

# We're The Atwoods

*by* Whit Sheppard

I remember a time when Calvin, my husband, was like Winnie the Pooh and I was a jar of fine Provençal honey. No amount of my sweetness could satisfy his craving for me. He would spread me on his toast with butter at breakfast and mix me with peanut butter and crackers for lunch. Sometimes he would drizzle me into the peppermint tea he would drink after dinner, swirling me around slowly as he drank from his mug. This was before his career, our children and my stretch-marks. That was a long time ago.

Now, we only infrequently stroll down the path of our shared erogenous memories on Saturday nights after dinner and too many drinks with friends, fumbling around like two teenagers in a darkened movie theater, watching a film we've both seen too many times to count.

Our friends are couples just like us with whom we share trains, carpools and a common vocabulary heavy on expressions like "Mm-hmm," "Really?!" and "You're kidding!"

I've been working my way through a book recommended by a guy who struck up a conversation with me last week in the vitamin section of Fresh Fields. My five-year-old, Sophie, and I were looking for some awful-tasting green-powdered mix called The Ultimate Meal for Calvin. He's trying to get in shape before he puts on his annual holiday dozen pounds and sends us back here to procure more of this stuff.

Anyway, this man sort of looked like the groom in My Big Fat Greek Wedding, you know, the one who used to be on that TV show set in Alaska, just not as good-looking. He asked if I happened to know where he might find some teriyaki rice crackers.

"I'm sorry, I don't," I said.

*Do I look like I'd know where they'd stock something like that?* I wasn't exactly looking to make a new friend at the grocery store. What he was doing looking for rice crackers in the vitamin section is anyone's guess.

But before we went our separate ways, without prompting, he off-handedly recommended a book called *Revolutionary Road*. I thought that was kind of weird. I'd seen the movie but had never heard of the book. The movie was a real downer.

Sophie and I headed down the aisle towards the supplements.

"Mom, what did that man want?" she asked.

"Nothing honey, just some kind of funny crackers."

"Mom?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Didn't you say it wasn't a good idea to talk to strangers in grocery stores and airports?"

"Yes pumpkin, normally it's not. But there are exceptions to every rule and this was one of those times."

We resumed our search for the green stuff Calvin loves so much.

Granted, I'm not exactly known for my open-mindedness, but I do reserve a certain latitude for reading recommendations, no matter how flaky the source. I majored in English as an undergraduate, and I've belonged to the same book club for years, ever since we moved out from the city.

A couple of days later, I went down to The Book Nook, and next to something by that Weird Al Yankovic creep, were a couple of books by Richard Yates, including *Revolutionary Road*. As I'm wont to do, I flipped to the inside of the back cover and checked out the author photo.

I like to know who I'm dealing with when I read a new book. An old boyfriend at Colby once told me that a person's face tells you everything you need to know about them. Pretty simplistic, I agree, but it's true more often than not, it seems. Sometimes I wonder what story my face tells, but no one's ever told me.

The author's lined, creased visage told the story of a man who took things seriously, who weighed things more than he thought about them. He had dark circles under heavy-lidded eyes and he looked as though he drank. These are impressions I could infer with some measure of confidence. I've always found it easier to read other people's faces.

I manage to read in stolen moments, like when the kids are watching videos in the playroom or when Calvin's snoring keeps me awake. A good work of fiction and the occasional elbow in the ribs are wonderful antidotes to his nocturnal snorts. I don't go for the nonfiction stuff piled up on Calvin's bedside table. I get enough reality throughout the day, thank you.

My husband gets up before dawn to catch the 6:22 into the city and often gets home just in time to pour himself a drink and read bedtime stories to the kids. Weekends are a different matter—he sort of moons over me and manages to always be in my way. It drives me kind of nuts, truth be told. I'm always glad when Monday comes and I get my house back.

Our life is predictable, as it pretty much needs to be with two young kids, a Latvian housekeeper and a big mortgage. I play doubles in a tennis league with some friends; I sneak out for quick runs to safeguard my sanity; I belong to a monthly wine-tasting group, and I give everything else I have to my children.

My generation may have seen the rise of the corporate woman but that doesn't mean that being a great mom has gone out of style. The exceptional events in my life, it seems, occur in venues like the grocery store, Starbucks and Filene's Basement. I take them where I can get them.

I read recently in a women's magazine at the hairdresser's that I ought to be careful not to project my fears and needs onto the slender backs of my children. I know I should strive to be a self-affirming, empowered woman. I'm getting there, but Rome wasn't built in a day.

Besides, I don't need all that much, really. I need to know what I'm doing a week from Friday; I need my house to be clean, well, actually sort of super-clean; I need to know whether we're spending next Christmas with Calvin's parents or mine; and I need to have all the presents wrapped and under the tree before we make our semi-annual pilgrimage to church on Christmas Eve.

Calvin stays up half the night constructing teepees, train sets and miniature kitchens, but I opted out of that marriage-wrecker a few years ago. We all have our limits.

I suppose I also need to be thanked once in a while for all the things I do to make life run more smoothly for Calvin and the kids. I'm trying to get the hang of this giving-without-expectations thing. Doctor Phil says it's the key to healthy relationships. He may have a point there, even if he comes off as a bit too earnest for my taste.

I have this college friend, Sim, a photographer, who lives in London when she's not travelling for work. She sends us postcards from the most incredible places. She just sent us one from the Balkans.

"Kosovo's wonderful!" she wrote. "It's the Buenos Aires of Central Europe. That is, after the currency devaluation and the rioting. Kisses, Sim."

I got a kick out of that. But I wouldn't trade what I have with her or any of my friends. It's my life and it's what I've always wanted: my house, my husband and my beautiful children. I leave the deeper introspection to my sister Gwen, who lives out in Sedona. She's forever contemplating things and doesn't seem all that happy with her findings. I love Gwen dearly but I could never be her, not in a million years.

