



**W**e all cope in our own special ways. I smoke. My friend drinks. In fact, I'm highly confident in betting that you and many of your friends cope by drinking as well. Come home from a long day at work, and what do you do? Pop open a beer? Or a bag of potato chips? Or maybe you take a Valium when you're feeling stressed out. Or get a massage. Or go to your gym and sit in the sauna room.

Why are other people's coping mechanisms better than poor people's? Because they're prettier. People with more money drink better wine out of nicer glasses. And maybe they get a prescription for benzos from their own personal on-call psychiatrist instead of buying a pack of cigarettes. They can buy whatever they like and it's okay, because retail

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therapy is a recognized course of treatment for the upper classes. Poor people don't have those luxuries. We smoke because it's a fast, quick hit of dopamine. We eat junk because it's cheap and it lights up the pleasure centers of our brain. And we do drugs because it's an effective way to feel good or escape something.

I get that poor people's coping mechanisms aren't cute. Really, I do. But what I don't get is why other people feel so free in judging us for them. As if our self-destructive behaviors therefore justify and explain our crappy lives.

Newsflash: It goes both ways. Sometimes the habits are a reaction to the situation.

And now I have to add one big caveat: Sometimes, sure, the stupid shit we do does explain our crappy lives. Are there meth addicts out there from nice middle-class homes who ended up homeless and far worse off than I've ever been? Absolutely. And if you want to believe that addiction is a person's fault and not a disease, then you can go right on ahead and judge that person for having brought about his own downfall.

But unless you're prepared to convince me that smoking and smoking alone keeps me poor, then please, spare me the lecture. I know it's bad for me. I'm addicted, not addled. There are reasons that I smoke, and they're reasonable ones. They keep me awake, they keep me going. Do they poison my lungs and increase my chances of getting cancer? Obvi-

ously. Does that stop me? No. Because the cost-benefit isn't a simple *I like it* versus *I'll possibly live longer*. It's *I will be able to tolerate more* versus *I will perpetually sort of want to punch something*.

I once talked to a neighbor about the fact that people who lived on our block were statistically likely to die earlier than the people who lived five blocks over in the wealthy neighborhood. He told me that it was just life, it was the way it was. He'd stopped questioning it. So if you already figure you're going to die early, what's the motivation for giving up something that helps get you through the here and now?

Look, I'm not saying that getting in a cage match or smoking copiously and with glee is exactly good for my longevity. But I don't much see the point in worrying about the end of my life if stress will kill me first. If I don't vent, don't perform some kind of self-medicating, there won't be an old age anyway. I'll wind up dead or in jail or institutionalized when I finally lose it.

Let me be clear: I am not all poor people. Of course there are wholesome people in every class. There are poor people who would never dream of doing anything as *déclassé* as using drugs. This whole book could be called *You Can't Put an Entire Third of the Country into One Group of Behaviors*.

Often, those folks who are unlike me are religious. I tend to think of religion as the same sort of thing as smoking—a soothing ritual that brings someone a moment of peace. But

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if I don't want to be judged for my habits, I'm sure as hell not going to judge anyone else for theirs. That's why I always defend religious people against those assholes who act like they're too good for anything so magical as religion. We all think magically about something.

So, on the one hand, sure, poor people have been known to engage in some unhealthy behaviors. It's not as though we, the unwashed masses, are doing anything that *everyone* doesn't do. It's not like drug and alcohol and cigarette sales just stop once a consumer hits \$75,000 a year in income or something. It's a bit galling, actually, to be lectured about my self-destructive habits by someone who's fighting his own hangover. You're still getting drunk, friends, whether enjoying a bottle of Bordeaux or drinking a can of Mickey's. But it seems that the disapprobation of excessive drinking is meant mostly for those of us on the rotgut end of the scale.

I think the reason for this is that people are less moralistic about the vices themselves than they are about the cost of the vices. The logic is that if you've got excess money and throw it away on booze and cigarettes, then that's your business. But if you're poor, then that's a sin and a shame. Because if you're poor, rich people assume you're on welfare, or you're getting food stamps or some other social services. Once you take a penny from the government, a morality

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clause goes into effect, where you're never allowed to have anything that you might actually enjoy. It's the hair shirt of welfare.

I have trouble understanding why taking a few grand a year in food stamps is somehow magically different than taking trillions as a bailout. Food stamps cost \$76.4 billion for 2013, compared with trillions, possibly hundreds of those, for the banks. And that's just *one* instance of handouts for the upper parts of society; it's not like the feds handed cash to the banks and the rich are otherwise left to muddle on alone in the wilderness.

I do not see a difference, the way many people do, in the federal money. Whether you are getting your benefits in the form of SNAP cards or deductions, it's the same thing. There is this money that you otherwise would not have had, that the government gives you. Stimulus spending can happen in proactive or passive ways; whether it's a block grant or a tax break, it's still the government investing money in a thing because it wants to ease some burden for someone somewhere or to encourage or discourage certain behaviors. It wants people to not starve? Food stamps. It wants people to buy houses? Interest deductions.

The one difference? Rich people get way more from the government than poor people do—see above-referenced mortgage interest, capital gains, light inheritance taxes,

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retirement savings breaks—but the poor are the only ones getting shamed for it. You want to know how I could justify relaxing sometimes while I was on benefits? The same way you justify blowing a reckless amount of money on a really nice dinner while you take a business deduction because you talked about work for ten minutes.

People bitch about double taxation, where corporations are taxed for their profits and then they give money to their shareholders, who are also taxed. This is apparently hugely unfair, and the only reasonable solution is apparently to exempt people from having to pay taxes on their dividends. Because some kinds of income just don't count as income? Because someone, somewhere, already paid a tax on this particular individual dollar? By the same logic, I shouldn't be asked to pay payroll taxes because my bosses already paid taxes on it too.

Capital gain, by definition, is money you make for the simple fact of having money. That's it. No work, no nothing. Just have some money, wait for it to grow, and then you have more money. Which you clearly should not have to pay taxes on, because that would be unfair. Somehow.

This, of course, is nothing like unemployment, where an employer pays a tax for every employee, and then if I pull unemployment, I have to pay tax on that as well. But sure, keep thinking that we've got all the cushy non-taxation going on down here in the lower classes.

All humans chase good feelings. It's just that people with money chase them in ways specific to the upper classes, which makes it okay. You can't argue that a pair of expensive shoes or an expensive steak is actually something you need. It's just something that makes you feel good.

According to a study published in *Science* magazine, which is a place I trust about science things, your brain actually has less capacity when you're poor. The theory is that so much of your brain is taken up with poverty-related concerns that there's simply less bandwidth available for other things, like life. It's not the only study like that.

At Princeton, they've found that the effect on the brains of poor people from the stress about money alone is equivalent to losing a bunch of IQ points. And they've also found that if you remove the stress, our brains snap back and perform at the same levels you'd expect to see in a wealthier test-subject pool. The same goes for the short-term memory impairment and trouble with complexities—skip a night of sleep and tell me how well you're performing the next day; you'd be functioning on about the same level we do every day. We're not dumb—we're conserving energy.

