

THINGS YOU DO WITH YOUR FEET

BEN FOUNTAIN

She was working on her radio persona, trying to hone a nervy, smart-mouthed style that could handle even the most obnoxious DJs. It was like taking her former self out for a walk, the pre-marriage, pre-mom Mimi Sadler who could stride into meetings and inflict tough love on clients and adversaries alike. She used to fix things—blown-up deals, mostly. Real estate, mostly. Dealing with jerks had been her specialty for six years, and now she summoned whatever wits were left to her to deflect a little of the on-air guff.

“And whatcha do for a living, Mimi?”

“I’m a mom.”

“A mom! Mimi the mom! So tell me Mimi, do you drive a minivan?”

“Yes, with flames on the sides.”

It seemed that the language had succumbed to valley-speak, the nasalized, dosed-sounding California style that implied life was nothing but a dream. And cursing, apparently, was now okay with the FCC. “Damn,” “hell,” “butt,” “bitch,” and “ass” were encountered regularly, “suck” got tossed around like a verbal tic, and sex came up more often than the weather.

“So Mimi, how long you and your old man been married?”

“Ten years. Almost eleven.”

“*Ten years*, wow, whoa. So you guys ever *do* it anymore?”

“Hmmm. I’d say sex might be the only thing we still have in common.”

If they wanted to push the line she’d go right out there with them. That’s how it was these days: there was a rant knocking around inside her that sometimes erupted in her spoken life. Emotion had done this, bumbling, brainless, helpless emotion, like a squirrel skidding across a steep metal roof or an elephant bursting past the joists and beams, crashing through the floors of domestic life below. The bruise was faded now, no more than a spoon-sized shadow on the inside of her thigh; Richard had become self-conscious about it and

didn't sling his hips around the way he used to. At an age when most men start to resemble sacks of mulch he'd maintained the profile of a famished teenager, a look that owed more to a nervous metabolism than any organized system of exercise. He was compulsive, obsessive, insomniac, all career-enhancing qualities for a corporate lawyer that also happened to burn off calories like a jet flare. At first Mimi thought the bruise was a battle scar, a wound she'd incurred while wrestling with the girls, but after a month of watching it bloom and fade she realized this was Richard's mark, his hipbone socking her thigh when they made love. It had less to do with technique than creeping middle age; they were changing, their bodies throwing jabby points and angles, but the bruise made her feel both worldly and blessed—she had her marriage and family to show for the years, and the bruise might also serve as a guide, a kind of marital heat index to keep an eye on.

218

Were they doing it enough? With fine reckless passion and pounding abandon? The soreness on her thigh could be as satisfying as that extra breath of weight on her ring finger, though when the firm threw a pool party on Memorial Day she felt embarrassed about the bruise. Well, screw it: if some pervert wanted to stare that high and deep she'd just have to let him. She sat at the shallow end with all the other moms while their toddlers plashed and gurgled within lunging range, the older children jetting around like squid. Richard sat nearby with the other young partners, their pale, stringy bellies gleaming with sweat as they drank beer and talked firm politics. Mimi was drinking as well, reaching to catch Megan in mid-lurch when it caught her eye, the truth standing to the side of her husband's chair. As if by reflex, obeying some deep behavioral groove, she grasped Megan and pulled her upright, was even murmuring "careful Megy" as she turned back to Richard. Like your brain shorted out, like a stroke, she thought later: you might be standing in the kitchen cutting vegetables and abruptly your hand wouldn't work anymore, and after a second you'd realize something awful had happened. *Her* bruise, its identical twin,

was nestled deep inside the slant of Lindsey Resnick's thigh, winking in and out like a form of semaphore as Lindsey—tall and taut in her show-off bikini, corporate's famously driven killer associate—touched Richard's shoulder and laughed at something he said.

And *darker*, that was what clinched it, as purplish-black as a squashed grape. They might as well have handed her a movie of themselves in bed.

"If you put butter on a cat's feet," Cassie said one day, "and the cat runs away? It'll always come back."

"Come on," Mimi said.

"It's true!" Cassie insisted, Megan nodding in support. "Angela Tribble's got a cat and she did that, she said her grandma told her to as soon as she got it. And the cat ran away but it came back."

"Well, maybe," Mimi allowed. "If we ever get a cat we'll try it."

"Yay!" the girls squealed like buckling sheet metal, "yay, yay, we're going to get a cat!"

While doing her Buddhist stretching exercises in the morning Mimi tried to put it all in perspective. Nobody had died, nobody was terminally ill, they hadn't been herded into camps by ethnic cleansers. In numerous fundamental ways they were still intact, but there was a massiveness to the thing that would not be denied. Her body reacted as if bearing a literal weight; she could feel it in the morning as she hummed and stretched, her muscles seething with subsurface groans and creaks like a field of calving ice.

