and nineteen.

At any rate, despite Sid's considerable charms, a baby turned out to be Kenny's deal breaker, and shortly after she declared she was going to have it, Kenny was gone. I probably don't need to tell you that Sid had never been rejected on any level prior to this point, so this was new territory for her. She went from golden child with the world as her oyster to heartbroken virtually overnight.

Seeing Sid in this new light came as a blow to everyone. I was as surprised as anyone when she decided to go through with the pregnancy. I guess those annual baby funerals that our favorite teacher in elementary school held on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* had an effect on her. Looking back, I cannot believe that my liberal-voting parents let us sit through that macabre production. Or that they let me wear that "tiny footprints" pin that I bought from Mrs. H for twelve dollars. Or that I had an eighth-grade teacher who sold dead-baby themed jewelry to her students.

After the initial shock wore off, Mom and Dad did their best to act supportive and positive, but it was hard not to detect their disappointment that Sid's promising future appeared to be caving in. To be honest, I was devastated at first. What about my plans for us? I selfishly wondered. She was supposed to take me under her wing, to help me make friends, to be my roommate when I moved off campus, to backpack across Europe with me after college. I wanted to scream at my parents: "This is what you get for sending us to twelve years of Catholic school. Some of that stuff stuck!"

I went off to college while Sid was in her first trimester, barfing and crying all day. Her pregnancy continued in much the same way; she was basically a puffy and weepy mess for nine months. I came home for a few weekends to spend time with her, and nobody in our open-minded family quite knew how to talk about it—or how to interact with a Sid who wasn't the shining sun around which we all orbited.

Eventually, I came to find comfort in Sid's lot. I'd read too many novels in which the only truly good character, the one who is beloved and respected by everyone, dies. Based on this, at some point during our preteen years, I'd developed an irrational fear that my sister would perish in a car accident or at the hands of a serial killer or of a rare disease or natural disaster. As it was, conversations about her could be downright eulogistic: Kind to everyone. A beautiful person—inside and out. And so humble! I harbored this secret fear for years, and in church, after Communion, I would actually kneel down and pray to God to keep my sister alive.

But her pregnancy was a major setback, and one that made her less mythical in my eyes. I stopped worrying so much about her then.

As soon as River was born, Mom and Dad and Joe and Margie promptly turned to mush, found their words, and couldn't stop talking about it, which was now a him. Sid, too, took one look at her new son and knew in her hippie heart that becoming River's mom at this moment in her life was her destiny. She went at mothering him with her trademark gusto. He had a charmed baby- and toddlerhood with an incredible support system, even if Kenny was never heard from again. Sid went back to school—premed—at the state school a half mile from our parents' house, where she and River lived until she became a certified nurse-midwife five years later.

New York

Jan 2

Dear Sid,

Happy New Year! I hope you guys had a smooth flight back and the jet lag isn't too bad. It was great to spend Christmas with you. I've been fantasizing about coming to visit you in Singapore. Alas, I don't think it's in the budget for us anytime soon. But maybe if I start saving now, we can do Christmas there next year. Hey, you were right about this letter-writing thing. It is going to be fun. I can't tell you how thrilled I was to see something from you in my mailbox. What a treat!

I want to kick off these letters in the spirit of openness. I want us to really know each other again—like when we were teenagers. I've been racking my brain for a fitting way to begin, and the only thing I can think of is a truly embarrassing confession. It's really stupid, but I want to make a gesture of honesty to nudge us a little closer to the time in our lives when there were no secrets. Right about the time River was born, I got arrested for shoplifting in Athens. It had become a little habit of mine. I started with books. Incensed that my Psychology 101 book cost \$125, I slipped it into my bag and walked out. I couldn't believe how easy it was, and found it perversely thrilling. I moved on to the odd shirt or candle, becoming bolder and bolder with each success. A few times, I reached behind counters for sunglasses or jewelry. After about six months, I was caught. As I was leaving the bookstore, a security guard stopped me and asked to check my bag. Well, there were two textbooks, a planner, some pens, and a T-shirt in there. Oh my God, it was so humiliating. There were like a dozen people there who saw what was going on. It hurts me—physically hurts me—to think of it now. I called home from the police station, and Dad drove down and bailed me out. I went to court and had to pay thousands of dollars (borrowed from Mom and Dad) and do community service for a year and join this support group. I still have no idea what I was thinking. I may have been depressed . . . This is going to sound like I'm blaming you, but please know that I'm not: When you got pregnant, it was like you suddenly dropped out of my life. I was so sad. I think the whole klepto thing was some sort of coping technique or distraction or simply a sign that I was going a bit crazy without you. What I should have done was make an effort to maintain our relationship then, instead of escaping into my ridiculous little crime spree, but good choices have never been my forte.

