

Mittelschmerz

~4,300 Words

When the face smiles I leave the stick on the toilet tank to let Kevin know the time is nigh. It is a mixed signal, really, like beckoning a man to his own destruction. The ironic happy face marks the opening crack of the fertile window and the simultaneous rush of a cold hormonal wind that intensifies as the endocrine system overcomes its restraints. I am used to this concept, though, I pee on sticks all the time and long ago learned to follow their semaphore and guideposts without question.

The purple sticks track ovulation, signifying the pending drop-kick of my egg through my fallopian tubes. They offer a smiling guide to timing copulation and maximizing our chances at reproduction. The pink sticks detect pregnancy and indicate it with two parallel lines I've read of but never seen. The sticks build up in the bathroom garbage. My average is five per week - I like to count them when I empty the trash, I've begun to see them as a new metric for femininity. I'm also a pro at aiming my urine at anything attached to a digital reader and mentally timing three seconds accurately.

I know all about metrics since I head up big data for a major retailer. I think the retailer hired me because I had the phrase "data scientist" in my LinkedIn profile. At the time I was tinkering with my statistics dissertation, which had to do with predicting the impact of texting videos on nutrition to the smart phones of diabetics. Kevin, my husband, was a "socially conscious entrepreneur," which meant thinking of apps, realizing they had no plausible tie to a business model, and then reading Internet comic strips for the rest of the day. He'd started out in advertising, which he'd found dishonest, then switched to marketing, which he'd found overthought, and then joined a clean tech start up right before the bust. I guess you could say that, when a major retail chain made me an offer, I looked at the graphs of data connecting blood sugar levels to time spent watching healthy cooking clips, then over at Kevin, who was playing

Scrabble on his phone, and decided to take the job. Now my name is followed by the letters ABD, All But Dissertation, which is fine. I already have the tools I need to crack life's code and I can leave to the academics the mystery of A Smart Phone-Based Intervention in an Insulin-Resistant Population.

Still, the sticks only have a detectable correlation with how often Kevin and I have sex and how often I want to smash things. I once thought the happy face was cute, like a young cheerleader coaching Kevin's sperm to reach new goals, but after six months without success I noticed that my PMS symptoms were triggered by the faces on those Have A Nice Day bumper stickers, like Pavlov's dog turning on his owner, ripping his throat out, and then ringing that stupid bell in his ear as he bled to death wishing he'd studied accounting the way his father had wanted.

I track everything on an app. It uses flowers and hearts to describe fertility and the act of love, respectively and respectfully. Sometimes, when Kevin and I are doing it, I think about how excited I am to log this data point afterwards. Self-tracking is a big tenet of the Quantified Self movement, and feeling rewarded is a big boost to self-tracking. I don't rely on the app alone, I also keep an Excel spreadsheet that pulls information on my body temperature, mucosal lining thickness, and sleep patterns into a Pivot table. I'm thinking of adding a chocolate consumption variable, but I don't really want to if I can avoid it.

My friend Shelly from work had twins via in vitro. I am going to see her fertility specialist in two weeks, even though Shelly said her kids ruined her life. She claims to love them like crazy in spite of the devastation.

"Are you doing candlestick pose?" she asks me over lunch one day.

"What's that?"

“Studies have shown that women who raise their legs above their heads after copulation have higher pregnancy rates.” Shelly loves to say, “studies have shown.” It is her mantra. Mine has become, “Let’s make this one a quickie.” I’m thinking about the meaning of this when she asks, “How does Kevin feel about all this?”

“Huh?”

Shelly puts down the fork holding her quinoa and salmon salad. “Kevin. The man attached to the penis you are having sex with. How does he feel about the appointment with Dr. Foo?”

“Fine, I think.” The truth is that I forgot to ask, just sent Kevin the meeting request on Google calendar and made sure he accepted it later.

