THE STALLED GENDER REVOLUTION

Over the years, many times I would say to poems, "Go away, I don't have time now... I did keep the house scrubbed and waxed and that sort of thing."

—Eleanor Ross Taylor, poet and wife of Peter Taylor, the Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist and short-story writer

People are saying that all feminism ever got us was more work.

—Heidi Hartman

It is 2 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day. In three hours, eighteen friends will arrive for the feast we've been hosting for years. In the previous days, while I worked full-time, I'd looked for recipes, planned the menu, put together a shopping list, and gone to the grocery store three times. I'd obsessed on finding a tablecloth and raced around on my lunch breaks to find one. I'd hauled folding tables and chairs from a friend's basement late one evening. I'd baked pies with all the children who would be coming over. I'd stayed up late several nights in a row chopping vegetables and prepping for the elaborate dishes I love to cook and get around to only once a year. That morning, I'd made a quick breakfast for friends before we all dashed off to run the neighborhood Turkey Trot. I am still in my sweaty running clothes. The twenty-pound turkey is still pink and raw, waiting to go in the oven. The table is still not set, and the kitchen, covered in pots and pans, mounds of vegetables, spilled flour, and all manner of foodstuff, looks like a bomb has gone off.
Tom strolls over to the refrigerator. I think he’s about to start cooking the turkey. He pulls out a six-pack of beer.

“I’m going to go over and help Peter cook his turkey,” he announces.

I raise an eyebrow. “Peter’s putting his turkey in a smoker. So you’re going to go and sit on the patio in the sun, drink beer, and watch Peter’s smoker?” I ask in disbelief. Tom smiles sheepishly. And walks out the door.

I can’t move.

All week long, I hadn’t complained. I love having friends over and I love cooking Thanksgiving dinner. I hadn’t nagged for help, because after nearly twenty years of marriage, it had never done much good and it had gotten really old. I was used to “doing” the holidays, which anthropologists say has always been the work of women—the holiday planning and “kin work” that keep family ties strong. And Martha Stewart, that cultural icon of domestic perfection, with her intricately carved “starburst” pumpkin sconces that look like Tiffany lamps and handmade cornhusk dolls to set on the Thanksgiving table, makes sure we’ll never feel like we’ve done it quite right.

As I slammed the raw turkey into the oven and scurried around the kitchen preparing dinner with, God bless her, the help of my sister Claire, who was visiting—just us “womenfolk” in the kitchen—I thought back in time. Tom and I had done pretty well dividing chores fairly when it was just the two of us. But once we had kids, the scales started tipping, and though we’d tried to right them every now and then, usually after I’d lost it, I always ended up feeling like I was in charge of everything. Forget having it all, it felt like I was doing it all. Even though we both worked full-time and earned about the same amount of money. “You are NOT the Lion King!” I would occasionally yell, usually after finding myself scrubbing an oven hood so clogged with grease that the smoke alarms wouldn’t stop screeching while he watched TV. “You don’t GET to laze around while I do all the work!” He’d shoot back that my standards were too high. “You’re just like Marge Simpson. When her house was burning down, she found dirty dishes in the sink and stood there washing them,” he’d say. “Guys will live in squalor.”

If you had asked him, on this particular Thanksgiving Day, Tom would not have been able to tell you where the kids’ dentist was. I could count on one hand the times he’d taken them to the pediatrician. And I was the one who reshuffled my schedule and tried to work from home when they were sick or it snowed and school closed. He was supposed to do the grocery shopping, but he refused to take a list, and staples like toilet paper seemed to make his brain freeze. I always wound up running to the store every week anyway to get all the stuff he forgot. At one time, he was supposed to do the bills, but when he kept paying them so late our credit rating took a hit, I accused him of doing it badly on purpose and took the responsibility back (not that I’ve done much better). When it was his turn to clean the kitchen, I often had to ask him if he thought pots and pans just washed themselves. He did help out, but only, it felt, when I asked, which didn’t free up any space in my cluttered mind. It had gotten to the point where I didn’t want to feel so hostile and resentful all the time, so I had made a weird lopsided bargain: I would do most of the kid, house, taxes, and drudge stuff. And all I asked for in return, I told Tom, was this: “I just want you to notice, and say ‘thank you.’”