Okay, there. I did it. I'm mortified (even Leo doesn't know about this!) but I wanted to reveal something real and honest and hard to get things rolling. I promise to lighten up from here on out, and try to bring you rainbows and sunshine more often than not.

Love,

Cassie

The next day when I went to mail it, I got to the mailbox and something stopped me. When I send an even vaguely important e-mail, I'll go back and read it two or three times to make sure I didn't say anything stupid. Yet here I was about to send this massively personal letter, and I'd never be able to see it again. What if it got lost in the mail?

Instead of dropping it in the box, I put it back in my bag. I considered typing it out and saving it, but that seemed silly. Plus, that would tempt me to then send it by e-mail, and the thought sullied the delicious vision I had of the piles of handwritten letters accumulating over the year. I thought about taking a picture of it, but a bunch of photos of partial letters on my phone didn't appeal. So I walked with the boys to the OfficeMax on Sixth Avenue and bought a scanner. The project, from making the purchase to getting the thing set up, took most of the day and all of my patience. But in the end I had a system to assure every letter Sid and I exchanged would be saved for posterity.

That night after bath time—letter scanned, saved, and re-enveloped—I let Quinn come downstairs with me while Joey played with Leo. There was a mailbox right on the corner outside of the Henrietta Hudson, our neighborhood lesbian bar. Its proprietor, Kim, was our downstairs neighbor. We had an unspoken agreement that I wouldn't complain about the noise from her bar or the patrons we sometimes found canoodling in the building's foyer, and she wouldn't complain about the running and stomping and screaming coming from our apartment at what must seem to a bar owner ungodly hours of the morning. I'd heard horror stories about angry downstairs neighbors from my apartment-dwelling friends with kids—heavy carpet; no running or jumping indoors; eviction threats from co-op boards—so Kim was basically the perfect neighbor for us.

“Would you like to drop the letter in?” I asked.

He held out his hand, “Yes.”

I hesitated for a second. Maybe I shouldn't send it. Maybe I should run upstairs and write a regular letter containing no shocking confessions. Maybe I should rewrite it. If it were an e-mail, I would have surely rewritten it several times.

“Mama? Come on,” Quinn said.

I brushed the dark hair away from his big brown eyes and kissed him on the forehead before handing him the letter. He pulled the box open and stood on his tiptoes to peek inside. To give him a better view, I hoisted him onto my knee.

“Huh?” he said, clearly disappointed that the envelope was just sitting there on a tray—I think he imagined peering down into a pile of letters and packages. I explained how the box works and he slowly pushed the handle shut, pressing the bridge of his nose to the lid so he could watch the letter as long as possible. As soon as he closed the lid, he quickly opened it again and gasped at the empty tray.

He looked at me, wide-eyed.

“I know, right! That letter is going to go on a truck to the post office and then on an airplane to the post office in Singapore, and then to Aunt Sid's house.”

Singapore

January 2

Cass—

I'm sitting here in what has to be Singapore's oldest and saddest shopping mall FOR YOU. You have convinced me to get over my moral opposition to hiring a helper and to let you live vicariously through me. What was it you said at Christmas? That me not taking advantage of this perk of expat living was a slap in the face to people like you, who would kill for that chance? Well, far be it from me to slap you in the face—literally or figuratively. Plus, I wouldn't mind another adult in the house to talk to. (Adrian's in Bangkok again.)

So I'm at this mothball-smelling storefront office looking through a pile of résumés—each with a grainy black-and-white photo, which is weird because the women whose resumes I have are all just milling around in the hallway. It's like a Pantene casting call in here. The hair on these women! It's jet-black and thick and so shiny. Oh, here comes my first interview. To be continued....

Okay, I just met the one I want to hire, and now I'm waiting while Mrs. Lee finishes up the paperwork. I couldn't get anyone to say anything other than "Yes, ma'am," or "No, ma'am," in response to every single question, which means each interview lasted only five minutes. So I gave up on getting an actual answer from anyone and went with my gut. Her name is Rose and she had me at "Good morning, ma'am," because of her dazzling smile. They have all seemed so nervous and afraid, but Rose's nervousness came across in smiles and giggles, and since she's going to be living with us, I figure the more smiles, the better.

