

Plan B

Secretly, she referred to herself as “Plan B”. This somewhat bitter, somewhat resigned aspect of her life and dreams she kept so closely guarded that B didn’t know it was widely shared among her friends and former lovers. They didn’t share it, exactly—each one individually and privately, simply knew it. She was Plan B.

Plan B was back-up, a security blanket, a fallback, an umbrella in wet weather. It was like having a few hundred extra dollars stashed in a bureau drawer, or hidden in the zipper pocket of a never worn but never discarded windbreaker. Such information wasn’t shared wives to husbands, nor vice versa. Many people kept an old windbreaker, thinking a day would come when it was needed, and miraculously, there it would be within reach, hung on an old fashioned metal hook. Containing a secret stash.

Plan B’s real name was Beatrice, given to her by her parents who had thought they would like to adopt a dog. Maybe a retired greyhound, something formidable but safe, or a Saint Bernard. Big, a really big dog. When Beatrice finally and unexpectedly entered their lives she was not too small, nor too large; a normal seven-pound baby born with normal birth-pains on a normal Sunday afternoon when there was little else to do. Father drove mother to the maternity hospital, cruising at a safe speed, without event. The contractions proceeded. The birth was not too difficult, the father noted silently; he wasn’t sure he could have shared any tremendous suffering nor appreciated a stalwart response by the mother. No need. About five hours after accepting her baby, B’s mother got to her feet, announcing she

was ready to go home. The nurse demurred. They wanted her to wait until Monday morning when everyone went off to work or not; it made an appropriate change-over time for the hospital discharge desk and the doctor. Reluctantly she agreed.

The parents took good care of B, as they called her. Their life was serene; the childhood shots were administered on time. In the proper year B graduated from kindergarten, clutching her rolled paper diploma tied with a ribbon. She wore pink, while the boys wore blue. Eight years later, with seemingly nothing marking the passage of time, B graduated from primary school with another rolled diploma, and proceeded to high school to accept yet another, clad in a black gown and mortar board. The motif of black followed her into university. At her graduation she wore black shoes to avoid a clashing color with the gown, although many of her friends wore red sneakers or blue ballet flats which highlighted the fact that they were immediately off on other adventures. When their mortar boards flew skyward, so did hers. She was well-known as an accommodating friend who would accept a blind date or suggest a reasonable theme for a graduation essay, and therefore was well-liked. Plan B, as by now she referred to her inner self, was always available.

During the third year of her modest career clerking in a lawyer's office, one of her colleagues proposed marriage. His first choice had ditched him, although he never alluded to the event or to a vanished bride. Instead he went to Plan B, because an overworked lawyer needs a stable home with hopefully 2.5 kids and a dog, although not a greyhound or St. Bernard. Some smaller breed. This man knew that Plan B was stable and would accommodate to his career, as indeed she did, not unhappily. She never imagined herself a legal star, nor wowing a jury with irrefutable rhetoric. She compiled a lot of paperwork; she was a good investigator who in a pinch usually had some obscure law from the 1970s ready when needed.

Plan B looked into the mirror after the birth of her second child, one boy one girl. She didn't think they could afford the .5 baby, because her husband's income was modest, and hers more so, although she resumed work after each birth. But they lived not unsatisfied. They enjoyed a circle of friends who would invite them to pot-luck suppers, to which B always brought a casserole and her husband a bottle of wine. If someone's babysitter came down with flu at the last minute, the friend would call B so

as not to miss her dental appointment. It was only for an hour, and she'd come straight home, before the baby woke up. B had acted as matron of honor at two weddings, which lasted four and seven years respectively. She was a known quantity. Reliable.

Now she stood in front of the mirror, age 38. Her features were not unusual, neither great nor bad. Her face was regular, with straight eyebrows and straight teeth. The kids were both in primary school. In a sense, she was free. Many mothers heave a sigh of relief when their kids go off into somebody else's care for most of the day. They were asleep now. She could go to work tomorrow with a mind unencumbered except for helping out with costumes at the school play. Some drama containing beasts and fairies. The school director was very modern and told B to go for unisex designs.

Contemplating this task, B idly moved her hair from its side part to the other side of her head. Momentarily, she was startled by the change in the mirror image. She looked different. She flipped the hair back to side A. She flipped it over to side B. How strange. Who was she, after all, side A or B? Slowly she began to take off her clothes. First her earrings and necklace, then the blouse. The skirt fell around her feet, and she kicked off her shoes to release it. Where was her husband? She supposed he might be out with a Plan A type woman; married life had lost any spark they might have enjoyed. Plan B didn't mind. She knew he would stay married for his career, and pay for whatever his family required. No big upheaval loomed. In fact, B was stable as a rock.

Then she took off her bra and panties and viewed her body in the mirror. A little soft pale-skinned roll circled her stomach, but really not bad. The rest of her body, her breasts and legs, looked like whatever breasts and legs one would expect to see at a PTA meeting if all the parents showed up nude. B nodded to herself. Truly, she could go out in public looking exactly as she did, without raising an eyebrow or causing a head to turn. So she did.

The door opened silently, although as she closed it she was well aware she had no key to re-enter. After all, where could she carry it? Down the few steps to the path between the garage and the sidewalk she stepped lightly, unhurriedly, until she stood on the clean sidewalk of her neighborhood, beneath well-maintained street-lights and trees. What were they?

Poplars, she thought. They didn't obscure the view of the road, so she stepped into it, and strolled away.

Her husband returned home at 2:00 A.M. and went directly to his study to sleep, so as not to wake B. In the morning the children woke and bounced downstairs for breakfast. It was a school day, a work day. Where were their Cheerios? Their father emerged, freshly shaved for work, wearing a clean shirt. The three, standing in the kitchen around the breakfast table, fell silent. The kids looked at their father. The father looked at his kids. There was no Plan B.

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