That bargain is a big reason why my life splintered into unsatisfying, distracted, and fragmented time confetti. Once, when I complimented a coworker on a brilliant story that, to pull off, had required the kind of extensive, uninterrupted time I never seemed to have, she looked at me with pity. “I feel so sorry for you single moms.” And once, when Tom was reporting in Afghanistan for a month, he e-mailed a photo of himself in the dusty nowhere of Forward Operating Base Ramrod outside Kandahar. He was sitting in filthy clothes, holding a cup of watery instant coffee and a laptop outside his “bunk,” a giant metal box like those stacked onto container ships. My reaction shocked me: I was jealous. Of course I missed him and worried about his safety. But in my world of crashing work deadlines, teacher phone calls, late Girl Scout forms, forgotten water bills, kids’ stomachaches, and empty cupboards, all I could think was this: Man, all he has to do every day is go to work.

But today, this Thanksgiving takes the lopsided division of labor in our house to a whole new level. As Tom walks out the door, I am both livid and, deep in my bones, flattened by a crushing disappointment. When we got married, we promised to be partners. But like that frog in the science experiment who has the sense to jump out of a pot of boiling water, but when plopped in tepid water doesn’t notice it gradually heating to roiling until he’s cooked, our division of labor had become laughably, ridiculously, irrationally, frustratingly unfair.

How did it get this bad?
Honestly, before I stepped away from the spinning top of my life and began researching this book, I was simply too busy to think much about it. But I always had company. Grousing about how little husbands do at home is a regular and tiresomely predictable social exchange. "When I work at home, I do all the kid and housework stuff," one friend told me. "When he works at home, he doesn't even think to." "We get the balance okay, then he'll go through an intense period at work, or travel, and I pick up the slack," said another. "And we never seem to recalibrate." There is a reason that time studies have found that married women in the United States still do about 70 to 80 percent of the housework, though most of them work for pay, and that once a woman has children, her share of housework increases three times as much as her husband's. And it's not because women will wash dishes in a burning house and men are Lion King slobs. But it took me more than a year of reporting and soul searching to begin to see past my rage to understand why, and then figure out what to do about it. And that didn't happen until I met Jessica DeGroot.

A few weeks after that fateful Thanksgiving, as I researched what social scientists call the "stalled gender revolution," I called Jessica DeGroot, who runs the ThirdPath Institute in Philadelphia. For more than a decade, DeGroot has worked to help families create something entirely new. Not the traditional 1950s "first path" families with one breadwinner and one homemaker, which requires an either-or choice, and for those who want to do both, lopping off a piece of themselves. Not the "neotraditional" "second path" families of dual earners or with one breadwinner, usually the man, and one flex- or part-time working spouse who also tends to be in charge of all the child care and domestic chores, like mine. The "third path," DeGroot explains, is for couples who want to share their work and home lives as full partners, each one with time for work, love, and play. She doesn't deny it's difficult. "Change is hard. The answers are not easy. They take work and sometimes they take awhile to put in place," she said. "But there really are families who are doing it differently and making it work."

I'd called DeGroot to interview her about her work. Unlike other organizations that push for flexible work or, like MomsRising, better family policy, DeGroot's is one of the few that looks at both sides of the work-life equation. Beyond that, with more than a decade of research, they've developed an actual curriculum to coach people on how to make changes. By the end of our conversation, I'd asked her to work with Tom and me, because I was out of ideas. So one morning, the three of us got on the phone. DeGroot asked us what we loved about each other—always a good place to start when you're seething. By the end of the call, we'd been reminded why we were together, but we hadn't broached the subject of our one-sided distribution of domestic labor. DeGroot asked Tom, who had been less than enthusiastic about the idea, if he saw the value in continuing coaching.

"No," he said. "We need to make more time for each other. But I think we're doing okay."

He hung up the phone.

I burst into tears.

Jessica DeGroot realized when she was getting her MBA at Wharton that she wanted for herself what both her parents had. Her father is an award-winning endocrinologist who wrote the definitive textbook on the subject, still in use today. Her mother raised five kids, cooked great meals, created a loving home life, and was active in the community. DeGroot wanted to live both lives, but without the overwhelm that typically comes with it. She decided to study not just the workplace, not just women, as most people were, and not just men, but how they all interact. She wanted to learn what kept most families stuck in the overwhelm, what allowed others to forge their own completely new third path, and how to bridge the gap between them.