That night after sex I fling my legs above my head and place my hands onto my lower back in an attempt to maintain the candlestick position. Kevin asks me if it’s really called “embattled mongoose pose” and, when I laugh, my legs fall down and odd noises emanate from my lady parts. I’m so embarrassed that I bury my head under a pillow and ignore Kevin’s attempts to reassure me, which he doesn’t do that well since he’s laughing so hard he is crying and can’t breathe. In the end he lies on top of me and pretends to sleep on my pillow-head with his hands tucked under the base of my neck. I eventually remove the pillow and let him kiss me and stroke my hair. I wonder if this could be the causative factor behind success and how I will code it into my spreadsheet.

It isn’t, though, and I get my period nearly two weeks later, before I can even use the pink stick to look for parallel lines and bringing down my stick count for the week. Kevin and I go see Dr. Foo and, in the waiting room, we sit on a couch framed by natural sunlight because I think it will coax the maternal side out of me. Kevin plays on his phone while I admire the photos of flowers that were deemed safe enough to be hung on the walls of a fertility clinic. The place is a train

station, women arriving, women leaving, women drinking tea at the counter, women, women, women. One sits across the room from us with her headphones plugged in and her eyes closed, and I realize I know exactly what she is doing – a guided meditation. I smirk as she stops to answer a text message and then resumes her pose. Then, I wonder if maybe she knows something I don't and I should incorporate mindfulness into my algorithm.

“So, how was the appointment?” Shelly asks me at work the next day. She is wearing a sweater with rainbow-striped sleeves and a neon yellow cat on the chest.

“Fine, he ordered some labs and I have to get an H-S-”

“An HSG test, I thought so,” Shelly says. “To see if your tubes are blocked with gunk. If they are, studies have shown that a small percentage of women will have their tubes unblocked by the exam itself.”

“Like Roto Rooter?” I ask.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Kevin just has to give semen for analysis, and I have to fill out like a 10-page questionnaire on my...myself.”

“Why are you being so cagey?” she wants to know. Shelly wants to know everything. It makes her good at her job, actually. Earlier that month, she deciphered that consumer spending in our stores was more strongly correlated with ambient light than ambient noise, as we'd previously thought. She was the only person who thought to look at sunlight as part of the analysis. When she did, it was clearly a variable that confounded the relationship between the alternate soundtrack we'd selected for afternoon shoppers and buying behavior.

“I'm not being cagey, I just don't like saying the V word at work,” I explain.

“Ah, no cha cha talk in the cafeteria, I get it.”

I laugh and spit my brown rice across the table where we’re sitting. “Cha cha?” I manage to say. “The most musical name I’ve heard was ba-jingo.”

“Cha cha cha, cha cha cha,” Shelly says, making her arms and her upper body twist to the rhythm. It makes the cat on her sweater undulate.

“Too much, Shelly, too much.” Sometimes that woman just makes my day.

During the HSG test I feel pinned to the exam table through my cha cha, kind of like a butterfly on a bulletin board at the visitor’s station of a national park. Before undergoing this exam, I was asked to take a pregnancy test in the clinic bathroom and, as I lie on the table, I tell myself to remember to count that stick towards my average for this week even though it isn’t in my garbage at home. As I lie on the table, I ignore the discomfort by thinking of how I will code this visit in my spreadsheet to see if my variables reflect any changes afterwards. I’ll have to make a timeline and show before and after.

Dye flows through my lower half and I see, on the TV screen, that it snakes its way through my fallopian tubes, the path clear as no excess tissue is acting as a bouncer at the entrance. I’m clean as they come. Kevin is waiting to take me home afterwards. When I re-enter the waiting room, he stands up and I see that his hair is sticking up from dozing off on the sofa in the waiting room. Sunlight always puts him to sleep unlike, I guess, the people who shop at my employer’s stores.

Even though we’re in our thirties, Kevin has this eternally boyish quality that makes my heart warm and, when he opens his arms to hug me, I kiss his cheek and whisper that I love him and that my junk hurts but the test was clear. We get coffee and go to a park where I try to focus on

what Kevin is saying but my eyes keep wandering over to young, urban mothers pushing their kids in swings. The moms have greasy hair and are wearing intentionally lumpy sweaters and thick, geeky eye glasses. I wonder, when we have kids, if we have kids, whether I'll join this special club of stylish-yet-excusable-frumpiness because children take all of your time.