They're even starting to find similarities between people in poverty and soldiers with PTSD.



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Poor people didn't need to wait for the science to know this, though. We feel it. We could have told you that being always tired and distracted wasn't great for higher cognitive activity. I stopped thinking in higher concepts, gradually. I feel stupid when I realize how long it's been since I thought about anything beyond what I had to get through to keep everything moving along: no philosophy, no music, no literature. We know we're not at capacity, and it rankles. So we fix it, as best we can. I know a few veterans, dealing with mild to moderate cases of PTSD, who have turned into potheads. It keeps them from getting too jumpy, keeps their memories from being too sharp. I hear that bankers like coke to stay focused. College kids take Ritalin to study.

I flirt with addiction, drinking too much coffee and smoking too much, but I've never let myself go there because I think it'd be too much of a relief and I'd never be able to come back voluntarily. And if I were dragged back, I'd face a lifetime of having to say no to one more thing that I knew would make me feel good. I doubt I'd do well with that. I'm not particularly strong that way.

Self-medication is a thing that exists. We fake rest and nutrition like we fake everything else to make it through the day. Mostly, we do it with chemical assistance. I smoke because it keeps me calm, because it keeps me awake, be-

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cause it keeps me from feeling hungry, because it gives me five minutes to myself, because it just feels good and I like it.

Have you ever felt tempted to go to one of those places where you can pay to smash china? I never have, but then I never saw a reason to pay to smash things. I just did it. It feels good, really good, to break things when you're frustrated. It doesn't actually solve anything, but for a second you feel better. I like breaking glass. It's therapeutic. It was my favorite part of working as a picture framer; we had to smash the flawed glass into tiny bits for disposal. More than once, I popped in to help on my day off just to smash things. It's the same logic that explains mosh pits.

One day, when I have nothing but free time, I will start a mosh pit for old people. I quit jumping into them only when I started to realize that I'd become the creepy old person in the corner. For years, though, mosh pits were my anger therapy of choice.

Sex is also therapeutic when it's blissfully mindless. Orgasms for orgasms' sake. It makes your muscles relax, your headaches lessen. It makes the stress go away for however long it lasts. It's kind of amazing to have some outlet, somewhere, that you don't have to work for; that's the whole point of having a fuckbuddy. It's effort-free. As long as you're attracted enough that sex is a possibility and you feel safe,

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that's all that matters. Sex, done properly, makes you feel wonderfully accepted.

It's different from love. Maybe in the upper classes it's called a fling, but down here where I live it's a pressure release, and no love or imitation Hollywood romance or delusions of long-term commitment are required. It's not like I fuck everyone within arm's reach, but I don't expect to fall in love with everyone I've ever been infatuated with either. It's just nice to be in a pleasant spot for a while, that's all.

The coping that I and many of my friends do via medication isn't just about emotional relief. For me at least, it's just as much about physical pain management. I've stopped paying attention to how much ibuprofen I take in a day. More than I should, certainly. A reckless amount, even. I'm a pill popper, just not the narcotic sort. I start my day with ibuprofen and cold medicine, because I get sinus headaches from pretty much every part of nature and my jaw is always killing me. B12 for energy, vitamin C as a prophylactic measure. The ibuprofen starts to wear off in a couple hours, so I take some more. Repeat as necessary. Add in a pot of coffee and maybe a guilt-ridden switch to naproxen in the afternoon for pain management, plus whatever nicotine I get in there. And if I absolutely have to sleep well, I wind up taking

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something that says "p.m." on it, whatever that might be. If the pain is bad, as it often is for people with serious back injuries and dental problems like mine, alcohol or some kind of narcotics might be taken too. That, friends, is what pain management looks like outside the health care system.

Miraculously, I'm not dead yet, and as far as I know, my liver hasn't started to fail. My husband comes from healthy stock, the sort of people who maybe keep a bottle of aspirin around for emergencies. He was horrified at my intake, to the point that he once asked me to try not to take anything for a while to see if it would reset things for me. After a couple days I wound up in bed trying not to breathe too much because moving made the headache worse, and he's never mentioned it since.

I know that any actual cure of my chronic pain would have to at least partly involve lifestyle changes that simply haven't ever been logistically possible. Any kid who watches *Sesame Street* can tell you that it's important to sleep well, drink lots of water, and eat a balanced diet. And I can guarantee you that I can drink lots of water. The other two are trickier, if not mostly impossible.

A balanced diet is one more detail to throw at me, and for years my diet consisted of whatever food at work had become expired for service most recently—sometimes beef, sometimes chicken. And when I got home, I ate dinner only when I was absolutely starving. I ate food that I was craving,

because it made me feel better. Healthy food, sad to say, just doesn't work as well as a pan of brownies when it comes to soothing yourself.

I've got way bigger problems than a spinach salad can solve.

A human body doesn't care if acute stress is caused by almost getting your electricity shut off or by a looming deadline on a million-dollar contract. The reason that poor people wind up coping in ways that seem pointlessly self-destructive is that all the constructive stuff costs money. I can't afford to join a gym. I can't just pay a shrink to listen to me vent. I can't go shopping or find an acupuncturist or a good masseuse or whatever else it is that the people above me do to cope. I can't pay someone to make my back relax when I have strained it, and we don't get to take it easy when it happens if we want to keep our hours at work.

Our bodies are no longer our temples. We can't afford for them to be. I have agreed, more than once, to let people have parts of my body for money. I have observed, lying on a bed to sell my plasma for twenty bucks, that it's the modern-day opium den—people languid on medical tables instead of couches, staring at the closest TV or watching in fascination as their own blood is separated in the machine.