"Since *September*? You've been doing this almost a *year*?"

"Well, since August." Richard was compulsively truthful now; having tasted the fruits of confession he wanted more. "That was the first time. It scared us and we backed off. Then it started up again in September."

"Why? Why did you do this?"

He shrugged, looked at his hands.

"Was it something I did? Was it me?"

“No,” he said miserably, his voice cracking. “I don’t know, maybe I was just bored. She was there and it just happened.”

“Okay.” Mimi gathered up various loose ends of herself. “So how serious is this?”

He gave a sigh like the end of the world. “I don’t know. Not very. Maybe intense is a better word.”

She resolved that to the extent possible they would carry on the habits of normal life. Sleeping together, eating together, going out on weekends—as she’d done since the age of fourteen she hid her fear within a juggernaut of competence, and after a couple of weeks they were also making love. But she wasn’t prepared for the energy that routine life now required. A primordial fatigue had invaded her bones; what she really wanted was to wallow in her grief, and there were rare private moments—Richard at work, the girls playing by themselves—when she’d sink into sadness as she might a luxurious mud bath.

“Can you stop seeing her?” she asked him. “Do you even want to stop?”

“I do, believe me, I want it to stop.” But the pain in his voice terrified her.

“Do you really?”

“I do,” he said, avoiding her eye. “It’s been driving me nuts anyway.”

So. They had several good cries together there on the couch, evenings after the girls were in bed. Mimi found that her calm, non-homicidal approach had the effect of gradually awing him; by ten p.m. he was often so slack with gratitude that he’d doze off with his head on her lap while she stroked his hair and stared into space. This was Mimi doing damage control, talking it out, acknowledging his normal human weakness and the role her own failings had played in this, nights when he’d come home to a snappish bitch for no better reason—not good enough!—than she felt tired and frazzled and hemmed in by this choice she’d willingly made, to stay home and raise their

daughters. But there was no denying the truth of her own secret life, the nights passed in such bitter sleeplessness that in the mornings, making the bed, she'd half-look for blood on the sheets, or the days when her head got the centrifuge going—*Goddamn you! How could you?*—looping around and around with the endless dirty movies, whatever Richard and Lindsey might be doing this minute.

Sometimes she wanted to scream, but she sang instead. When her daughters rebelled against the nonstop singing she turned on the radio and got herself hooked on six or seven hours a day of mass market rock, a handy and conveniently legal means of shutting up the raving in her head, and in this way her luck soon revealed itself, fate offering up trinkets like a heartless practical joke. "Be our ninth caller," a DJ advised; Mimi was stuck in traffic with her two suffering girls, and for something to do she dialed the station and *bingo* she was on the air, the stunned, slightly bemused winner of two tickets to see Mike Vom-it at the Beast Bowl.

221

They gave the tickets to a girl in Richard's office, a nineteen-year-old gum popper in word processing with green hair and twenty-six body piercings. Mimi began to roam the airwaves with a mission. If an offer went out and the phone was near she dialed and hit redial and kept on hitting, bucking the odds and yet always secretly surprised when she didn't win. Because she won with prophetic frequency: a NASCAR jacket, various sums of petty cash, a free oil change at Kwicky Lube, tickets to see *Screamarama* and *The Holesomes*. The shower of prizes made Richard nervous, as if her fiendish streak of luck had something to do with him.

"I can't explain it!" she cried, laughing, feeling the pressure in her chest like a giant soap bubble. She had to milk the laughter in measured puffs, or it would blow out all at once, hysterically. Better than prizes for venting the internal stress were the songs themselves, the big billowy smelts of orgasmic chords and evanescent mattings of fuzzbox vocals that could set her ribs jangling like a rack of coat hangers, though she felt ashamed to need the music so much. Most of the

Ben Fountain

songs were plain moronic—even Goth seemed as feckless as Rust Belt polka—and yet they’d locked onto the fundamental question: *What is love?* What is love indeed, if not this spongy, mushy koosh ball of exploding pheromones that could be so sublimely, so winsomely rendered in tapestries of skronked power chords? That was the real prize, a working definition of love—finally figuring out where you were going with this. Did you want to be married, could you hack it. Would it be any better with anybody else. In the meantime she won a titanium pool cue, a custom snowboard, and a blind date survival kit with Kama Sutra lotion and condoms. For knowing Warren G. Harding’s middle name she won KVNМ’s Smart-Ass Quiz, which got her tickets and a limo to see Lick.

“So you’re doing the mom thing.” This was Kid Lebo, the K-venom DJ whose sly, ripply voice always made her think of lizards.

“That’s right.”

“Wiping noses and butts and all that good stuff.”

“Otherwise known as the facts of life.”

“Cool,” he said softly. “You ever find dustballs as big as your head?”