Shelly hosts Kevin and me at a barbeque a few weeks later. At this point, we have been trying to get pregnant for one year and we are the only couple sans-children at the party. Kevin and the men stand in a circle comparing their new cell phones and I look at the children running around wearing colorful leggings, their heads marred with hair chalk, their nails unevenly painted with polish that they chew off while spacing out. I want to scream at them to stand still and shut up. I wonder if that makes me an unfit would-be-mother, then I realize this is entirely predictable since I had the Happy Face of Mental Anguish this morning. Janine, another coworker and the mother of two little boys, comes over, which is also predictable since she either can't read expressions or doesn't understand that anger means, "Stay away."

"You look like you are in pain, Laura," she says, confirming the latter. She is wearing an earth mother, ankle-length, bohemian dress with Birkenstocks. Her children are blond and curly with names I can't remember except that they make me think of hippie communes and gluten-free granola mixed into plain yogurt.

"My stomach hurts a bit," I answer, which is true, I've been having cramping here and there ever since that HSG test.

"Is it your special time?" I don't understand what that means until she says, "I can get you some Ibuprofen."

“No, actually, it’s too early for that.” Special is not how I’d describe my period. Persecution is likely closer.

“Oh, mittelschmerz!” she exclaims. “I was like clockwork with that stuff.”

“Mittel-what?”

“Mid-cycle pain. From ovulation. Tell Kevin he’s going to get lucky tonight!” Janine winks at me and I wonder why everyone assumes we’re trying to have kids, even though we are.

“That sounds like a German torture device,” I tell her, trying to joke around as I ponder why I’ve never heard this word before.

“Anyway,” she continues. “I brought you something.” Janine sets her son’s organic apple sauce squeezable thing down and pulls a brochure out of her back pocket. It has a drawing of copulating male and female bodies on the front and, just as I’m about to smack her under the assumption she’s going to hand me the Vegan Guide to Reproductive Kama Sutra, I notice the title says Bay Area Ballroom Dancers. “I heard you and Shelly talking about Latin dancing in the cafeteria, so when I saw this I thought of you.” It takes me a moment to grasp this and then I manage to say, “Thanks Janine, I need to freshen up” before I run into the house in a giggling fit. I have to tell Shelly, she’ll just flip.

The parents at the party seem exhausted and the children are misbehaved. The collective sound of their tantrums is like hearing a hundred entrepreneurs whine about not getting onto a Top 30 Under 30 List. I wonder why Kevin and I are putting ourselves through this. Maybe we should just forget it all and travel or spend our money on fancy restaurants or those ballroom dance lessons in Janine’s brochure. Then I see one little boy with dark blond hair and chubby cheeks run across the living room, pause, stand on his tippy toes to turn off Shelly’s halogen lamp, and run outside. He has the same rascally quality as Kevin and, with that one antic, he makes my

chest open in a feeling of longing and sadness. “Wilder! There you are,” I hear Janine say. So that was his name, Wilder, not Rory or Shepard or Kai. I think Kevin and I would prefer traditional, slightly old-fashioned names for our kids like Henry or Rose, but I put this thought aside because I don’t want to cry at Shelly’s party. I’ll just let it feed my bitterness instead. I slip outside again as I’m curious to see how Janine handles a scoundrel. Wilder has found his apple sauce container and, just when I’m about to be impressed at his self-reliance, I see him smile with half of his mouth. This is an expression I recognize as the one Kevin has when he is sneaking drug store candy into a movie theater while humming the Pink Panther theme song. Then, darling Wilder points his snack at Janine and squeezes a large stream of organic goodness onto her dress. When she shrieks, I have to run inside giggling for the second time.

“Having fun?” Shelly asks.

“Great party!” I tell her.

After Kevin and I try that night, I kick him out of the room, debunking the myth that women prefer to cuddle and making it clear that his entire body becomes unnecessary once it has released the pieces that I need. Then, I place pillows under my lower half and heave my legs up into the air with no need to feign modesty or elegance. As I lie there, I wonder what else have I been in the middle of without realizing. Mittelschmerz, mittel-grocery-store-checkout-line, mittel-sentence, mittel-life crisis. Maybe I should have finished my PhD after all because I’ve missed so many causative factors in this analysis.