She has three children back in the Philippines, and she's been in Singapore only two years. Can you imagine leaving your kids? But that's what they all do. She worked the last two years for a Chinese family. Almost every woman I interviewed is with a Chinese family and hoping to land a Western one. From the sounds of it, the Chinese don't treat their helpers very well. One girl told me that she was given a single chicken a week plus a ration of rice, and that's all she got to eat! I tried to foist a granola bar from my purse on her, but she refused it.

Another welled up with tears. "To work for you would be a dream come true," she said, holding my hand. I almost hired her just to rescue her. Her "sir" requires her to massage him every night, and her cell phone was confiscated for talking on it during "work hours," which are six a.m. till ten p.m. Today was her one day off for the month, so this is her only shot at landing a new job until next month. Can you believe that?

This is all so weird. I feel like I'm adopting a forty-three-year-old. I had to watch a video and take a quiz to make sure I understood that I'm not allowed to beat her or make her climb out of high windows to wash them. It's sickening, and part of me wants nothing to do with it. But once I started on this path I felt like I had to continue. I don't know, maybe I can help in some way. Here comes Rose with all of her worldly possessions in a roller carry-on bag. I think some of them are living in a back room in Mrs. Lee's office.

Love,

Sid

I couldn't enjoy this letter as much as I wanted to. According to the postmark, she'd sent it the day after I sent my letter, so while it would have been impossible for her to have read what I wrote to her, it stung a bit to get no acknowledgment of my confession. It took a while to get used to waiting weeks to hear back from her on something I'd written. Often I'd forget that I'd asked her about something and puzzle over her weeks-later response and have to open the scanned letter to figure out what she was talking about.

When the letter I was waiting for did come, it gave me great relief.

Singapore

January 12

Cassie,

WOW. I was not expecting that. You always were the rebel of the family. But really, it's not so horrifying a crime. I'm more concerned that you mentioned you were depressed and felt like you couldn't come to me anymore. That makes ME sad. I'm sorry you went through that rough patch alone. I would give anything to go back in time and be there for you. Thank you for that honest and real kickoff. I have a good feeling about this year. I feel like I should reciprocate, but alas—or maybe thank goodness—I have no major confessions to offer. When I really think about it, I realize we haven't talked about much else other than the kids or Mom and Dad or Joe and Margie in the past, oh, seventeen years, so there probably is a lot you don't know. But none of it seems important now. You rest easy, little sister. My admiration for you only grows.

—Sid

New York

January 24

Sid,

Thanks for that last letter. I feel good now that you know.

Now, moving along. A helper!!! Woot-woot! (Or is it whoot-woot?? That's the first time in my life I've written that, but I think it's warranted here.) I want details. This is like mommy porn for me. Send me a letter telling me—slowly—about everything she does for you and also what you are doing while she's doing it (napping? reading a magazine? drinking your own beverage that doesn't contain toddler backwash?). I'm not joking.

Also, that is so messed up re. the way they are treated. I don't get how that's even allowed. Isn't there some kind of union?

I just remembered something. When the boys were about four months old and I had been back at work for a month, I used to watch TV during their two a.m. feed. I got into that show on Showtime with Chloë Sevigny about the Mormon polygamists, and I remember thinking, these people are genius! A few extra wives really come in handy with a house full of kids. It's just good sense. We could have used an extra wife right about then (still could, actually). I would have gladly let her sleep with Leo. God knows I wasn't. I fantasized about it for weeks—not the sex part, but the wife part, the extra set of hands to take care of the babies, cook, clean, all that. Now you have that, minus the husband sharing.

xoxo, Cassie

Singapore

Feb 3

Cassie,

I can't get used to having a person here all the time. Her English is good, but there's still something of a language barrier. I was telling Lulu that I saw a frog earlier, and Rose said, "You like the frog?" And Lulu clapped and smiled. And Rose looked at me and said, "You like I prepare for you, ma'am?" What? What was she thinking? That I wanted her to go spear a frog from around the koi pond and fry it up for dinner?

And she mops the floor every single day. Which would have been great back before our furniture arrived and Lulu was eating off the floor like a puppy, but now it seems a bit excessive. I tell her to relax, but she's totally uncomfortable unless she's scrubbing or cooking something.