Last night Calvin came home late from a business dinner smelling of charred meat and cheap cigars. He let out a series of deep sighs as soon as he came in the door, the sort he often lets out before we go visit his parents in the Berkshires.

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked him.

"Nothing really," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Just a long day on the desk."

"Anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Nah, not really. Just a long day on the desk."

Normally, when he gets home late, he mixes himself a drink and heads upstairs to kiss our sleeping children. But on this night, my neck was sore after 20 minutes of nodding and saying "Mm-hmm" about sixty-two times.

I didn't get all of what he said, but I think I caught the highlights. Things had gotten more political at work and he wasn't happy about that. It seems that the more bonds he sells, the larger his bonus gets, and the more complicated our life becomes.

"That SOB McCreavey ... man, is he an operator," he said, talking about a colleague of his from Long Island who, by virtue of his six handicap and Everyman qualities, was rapidly climbing the firm's executive ranks. Calvin's normally really confident, but something about guys like McCreavey brings out his insecurities, definitely not his most attractive quality.

"My lack of political savvy's going to be my undoing," he said. "I'm caught up in a goddamned rat race and I'm sick and tired of pretending that I like it. I don't, to be perfectly honest."

Most important, though, from my perspective was what he said next.

"Honey, I've got some bad news. Word is that bonuses are gonna be way down across the board. Apparently, we've gotten our privates in a vice arbitraging the dollar against the Euro."

"Is that right?" I said, as nonchalantly as I could manage.

"Yup. It's not looking good this year. Not good at all."

We'd just put a deposit down on a rental on the Vineyard for the last two weeks in August and the architect had just sent over revised drawings and a detailed estimate for the addition to the kitchen and family room.

While I considered a mind-boggling array of logistics and a scaled-down redesign, Calvin busied himself without much success trying to liberate a lone cocktail onion out of its cylindrical glass prison.

"Can I help you with that, hon?" I asked.

"No thanks. I just need a little more... there, got it," he said.

"So what's the payout going to look like this year?"

"Anywhere from 40-70% of last year's," he said, popping the onion into his mouth and then licking his fingers, which annoys me to no end.

"Is that net or gross?" I took a finance class at Colby and know just enough to be dangerous.

"Gross, honey."

I quickly did the math. The calculations held some magnitude for me. Forty percent of \$800,000, got it, that's easy enough but seventy percent, let's see ... okay.

"There's something else," he said.

"What's that?"

"Seventy-five percent of whatever we get will be in the form of long-term stock, with a three-year minimum holding period."

*Dammit, now I'll have to do the math all over again.* I hate surprises.

We were looking at about \$80,000 in cash, pre-tax, and the rest in stock in the most pessimistic scenario. In the rosier case I could conjure, we'd see about \$140,000 in cash and \$420,000 in stock. There are worse fates, I'm sure.

I just couldn't think of any on short notice.

It was looking like the great summer add-on would have to be eighty-sixed. The kids' tuitions weren't shrinking and neither was the region of my frontal lobe where worry feeds like candida on a jelly donut. I could feel the anxiety growing a cell at a time and headed upstairs for a couple of Advil.

"Don't worry, honey," Calvin said to my back. "We'll figure out something. We always do."

He's such an optimist. I love that about him. He really does understand me better than I give him credit for.

I looked in on Sophie on my way to the medicine cabinet. She was sleeping peacefully, her thumb curled up in her mouth. The days of children being seen and not heard have gone the way of Bosco, Slip-'N-Slides and the wooden spoon.

There are times when I envy my children this power we haven't taken from them, the power they have to feel and express what's real. When they see a pink elephant, they say so. We've had to unlearn things as much as anything else. It's not that easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is, right?

The other day, Sophie said to me, "Mom, why do we always have to go over to the Fentons? Do we have to?"

She knows her vote counts for something in our little democracy.

"Sweetie, you know that Daddy and Mr. Fenton work together and are great friends."

"I know, Mom, but I still hate going over there. I really don't like that dog."



That would be Flash, their golden retriever pup, who tries to hump her leg at every opportunity. The Fentons think it's funny. I find it mortifying. *Get a trainer, you know?*

"I'll talk to Daddy and we'll see if we can't get the Fentons to come over here once in a while instead. How would that be, bug?"

"Without Rocket?"

"Yes honey, without Rocket."

I took the Advil and got ready for bed, which used to be a more complicated ritual involving a small measure of seduction. These days, it's simply a matter of flossing, brushing, spitting and rinsing. I don't feel the need to doll myself up for Calvin—not after 14 years of marriage, three housekeepers and two kids (Oh, I forgot to mention our oldest, Jonah, who's nine. He's off at sleep-away camp in Maine).

We used to chew each other's lips red for just a few minutes before he would betray the clear, slick stain of his desire for me. I had a man whom other women wanted, but he was mine. And he still is—it's just different now.

We share a passion and a vague guilt for our children and the nostalgia of our life together. We're the Atwoods. I gather the photos in big albums arranged by year. I flip through the pages on chilly winter evenings when Calvin's still in the city and the kids are down. The memories are potent enough to keep me here. Sometimes though, I wonder.

I could smell pine-wood burning at the Caswells' next door. I slowly took off my clothes, put them in the hamper, and took down the powder-blue nightgown that hangs on the back of the bathroom door. I pulled it over my head and felt its familiar smoothness slide

down the contours of my body. I flossed and brushed, more up and down than across, just like the hygienist at Dr. Murdock's had instructed me to do. I headed for the warm embrace of my duvet.

A short while later, as I began to drift off, I felt the gentle touch of my husband's hand on my cheek, and a faraway voice whispered, "Goodnight, honey... I love you."

