

THE SMALL THINGS COME EASY TO ME

Timothy Normandin

MAYBE THIS thing we call women's intuition is just the stone-simple act of staying still long enough to pay attention. Maybe once you master this, all things previously undetected just up and show themselves. I raised all five of our children while my wife brought home long dough from a law firm down in Burlington, and my intuition — a woman's or not — is near on foolproof.

I know when a coyote is in the backyard, or when someone has left the cap off the bleach or the cellar door open. Somehow I was always awake to assess the soft croaking sounds from the baby's crib. I know when a midnight fever is the most natural of events, a mammal's own furnace fired hot and waging war. I know when it's going to rain, and I know when something's just not right.

MY WIFE teases me about my lack of ambition — when she met me I was a big divorce lawyer in Houston, Texas — but I counter by saying that it's only a matter of simple tastes. I bought a 1964 Ford 100 four-wheel-drive truck from the blacksmith in Stowe for 900 dollars. This white beast does nothing but run up and down these steep rutted mountain roads. My wife's name is Rebel and she drives a Peugeot when it's not in the shop. Which is where it most often is.

Rebel tried to broker a deal, getting me to work at her firm on part-time basis. Part of this deal was that I'd have to attend Monday morning "group" with the partners. I claimed these meetings were the intellectual equivalent of menstruation, to which my wife replied that if I wasn't careful my head was bound to disappear right up my own asshole.

I MAKE sourdough pancakes every Monday without fail. Rebel says the kids are old enough to get their own breakfast one morning a week. It's a small thing but I find letting go of pancakes a tough nut to crack.

ONCE I snuck Rebel into the backseat of her father's Cadillac while the wedding reception for her youngest sister was in full swing. We'd been married forever at that point but there are times when I look at her and feel the lust of a longhorn. We were almost caught by two of Rebel's great aunts, and after we finished she said I wasn't to be trusted. She's right, I'm not to be trusted. Rebel might come home from the firm all tuck-

ered out from suing the pants off the bad guys, and find me and our five children in the backyard playing rugby, when by all the damn *What to Expect* books we have lining our shelves they should have long been put to bed. And what do I have to say for myself, the kids all barefoot and muddy, running free in the soft April sod. I say for myself that I have never once lusted after the 33-year-old ballet teacher that lives directly across the street from us. I say it for myself but I don't say it out loud, having harbored a superstition about jinxes since childhood.

YOU CANNOT be a good parent and a coward at the same time. I walk into the university hospital in Burlington like I'm stepping into the Olympic Stadium. I have Abbey with me and she's not doing well. She hasn't felt right in weeks. I'm polite but I'm not taking shit. I made Rebel stay at home with the boys. I told her to do her lawyering, and that I'd call her with the news. There are snow peas ready in the garden, peas that should be picked today, and she was to send Atlas or Kirby to do the job. They're twins so I knew that no matter who she sent they'd both go.

They wanted to keep Abbey overnight, more tests in the morning, that kind of crap. They said it was out of the question for me to stay with her, that my insurance wouldn't cover a private room. I'm not a big man, but I don't look like a lawyer anymore. I've been in the woods chopping wood and running my sawmill for 17 years now. I was in my logging boots and wool trousers with the dust of cut pine clinging to them when they passed along the news to me about Abbey having to stay alone.

I peeled three one hundred dollar bills off my money clip and we were shown to a private room. There's a ropy-muscled confidence you get from being a logger, it's something you can't ever feel in a courtroom.

ON THE way back home the next afternoon we stopped at the storefront bar on the road to Winooski that serves as the headquarters of the Burlington Rugby Club. I'd played for this club some years back and still occasionally joined in with an old boys ad hoc squad called Northern Lights. Abbey seemed to have a bit of an appetite and this tavern has the smoked trout and pinball machines she loves so much. I had one schooner of Belhaven Ale, and had the bartender, Tim, a big busted-

nose forward on the Burlington club, call a friend of his down at Children's Hospital in Boston. The rugby world is a spiderweb of connections, there's no better way to get at what you need, maybe with the exception of rowing crew in the Ivies.

I GREW up on the Gulf Coast of Texas, but my daddy was from the Ozarks so I can fend for myself. When we first moved to Vermont the property we bought had the sawmill and an old rundown barn and not much else. Rebel and I rehabbed the barn ourselves. We slept in a pup tent in the yard all summer. We brought in oak post and beam and installed south facing glass. We have 50 acres that include a small mountain and two rivers passing through.