For both men and women to have time for work, love, and play, she realized, the way most people work, their relationships and their attitudes about play have to change. But with no real role models, she didn't know how. So she began to imagine: What if not just women, but both men and women, worked smart, more flexible schedules? What if the workplace itself was more fluid than the rigid and narrow ladder to success of the ideal worker? What if a performance-based instead of an hour-measuring work culture could more easily absorb both men and women "taking their foot off the gas pedal" for time to care for children and families or have lives, as well as ramping up again when that time had passed? And what if both men and women became responsible for raising children and managing the home, sharing work, love, and play? Could everyone then live whole lives?
She experimented with her own life. When she married and she and her husband, Jeff, started a family, they both wanted to work and to share the care of their baby daughter. So they both shifted their work schedules and swapped days being the primary caregiver. They had repeated conversations about what each expected when it came to work, kids, and home, agreed to common standards, and sought to divide the duties in a way that felt fair to both. Sharing fairly also meant clearing mental clutter. Once when Jeff asked what DeGroot wanted for dinner, she responded, “To not have to think about it.” Then when it was her turn to cook, she gave him the same mental break. Twenty years later, Jeff, co-owner of a manufacturing company, has seen his small business grow to three hundred employees and DeGroot’s non-profit ThirdPath Institute has become an important voice in the growing national movement to ease the overwhelm and conflicts between work and life. They both have strong relationships with their two children, now seventeen and twenty-three. And sharing equitably gave them time for regular date nights. “We thought we made this decision for the good of our kids, but it turns out it was good for our marriage, good for our work, and good for ourselves,” she said. “It was such a gift.”

Traveling the third path herself helped her see that to right listing family systems like mine so precariously off balance requires challenging enormously powerful cultural expectations of who we are and how we’re supposed to act: the work-devoted ideal worker, the self-sacrificing ideal mother, and the distant provider father. The norms are what get us into the overwhelm, she said. And the overwhelm keeps us from having the time to imagine a way out. “When couples are angry with each other, standing in their living rooms fighting about ways to create more time and not seeing any, they don’t realize that there are these other invisible forces in the room with them,” DeGroot said. The ideal worker, the ideal mother, and the provider father are right there, pulling the strings. “They’re the ones creating the stress.”

Talk to a father about cutting back on work hours to become more involved at home, and the ideal worker takes a tug. Both men and women instinctively know—as the social science in chapter 5 showed—that he would be far more punished in the workplace for flexible work than she would. And for so many people living on the edges of their budgets, the fear of taking a big financial hit stops all conversation right there. Talk to a mother about stepping aside to let the father do more with the kids, and all three cultural norms yank that chain and shut her up. Aren’t women just naturally meant to be the better parent? Isn’t it selfish for a mother to want to work? Won’t he get grief? And if his work suffers, how can he provide? We’ve got bills to pay! “So they both end up taking the path of least resistance. They get stuck,” DeGroot told me. “People feel like they don’t have a choice, because choice requires having meaningful alternatives, and so many couples don’t think there are any.”

To start down the third path, DeGroot asks people to fight what she calls “the good fight” right when the overwhelm kicks into gear: when the first baby is born. That one event, as I had discovered in all the time-use research around the world, changes a woman’s life profoundly and, until very recently, a man’s life hardly at all. DeGroot knows that’s a tall order. “I’m asking couples, at the moment they are most exhausted, to think differently,” she said. “To ignore all their neighbors, colleagues, family members, and these cultural norms. To start to imagine their own way.”

I thought of our friends, Peter, with the turkey smoker, and Jenny, my running partner and one of my best friends. They’d met and married while getting their Ph.D.s in physics and were living in Holland doing postdoctoral research when they had their two boys. Away from family, free from American cultural norms, yet not fully integrated into Dutch society and not knowing what else to do, they created what I’d wistfully come to think of as Their Own Private Netherlands. Since flexible work arrangements are common in Holland, they each worked four days in the lab, alternating so that each parent had a day alone in charge of the kids. A nanny watched the kids on three days. But the days weren’t long, since work hours in Holland tend to be intense and short. They’d leave the lab in the late afternoon and one would grocery shop before the stores closed at 5 and the other would get the kids, passing for a cup of tea with the nanny, before meeting at home for dinner. The family had weekends together. That equitable division of labor would shift when they moved back to the United States, as both Peter and Jenny found themselves at times caught up in ideal worker workplaces. But when things get too far out of whack, they have a sense of the possible and a touchstone to guide them.

