

We

by Mary Grimm

We all got married — Suzanne, and Virginia, and I — and it was all we ever wanted to be at the time. I fought with my parents to get married, and Suzanne ran away from home with her boyfriend to get married, and Virginia saved her money for a year and eight months, eating a bag lunch at work every day and walking up from the square to save the five cents for the transfer and making her own clothes and only seeing movies when they came to the drive-in — all to get married.

And then we had done it and we were married. Sex all the time. Our own houses (rented). A whole list of things that would not have been gathered together except for us: toasters, glassware, unbreakable dinner sets with a rim of gold around the white plates, towels we were going to paint the bathroom to match. It was heaven. Every day we woke up to different clock radios all set to the same rock station and we had breakfast with our husbands, except for Suzanne who said good-bye to hers at 2:30 A.M. unless he tried very hard not to wake her and only kissed her on the forehead before he left. Then maybe we did the dishes or made the bed or put something out for dinner. I would get this really happy feeling when I was putting on my coat if I could look around and everything was nice: the glasses turned upside down and shining, the carpet speckless and smooth like a mowed lawn, the pillows on the bed fat and indented. Or maybe we only had time to put on eyeliner and go. We went to work and at lunch (still a bag lunch for Virginia, because of saving for their future house) we told stories about our husbands. Then we went home and a) fixed dinner from a new recipe, or b) called out *for* pizza, or c) went to a sit-down restaurant that wasn't too expensive. Later at home, we watched TV with our husbands, with our arms around each other, or somebody would come over and we'd play gin rummy or pinochle with the tape player turned up loud. We could have done anything we wanted to do, that was the thing.

And then (we still didn't know each other yet, although Suzanne lived only one house away from me) we'd been married for a while and there was something funny about it. I didn't want to have sex every night, for instance. This was awful, after how it had been. Sometimes I wanted to watch the end of a movie or one of my favorite shows instead of having sex. I didn't tell him, but I felt sick. Then I got used to it. Suzanne says it was the other way for her: she could tell sometimes he wanted to listen to the ball game on the radio instead. Virginia didn't say much about this, but she's shyer than Suzanne and me. And also when he and I were at home together, alone, one of us would always be calling up someone to come over. He would call up his buddies to come over and work on the car. Or I would call up my sister and her husband to come over and watch a movie. I had a feeling like— "What's next?"

Right here was when I met Suzanne, in the supermarket. I'd seen her around a lot before, in the yard or driving up her driveway in her car or hanging up bedspreads on the clothesline in her backyard, so I thought what the hell and I said hello. The thing is I probably wouldn't have said hello earlier on because then I had everything I wanted. But on this day — it was April — there was a wind scooting little pieces of paper around the supermarket parking lot and a feeling in the air like you should be driving fast someplace and I didn't know it but I was pregnant. I wanted something and Suzanne looked like she had some of what I wanted. She was wearing a new miniskirt and mirror shades, and she had a way of walking as if she was in a commercial. She was pregnant, too, but she already knew and had gone right from the doctor's to buy the miniskirt so she could wear it for a couple of months before her stomach pushed out.

But whatever we thought we wanted or thought each other was like didn't matter — was forgotten, even — because from the first words we said to each other we knew we were going to be friends. I had thought that wouldn't happen anymore now that I was married. I went back from the supermarket to her house for coffee (I felt like my mother — having coffee and doughnuts with a neighbor) and we

talked for two hours while my groceries melted and slumped in the car. I can't remember what we talked about. Everything. Suzanne said it was like being in love, which I found upsetting when she said it. But it was true. We leaned across the table toward each other, that morning and other mornings, drinking cups of coffee (later Sanka) and eating and smoking until we had to quit, and told each other stories about our pasts, our families, our school loves, our hopes for adventure. It wasn't like a conversation, which sounds too stiff and polite; it was more like a piece of music where we each had parts that overlapped, or a play when the actors say what is closest to their hearts.

And then, when we were about five months along, Virginia and her husband moved into the house on the other side of Suzanne. If Suzanne and I hadn't gotten to be good friends so fast, things might have been difficult or different. There might have been jealousy or misunderstandings or whatever. But as it was we knew each other so well already that there was room for Virginia, who was nice and really not a demanding sort anyway. She wasn't pregnant but was planning to be, and in two months she was.

For a while we didn't have to worry about the thing of being married. For quite a long while. There was all the business of doctor visits, baby showers, maternity clothes, painting the extra bedroom. And then the hospital, the drive home with the baby looking so cute in the infant seat for the first time, the adoring grandparents waiting at home with giant panda bears and potty seats that played tunes. And then the long plunge into babyhood. All of life was baby life: baby food, baby clothes, baby wipes, the baby-changing table, baby's schedule, baby's nap, baby's bad time with breast-feeding/colic/teething. All our stories were baby stories: how baby had thrown up yellow, how baby had pulled the pierced earrings right out of our ears, how baby had rolled over for the first time while we were out of the room and almost fallen off the bed, how baby would not go to sleep until a certain song was played on the tape player.

