

Slow Love

*How I Lost My Job,
Put On My Pajamas
& Found Happiness*

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1. SATURDAY

FOR NEARLY THIRTEEN years, I had a job as the editor of *House & Garden*, a magazine that celebrated the good life. It would be an understatement to describe this enterprise as part of a company that was decidedly *not* in the business of philosophical, spiritual, or moral soul-searching. Condé Nast's roots and branches are in the material world. So, though we maintained high standards in writing and photography, and included stories in the magazine about spirituality, sustainability, and social responsibility wherever we could (and worried about offending gas-guzzling car advertisers), the good life in *House & Garden* generally meant cultivating your own backyard rather than being involved in the body politic. As much as we pushed against the limits of making a so-called shelter magazine, I always felt clear-eyed about how things stood. To give you a glimpse of the sorts of things designers put up with: Its perfect madness came home to me on September 12, 2001, when a decorator called me in tears because one of his clients on Manhattan's Upper East Side had berated him for an hour as he tried to explain why her new sofa cushions could not be delivered that day. I spent more than a decade in the belly of the beast of muchness and more.

The folding of the magazine was ruthless. Without warning, our world collapsed. No one was expecting it. I came to work on Monday, went to the corporate offices for a meeting, got

the news, and was told to have everything packed up by Friday. Within five minutes I was getting phone calls from media writers outside the company; they heard the news before I could get back to my office to tell my colleagues. Security guards were posted; I wondered if there was management concern about the fate of all those wildly expensive bolts of fabric in our prop closet.

“Fabric? Who cares about fabric?” said one guard in response to my question. “We don’t want anyone kicking in the walls. Or taking computers.”

I had to laugh.

In the four days we were given to pack up our belongings, I was overwhelmed with an urge to hoard, and began stuffing every *House & Garden* paper bag, pencil, and notepad I could get my hands on into a box, so that I would never run out of office supplies. I salvaged enough to run a small corporation from my kitchen. I didn’t think of this as stealing. I thought of it as a twisted sort of recycling, for me, and for the stuff—part of the strange new economy of severance into which I had been thrown. Everything with our logo on it was destined for the shredder anyway.

Even so, a few weeks later I realized I had some gaping holes in my inventory: I had no ink for my printer. The pages of my résumé looked faded, ghostly. You would have thought I was fading too, but I wasn’t. I was getting plump. All I could think about was food. This was the beginning of being hungry all the time. My addled brain was interpreting the white noise of unemployment to mean that I was going into hibernation, so I had

to fatten up to get through the long winter ahead. After the closing of the magazine was announced, my public line was: “I had a great run; I took a magazine from zero to 950,000 readers in ten years, won awards, published four books . . .” I was a zombie. “Great run . . . 950,000 readers . . . four books . . .”

But privately, I was in a whiplashing tailspin. My nightmare had finally come true. For years, I had had a profound dread of unemployment that went way beyond worrying about how to pay the bills. I would like to say that this was because of the insecure nature of magazine publishing in general, and life at Condé Nast specifically, where the backstabbing at the highest levels of management was elevated to an art form, an elaborate corporate kabuki. But actually my anxiety had more to do with my own neuroses. Work had become the scaffolding of my life. It was what I counted on. It supported the structure. Work held up the floor of my moods, kept the façade intact. I always worried that if I didn’t have a job, I would sink into abject torpor. I couldn’t imagine life without work—or, if I did, I went cold with fear. Not for me, those fantasies of sunny days at the beach.

I have always had a job. I have always supported myself. Everything I own—my house, my piano, my kayak, my trees—I purchased with money that I earned. For the thirty years I’ve been an adult, I have had an office to go to and a time to show up there. I’ve always had a place to *be*, and you can read as much existential gravitas into that as you want; there’s plenty there. I had never even changed jobs without having another job lined up. It was probably compulsive not to spend a few days in between

jobs quietly thinking about what I would like to do, rather than just leaping into what others offered me next—but this problem afflicts many of us, sort of like not leaving a bad boyfriend until you have a new boyfriend lined up. It feels safer. Without work, who was I? I do not mean that my title defined me. Whatever status came with being an editor at Condé Nast didn't mean much to me; it seemed silly, overblown, something that other people projected. What did define me was the plain old simple act of working. The loss of my job triggered a cascade of self-doubt and depression. I felt like a failure. Not that the magazine had failed, but that I had.