Helping couples find Their Own Private Netherlands, so to speak, is a key mission of DeGroot’s institute. Her approach includes three
main elements: vision, space, and story. When she asks couples to fight the good fight, she uses a well-researched curriculum to help them see the powerful unconscious forces at work in their lives—the ideal worker, the provider father, and the ideal mother. Then in what she calls “active listening” sessions, she creates a regular and predictable space for couples ordinarily too overwhelmed to even think, so they can begin to sort through where they are and how they got there. It’s a time to pause, to step outside the swirl and examine their own work cultures, work creep, how their own histories can unthinkingly shape their expectations, and how easy it is to fall into what she calls reactive, no-win “tangoing” when those unconscious forces are pulling the strings. She asks couples to talk to each other about what they really want for their life together. She asks them to start to imagine how to get across the gap between where they are and the vision of what they really want. Then she tells couples to experiment and see what happens. Over and over. Until the vision gets clearer and the path to it better lit. And when they get stuck, when change seems impossible, like MomsRising, she, too, has a bank of stories, and connects couples, families, businesses, and leaders who are striving to remake their lives on the third path to those who already have. Like at Stanford, and in the bright spots workplaces, she is rewriting the narrative and rewiring the culture. At home.

Some couples figure this out on their own. Tom and I, obviously, hadn’t. Feeling stuck, I asked to hear some of those stories of people seeking to change.

**Anna and James—The Unintended Slide into Traditional Roles**

By the time DeGroot began coaching Anna and James, a couple in Minnesota, they had slipped into traditional gender roles despite their best intentions. Anna, who had an emotionally volatile childhood with parents who divorced early, was between careers when they had their first child. She grew to like the idea of devoting her full attention to the family for a few years. James became the breadwinner. With their first child, he took his company’s maximum paternity leave: one week.

When their second child was born, James planned to take leave. But after just one day off, his extreme-hour company called in a panic and said if he didn’t return immediately, his job would be on the line. A big house and mounting expenses pushed them further into their separate spheres as James became sleeping with his BlackBerry and handling work crises at all hours and Anna did the work of both parents. At home, James was exhausted, snappish, and distracted. “If the kids tried to say something, I’d be thinking, ‘Don’t talk to me, I’m thinking about work,’” James told me. “If I read them a story, I’d read them the shortest one I could find because I was so stressed-out.” James became physically ill. Anna was lonely and miserable. This wasn’t the life either of them envisioned.

With dedicated time and space with DeGroot to think about their work and lives, Anna came to see that, as much as she wanted James to be a coparent, she was too often undercutting him—criticizing what he did or scolding him for what he didn’t do. Social scientists call this “maternal gatekeeping,” a common but largely unconscious behavior that flares because the ideal mother norm that is nestled deep in a woman’s psyche holds that mothers not only know best but should always be in charge. James, instead of backing down, as he usually had, began to tell her to back off. “And I did,” Anna said.

Anna was shocked to discover that James really wanted to work a reduced schedule to have more time to be part of the family. “His own father died when he was fifty-five and James was worried that if he didn’t de-stress his life, he’d die early, too,” Anna said. “I realized we’d never talked in any great depth about what we really wanted.” It took years of small, incremental steps, of trial and error and backsliding and a lot of talking, but they finally sold their big home and downsized. James took a job with flexible hours, works from home, schedules travel around school events, and has become a much more active parent and partner. Over time, Anna found her passion as a parent educator and as a volunteer with the ThirdPath Institute. Both Anna and James ultimately aim to work about thirty hours a week. James cooks. Anna mows. They have found time to walk in the nearby woods, have dates with each other, and laugh with their children. “Sometimes, it looks weird on my résumé, I went up up upupup and then all of a sudden you see I’m an assistant engineer,” James told me. “But the other
day, the kids were listening to a silly song and I found myself singing along. That was an aha! moment for me. A year or two ago, I wouldn’t have even known the words.”