During our our second appointment with Dr. Foo, he claims that all our tests are normal. I have plenty of eggs in storage. I think of myself as the Costco of ovum, my eggs all lined up in glass enclosures wearing US Marine Corps fatigues because they are ready to deploy. Then I realize

how small my eggs likely are and begin to think of them as ping pong balls bouncing into the bushes, hopefully to be found by Kevin's troops during a search and rescue mission.

"So, if everything is normal, why is this taking so long?" I ask.

Dr. Foo leans back in his chair and presses his fingertips together. His fingers are extremely lean and his nails are completely clean. In front of him lie laminated pictures of the human reproductive system. They are completely unsexy. Kevin holds my hand. "Well, Laura. Sometimes infertility is unexplained," Dr. Foo says.

"What?"

"There is no reason for not getting pregnant. It just doesn't happen." I sit, stunned. He continues, "I think you should continue to try for a few more months, and we can try intrauterine insemination if you don't become pregnant on your own. Also, remember to just have fun." He smiles, showing teeth as perfect and clean as his hands.

Fun? Didn't he know that was really just for the husbands? I was hard at work tracking if my cycle length had anything to do with the weather, or pollen levels, or if our receptionist at work wore yellow. I was perfecting my candlestick pose. I had eliminated alcohol from my diet. Did any of that seem fun?

When we get home, Kevin makes dinner while I watch Shark Tank. We eat without talking because Kevin knows when to leave me alone to digest thoughts and / or food. He is very empathetic that way. It is a trait I hope our children inherit.

"What would you invent?" he asks, when the show is over. He presses his nose against the top of my head and smells my shampoo.

"I don't know."

"You're going to be a great mom someday."

I nod but don't speak. Lately, reassurance has begun to feel as packaged as a TED talk. Now comes the part where he connects our personal hardships to a revelation on humanity. But Kevin lets his sentence lie in the room as the last words spoken for a while.

“Want to see what I invented?” he asks, making me realize I not only forgot to return the question, I have no idea what he has been doing lately. When I nod, Kevin hands me his phone and I take it with both hands to show respect for his creation. I press “Enter” on an icon of an ancient, wooden sign and am presented with the image of an old woman holding a crystal ball. She looks perfectly old-fashioned in the way that I'd picture a fortune teller at a carnival or state fair. A cartoon-like speaking bubble appears by her mouth and the text, “What is your question?” appears in it as a raspy sound voices this question aloud. Kevin nudges me to talk. “What is our future?” I ask.

The woman's mouth opens and closes as she whispers her reply while “Go outside” appears in the text bubble. Kevin gently but eagerly shoves me off the couch. I walk out into our tiny backyard. The phone vibrates in my hand and a constellation map appears that pivots a bit until it matches the night sky above me. “See!” Kevin says, practically dancing in his flip flops. “It knew you were outside, and figured out exactly where!” The fortune teller re-appears and says, “Adventure is a great way to harness the feminine energy of Neptune. Be sure to try new and exciting things to connect your inner, spiritual and outer, physical heroines.” Then, she dissolves into nothing, leaving behind a flashing ad for a conference on embedded systems.

“Hey, ads were the only way to monetize it,” Kevin says, shrugging. A surge of conflicting emotions renders me nearly dumb, so I switch to canned tech talk. “How many active users do you have?”

“Two hundred K,” Kevin answers, beaming, “and half signed up during our soft launch! Users log in like three times a day, and most just want to know if they should marry their significant others.”

“Really? How do you answer?”

“We dip into their social media streams. If the sentiment analysis is generally positive, and photos containing the end user and one other human body receive a high number of likes, we show two smiling emoji’s standing under a huppah.”

“A what?”

“You know, the Jewish wedding canopy?”

“And if it’s negative you link to Tinder?”