I needed a job to do. I thrived on deadlines. I wanted my attendance to be required. I wanted reasons to stay in touch with people, good reasons like monthly corporate meetings and budget meetings and circulation meetings, weekly meetings with product designers and decorators and architects, daily meetings with editors and writers and photographers to generate story ideas, sales calls with publishers to generate ads, speeches and television appearances to generate publicity. Work even dictated my social life. Every night, if I chose to attend—and often enough, attendance was mandatory—there were openings and parties and lectures and dinners. I am not a very social person. If anything, my natural state is solitary, so this was the hardest part of my job, but at least it kept me out and about. I hired people who reveled in high society, with its patronage of design, to compensate for my shyness. They would bring photos back to the office, and with me safely behind the scenes, we would choose what to feature.

The thing about running a magazine is that there is always so much to do. One deadline is met, and another rolls in right behind it. But editing the magazine was only the beginning of the job. The days of walling off editorial from the business side are long gone, if they ever existed at Condé Nast; editors are expected to sell ads, and to participate wholeheartedly in marketing events. Publishers seem to claim the right—and indeed, are expected to deliver—editorial coverage of their important clients. Editors who don't respond put their jobs at risk. When Giorgio Armani demands coverage for his collection or he'll pull his lucrative pages, guess what's going to happen? Editors are also expected to generate publicity for themselves as much as for their magazines. It doesn't matter if the gossip is negative, so long as it is boldfaced.

There is no such thing as corporate camaraderie. It is every publisher for himself, all pitching the same advertisers, and asking them to pay premium prices for our pages. The pressure is unrelenting; we went through five publishers in ten years; the turmoil was unimaginable. And every editor is on her own, too. No such thing as calling someone who knew the ropes to get advice; no such thing as a colleague to bounce ideas off of. For that matter, for thirteen years I could count on my colleagues to start rumors about me—that I was about to lose my job—every six months. And that elevator full of fashion snobs! It is legendary: how you're looked over, head to toe, by flocks of beautiful, mean girls, their needle-stung lips puckering in disdain. I felt as if I were surrounded by flights of gazelles on a savannah, strange, exotic creatures. One punishing winter, it was mysteriously

decreed that legs had to be bare, and I watched as haughty women, bowing to the pressure of the herd, stalked in to work on stilettoes, shivering with cold, their flesh attractively mottled and goose-bumped.

Over the years, many of our advertising clients remarked that they were stunned by the competitiveness of the company, and while they were drawn to the glamour of the parties we would throw for them, they were offended by the gossip-mongering. While the company lifestyle is lavish, the company culture is fearful. The day I started, the editor of *Architectural Digest* announced to the press, "I killed that magazine once, and I'll kill it again." I felt as if I had walked into *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. She wasn't the only one gunning for us, but she was the only one vulgar enough to dance publicly on our grave, when she announced at a design industry dinner her pleasure that we were gone and her decision to blacklist from her pages anyone who had supported us. It seems petty, but it was punitive for designers, who run small businesses and cannot afford to advertise their skills; magazine features are the only way to demonstrate what they can do to a wide audience of potential clients.

All of it was perversely fascinating, so long as I could maintain a skeptical distance. I tried to keep my colleagues away from the culture of gossip and backbiting, partly by hiring from outside the company, and partly by not tolerating it within our offices. It certainly took a toll on me; I couldn't begin to count the number of evenings I went home and collapsed in exhaustion over yet another round of political savagery. The only way

I could survive was to toughen up, just ignore it all, and do my best work.