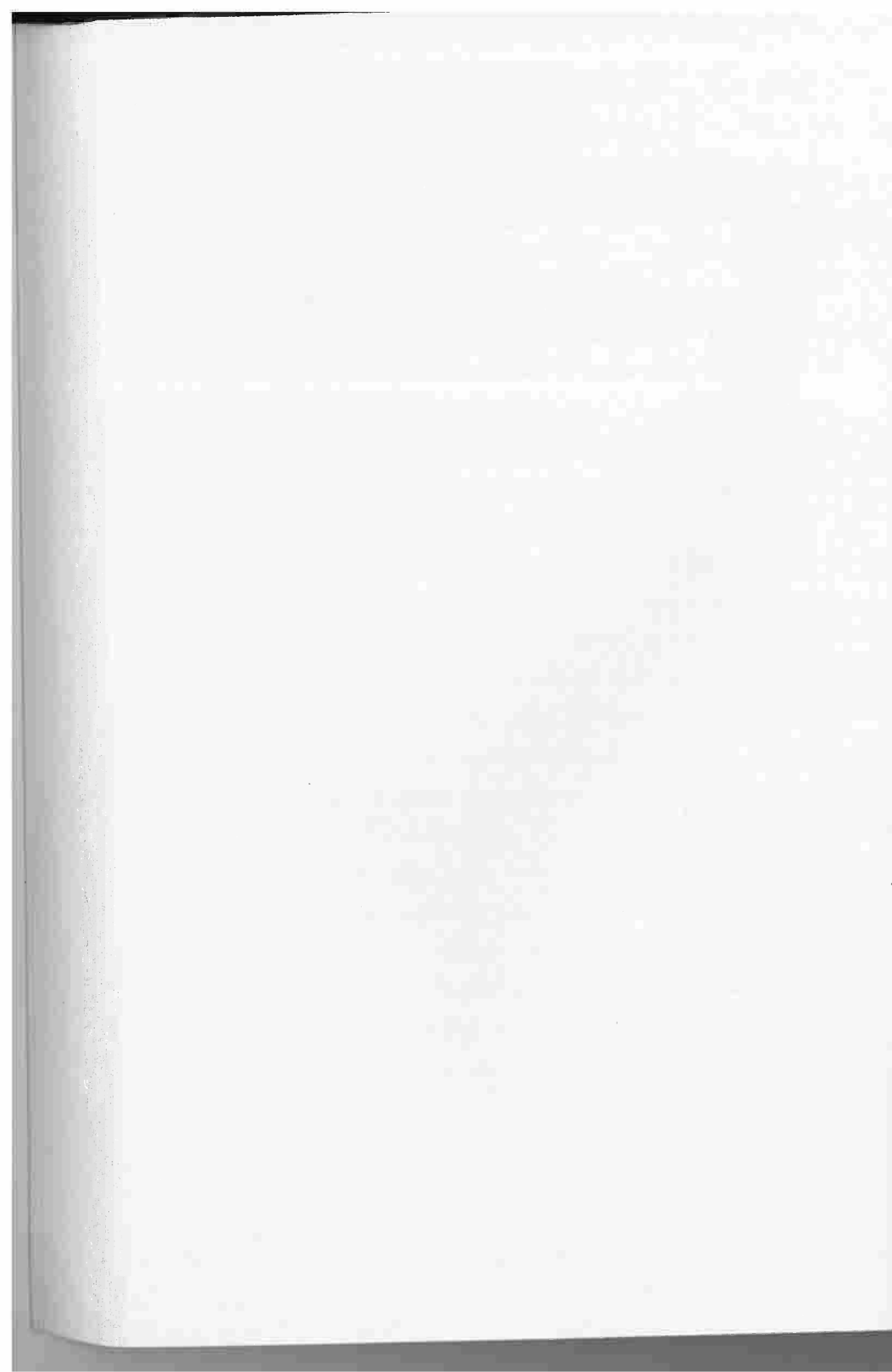
But I have only so many body parts I can spare. Only so much blood.

There are millions of us who have had enough of this.

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We have waited. We have been patient. We have coped. And we've survived, which we'll continue to do. Humans are amazingly resilient.

The question is, how can the rest of the country live knowing that so many of us have to live like this?



# 6

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This Part Is  
About Sex

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I'm writing a chapter about sex, so I'm trying to remember the names of everyone I've slept with. I don't think it's possible; sobriety hasn't always been involved. I never bought the idea that sex is actually immoral. God made me human, so I tend to think he doesn't expect me to act like an angel, if in fact angels don't mess around. And I really don't understand why rubbing genitals with someone is immoral. With all the evil in the world, we're really going to judge people who make each other feel good?

Being poor is isolating. You're constantly being rude to friends and family because you never have time to talk, never have time to hang out. Never have the money to do anything, not even to reciprocate a birthday present. You

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don't ever have anything new happening—no news to share unless you're getting married or having a baby. You lose the most interesting parts of yourself to the demands of survival. I got so boring when I was at my worst that even I didn't want to hang out with myself. Why on earth would I invite anyone I liked to come over and stare at walls with me?

For me, sex has been a logical fix for that problem. It doesn't require conversation, no personality necessary. Just some skill and willingness and a partner with the same two things. It's catharsis without any baggage or investment. Sex is kind of magic that way; if you tell a woman she is beautiful, and you do it when you are as unguarded as you can possibly be, she will believe you, and it will stick with her. If you tell a man he is wanted, and you do it when you are making that very clear, he will remember your words longer than you do. You can fix people a little bit, plus there are orgasms and cuddling. I couldn't design better therapy.

Sex is fun. It's fun for rich people, it's fun for poor people. But there are two possible reasons for having sex that I think tend to be way more important to poor people than to rich people: 1) The chemical rush of sex is a great way to forget about your problems for a little while, and 2) sex is completely free.

Let's talk about the endorphin rush first. It's not just the thrill of an orgasm that I'm talking about. It's the physical comfort and feeling of a little pleasure in your body. Few

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things are more isolating than financial desperation. Sure I have my friends to talk to, but while we commiserate about the practical—the unpaid bills or the car troubles—we rarely talk about our feelings. We shy away from them. And when I come home from a long day at work, it's a guarantee that my husband has had just as sucky a day. If we want physical comfort and a loosening of the back muscles, it's only going to happen while we're having sex.

Given that the reason that I'm often in need of relaxation has to do with the lack of money, it's an added bonus that sex is also free. Entertainment costs. Movies, bowling, whatever you can think of that nice folks do on dates that don't involve sex—that's all a luxury. When you have nothing in your wallet and nothing else to do, sex is really good for killing time. I've spent more than one afternoon in bed because it was the only entertaining option I had. Given the choice between a) sex minus boredom, and b) celibacy plus boredom, I think we all know which one is preferable.

Wealthier people don't seem to understand it when some poor person pairs up with some other poor person who maybe isn't so perfect. Maybe doesn't have the greatest teeth, or the most steady employment, or the best attitude about the world. They seem to think that for every Julia

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Roberts, there's a Richard Gere just waiting to catapult her into respectability. It's only among the wealthy that most people could potentially model for clothing catalogs. Marry up as a life strategy—sure! In real life, Julia would have married a recently laid-off cab driver.

We choose from what's available, after all. It's not like laureates and models are thick on the ground, and Richard Gere isn't going to show up to whisk me out of the strip club anytime soon. So I wind up with people who are as flawed as I am; people who work where I do and shop where I do and socialize where I do. It doesn't lend itself to meeting a millionaire and running off to a happily-ever-after in the Hamptons, or even the suburbs.

That doesn't mean we're indiscriminate. We do not simply drop trou and rut like animals upon spotting another human that we might be able to fuck. We have sex for the same reasons rich people do—we are in love, we liked someone's smile, someone made us laugh. Sometimes they're cute and there's a spark.

Of course the kind of cliché downward spiral about poor women is that once things get really bad, they have nothing left to sell but their bodies. That's probably the worst thing most rich people can imagine a poor person having to sink to. Well, that and starving to death. But don't we all trade sex for something? Even rich people do that—just ask one of

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those women you see with a big fat diamond on her finger and a boring and unattractive husband to go with it.