“In case you didn’t know, Kid, dustballs are what hold the world together.”

She had options. She still had her law license. She could kick Richard out and find a real-world job for herself, and while Mom and Dad went their separate ways Cassie and Megan would be packed off to day storage. The girls were Mimi’s emotional ballast, but they also made her vulnerable; to be a single working mom had always struck her as a particularly vicious form of middle-class hell. So why destroy their lives over a little sleazy sex? Sure, why couldn’t she be more *French* about this? That people lied and had affairs was about as startling as the rumble of the trash compactor, and she’d been cool enough about calling Lindsey down, stashing the girls outside in the sandbox and watching them from the kitchen as she dialed Lindsey’s office, praying they’d stay put for the next five minutes.

“Lindsey, this is Mimi Sadler,” she announced. “You and I are going to have a conversation. Are you alone?”

“Yiis,” Lindsey peeped, very much the timid mouse.

“Good,” Mimi said briskly, and stifling the urge to damn her straight to the smoking pits of hell she proceeded with the ritual confrontation: I know everything, Richard says he’s ending the affair, he and I are going to try to fix our marriage and I expect you to honor that, etc., etc., all delivered in an archly formal voice that made Mimi feel like a frigid twit. But ten minutes later Richard was on the phone, almost giddy with—surrender? excitement? It must be nice having women fighting over you.

“You handled that really well,” he said.

She made a flubbing sound with her lips, a telephonic shrug. No matter that Lindsey had been reduced to a puddle of spit, the situation was degrading for everyone.

“So she told you.”

“Yeah, she was just in here.”

Great. “I just hope she got the message, Richard.”

“She did. Believe me, she understands. Honey you’ve been so strong through all this, I am so, so sorry about everything.”

Well, thank you, every family needs a martyr; now can we please work on the marriage? If things were good at home then Lindsey Resnick would flake away like a dried scab—that was the mantra Mimi consulted for daily inspiration. She and Richard hugged a lot, they made solemn, grateful love, they cut off the TV at night and had quiet sofa talks. Yet she found herself blocked, unwilling to trust the happiness that came her way. How could she smile each morning as he left for work without breaking all the bones in her face? It wasn’t so much the sexual threat that made her crazy—she did, to her amazement, trust him on that, although he’d proved himself such a skillful liar that she had no choice—as the fact that he and Lindsey were together all day, engaged in a constant niggling traffic of looks, gestures, carefully shaded tones of voice, the whole simmering voodoo language of signals and cues.

Doing her stretches in the morning she imagined herself balancing on a bike that had come to a stop. *Ommmm* it was all a matter of focus and discipline, and failing that she could always crawl into the radio. Then the weekend before Richard's birthday she was in the wine store shopping for his present; emerging from Bordeaux she almost ran over Lindsey, who was laughing with the slacker sales clerk as he riffed on the merits of California champagne. As Mimi came around the corner Lindsey was rocking back, her thick auburn hair massed about her shoulders like a mansion hovering just off the ground. *Dammit*, Mimi thought, dodging to the side, damn damn *damn* of all the shitty bad luck, and why did she have to look so sluttily sumptuous—short-shorts, long legs like creamsicles, a cropped tee floating over pillowy breasts. For a moment Mimi was completely undone, juking sideways, mind cauterized with fear and rage, and then she realized that Lindsey hadn't seen her. She careened down the aisle with her head down, and by the time she got to the checkout counter her relief had given way to a silent collapse, a stoic, inwardly-directed meltdown that the cashier took for mere spaciness.

How to maintain, that's what she wanted to know. How to keep from going crazy when even the random happy moments felt like guilt, like you were allowing yourself a trust in life you hadn't earned.

"I just realized what I'm scared of most," she said that afternoon. They were standing in the kitchen, hugging; she'd just told him about seeing Lindsey, which she hadn't meant to do, but she was acting so flayed and skittish that he'd finally asked.

"Honey," he said uneasily, lips mashed against her hair, "I'm not with her anymore."

Mimi pulled back and looked at him. "Not that," she said, shaking her head. "I know how to deal with that. It's the chance you might be lying that I can't stand."

His arrival home from work became the hardest part of the day. Amid hellos and kisses and screeching kids Mimi couldn't help

watching his face for clues, her body clenching, bracing for the daily threat that she was about to be proved the world's biggest fool. She began listening to heavy metal as she cooked dinner, cranking up the volume to air out the angst. Now bursts of sonic shrapnel met Richard at the door, the girls running amuck on the sectional while Mimi sipped wine or maybe a big fat drink amid the columns of smoke and steam in the kitchen. Afternoons with the girls were mellow. They'd get home from the pool or running errands and Mimi would fix their snacks while KZNE pambled in the background, the "alt rock" station. Alternative to what? she sometimes wondered. Apparently this was something you were supposed to know, but she liked the jammy chords that went down like candy, and the DJ, his hip but friendly attitude, the old-shoe quality in his adenoidal drone. One day she was cutting up fruit for snacks when the Three O'Clock Threesome came on, songs by Dreamtree, Gravity Kills, and the Methadone Mothers playing one after the other. Easy, she thought, and reached for the phone; a couple of seconds later her heart was doing that little zoomy thing it always did when her call went through.