We walled ourselves off as best we could, and within *House & Garden*, we enjoyed years of stability. Some of us were together for more than a decade. We formed a sort of office family; we spent more time with one another than we did with our own families, and we were united in our simple ambition to make a beautiful, informative, well-written magazine that would teach readers about the design world. The flip side of being part of the high-strung stable of thoroughbreds owned by a mercurial boss was that editors in chief were given freedom to be inventive about their subjects. We had generous budgets for writing and photography. The corporate zaniness seemed a small price to pay for the opportunity to create my own magazine; that doesn't come along too often in an editor's life. Besides, I liked *not* being in control of my time, no matter how much I might have whined about it—that meant I was always busy.

I thrived. I couldn't even do one thing at a time; I had to multitask in order to focus on anything at all. In some ways, I was extraordinarily productive. Because *House & Garden* was a monthly magazine, our deadlines for getting pages to the printer were months ahead of the date on the cover of the issue. So, for example, we would be working on the September issue in May. That meant we were never operating in real time—it might have been late spring in the world, but in our everyday working lives, it was fall. I always felt out of step with the seasons. Eventually, I wasn't even living in real time. One Saturday in June,

after a grueling deadline for the September issue, I asked my younger son how he had enjoyed summer camp. “I haven’t gone yet, Mom.” Of course. I knew that.

With the closing of the magazine, my beloved family of colleagues was obliterated. And so was the structure of my life.

Within hours of leaving my office for the last time, I can hardly bring myself to care about my résumé, or my reputation. I just want to eat. I begin calling every employed person I know with a job to take me to lunch. I want to fill my calendar with the promise of meals, days and days of them, even if they are only penciled-in promises—this, after all, being Manhattan. Only food can ward off the rage, fury, despair, and raw fear that have overcome me.

During my first post-employment lunch, my panic about not having a job is full-blown. When the waiter comes bearing bread, it is all I can do to keep myself from wrapping a dozen breadsticks in a heavy linen napkin and tucking them into my bag. I float the idea, actually, and my companion laughs slightly, nervously, gauging the level of my seriousness. I manage to control myself. He is an enormously appealing, calm, funny, brilliant person who knows a lot about business and politics, so nothing in the world surprises him, and he sees a way to market oneself right out of every disaster. He is a good friend, and gives me loads of advice, which I hear through my frantic chewing. I do feel better. I eat a huge amount of food. I end the meal extracting a promise of several more meals in the future; I want meals with friends bearing menus.

Panic hangs heavily about my shoulders for the next few weeks. How had I managed to get this far in my life completely unprepared for the unknown—which I had always known was out there? The unknown: what is going to happen today? What am I going to do? My friends begin to worry, and to make koan-ish statements like “No one gives a crippled crab a crutch.” I take riddles like that as distractions, turning them over, the way a child takes a rattle in its fist.

I begin keeping notes about how I am feeling, what I am doing. Writing has always been my way to absorb things; I often write out my troubles. It even crosses my mind that maybe this will be the time in my life when I finally have a chance to write for a living. I know that it doesn't pay well, but I figure if I combine it with some consulting work, I could support myself. Luckily, or wisely, I had not changed my lifestyle while I was working at Condé Nast, so I had saved money. This was just before the stock market and the publishing business fell through the floor. Little did I know how frightening things would become.

But I quickly develop a strange problem with my typing—and I am a world-class typist. I notice that I keep mssng the *i* key—things kept coming out without t. Strange. I know there is no neurological pathology in the middle finger of my right hand. I just can't strike the *i*. Mssng the *i* means retyping words over and over again. This goes on for weeks. It is a pain. I stop wrtng.

After a few weeks of being unemployed, I begin to settle into a routine—of getting up.

“Today is Saturday,” I say to myself one morning. I repeat this several times, like a mantra, trying to convince myself to get

out of bed. Saturday is what I have come to think of as one of the nice days, like Sunday—when I consider days at all. “Today is Saturday. No one is working today, so you are no different from anyone else,” I say out loud.

In fact, I have found it hardly necessary to be aware of what day it is. One of the pleasures of a workday morning was to rise early, have a cup of tea, walk through the garden, and get to the train on time, where I could read the paper front to back. Now that I do not have to get to work, I no longer have a structured time to read the daily paper, so I stack it into a pile, thinking I’ll get to it later, until I realize I am creating a weekly daily.