Living rent-free is a pretty good incentive for adding a sexual element to an existing friendship. More than once, someone has offered me a place to live when I needed one, and then kind of let me know we'd be having sex. It wasn't a power imbalance; it was just an understanding that, value for value, this was the deal. If I didn't like it, I could leave and no harm done. I could probably still have crashed for a day or two, just not long-term. It's sex as currency. Cutting the bills by moving in with someone you've only just started dating is less sexual than it is practical. If you have found someone who you get along with, who you enjoy the company of, and it's likely to last at least a few months, it just makes sense to move in together. There is no shame in it, and nor should there be.

I've been in less comfortable sorts of sex-as-barter scenarios at work, but I've never had to accept them. I could always quit or get fired. I was young when the offers were made and didn't have kids to feed or extended family counting on me. I was lucky; it never worked on me because I had other options.

That said, the situation isn't always as gross as that. Sex, as a commodity, isn't traded so explicitly and openly as "here is cash, now please fuck me" in all cases. Sometimes, it's a

quid pro quo. Sometimes it's even between friends. I don't see a problem with that; it's a human need, and filling it thus has economic value. Related: If you want to have some fun, ask a free-market religious conservative whether you should restrict prostitution, given that there's a clear market demand for it.

And look, you can't blame people for leading with their assets. My occasional forays into the sex industry have convinced me that breasts really are magic. I got bigger tips as a bartender in a strip club when I wore a corset. We all exploit our advantages. There's something about a corset that turns an otherwise reasonable bar patron into something resembling a monkey. A very well-tipping monkey, to be fair.

The act of putting on a corset is enough to negate any dental problems, weight issues, or personality flaws. Guys would just see that three inches where a very specific kind of fat folds together and boom—instant idiots.

The girls who actually took their bras off made the real money, relatively speaking—it was more than I made but still not enough. If there was cash within five feet of a topless woman, it was often hers for the asking. The only reason I never did it myself is that while my breasts are big, they're also kind of wonky. And also I can't dance. And I would not be able to keep my temper through what I saw those girls deal with. So I kept to my spot behind the bar. Guys actually thought I'd be impressed when they told me

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that they liked me best out of all the women at the club because real honest women wouldn't strip, that it was beneath them to like a stripper. Amazing. Some guys will moralize at you *while they're getting a lap dance*. These guys were conflicted about their own sexual moral systems and they blamed us for it, which led to insanely entertaining scenes of dancer rage. You'd see a girl storming out of the lap dance area and a guy leaving just as mad. And she'd tell you that he'd been rude, demanded some seriously inappropriate, um, dance moves, and then told her she was going to hell. It didn't happen often, but it was gold every single time.

It's ridiculous to suggest that poor people should behave more appropriately about sexual matters than anyone else does. I am fairly certain I could walk into any swanky bar and find well-off people who are hoping for a night's fling. I can say with near certainty that most high-end sex clubs cater to wealthy patrons.

I like to remind people that everyone's parents fucked. Sex isn't dirty, isn't abnormal, shouldn't be a source of shame. Sadly, we as a society are a bit more conflicted about it than that. And for some reason, we moralize more at the poor about sex than we do at the population in general.

Living in low-income neighborhoods, I've seen sexual



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health campaigns aimed at slut-shaming us into celibacy. They talk about things like self-esteem and value and all the usual abstinence arguments. They assume that our bodies are a gift that we should bestow selectively on others, rather than the one thing that can never be anything but our own. Even if we do share it, it is ours irrevocably.

These are the bodies that hold the brains we're supposed to shut off all day at work, the same bodies that aren't important enough to heal. These are the bodies that come with the genitalia that we should be so protective of? I really don't understand the logic.

You can't tell us that our brains and labor and emotions are worth next to nothing and then expect us to get all full of intrinsic worth when it comes to our genitals. Either we're cheap or we're not.

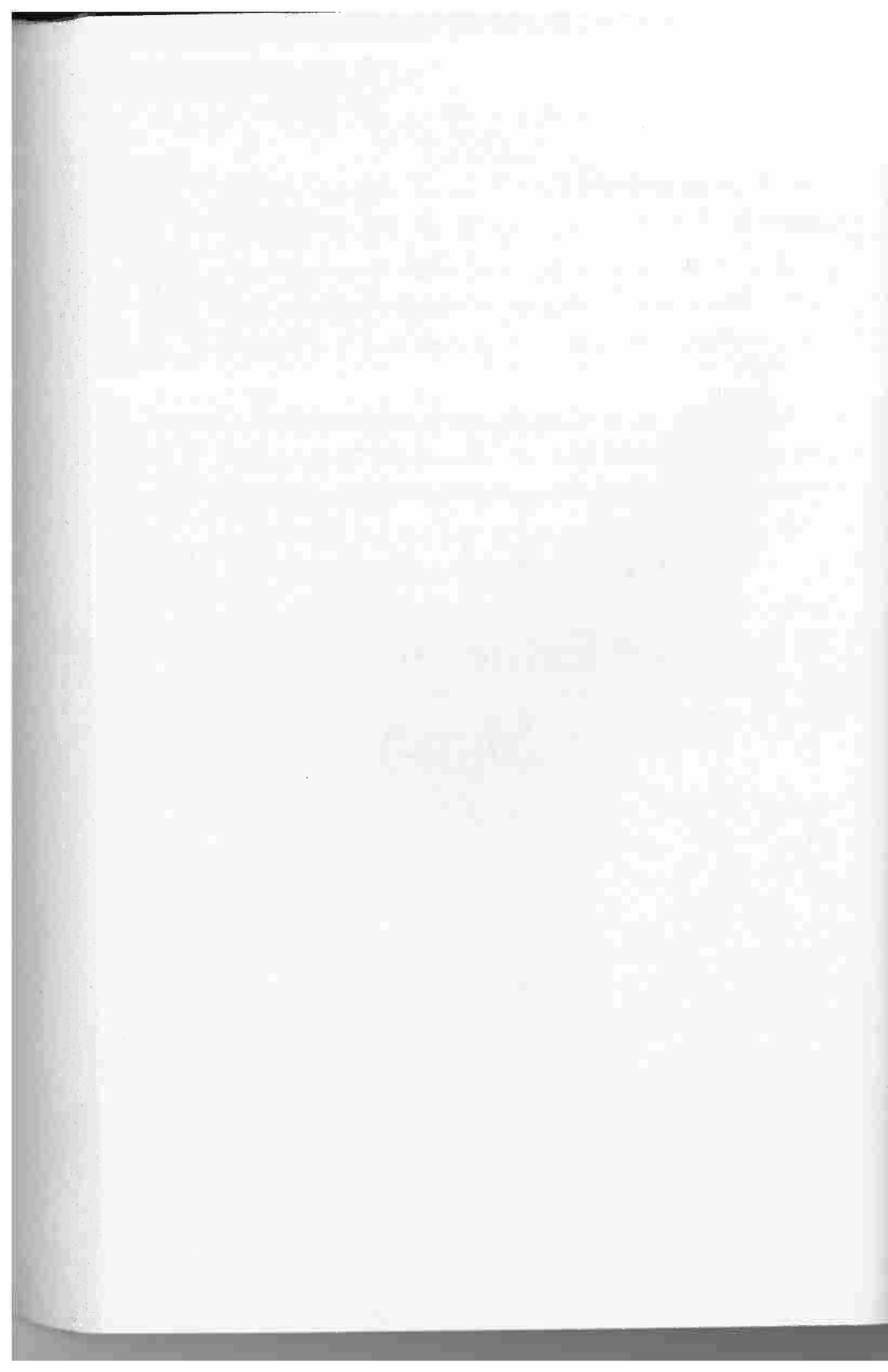
Make up your fucking mind.