Suzanne and I both had two, Virginia only one: she seemed shy and

not very definite, but she was a planner. And for three years, we were submerged together. We woke up at seven and sank into our lives, making breakfast/lunch/dinner, cutting food up into bird bites, taking slow walks pushing strollers or with a staggering child hanging on to our hands, slipping the top diaper off towering stacks of whiteness, pulling out the potty chair, holding someone else's eager flesh in our arms, holding it back from destruction by fire, cars, household pets, electric sockets. Our husbands visited every day, between work and going out and going to bed, but we scarcely noticed. And every night we went to bed later than we wanted and as soon as we touched the sheets we found ourselves rising up into sleep and dreams, as light as birds.

And then there was a change. At first we thought it was just because Virginia had gone back to work. Her little girl was three and old enough for day care, she said. We were amazed that she had had the strength to think ahead — she had been on the school's waiting list for months. She went back to the phone company — not to her old job, but to a new one they found for her. This made Suzanne and me discontented. Our younger children were only one and a half and two — too young, we thought, for day care. And we had no jobs to go back to. Suzanne had gone to college for a while, but she had quit when her money ran out and her family refused to lend her any. Come back home and get married was not what they said, but they might as well have. I had never been to college at all. Virginia, though, had her BA. For a while we couldn't like her as well as we had, and we looked for signs that her little girl was suffering from going to day care. Was she thin? Was she more quarrelsome and whiny? Was a career more important, Suzanne and I asked ourselves, than your child's happiness? Could you have a career at the phone company?

We got together more and more often to discuss this, and then other things. We were surprised to find ourselves thinking again, it had been so long. And then we realized that the change was in the kids, too, and that that change had made it possible for us to think, to put our heads above water, to begin to float again on the surface

of the world. They, the kids, were becoming people, sometimes responsible for themselves, capable of wishes that were not dictated or instigated by us, wanting to be on their own. The older kids had been like this for a while but we hadn't noticed.

And we noticed other things, too; that our husbands were still there, but that things between us were not quite the same. That we were not as young as we still thought of ourselves *as being*. That we looked different — older, or maybe just not taken care of. It's a wonder we didn't lynch Virginia for only having had one and being already out in the world. Suzanne and I knew that we would have to wait — did we ever discuss this? — until the little kids were older. It would be at least a year, but probably more like two. We couldn't afford Virginia's day care, so it would have to be the church day/play, where they only took four-year-olds. But what to do in the meantime, now that we were conscious again?

You might have thought we would have taken another look at our husbands. But things with them had gotten into a different way, and maybe we thought that was the way it was supposed to be, or maybe we thought it would do no good to try and change. We had things we did with our husbands on the weekends, and we went out sometimes, but really we had separate lives. I had a memory of how I thought before we got married that we would spend all our time together, that we would go places together and do things as ordinary as shopping for the fun of it, but now I knew how dumb that was. We didn't think of getting divorced; we knew we were married, and that was that. But the feeling from the day in April came back, worse than ever, and Suzanne and I put our heads together to do something about it. But it was hard to even think of change when things had been the same for so long.

Oh, we were so bored, Nothing ever happened on our street, except the regular visits of the mailmen and the meter men and the teenagers who stuck flyers into our mailboxes or rubber-banded them to the banisters of the porch. Nothing happened at the supermarket except that you heard from the cashiers about who had

died in the neighborhood. Nothing happened at church except you could see who had new clothes or was pregnant. But we were determined to look for what there was.

The first thing we tried was new recipes. For a while we cooked something new every day. We got cookbooks out of the library — Hawaiian cookbooks, make-your-own-bread cookbooks, tomato cookbooks, dinner-in-an-hour cookbooks. We bugged our aunts and grandmothers for family recipes which we wrote out and exchanged on file cards. At every dinner we tried them on our husbands and children. Every morning when we had coffee, instead of buying doughnuts from Snow White the way we used to, one of us made something: chocolate-chip kuchen, apricot-sour-cream coffee cake, banana-bran muffins with lemon glaze. Instead of Oreos and chips, our kids ate snacks of prune-peanut crunch, sesame bread sticks, carrot-and-cheese-cubes on a stick. We made ice cubes with single grapes and cherries frozen inside, we candied violets in the spring and rose petals in the summer. We had gala dinners to which our husbands and children — arid Virginia and her husband and child — came, uncomfortable and surprised to find themselves all together in one house or the other, But that was no good, and it was back to meatloaf and macaroni and cheese.