I miss Fridays especially. They once meant relief, relaxation, an end to the busy week, time for rest and housekeeping. Now every day is Friday. Or Monday. Whatever.

Time hangs heavily on the unemployed soul. I eat an egg at 8:00 A.M., and by 9:30 I am starving. I become obsessed with eggs, gazing on their refined shape in wonder. Perfect packets of nutrients. I eat eggs all day long. When I had a job, I never had to think about eggs. I become broody, producing nothing. And the more I eat, the hungrier I get. It is easy enough to understand the concept of comforting oneself with food, but the comfort part goes right by me.

I might be busy all day, and then, when I’m in bed again, realize I have done nothing. The last time I felt this way was when I had a newborn and was so exhausted from nursing through the night and keeping an eye on the sleeping infant all morning that I couldn’t get into grown-up clothing until late in the afternoon.

For heaven's sake, I hadn't even thought of it as grown-up clothing since I was a five-year-old dressing for kindergarten. Unemployed, I can't think straight enough to figure out what to do, until I realize that the day has gone by and I have done nothing.

"How are you today?" my sister Nicole asks. She is worried, and she calls several times a day. "How was your morning?" my sister wants to know.

"Incredibly busy. Unbelievable."

"What were you doing?"

"Sleeping."

In this way, being unemployed is a lot like being depressed. I wish I could be expansive about the mental physics of it all; I simply know enough to tell you about time, energy, and motion. Time drags, when it isn't speeding past. This is relative to everyone else. Energy is unreliable and has a distinct bearing on motion. Ah, yes, something else hovers at the edge of my consciousness. Mass. That would be me.

Why is it that for the last ten years, when I most needed its healing balm, I was unable to sleep? And why now, when I have no reason to be rested, can I not wake up? For years I had tossed and turned, and been awake at 4:00 A.M., a miserable hour if ever there was one. Yet I could be bright and happy all day at the office. Now, I am sleeping for ten or twelve hours at a stretch, and still, when I wake, I am tired and cranky.

This undoubtedly has to do with chaos theory.

You know how there are millions (okay, a handful) of things you swear you would do if you only had the time? Now that I have

all the time in the world—except for the hours during which I’m looking for work—to read, write, travel, take walks, play minor-key nocturnes, have lunch with friends, train a dog, *get* a dog, learn to cook, knit a sweater, iron the napkins, and even the sheets, I have absolutely no energy for any of it. Just thinking about it exhausts me. I am no longer a body in motion.

Entropy. There’s a concept I can tell you something about. “A closed system,” my dictionary says, “evolves toward a state of maximum entropy.” I feel like a closed system, because I have lost my part in a living, breathing entity that was a function of all the quirks and passions and personalities of everyone I had worked with, gathered together. That brilliant organism, sparkling with imagination and effort and love, dissolved around us. We were left scattered, little unbonded atoms. I have absolutely zero experience in filling my days with activity of my own choosing. Being unemployed means being unoccupied, literally. I feel hollow. “Entropy is a doctrine of inevitable social decline and degeneration.”

To which I can only add: me, too.

“Today is Saturday. Get out of bed.”

It being Saturday means that I can feel a little bit normal. Saturday is not a workday. I rise early. I open the curtains to let in some light. The clouds have lifted; the sun is sparkling through the rich, late fall colors of the sassafras trees that fill the front yard. I remember how I had once loved Saturdays, how weekends had given me a heady sense of freedom. When my calendar had been crammed full of meetings, simply to have had a

blank day was elating. Now, all that mattered was that everyone else's Saturdays were different from Mondays.

I make a breakfast of the leftovers from a post-employment lunch, and then I put on a hat and mittens. Did I mention that we were all fired just as the holiday season was upon us? So much for Thanksgiving. I head into the streets. The early sunlight is slanting across the shop windows. Everyone is hurrying past me. Suddenly I notice that the men on the sidewalk look strange; they are in overcoats and polished leather shoes, and carrying briefcases. The women are dressed up. They have introspective, determined, grim faces. Strange for a Saturday.

That's when it hits me.

Today is not Saturday. It's Friday.