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We Do Not  
Have Babies for  
Welfare Money

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I never expected to be a parent. I've got wonky hormones, and pregnancy was supposed to be a non-option for me; I was as surprised as anyone when I wound up getting pregnant. But once my husband and I had our oldest daughter, we decided we wanted a second child. Our kid needed a playmate, needed to learn to share, needed someone to join forces with against us. My husband's brother is only a few years younger than he is, and I'm forever hearing happy-childhood-with-Andy stories. As an only child, I have favorite childhood memories of times when I was utterly alone, sitting in a tree with a book. So Tom and I decided that for our child, we preferred the former.

So I never understand it when people want to know why

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poor people have kids. I don't think having kids is a money question—why does anyone have a second child, or a third? Because their family feels unfinished. We have two children now, and we're done. We feel done. But we didn't feel that way before our youngest came along. That's why we had a second child. Why do rich people have kids? Do they sit around looking at their bank statements and decide it's a good time to procreate? So yeah, poor people get to have kids too. Deal with it.

But what about all those unplanned pregnancies that you're tut-tutting over? Let's talk about those first, and the whole subject of birth control. Then we'll go on to discuss what we do with our babies once we have them.

I mentioned that I thought kids weren't exactly likely for me and my husband. A lot of people in my situation would have taken their chances and skipped birth control altogether. But I had a firm belief, instilled in me by my girl heroes from the 1990s, that I should simply be on birth control on principle. Just in case. It was a feminist act, somehow. And I fucking hated it.

The pills made my moods uncontrollable. My periods came nice and regularly, but they were suddenly insane-flood level instead of anything manageable. I'd switch

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brands or types of birth control, only to discover some fresh hell.

Did you know that if you forget one crucial pill, just one day, you can wind up pregnant anyway? As it turns out, the odds of medicine working are much lower if you don't actually take it. I'm a forgetful person, to put it very nicely. The Pill and I didn't get along well.

Since I was with one person who had been tested since he'd been with anyone, and as I was in the same situation, I just sort of stopped bothering at all. Call it magical thinking, or trusting vague assurances from doctors, but I really didn't think I'd wind up pregnant, because I have never had normal lady parts. I also think I'd have been more vigilant if we didn't have some notions about having kids in the future. I thought maybe we'd adopt some foster kids, actually. We both came from families in which you married and then had kids, and that was likely what we'd do. We were having a lot of fun as a couple and weren't in any hurry to get to the next step, but in skipping birth control, we weren't actually risking more than bringing on a planned future.

So that's how I ended up pregnant without meaning to. Did that happen because I'm poor? Maybe. If I'd had the luxury of having a regular gynecologist who made it her mission to find a reliable form of birth control for me that didn't mess me up mentally and physically, then I almost certainly wouldn't have gotten pregnant when I did. And that's the

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thing about gynecology in this country—we seem to care about women's bodies only once they are pregnant.

Just like every other sector of health care, access to family-planning services is heavily dependent on income. But a good portion of the unplanned pregnancies I've seen in my circles weren't the result of an active lack of concern for the outcome or even access to contraception. Rather, the condom broke, the pills didn't work, someone miscounted. And then there are people like me who just thought they'd never get pregnant. That all happens to plenty of rich people too. Likewise those cases where the heat of the moment really just sort of blew their brains away for a minute and no birth control got used at all—I don't think that's really something you can say belongs to any one group of people.

I've got zero trouble walking into a Planned Parenthood clinic. I cannot say the same for a lot of women I know. There's a stigma attached to walking into a place that a lot of demagogues associate with abortions. I actually enjoyed my brush with the protesters; they kept telling me, "You don't have to do this" and "You have options." Since I was arriving at the clinic for my first ultrasound to make sure that the baby was healthy, I had a ball pretending to be outraged that they obviously wanted me to abort my baby. You know how sometimes you leave and you figure they'll get it in about five minutes, and you have won utterly? I totally got to do that with the protesters.

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I've actually led a bit of a charmed life when it comes to family planning, at least compared with most poor women. That's because I don't give a fuck whether people think I'm a bit of a whore and I've generally lived near enough to cities that clinics aren't too far away. I've usually had a car and enough cash to spare. But man, that does not mean it's easy. First, the fees are unpredictable. I've paid ten bucks for a month of pills, and I've paid fifty. It depends on the funding of the clinic you visit.

And that's just the pills; you have to take off work, have a car that'll make the trip, and pay for gas to get there. In rural areas, it might be a few hours to the closest clinic. Of course, most people have a doctor in their hometown. But they might not have a low-income clinic, and even if they do, it might not do birth control. Some women don't want to get birth control locally, because we've actually been pretty successful at slut-shaming Pill users, as though there's no use for them beyond their contraceptive value. Lots of women would be ashamed to be discovered as medicated harlots.

I know a woman who has been married for five years. She and her husband are in college, hoping to start a family—just maybe in a few years instead of now. She will not visit a Planned Parenthood in Utah or ask for the Pill from her gynecologist, because she is terrified that someone will find out. And that's in Utah, where the dominant religion is all for married people using birth control. I can't



imagine what it's like someplace where whore pills and birth control are synonymous.

Look, it's not like condoms are superexpensive. But they're not free, and we don't run across those bowls that you see on college campuses. And God help you if you're poor and allergic to latex. Then you just don't get to have sex.

Okay, so for whatever reason—whether you wanted kids or your birth control didn't work—congratulations, you're pregnant! Now what?

Here's a big secret from a poor person: Having a baby is expensive only if you want it to be. Let's go back to the rich-people-looking-at-the-bank-statement thing: A lot of rich people look for a new house or a new apartment before they even get pregnant. Because, the thinking goes, they must have a nursery, or they must have a second or third or fourth bedroom. God forbid kids should share a room. But kids don't care. Kids know what they know. Babies are happy in a drawer in their parents' bedroom, and if kids are used to sleeping in the same room with their brother or sister, then they are happy with the company. Sure they'll fight over space at some point, but I don't care how big your house is—your kids will fight over space. So let's just dismiss the whole idea that kids require a big real estate investment.