I log my land selectively, taking stave and red oak, some maple, and pine. A few big trees at a time, turning them into wood right here in my mill, not taking them all and putting them on boats to Asia. I've seen the clearcuts on the public lands, the land the politicians gave to the corporations. Nobody could live in the mountains and do that. These people, these executives and shareholders, they live someplace else. Not in the woods.

THE LAKE in town is bone-solid frozen. Sunday afternoon we, all seven of us, go down to skate. There are fires and barbecue all around the shore and the ice is smooth as a billiard table. The boys are football players first and foremost, and are not comfortable on skates. Abbey moves across the ice like a dream in high-topped white figure skates. Rebel has brought down an expensive bottle of Alsatian wine that we leave out to chill in the subzero air. Kirby and Atlas carry our rucksack filled with roast tenderloin and scalloped potatoes. Jake and Tommy bring another bag containing the fireworks. Being a Southern boy, I take along a hockey stick to lean on; I skate until my ankles begin to ache like a rotting molar. Rebel and I drink the sweet wine out of cut crystal goblets while we watch Abbey whirl and bank as if the laws of physics are loose and very rarely enforced. After dinner the boys launch off their bag of fireworks. We buy most of it in South Carolina. It's quality stuff, and the boys handle it like pros.

I'VE GOT the night sweats again. It's nothing, just nerves. I woke up soaked as if it were high noon in New Delhi, my hair matted, the bed full of puddles. I got up and toweled off. After I checked in on Abbey I poured a brandy, bundled up, and went outside. No good can come of sitting when it's three in the morning, and there's no pain that the night sky can't – at least in some small way – ease. I never told a living soul but I was half disappointed every time we had a baby and it wasn't a girl. There's no explaining it considering that the very word explanation implies something rational and thought out.

ABBEY AND I have found gold in Gold Creek. Nobody else looks, they think the name is based on exaggeration like so many other things you find on maps. They think the guy from the Adirondacks who came over and built the sluice on the wide wash just before the creek empties into the Middlebury River was a crackpot. This broken-down sluice that never so much as one time produced even a flake of gold stands like a totem to pessimism. But we've found lots of pea-sized nuggets miles upstream on the edge of deep cold trout pools. Places the old miner never bothered to think about. Abbey keeps them in a Chock Full O'Nuts coffee can on the top shelf of her closet. It's our secret and we like to wink and say "good as gold" when we approve of something.

REBEL GOT a leave of absence from the firm, we took the boys out of school, and went down to Boston as a family. God help me, but it felt like a vacation. We rented a suite at the Westin. Boston was in the midst of a once-in-a-generation phenomenon: an early and consistent spring. It felt more like Atlanta than New England. I had planned out a course of study for the boys using the Boston Public Library and five of the city's museums.

I told Rebel that even after this was all through and Abbey was right and fixed that she'd never stand a chance of getting life insurance. It was a stray and asinine thought that somehow bubbled up to the surface unchecked.

"There's no such thing as life insurance," she said gently. "If there were, it would cost a hell of a lot more than it's currently going for."

THERE IS no harm in being prepared. For some years I've kept a dry suit folded up behind the seat of my truck. I spent the last gasp of my teens in the U.S. Coast Guard. I was stationed on the Mars-like island of Attu, and I can put this suit on in under 45 seconds. A dry suit can turn a weak, hairless mammal into something primal and ancient, something able to live in greater harmony with fate's fouler moods.

When the ice is near to out, I park down by the river and wait to save the skaters. The fact that they would no more be caught on the broken spine of the winter like that than a blue bird or a duck would mistime its flight south is of little consequence to me. I'm not afraid to wait until I'm needed.

THEY TOOK the bone marrow from me. Abbey and I were matched dead-on perfect, which is something I could have told them before all the tests if they'd been inclined to ask. Now came the waiting game. I was so elated at the prospect of treatment, of doing something, that I must have given one of the doctors the wrong impression. He felt inclined to pull me aside and warn me of "false hope."

I had to tell him there was no such thing. The feeling that what is desired is also possible is not burdened by guarantee, and as such can only be true. It's a small point but I thought it important at the time.