**Marcee and Jon—The Pull of the Ideal Worker**

The power of the ideal worker keeps Jon and Marcee from sharing their work and home life more equally, even after making explicit promises to each other that they would. When their daughter was born, Marcee’s progressive company allowed her to take six months of maternity leave; Jon had one week. So Marcee came to better understand what the baby needed and her routine and became the “expert” parent and Jon the backup. When Marcee returned to work—she was overseeing her global financial services company’s transition to a 100 percent flexible workplace—she worked four days and had every Friday with the baby. Then Jon got a big promotion and the family moved from San Francisco to New York. Jon began working late nights and weekends, wanting to prove himself in the new job. Marcee, alone with no friends or family in the new city, struggled to work and take care of the baby. “That started the slippery slope” toward traditional gender roles, Jon said. Marcee was sleep deprived and spent. “I finally just said, ‘I can’t do this. This isn’t what I signed up for,’” she told me.

The two began working with DeGroot. Their housework wasn’t so much the problem—she bought the groceries online and cooked. He picked up the house, vacuumed, paid the bills online, and planned the vacations. They both did laundry. But caring for the baby clearly was an issue. Marcee felt she was doing it all. “I had tunnel vision,” Jon said. “I don’t think I knew how much this was bothering Marcee until she sat me down and told me.” They started small, creating new routines. They began to rotate days for who was responsible for getting the baby when she woke in the morning. That gave Marcee the ability to go to the gym again, or to get more sleep every other day. Jon agreed that he would come home in time to relieve the babysitter one night a week, come home for dinner more often, and wait until their daughter was asleep before going back to work. He agreed to work only during her naps on the weekend. On Saturday mornings, Jon takes over as the primary parent. But the grip of the ideal worker still keeps them from living the third-path life they envisioned. “Most of my sense of self-worth, which pains me to admit, comes from being successful at work,” Jon said. “That doesn’t mean I want to be a deadbeat dad. But I have a ton of ego wrapped up in being successful professionally, unfortunately at the expense of other things. That’s something I constantly struggle with.” Life is better, Marcee said. “But,” Jon allowed, “we’re not there yet.”

**Laura and Jim—Letting Go of the Ideal Mother**

In creating their third path, Laura and Jim, a couple DeGroot met in Philadelphia, wrestled not with the ideal worker but with the pull of the ideal mother on Laura. “There was this period at the very beginning that I felt like I really needed to do everything at home—all the shopping, all the cooking, all the things related to our kids—plus go to work. I was driving myself crazy,” Laura told me. “It was Jim who stopped me. He said, ‘It doesn’t make you a perfect mother because you wash every dish and clean every piece of clothing. What makes us a great family is we help each other.’”

At work, Laura, a partner in a public accounting firm, learned early on how productive she could be on a flexible schedule when she cared for her mother. “So when we started a family, what really made the difference was just being very up front and honest with my employer about what I was going to need,” Laura said. “And then being confident enough to say, in a nicer way, ‘You owe this to me. I earned it.’” Jim, a senior vice president at Citibank, came up with his own flexible work plan and sold his boss on it. Work is important, he said, “but my kids are four and two only once. I wanted to see it.” Now the two work out of their home two days a week and share caring for their two toddlers, who are in preschool or with a babysitter for the other three days. Both use their home office time for conference calls and tasks that require quiet and concentration. On the days Jim works in his Manhattan office, he uses his commute time to plan and his office time for face-to-face meetings. The couple plan their calendars on a whiteboard at least one month in advance, and send each other Outlook invitations as reminders for whose turn it is to take the kids to the doctor or the date of a teacher conference. They have regular date nights and get away for a
few days alone as a couple several times a year. "Jim and I have become very, very clear about what's important to us," Laura said.

The third path isn't easy, DeGroot said. But then again, neither is living with regret or in the overwhelm. "There are always going to be 'code red' moments when work and life collide," she said. "There's a myth that you can have everything. You can't. But you can have time for the things that are most important to you."