Next: sewing. I had a sewing machine that I had hardly ever used, bought from a high-pressure salesman in the first months of our marriage. My husband and I were so dumb, and the salesman was so powerful and certain. We sat before him on the couch holding each other's hands behind a cushion and we said yes to everything, yes to the cross-stitching attachment, yes to the five-year service contract. The sewing machine sat in the hail between the bedrooms, sometimes with things stacked on it, sometimes used as a stool by one of the kids. But we dragged it out, Suzanne and I, and we got a pattern that was marked "Easy-Sew" and we picked out cloth at the Sewtex fabric store, with the kids rampaging up and down the aisles and begging for cards of buttons and long curling strips of ribbons and lace. We looked at but prudently did not buy the patterns for baby and children's clothes — little rompers with duck appliqués,

little dresses with ruffled sleeves and hems. We planned how we might make all our clothes except for coats and bathing suits and underwear. The cloth was wonderful to carry home, heavy and bright-colored, smooth to touch, folding over and over on itself without wrinkling. Mine was golden, yellow and full of light. Suzanne's was silver, a gray as pale and shining as the moon.

And all that month we pinned the thin crumpled tissues of the pattern to the cloth with sharp, glittery pins and flashed the metal of the scissors through the folded layers and attached the pieces to each other under the whirl of the machine's needle. They were simple dresses: a panel for the front and one for the back, attached at the shoulders by slender strips of cloth that were meant to be tied in a bow. But we sweated and swore over them, sewed pieces backward, stabbed our fingers with pins until they bled. The kids ate cookies and pickles and M & Ms and Popsicles unheeded for the last two days before we were done. We tried the dresses on in Suzanne's bedroom, pulling the shades in the middle of the day and standing on her bed unsteadily, laughing and holding on to each other, to see if they looked good in the back. The ties tied, we exclaimed to each other. They were real *dresses*, wearable, that we could go out in and no one would be able to tell that we had bled on them. But never again, I said, and Suzanne agreed — never again would I sew another thing except for putting on a button or turning up a hem.

And then we joined a book club. Once a month the members met to discuss a book that had been agreed on beforehand. Suzanne and I were conscious that we had not used our minds much for a while. We went to the library and got out the book, a very long novel by a famous South American writer, and read it in tandem, borrowing it back and forth. What do you think it means, I would ask Suzanne between loads of laundry, when that old guy comes back and looks just the same but he should have been dead for a hundred years? How about that blood? she asked me when we were giving the kids peanut-butter sandwiches for lunch, letting them spread their own so they would learn to be independent even though it took so long

and was so hard to clean up. What did you think when that blood dripped and flowed like a stream down the street to the house of the murdered man's mother? We didn't know. We went to the meeting, held at a member's house, and sat waiting for enlightenment, but no one asked the questions we were interested in, and we were afraid to ask them. The other members were teachers, mostly, and they argued with one another and harangued and pounded the arms of their *chairs* and were .so terrifying to Suzanne and me that we could hardly eat the pasta salad and brownies afterward. Did we have suggestions for the next book? one of the teachers asked us nicely when we sat balancing our plates and glasses. We said no.

It was summer again now: longer nights, warm sweet air. It seemed like a long time since we had had any fun. In the mornings we sat drinking countless cups of coffee while the kids drove up the driveway and down the driveway on their Big Wheels. We sat on Suzanne's back steps watching the kids play with dirt and water under the apple trees. We lay on a blanket in my backyard while Suzanne's husband mowed the lawn. And we moaned, and we moped. Why didn't we see any fun people anymore? Why didn't we ever get to go anywhere? Why didn't anyone we knew have a party? Why didn't we? It would be an outdoor party, we planned, with lights in the trees and a speaker hooked up outside. While the kids threw sand at each other we made a guest list, a food list, a decorations list, a music list. Twenty times we decided what to wear, and twenty times we changed our minds. On the night of the party, we carted the kids off to Grandma's, harried our husbands to do the electrical and musical preparations. We combed the silken lengths of each other's hair, applied layers of scarlet and heather and ivory bisque to the smooth skin of our faces. 'You look wonderful," we said to each other.

Virginia came early with a goose-liver pâté and her husband. How is work? we said. She told us about the feud between her supervisor and the most senior operator, about the new system being installed that would require them to learn a new form of data entry, about the new coffee machine that she and her coworkers had chipped in to

buy. She said that she was thinking of getting her own car and had found three new places to eat lunch and wanted to update her wardrobe to a more office look. What's new? she asked us. We looked at each other, and then away. Our kids had new teeth, new scrapes and bruises, new words learned from illicit television and unapproved friends. Suzanne had new eye shadow. I had just gotten a new bra and had found a more efficient way to pack the freezer. Nothing much, we said.