She also keeps propping up Lulu's dolls and teddy bears around the house, which I have mixed feelings about. On one hand, it's funny to walk into the living room and have three teddy bears staring at you from the base of a lamp (and it's sweet that she's taking such care), but on the other hand, no thanks! I mean, grown-ups live here, too. And just because I don't have the refined New York tastes that you do doesn't mean I'm cool with being surrounded by stuffed animals.

The best part is that sometimes it feels like we live at a hotel—Lulu and I go to the pool, and when we come back, our beds are made and the bathrooms are spotless. Actually, scratch that—the best part is the on-call babysitting. I can go for a run or to a yoga class with no advance planning. I just tell Rose I'm going, and I go. I almost feel awful telling you this, but I even go grocery shopping alone.

I've been letting her cook dinner for us every night, because I'm still so in awe of this whole thing. But I do want to reclaim the cooking at least partially at some point—which is going to be necessary if I don't want my heart to explode. The woman has never met a food she can't drown in vegetable oil. She went through a huge jug of it in one week! Everything—a chicken breast, broccoli, whatever—is basically deep-fried. Last night I showed her how to sauté vegetables without so much oil, but I can tell she feels awkward with me in the kitchen. If I do even the tiniest bit of tidying up, she seems mortified. And you should see her go pale when Adrian goes for the sponge or tries to put his plate in the dishwasher. She will drop what she's doing and sprint toward him, practically yelling, "Sir! I do it, sir!"

We have a guest room in our condo, and I figured she would sleep there. I even got it all ready for her. But she prefers the maid's room in the back of the house. It has its own very small, very basic bathroom (a spigot on the wall and a toilet). Her room does have a window, but the room is so tiny that I had to buy a toddler's bed at Ikea so that it could also fit a dresser. (The toddler bed isn't so bad actually. I curled up on it in the store. Still, it just seems wrong.)

On the bright side, our guest room is now ready for visitors.

Okay—I feel completely obnoxious about this whole thing. But you asked for details. I'm going straight to oxfam.org to set up a regular donation to alleviate my white guilt.

Xo,

Sid

I did this only once, but I read that letter aloud to Leo, who hung on my every word.

"And how much do they pay her?"

“Six hundred a month I think is what she told me at Christmas.”

“Holy crap. That’s less than what we paid our nanny in a week.” He was right. When I was working, we paid Wanda, a lovely Dominican woman who doted on the boys and never complained about lugging them up and down the stairs every day, \$850 cash every Friday, wiping out almost all of my paycheck.

We spent most of the rest of our evening fantasizing about having a person living in the back of our house, swooping in to help with the kids when we needed her. Since there was no back of our apartment, though, we supposed we could fit a small mattress on the platform we erected for storage that spanned the ceiling from the front door to the bathroom. She (or he!) would have to be a gymnast, we decided, tiny and limber so as to not require anything more than a rope or a little springboard to launch him- or herself back up to their tiny platform. We could ring a bell when we wanted our helper to come down to do some laundry or dishes. She’d cook exotic and nutritious meals on which we would dine with joy and civility around our family table. For the next few days, when one of us was doing the dishes, in what we imagined a Filipino accent to be, the other would start yelling, “Sir! I do it, sir!”

Both of us did Internet searches for jobs in Singapore, e-mailing the other links. It was all we talked about.

Leo came home one night and said, “Let’s leave the kids with the helper tonight and go out to dinner.”

“Great idea. Now, where is that bell?” I said, looking around in jest. And then we both sighed and stared off into space, imagining the possibility.

“In the old days families would just help each other. According to my mom, her parents never went outside of the family for help,” said Leo.

“What are you saying? That we should call your uncle Sal and have him come watch the boys tonight?”

“Yeah, right.” Leo laughed. “But seriously, it’s kind of sad that families don’t do that anymore—don’t you think? I mean, everyone trusts total strangers to practically raise their kids. Wanda spent fifty hours a week with these guys, and we found her on Craigslist.”

“Wanda rules,” I interjected. “Don’t knock Wanda.” And then I teased Leo about turning into an old man who’d hold up his finger and trill, In my day . . . But in the back of my mind, privately, I returned to my old fantasy— now picturing Sid and me living in a huge house with our families, helping each other with the kids and the housework.

It was a fun week for Leo and me, having a playful inside joke. But later, I felt a bit guilty for reading Sid’s letter to him. I doubt she would have minded, but I promised myself I wouldn’t violate her trust again. There was already something sacred about these missives. They couldn’t be forwarded or copied and pasted. I was the owner of a bespoke object, and I held that dear.

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