International surveys have found that majorities of men and women in most Westernized countries say marriages in which both partners share work, child care, and household duties are the most satisfying. Research has found that when men and women share the housework, they have more sex, and that the more equitably they share duties, the happier they both are. Still, the gaping domestic divide, what social scientists call the "gendered division of labor," persists. The gap is narrowest at the top of the socioeconomic scale, among couples who have the resources to hire others to do the drudgery work for them, and widest among couples with fewer resources. Though men today certainly spend more time caring for their children and doing more chores than their fathers did, it is still about half of what women routinely do. Even though women's paid work hours have been on the rise, as a whole they are still nowhere close to men's. And since the mid-1990s, nothing's budged: Married fathers, on average, aren't doing more housework and child care. The number of mothers in the workforce has dipped, despite increasing numbers of women graduating from college and getting advanced degrees. And attitudes about whether fathers should be more involved at home and whether mothers can both work and have warm relationships with their children have, likewise, flattened. Social scientists puzzling over the trends call it the stalled gender revolution.

And no one is very happy about it. A host of surveys have found that arguing over housework is one of the main sources of conflict in relationships. One survey in the U.K. found that women spend as much as three hours a week redoing chores that they think their partners have done badly. Time studies show women are two and a half times more likely than men to interrupt their sleep to care for others, and they stay awake longer when they do. Stress research is finding that when women come home from a long day at work, their stress hormone levels fall if their husbands help with the chores. But how's this for a twist? The study found that husbands' stress hormone levels fall only when their wives do all the housework and they are relaxing." Even during the Great Recession, when more men began losing their jobs and more women took up the mantle of family breadwinner, time-use studies found that the division of domestic labor became slightly more fair, but only because working mothers stopped doing as much, not because unemployed fathers did more. And what did those unemployed fathers do with that extra time? They relaxed.

Which might explain why psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's time studies have found that men feel happier when their wives are present, but that women do not necessarily feel the reverse. It might also explain his finding that men feel happier at home, and women when they go to work. Women, he found, reported feeling happiest around midday, when most were at work, and felt the worst between 5:30 and 7:30 p.m.—which most families know as the "witching hour" of flying to child-care pickup and squeezing tired kids, homework, dinner, baths, the detritus of bills and home stuff, and the hope of making meaningful connections into the space of a few hours. Men, in contrast, felt crummiest first thing in the morning and happiest in the evening, when they were heading home from work. The media latched on to the study as another example of selfish working mothers gleefully ditching their kids. But let's think for a minute. If work is something working fathers are supposed to do, nonstop, unending for forty-plus years because they are the "providers," the stakes are high for them at work. They are under pressure to perform and always be on their toes. Home is a place of refuge. And, Csikszentmihalyi's studies found, men tend to have a choice whether to be involved in domestic duties. They tend to do only chores they like and tend to care for their kids only when they're in a good mood. What's not to like? For women, however, home, no matter how filled with love and happiness, is just another workplace.

Men and women, it turns out, not only do different things with their time but experience time itself differently, so much so that the groundbreaking work on the phenomenon is called "divergent realities." Research has found that even when a family is engaged in the same activity—eating dinner—the mothers tend to feel frustrated that they aren't doing enough, while the fathers are proud of themselves.
that they’ve managed to get away from work to be there at all. Czik-szentmihalyi, using his Experience Sampling Method, or ESM, technique of paging people randomly throughout the day and asking not only what they are doing but also what they are thinking and how they feel, was one of the first to uncover how women’s time is “contaminated.”

No matter where they were or what they were doing, the women in his studies were consumed with the exhaustive “mental labor” of keeping in mind at all times all the moving parts of kids, house, work, errands, and family calendar. That, he wrote, only intensifies the feeling of breathless time pressure for women. It’s no small wonder, then, that in surveys around the globe, women are more likely to report more chronic stress and the feeling that life is out of control than men. It is no wonder that economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers have found that women are unhappier today than forty years ago and that it is men who are happier later in life, while women are left with unfulfilled desires. To get the stalled gender revolution moving again, heterosexual couples need look no further than gay couples. An emerging body of research is finding that, free from provider father and ideal mother expectations, gay couples share labor more fairly and split tasks based on what people like to do or are good at doing. Gay couples tend to resolve conflicts more constructively. And research has found that, unlike in heterosexual couples, where one partner may be happier than the other, gay partners tend to be equally happy.

I called Patrick Markey, a psychologist and director of the Interpersonal Research Lab at Villanova University and author of many of these studies.