“Good idea!” Kevin says, totally serious. “And look,” he continues. “It’s just been gamified!” Kevin opens the beta version of the app on his phone. “See, you can upload photos of your palm and see if your prediction matches the fortune teller’s, in which case you get points. If you want, you can send your friends a ‘high-five’ and read each other’s palms.”

I’m grateful for the dark because it gives me the chance to compose my thoughts and my expression. Initially, I want to scream at him and his stupid fortune teller, but then I see how happy Kevin is with his creation and I give him a hug and congratulate him.

The next day I manage to forget about it until I notice three people sitting around me on BART, our rapid transit system, taking photos of their palms and giggling. Shelly can tell I’m livid about something and demands to know what. When I tell her, I detect a flinch but I’m not sure if it’s because the analyst in her is sad or she has the app on her phone. I don’t ask.

“Two hundred thousand users are a strong indication that the market needs a GPS-enabled fortune teller app. Apparently we’re all seeking some kind of answers in the form of a predictive model.”

“That isn’t a predictive model! That is random gunk!” I try to keep my voice down.

“Look, nothing is predictive until it is. At the very least, the app is providing people with some sense of safety we all crave.” She yawns and rubs her eyes.

“Tired?”

“We’re sleep training. We’re using the No Tears method,” Shelly says, as if I’m supposed to know what that means.

“No tears for who?” I ask in all seriousness.

“Funny ha ha, Laura. It means I run in there whenever they cry even though we’ve spent two hours rocking them to sleep.”

“That sounds tough.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t seem totally right to me, but some studies have shown ... you know, whatever.” Shelly presses her palms into her eyes and I put my hand on her back and give her a small rub. “I think I’m going to nap in the conference room,” she says, and slugs off.

That evening I stand on the BART platform waiting for my train and refusing to look at my phone even though it keeps buzzing to remind me to do the mindfulness meditation I’ve been delaying. All I want is to go home and lie on the couch with my iPad propped up on my stomach. I hear an annoying, repetitive noise and spot a familiar, blond and curly-haired little boy dribbling a kiddie basketball a few yards away. Janine’s husband is sitting on a bench behind him, immersed in his phone. I’d say hello if I could remember his name.

Wilder walks towards the platform edge, dribbling the ball and looking over his shoulder at his oblivious father. When Wilder uses both hands to throw the ball down hard, it makes such a large sound and echo that a few commuters standing nearby seem to hear it despite their ear buds. Still, his dad still doesn't detect his son's departure. Wilder moves further away and raises his hands dramatically above his head, the ball poised to create maximum impact. This time, it ricochets off the floor and over the platform, landing on the train tracks below. He stares at his basketball, his lower lip sticking out and his fists by his sides. I hear the grumble of the oncoming train and get this "oh no" feeling in my chest. My legs begin moving before my mind knows what I'm doing.

"Wilder!" I yell as I shove past people. "Stop!" I don't think he can hear me since the train is really close by now, its grumble turning into a full growl. As it slides into the station, Wilder takes a step forward. I jump. Before he can lift his other leg, I grab him and propel us backward towards safety. I land on my back with him in my arms, his tiny shoulder blades pressed against my chest. We are both shaking. When the little basketball is run over, it pops and pieces of it fly into the air. A few people film it on their phones as if someone else might want to watch it on YouTube.

I sit up and hold Wilder as he begins to cry. "You're safe, kiddo. It's ok. And we'll get you another ball. Hush," I say as I rock him. He seems to calm down, if wiping his nose on my sweater is any indication.

"Sorry! Oh my gosh," his dad rushes up to us. "Sorry! I lost him for barely a minute!"

I help Wilder up and then slowly stand, wiping my hands on my knees.

"I was just...I wanted to log his afternoon nap onto my phone, I thought it would take a sec, but the app froze, and, um," he shakes his head. "Don't run away from me ever again, little guy, got

it?” Wilder stares at him blankly. “Again, I’m so sorry,” his dad says to me. “I need to stick a tracking device to his body.”

“Just trust your instinct,” I say. “It’s like a predictive model.”

“Thank you,” he says. “Really.”

I nod and board the train home to Kevin, smiling and eager to explain it all.

[END]