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The idea of privacy among nuclear family members is actually pretty new. Parents used to share a bed with their kids—and *still expand their families somehow*. If people could manage to perpetuate the species with their toddlers thrashing around in the same space, well, I'm not going to bitch about having to share space too much.

Now let's get down to the real basics of what kids need. Sure, you can buy disposable diapers or spend forty bucks a pop on bespoke organic cotton for Junior to poop on. Or you can tear up old T-shirts. Babies don't really even care whether their butts are covered; we do that to avoid the cleaning up that would be needed otherwise. It's quite satisfying to buy thrift store T-shirts with logos of things you hate for a quarter a pop and tear them up so your baby can do her worst.

What I think people are talking about when they say that kids are expensive is either stuff that's so unattainable that we'd never have kids at all if we waited for it to come along, or stuff that's entirely unnecessary. When I got pregnant, I started reading up on the latest in parenting, which I'd really not been paying attention to at all. And I was mostly pretty appalled. There are whole articles in women's magazines about how to politely turn down hand-me-downs, like this is a major problem for some people. The idea of turning down hand-me-downs is so crazy to me that I don't even know where to start. Your kid will be able to use this stuff for only

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a few months. And kids absolutely massacre clothes. My youngest can be sitting in the middle of the living room with nothing in her reach, and within five minutes her clothes can pick up a stain from something that I'm not even sure is in the same room with her. For what possible reason, short of family photos or weddings, would you pay retail for something you can get free or secondhand?

Until your kid is old enough to start begging for toys (and this is one of the reasons why I don't have cable: no toy commercials, no begging), the only truly essential expenses you have to incur are for food and medical care.

I've talked about what it's like to be impoverished and pregnant, but the bare fact remains that I wound up pregnant and *then* hit full impoverishment. I had to figure out how I'd make it work. What I figured was this: Kids can eat pretty much everything adults can, and they don't eat nearly as much until they hit puberty. And thank God, WIC would cover formula until we were back on our feet.

I'm not being dismissive of hunger. I have known hungry children. The ones I've met have uniformly come from families that were overextended, that had cousins and close family friends crashing in their living rooms, or that had some medical emergency or long-term unemployment. There was always an actual external reason for their hunger. I've never met a parent that simply didn't bother to feed their kid. (I've no doubt they exist, but I've never met one—I

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think they're probably about as common as serial killers and receive as much publicity too.) The key is that it wasn't the having of the kids that was the backbreaking straw for these families.

Children, themselves, do not actually require much. Two families living on one poor person's income, though, or one family on no income, is impossible no matter how little they need. It's ridiculous to make the argument that people should be able to predict every possible downturn in their lives in advance. Poor people are not uniquely psychic. Just like rich people don't think, wow, maybe we shouldn't have kids because we might have an acrimonious custody battle someday, poor people don't decide not to have kids because they think, wow, maybe Aunt Jane will lose her job and have to come live with us with all her kids. And I'm using the extended-family example, but it could be any disaster—illness, whatever. The point is that people don't plan their lives around certain disaster. People who do are called paranoid.

And there are resources for families so their kids don't go hungry, ideally. On a daily level, there's WIC for formula, and once babies have outgrown that, they're old enough to eat whatever you're eating. I've heard critiques of that too—that you shouldn't have kids if you're not going to feed them a healthy diet (which apparently consists of organic kale and quinoa, because it's not like poor kids have never seen

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bananas or apples). What we eat is generally fine for our kids, at least according to the food safety people. And people do tend to buy healthier food when they have kids in the house, from what I've seen. I know we do. My kids eat a lot of fruit. A lot. My three-year-old is obsessed with all the different kinds of fruit in the world; we go to grocery stores and she picks it out and we call it a good choice. She eats chicken nuggets and fries, sure, but not constantly. Mostly, she eats a bit of my sandwich or her dad's noodles or whatever it is we're making.

I can promise you that I did not buy much fruit before the kids came along. I rarely bought anything perishable outside of the requisite coffee creamer and milk. So yes, believe it or not, poor people do sometimes make smart decisions just for their children's sake.

Yet hunger is still a real thing. I've been there. I didn't qualify for food stamps at one point because on paper we were said to be getting a living stipend from the VA. I know this sounds crazy, but hear me out and maybe (if you don't already) you will finally understand why being poor and qualifying for benefits is not the same as being poor and actually getting benefits. I've briefly mentioned before that we didn't get a stipend from the VA that we'd been promised. So here's what happened: Basically, we were awarded a certain amount of money through the GI Bill. Because of a

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paperwork error on the part of the university, the VA never actually mailed us the living stipend I've mentioned. And they knew this, and acknowledged this, as did the folks at SNAP to whom we applied for food stamps. However, simply because the government *said* that we should be getting \$1,200, we were disqualified from receiving food stamps. Despite the fact that everyone involved agreed that the money was theoretical and that we didn't actually have it. We eventually got it cleared up, but it was one more thing to deal with.

When I think about that, I hope that the people who want to make sure that they weren't feeding a single person who isn't abject are happy. I know I certainly felt better about the state of the country watching my husband being thanked for his service by the people telling him that they'd be rejecting him for food aid. So, dear voters and policymakers who are very, very afraid that a poor person might illicitly have a decent steak for their birthday: Thanks for the months of ramen.

I have the solution to hungry children in America. Nobody wants to do it, but here goes: Fucking feed people. Cancel the programs where we pay farmers not to farm, and grow food. Buy it from them and use it in schools. Create real jobs. Fund SNAP. Stop calling it welfare and start calling it something that describes what it is: a subsidy like any

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other so that the people actually moving this huge wheel of capitalism can live decent, maybe basic but still pleasant lives. Hunger: solved.

Now let's talk about health care, which obviously kids need. There's a thing called the Children's Health Insurance Program. Its income standards aren't as stringent as Medicaid's. Most kids who need it qualify. It's not the same as being able to take your kid to the doctor for every sniffle, but if they have a serious fall or a scary spike in temperature, you can call a nurse. We can also take them to the ER, which is where the pediatrician tells you to go if it's an acute situation anyway. In general, poor parents know what to do for minor maladies, and we know our kids will be taken care of if it's catastrophic and we're not working at a place that offers insurance.

But just because poor people can't afford to be hysterical about our kids' health doesn't mean we're blasé. I was sitting on a park bench one time when my daughter came screaming over to demand that I kiss her knee better. She'd scraped it somehow—it looked worse than it was.

So I kissed it and sent her back to play. Another mom, clearly in a different tax bracket, turned to me to ask whether I needed to borrow her antiseptic; I said we were fine. And

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then she told me how she'd really like to be able to be so nonchalant about her baby being hurt. I wasn't sure whether she was trying to be cutting or really meant it; either way, my brain started demanding I cross the vast gulf between "not making a big fuss over a skinned knee" and "nonchalant about my child being hurt." They're different things. Way different things. So, rich lady who thinks I'm nonchalant? Mind your own business. And maybe sometimes, when your little princess skins her knee, send her back out to play instead of acting as though she'd just lost a limb.