“The biggest difference we see between heterosexual and gay couples is the trait of openness. And because of that, gay and lesbian couples tend to be more egalitarian. They’re much more willing to share power.”

I spent an evening in the toy-filled house of Bill and Andy, partners of ten years, and their nine-month-old twins born by surrogate. Both have cut back on their work hours, work flexible schedules, and share caring for the babies. Both do laundry. They take turns cooking. Andy does the long-range planning. Bill pays the bills. With the help of their mothers, who live nearby, each takes time for himself. “I can honestly say that I don’t feel at all imbalanced or that I’m doing more than he is, or that there’s any ill will,” Andy says. Bill, swaying with a baby on his hip, nods in agreement. “With two men, there’s just no expectation for who does what.”

To understand what happened in my own life, I did the one thing that came naturally to me as a reporter: I took out my notebook and pen and began asking questions. I ranted through twenty years of pent-up anger in weekly “active listening” sessions with Jessica DeGroot. I took long walks with Tom. We both slowly realized that we never had talked about what we really wanted. When we said we wanted to be equal partners, we had only a vague notion of what that meant.

In truth, Tom was always much more disciplined about his work hours, working efficiently, leaving when his work was done for the day to come home and make time for the family, and never buying into the face-time ideal worker culture in even the most toxic work environments. I was the one with work creep.

But we both came to see that the pivot point that had shifted the balance of labor, power, and time in our relationship arrived, just as DeGroot finds, with the birth of our first child. We never fought “the good fight.” We just took our assumptions and swallowed them like a bitter pill. I assumed Tom would take parental leave, so we could share parenting. He’d always talked about wanting to be more active and involved with our kids than his own father had been. Instead, he took a few days of vacation after the kids were born. And, perhaps feeling guilty himself, he’d always cut me off whenever I pressed him about why he wouldn’t take more time off all those years ago. One day, my notebook in hand, I asked him what really happened.

“I thought I’d be an equal partner,” he said. “But where I worked at the time, it was just understood that taking parental leave wouldn’t be a good thing to do. Only one father had, and he was a ‘star.’ I was wary of my position. I would now, though. It’s much more accepted and I see young fathers doing it all the time.”

“I was mad at you for years,” I said. “Were you aware of that?”

“Yeah. But I was working in a really toxic atmosphere. There was always a lot of pressure to do more.”

So I took the long maternity leave. I got to know everything about
The baby. I became the default parent and we both assumed it was just "natural" anyway—an assumption I investigate in a later chapter. I flexed my schedule at work and, since I was at home more anyway, I began taking charge of everything else, too. As we talked, we began to see how the rest of our lives tipped the fulcrum even farther: When our daughter was born, she barely slept for two years and hated everyone but me. The kids started school in a Spanish immersion program and, truly, I was the only one who could help them with homework. Tom began to travel overseas every year. We came to see that just as the ideal worker pulled his strings, the ideal mother, crabby, sleep deprived, and "gatekeeping," kept a tight grip on me. Tom became the fun parent, wrestling with the kids, mugging for the camera, changing a few diapers. And I, always the one behind the camera and nowhere in all the photo albums, did the invisible drudge work. So invisible, in fact, that, as we unspooled our lives, I discovered that Tom thought we really had divided things fairly. He was angry that I was angry all the time and felt I didn't give him credit for what he did do, which was so much more than his father had.

"And the fact that you didn't know where the dentist was? Never took them to the doctor? That I stayed home when they were sick? Planned all the kids' activities and summer camp . . . ?" I started one day.

"But that's the kind of stuff mothers do anyway, right?" he'd said. "I mean, what man do we know who does any of that?"

On that infuriating Thanksgiving afternoon I described at the beginning of this chapter, truly, the ideal worker and the ideal mother were both right there in the kitchen with us, clouding our vision. "Let's face it," Tom said, "without thinking much about it, men expect women to do all the stuff with kids and home. It's just the role they've always had. I've probably always had it in the back of my mind, too."

And, I came to see, so had I. Never asking for help because I thought I should do it all. Always deferring to his career as more important. Always assuming that if people saw a messy house, I, the negligent housewife, would be blamed. Watching angrily as he went to the gym, read the newspaper, and worked in long, interrupted stretches, but both of us thinking the reason I didn't was that I just couldn't get it together. Never realizing that it would take both of us to crawl out of the overwhelm.

