

Pretend

by Brenda Bishop Blakey

I enter the plane in front of Allen. His cell, barely pressed to his ear, allows a female voice to leak out. Her words, intermittent but sweet, mix with engine fumes; the combination makes me queasy. The familiar female voice has a syncopated cadence. "...miss you honey...call me." Allen answers, "Of course, Mr. Fineman, as soon as the holidays are over. Bye now."

We take our seats, me at the window, Allen at the aisle, and an empty seat between. Allen refers to the middle seat as the 'throw away' because nobody wants to buy it. Nobody wants to be hemmed in, least of all him. After ten years, I understand. It's an advertisement: 'Opening for new trophy wife, help me look good to clients, no family dramas, please.'

Our marriage is defined by what we pretend. I pretend he's not a womanizer. He pretends I am too dim-witted to catch him. I pretend he will want children one day. He pretends I'm happy with the way things are.

Allen takes one of those airline magazines out of the seat pocket in front of him and pats his jacket. "Rachel, glasses please."

I open my purse and fish out his spare pair, but drop them between the seat and the arm rest. "I'll get them." I see them poking out as they rest next to a piece of paper wedged there.

I hand him the glasses and pluck the paper out. It's one of those business reply cards found in magazines. Fascinating how they get into the magazines. A puff of air splays the pages partially open while a suction hose draws a reply card up and shoots it into the magazine. The card is thicker than a regular piece of paper because its tensile strength must withstand the pressure of being sucked up without ripping. Ex-print buyers know this stuff. Useless stuff. The card is blown in, but ironically, when you open the magazine, the card falls out. That's the beauty of it. Once it falls out, someone's bound to pick it up and put it to good use. Marketing genius. I flip

the card over. *Parents*. A grocery list is scrawled in the card's white space:

milk
bread
after shave
hair spray
diapers
baby shampoo

I stare at the card. Baby shampoo. My thoughts wander to the day that my life was blown between the pages of Allen's career.

After only two months of marriage, Allen told me to quit my job as a Senior Print Buyer. "Sweetheart, you don't need to work. Anyway, I want you to help me stay organized and climb ladders and have parties. It'll be great."

"Allen, we *will* have children, won't we?"

"Sure, sweetheart, in a few years, just as soon as I make partner." He made partner four years later. It's been six years since he made partner. Ten long years without children.

My gaze is frozen on a point beyond the list. The card has a powerful tinsel strength; the past has blown it between the pages of my future.

"What's that?" He snatches it. "*Parents*. Glad we don't have to worry about that crap." He crushes it and it falls on the floor.

I unbuckle my seat belt and pick it up, pick myself up. A rumble builds and roils out in a declaration that is guttural and defiant. "I. Want. Children."

"Rachel, what in the hell is wrong with you?"

Tears volunteer and I ignore them. I put the card into a zippered pocket in my purse.

"As soon as we land, I'm leaving you."

"You're—leaving me? Why would you want to do that?"

"I'm leaving you for—for my children."

He glares at me for a long second. "Rachel, you don't have children."

“That is the most enlightened thing you ever said to me, Allen; too bad you don't understand it.” He pretends I hear his tirade, white noise like the roar of the engines. But I stare out the window trying on baby names in pink and blue.