It's good for them, you know.

Once we move past all the daily subsistence-level stuff that we really need to worry about, the question seems to change from "Why do you have kids you can't afford to take care of?" to "Why don't you take care of your kids in the exact manner of which I approve?"

Take college, for example. Many rich people look at poor people and think it's disgusting that we can't afford to give our kids a good education. Or maybe they think we deserve it for being poor. Either way, I know they think that our kids' educations are suffering because of our class status. As if we haven't thought about this or don't have a plan. Well, newsflash, we do. My husband and I will do what our parents



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did. We'll make sure our kids are curious, well-read people. We'll make sure they get good grades. We'll make them study. And when it comes time, we'll see what sorts of scholarships and grants they qualify for and then probably take out loans for the rest. I guess I don't really see how my plan is that much different from a wealthier person's until you hit the "we'll just pay for it" level. Is it really the end of the world to go to a state school?

I think there's also a judgment leveled at poor parents that we give our kids a terrible quality of life, as if our children are deeply conscious of their poverty on a daily basis. And certainly, there are a lot of people who've been plunged into circumstances so bad that they can't keep their kids ignorant of it. But lots of people are just struggling to get by, and they're doing so without irreparably harming their children. Maybe things aren't picture-perfect all the time, but I don't see the value in that anyway. I promise that if, like I did, you paint rainbows on your kids' walls, it'll be a decade or so before they realize that it's crooked and definitely not a professional job. You might notice. I notice. My kids? They think it's a pretty fucking cool rainbow.

That's what I love about kids—everything is magic for them. If you tell them the world is awesome, and you make sure awesome things sometimes happen, they will totally go with you on that one. Awesome, to a kid, is a rainbow wall or a tickle fight or a hiding place in the closet. They don't

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realize that collecting every My Little Pony is awesome unless you tell them it is. Class, the relative having of things—that stuff doesn't come up until later. Until we put it there. Kids will not notice worn spots in their clothes until they are socialized to. They simply don't get social constructs, class included. We raise our children to believe whatever we decide they should. And like most poor people, I'll raise my kids to be resourceful and aware. At some point, I will discuss class with them, just like every parent will discuss the real world with their children.

The point is that my kids are loved and they know it. I've heard a lot of young women give that reason for having their babies, actually: love. I come from a culture where the girls marry young and the families are big. It's just how we roll in Utah. I've actually seen people have numbered jerseys made for their kids when they made a full team's worth. That is considered cute where I come from.

I've heard it said that poor people have kids because they want someone to love them unconditionally. But I think it's more nuanced than that. I think that the stereotypical teenage wannabe mom who gives that reason wants someone she can safely love, someone who is predictable and steady and will stick around no matter what. And yes, it's sad for a young girl to feel that way. That said, I can understand it. In Utah, where we often marry young and have babies young, young women might think, "I may as well get started being

an adult and having a family." Is it the wisest course? No. But it's not crazy. It's not even unrealistic. It's not like these girls have brilliant futures in the Ivy League that they're passing up to have babies; those are typically reserved for the children of brilliant Ivy Leaguers. They are deciding to have their toddlers while they themselves are young and have the energy. And plenty of people, no matter where they are from, simply have love to give.

What really riles me is this idea that poor people are somehow inherently more selfish when we have children. There are plenty of rich people who have kids for exactly the same reasons I just described—because they want someone who will love them unconditionally, and with whom they can share that kind of all-encompassing love. But somehow, because they have money, rich people are entitled to feel that way without being derided. Let's not kid ourselves, though, that it's any less selfish or self-centered.

What, after all, is Baby Gap and its ilk appealing to, if not parents who enjoy dressing up their kids as little minimes? Trust me, no infant has a serious desire to wear a cable-knit V-neck sweater with a collared shirt underneath, no matter how adorable they look. Preschool prep classes? Not meant for the kid's self-esteem. So the problem of child-bearing as an extension of your own personal brand sort of transcends social class.

Truth time: We do not breed for sweet, sweet government cheese.

I understand that some people will say, "But you just said that everything was cool because of welfare!" I can see how one might come to that objection if you're only working on what you have read in this book so far. But trusting that you will always at least be able to feed your family, even if it is at food banks and with SNAP, is a whole different ball game from actively deciding to have a child specifically for the money.

Okay, quick lesson time. Welfare isn't a thing. That is to say, welfare is a lot of things as opposed to one thing. And each of these things has different requirements. It's not hard to qualify for some things, relatively speaking. If you're starving, you can pretty much count on qualifying for SNAP or food bank services. Now, access to those things can be sketchy, but that's a different point. The point here is that food benefits can be spent only on food; the benefit card blocks anything that isn't approved. Cash benefits, the ATM-withdrawal kind of welfare—money that you can use on rent, gas, the water bill, clothing—are actually damn near impossible to qualify for. And to get them, you've got to

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jump through a lot of extra hoops. Cash benefits are the ones tied to work or looking for work or training for work or working for the state.

If you are desperate enough to be breeding for cash benefits, you are for all practical purposes having kids in order to be poor enough for the government to give you a full-time job. See, the reason everyone says that you get more money for having kids is that your benefits are determined by both your income and household size. So, to make it an income stream, you have to decrease your non-benefit income and/or increase your household size sufficiently. That, I think, is probably pretty rare. And if you think about it for a few seconds, I think you will see how ridiculous the whole idea of it is. It would be like breaking your leg so you can go to the hospital because they'll feed you while you're there.

I definitely have told that joke once or twice—that I was having kids for the sweet, sweet government cheese—but hello? I *meant* it as a joke. Granted, I do think there are many stupid people out there. There are stupid rich people and there are stupid poor people. The stupid rich people think that welfare queens are breeding like rabbits. And sure, there are probably a few people out there who did not realize even after Kid One that kids are a giant pain in the ass. Maybe a few of those idiots thought they'd make an easy paycheck by having another kid. But I'd argue that there are a lot fewer of these poor idiots than those rich idi-

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ots think there are. And by a "lot fewer," I mean a statistically insignificant number of poor people are doing this. Can I prove this? No. But nor can I prove that people aren't breaking their legs just to get some lunch.

I'm not even certain how people think it's possible that someone would have kids for welfare benefits. Do these people not have kids of their own? Did they manage to sleep through the colic somehow, or did they simply block it out? I mean, if you're going to pay me in multiple tens of thousands of dollars a year to have a kid, okay, maybe it's worth thinking about. But a few thousand dollars extra, best-case scenario, and that's my entire income and I'll still be living this desperate life? Yeah, no, I'll pass on that deal.