"Looking back," Tom said one day, "we should have worked this out a long time ago."

So we started, finally, to try.

Now we take turns getting the kids to the dentist and the doctor. We take turns driving Liam to his drum lesson and picking Tessa up from swimming. Tom puts his e-mail on all the PTA, Cross Country team, Girl Scouts, and other Listservs so we both know what's going on, not just me. We trade off checking homework. Even if it's in Spanish, he can see whether it's been done. He cooks every night and I clean up. I empty the dishwasher in the morning. He loads. Last one out of bed makes it. The kids have their own chores, so I don't have the mind clutter of keeping track in my head. We have family meetings. Everyone is responsible for putting his or her own activities on the family calendar. If we miss something, too bad. Write it down next time. Each child can choose one field trip a semester for a parent to attend, then we schedule it. No more last-minute, wrenching requests that can really ruin your day.

Tom still grocery shops, but I rarely shop after him. When we're out of something, we're out. Even toilet paper. I wash and sort the clothes, but everybody folds their own—sometimes we'll have a "folding party" when we watch our family movie on Friday nights. I've even called up YouTube and had everyone watch a video on how to fold fitted sheets. I've made my invisible work more visible—once leaving the mass of bills and paperwork that I manage all over the dining room table for days, then showing Tom the files where everything goes, the book where I keep all the passwords, and how to manage the online accounts. We both now pay bills. I stopped weeding, so he could see that without effort, the tranquil Zen rock garden he loves so much becomes a fuzzy, overgrown Chia Pet. Then he and the kids started to pull them, too.

We had to agree on common standards—no doing the dishes in a burning house. No Lion King slobbery. Making the bed means not leaving the pillows on the floor. Doing the dishes means washing the pots in the sink and wiping the counters. When Tom at first kept shrirking on the standards, I didn't just do it for him, like I had for years, figuring I was more efficient. I took a photo on my iPhone and sent him a text instead.

And we had to take time to think about what we really wanted—how finally becoming equal partners and sharing the load more fairly
would free us from our usual crouch of anger and defensiveness and give us both time to do meaningful work, share moments of connection with each other and the family—and play. For Christmas, we cut down on giving stuff and started giving each other little “gifts of time.” Tom and Tessa got “T-time” in the park and an afternoon together in an art studio learning how to make stained glass. I gave Liam “A Day of Yess,” when he got to choose what to do. For our anniversary, I told Tom I didn’t want flowers. I wanted a love letter. Tom and I now have “cocktail minute” (who has an hour?) to check in with each other alone at the end of the day. We talk. We fight. We get it wrong. We get it right. Life changes. We adjust. We’ve learned some lessons. There will be countless more to come. But we’re finally starting to learn them together. Here are just a few:

The Lesson of the Twinkie: Like any ideal mother, I signed up to bring baked goods to sell at Liam’s school band concert. Then I forgot to bake something. The realization stabbed me right as we were on the way to the concert. We pulled into a nearby grocery store and Tom ran in. He came out not with the pretty cupcakes from the bakery that I’d asked for, but with two boxes of Twinkies. My inner Martha Stewart was mortified. “Are you kidding me?” Tom said. “It’s middle school. They’ll sell out in a heartbeat.” And they did. I had to let Martha go.

Sometimes, Just Leave: Traveling to research the book was, honestly, probably the best thing I ever did. For everybody. The kids survived without me. Tom was forced to learn how to be the primary parent, and I left the ideal mother in storage and got to be just myself again. At first, I left entire packets of phone numbers and notes with the kids’ schedules and activities, which were all ignored. (How do I know? The frantic text message that came in the middle of an interview in Copenhagen asking for the drum teacher’s phone number, which was in the unopened packet.) But over time, Tom became more confident running the show, even flying solo for parent-teacher conferences. I let go. If a kid missed a flute lesson, she missed a flute lesson. If no one scooped the kitty litter, the cat would survive. And the kids got to see their mother in a new light. “I think it’s cool you go off and have adventures,” Liam said.

Camp Del Ray: This past summer, a group of five working families in our Del Ray neighborhood, sick of high camp fees, the stress of running around, and overscheduled kids, came up with a plan: For