And then we set out to have fun. Fun was drinking new combinations of liquor and mix, drinking out of other people's glasses, perching on the arms of chairs and saying outrageous things, letting someone light our cigarette and looking into his eyes with the flame between us, talking about things that our mothers would have been shocked to hear said aloud, playing the music as loud as possible but not so loud that the neighbors would call the police. It was fun to sing along with the music from where we lay in the grass under the rocking, bobbing lanterns that hung in the apple trees, arid to race back and forth between our two houses for more drinks, more cookies, more celery stuffed with peanut butter. We were glad to go to the store for more ginger ale, recruiting someone to go with us who was not our husband, walking down the street in the welcome dark and into the dead daylight of the streetlights. We thought it might make us finally and forever happy to kiss someone in the kitchen, leaning against the sink, one hand on the cool smooth curve of the enamel and the other touching the weave of a shirt that we had never washed or ironed or sewed a button on. The morning after the party, though, was just the same, filled with cornflakes and daytime television, and there were the dirty glasses and erupting ashtrays as well.

We took a class in calligraphy. We made a list of places to take the kids and we took them there: fast-food lunches, swimming, the park with the jungle gym or the park with the hiking trails, for walks, to story hour. We took up badminton and played for weeks with anyone who showed up on a court marked on my lawn with white spray paint, waiting our turn lounging on the old car that my husband

thought he might get around to fixing someday, our backs against the front window, legs stretched out on the metal of the hood, heads thrown back to the sky. We played on into the dark, until we could see nothing except the small white blur of the shuttlecock arcing across the yard, and then not even that, so that we struck out at it on faith.

It was fall. And then maybe, we thought, if we go out together? . . . Just the girls, since our husbands didn't want to go anyway. We could go to movies, to plays, to dinner. We went out with an old friend of mine, still unmarried, whom we envied and felt superior to. It was more fun to go out with Janine because she was single and we were not and we could do anything because we were not involved in the game the way she was. You guys, she would say, I can't believe you guys. Will you cut it out? she would say. We went to dinner and ate unfamiliar foods, spicy and fragrant. We went to plays and strained forward in our *seats* the better to enter another world. We went to a Tupperware party when we were high as kites. We went to bars where we met podiatry students who claimed to be amazed when we said how old we were and some of whom got sentimental and clingy when it was time to leave. But when we went out, no matter how immensely silly we became, or how high we got, no matter how many places we went and how late we stayed out, drinking cup after cup of coffee at an all-night restaurant while we talked and talked about our lives and how they disappointed and how they might gladden us, when we went back it was still the same.

And then I got the flu, a long, lingering flu. I was sick as a dog — so sick that my husband had to do for the kids, get their dinners and take them in and out of the bathtub and read them the same book over and over again. And Suzanne was invited to join her cousin's bowling team while I was sick. Twice a week I watched her from my front window, where I was lying on the couch using up Kleenex as she got picked up by a carful of women wearing satin team jackets. And when I was well she came over and told me she'd stayed after

one night and made out with the bartender. I thought I'd never get over it.

So what happened? Nothing really. Everything went on a little while longer, until we got to the end of this period in our lives, until we stopped looking for something that we didn't have or know. But we didn't stop because of despair, or because we were tired of looking, but because it was time. Suzanne got a job at an office. I started college. We started meeting Virginia downtown for lunch. We threw our jeans and T-shirts to the back of the closet and bought new clothes: suits and blouses for Suzanne, slacks and sweaters and a denim jacket for me. There was new stuff on our minds: day care, time-saving appliances, comfortable yet attractively businesslike shoes, notebooks for shorthand and for notes on Dutch medieval art. And we were still married. We had never been able to forget completely about being married, so our husbands were still there. They still came home and called up their friends to work on their cars and didn't want to go anyplace, but it didn't matter so much anymore. We smiled at them over breakfast and bragged about them at lunch and at night; we thought about sex again, and did something about it. Janine got married and we all went to the wedding and we cried, every one of us — even Virginia, who had just met her.

Now we're too busy to think or to remember the time when Suzanne and I sat in one of our kitchens with the kids milling around while we talked on, oblivious, or cooked together, or sat under the apple trees, of how we were pulled together like magnets every morning after our husbands went to work; how we spent the whole day together; how our kids had lunch together, took naps and went to the bathroom together.

Which is OK. But do we miss it, what we had together when there was no one else in the world but mothers and children? And do we miss it, the soft solid feel of our children's bodies under our hands, the sweet smell of their breath, their voices in our ears singing the alphabet and the names of trees, puddings, television characters; the look of their bodies asleep, arms and legs flung out like a star or

wound in a tight breathing ball; their questions asking why and what and how the world is made and ordered and laid out before us? No. Not every day.