To accept the idea that someone would have babies just for the money, you have to assume that they see their children as stock rather than as kids. The more temperate assumption that follows is that poor people neglect their kids. But what wealthier people view as neglect is pretty shallow stuff and to me is just a matter of taste. My kids have dirty faces sometimes. Unless we're going somewhere or expecting someone, my husband and I really don't bother making sure they're spotless. It's a losing battle with toddlers. Our kids are both fascinated with baths, so they're always pretty clean overall, but their faces and hands are a different story. Most people I know are the same way; we just don't have the time or energy to chase little kids down and demand that

they keep their hands clean. They're little, they're *supposed* to ignore the lawn in favor of the mud puddles.

That said, I'd be horrified if they left the house like that. I think most people are that way in secret, inclined to be a bit lax at home. It doesn't speak to your actual parenting skills, I think, although the state of your children's faces when nobody's watching is a clear indicator of whether or not you lean toward OCD.

I'm not saying that there are no standards, just that maybe some of them could use some loosening. And of course there's a line you're just not supposed to cross. There's being a bit lax, and then there's being legitimately a kind of awful parent. Don't worry, poor people disapprove of those people in Walmart screaming empty threats at their kids at top volume too.

But I think it's a little misguided when wealthier people turn up their noses at the parenting style of poor people who don't necessarily treat their children like precious china that would break if looked at sideways. I'm not preparing our kids for a gentle world, full of interesting and stimulating experiences. I'm getting them ready to keep their damn mouths shut while some idiot tells them what to do. I'm preparing them to keep a sense of self when they can't define themselves by their work because the likeliest scenario is that (unlike doctors and lawyers and bankers) they will not want

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to. I'm getting them ready to scrap and hustle and pursue happiness despite the struggle.

I think a lot of what people see as bad parenting is simply that our kids have different expectations. It wouldn't make any sense to take wealthy kids and prepare their brains for drudge work. And it doesn't make much sense to take poor kids and prepare them to seek fulfillment from work. That's not how it goes for us. If they find it, that's fantastic. But odds are, they will work just as many zombie jobs as they will good ones.

I'll teach my kids to be curious, to learn stuff for themselves because learning is kind of awesome for its own sake, to find what interests them and get obsessive about it. But learning and thinking is only a hobby for the working class, and I think it's best they're prepared. You never know what their lives will be. The happiest people are the ones who can simply block out the worst of it.

When I gave birth to my oldest daughter, I was visited more than once in the hospital by authorities because I'd had no prenatal care. They asked invasive are-you-an-idiot questions. All the questions seemed designed to make me look like an unfit parent: One of them was "Do you have a job?" My



answer was "Not at the moment." (True—I'd quit work just before giving birth and didn't intend to look for more work for another two weeks.) Another was "Do you have a permanent home?" My answer to that was also no. (This was during the time when our apartment was flooded and we were fighting with our landlord about our housing.) I was asked my education level (college dropout), and I was even asked if anyone in my home had a diagnosed mental disorder. Yep. After all this, I was pretty convinced they weren't going to let me take my daughter home. Luckily, I dodged that bullet. She was healthy enough, and it's not like I was the first uninsured woman to get pregnant in a century or anything.

A neighbor of mine was investigated because she was at work *too much*. And they asked her the same sorts of questions, meant to find fault: How many hours are you gone? Have you considered cutting back? She said that they spoke a lot about marriage during her sessions, like making her boyfriend a permanent fixture was some kind of panacea. (The dude was useless, and as far as I could tell, he was her one indulgence.) The whole time these authorities were shaming her for working so much, she was thinking about nannies. See, if she'd been wealthy enough to hire a nanny, it wouldn't matter how much she was gone. She was talking to the authorities only because she didn't get paid enough.

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I knew a guy, a single dad, who had two girls. One in particular decided to be a hell-raiser; she started fights at school, stole beer from the fridge and gave it to her friends (of course on school property), and generally made herself a giant pain in his ass. I don't think anyone really blamed the girl; being motherless at thirteen can't be easy, and her mom had died not too long previously. It was the sort of situation that, I imagine, wealthy kids get some extra consideration, maybe some therapy for. Instead, they sent the dad to jail for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Needless to say, he lost his kids. He's been spending every penny he's got ever since, trying to regain custody.

Are these irresponsible parents who deserve to have their kids taken away—or to have even the threat of that held over their heads? No. They're just poor people who love their kids and are doing the best that they can for them with limited resources. So let's stop saying that poor people are irresponsible parents and start admitting that society doesn't seem to believe that if you are poor you are entitled to be a parent at all.

Given how easy it is to lose our kids, it's no wonder that many poor people avoid any brushes with authority. We've learned how truly defenseless we are, so we just stay away. And what's the biggest authority in most children's lives? School.

My kids are still little, but I am not looking forward to dealing with a school once they hit that age. I'm afraid my kid's going to repeat something she heard at home between me and her dad. For example, our endless *South Park* references. What if someone hears her say something from the episode in which Cartman feeds a kid his own dead parents to make up for a pubic hair scam and assumes that we're teaching our kid about the joys of revenge via forced cannibalism? Is a woman from social services going to show up at my door and start asking questions about my salary and employment? Will it matter that she hasn't actually seen this happening, only heard us reference it in passing?

I've got it relatively easy here. I was well educated through much of my childhood. I don't have to feel awkward going to a parent-teacher meeting for my kid. I don't have to deal with a language barrier. I don't have to deal with getting the shaming that single parents so frequently come in for: Your child needs you home, you're not doing enough, you have to find more hours in the day or you're a bad parent.

When I was living in California, a Spanish-speaking neighbor asked me to read her a letter from her kids' school. The letter was full of impressive words. Words like "responsibility" and "consequences" and "requirements." She had been ducking the school for weeks because they'd required her son to participate in some fund-raising program and he

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owed the school money for not hitting his minimum sales. She didn't have it, so she stopped answering their calls. When she got this letter, which was a wordy "what we're up to" newsletter deal, she thought it was a collection notice. I tried to explain that he'd get to go to school regardless of a \$20 debt, but I couldn't convince her. She simply didn't believe me. And the truth is, given how badly I've seen poor people treated by whatever system they're forced to deal with, I didn't really believe me either.

What it comes down to, then, is the idea that the *very same situations and behaviors* are treated completely differently depending on how nice your stuff is. Kid gets into a fight at school? If he's black and poor, he's going to jail. If he's rich and white, he's going to military school. Was your daughter busted with drugs? If she's poor, she's getting charged. If she's rich, she'll go to a nice rehab facility for however long propriety demands. The only reason it looks like our kids misbehave more is that we can't afford to cover up for them when they do.

During World War II, we had government-sponsored day care facilities. It was generally acknowledged that single-parent households, which the families left behind by the soldiers were, needed extra support. Maybe, and this is just a thought, we could do that again. Child-care crisis solved. Plus, it's another jobs program.

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I'm not saying that poor kids have the same opportunities as rich kids. They don't. And that's bullshit. But that is not the same thing as saying that the poor are not capable of being decent, loving parents of decent people.

Besides. If we don't keep having kids, who do you think is going to work in tomorrow's restaurants? *Your* kids?

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Poverty Is Fucking  
Expensive

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