225

"All right, this is Jared on the Zone, who'm I talking to?"

"Mimi!"

"All right *Mimi*. You been checking out the Threesome?"

"Sure have."

"Got any idea what it's about?"

"I think so."

"Okay Mimi, now's the time to show me whatcha got. Ahem." His voice drooped to a meandering Dean Martin burble, though lighter on the smarmy lecherousness. "Now Mimi, can you tell me what *these ... three ... songs ...* all have in common?"

"Well, there was walking, then running, then jumping. So I'd say it's things you do with your feet."

"Yes!"

She couldn't help giggling. Winning prizes was fun!

Ben Fountain

“Uh-huh, yeah, we got a winner on the Threesome. How ya feel about that, Mimi?”

“Feels great!”

“Well you oughta, cause what we got for you is a *fab*-ulous twisty-twirly CD holder thing from the good people at Soundhaus, holds a hundred of your favorite CDs plus it looks like a great piece of modern art. Plus, *plus*, you’re automatically entered into our \$20,000 Get-A-Life Sweepstakes, drawing to be held this September. Cool, hunh.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“So keep your punky thang on the line, Mimi, and we’ll get you fixed up.”

He put her on hold. Cassie and Megan rambled into the kitchen with an effect like an overturned pail of marbles. Mimi snapped her fingers and got them settled at the table just as Jared clicked back in.

“All right Mimi—we’re off the air, okay?—give me your personal stuff and we’ll get you signed up for the sweeps.” He took her name, address, and phone numbers with a series of cheerful grunts, a man happy in his work. Behind her Cassie and Megan were chattering over snacks, pretending to be bunnies who worked in an orphanage.

“Okay, now about this CD rack.” He paused in such an expressive way that the words popped from her mouth.

“You’ve got it there!”

“Yeah, even as we speak. I’m gonna warn you it’s kind of a funky-looking deal, like a mutant elephant tusk or something. Yo Meems, you being held hostage by the munchkins over there?”

“Those are my girls,” she told him.

“Oh, you’re a mom.”

“That’s right.”

“You home full time?”

“Yes.”

“That’s cool. Keep the kids from growing up to be serial killers and all.”

“That’s one of my goals, yes.”

“Don’t you just *hate* laundry?” he cried out of the blue. “The way it *just, never, stops?* Like I’ll do my laundry on Saturday, and two days later it’s spilling all over creation again.”

“I finally decided there’s an extra person at my house. That’s the only way I can figure how it piles up so fast.”

“There you go,” he laughed, “I think I’ve got one of those at my place. Probably doesn’t help that my cat sleeps in my underwear drawer.”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind, kind of a long story.” He didn’t seem in any hurry, though; she heard him lean back in his chair, take a leisurely slurp of something. “So you’re a mom, hunh. You sound way too young.”

That got her attention, though she answered smoothly enough. “Wrong, Jared. I’m old enough to remember actual hippies.”

He was laughing again. “You a hippie yourself?”

“Nah, I was a biker chick. Just kidding,” she added.

“Unh-unh, I wasn’t buying that for a second. You sound way too gentle.”

“Well, thank you,” she managed to say, undone by the tears that suddenly burned through her eyes. Lately it was the small mercies and passing acts of kindness that got to her more than anything.

“It’s true, you have this really calming voice.” His own voice kept wambling in and out, flopping around itself like loose shoelaces. “So you’re on Blackburn—what part of town is that?”

“Lakeside,” she answered, which was a nice part of town, one of the nicest. That she might be rich got a snuffling laugh from Jared, and she realized that she liked it, the way the information made her more attractive, more tempting. He didn’t have to know the Sadlers had a giant mortgage.

“That’s not so far from here, we’re on the Beltline.” His voice was slower now, almost sleepy; Mimi registered a quiet shift of intent. “Listen, about this CD rack. We could have it delivered out to your

house, or if you want you could come over and pick it up. I could give you the tour as long as you're here, show you around, introduce you to everybody. If there's time maybe we could grab some lunch before they lock me up in here."

Good lord; was he hitting on her? "How nice," she said as casually as she could. "You do this for all the winners, Jared?"

"Unh-unh, no way indeed. This is the extra special prize."

"Just for me, hunh."

"Just for you, Meems. Whaddeya say, come on over and we'll have some laughs, you can watch me make a Taco Twist commercial. And then we'll go grab a bite, I can charge it to the station. I promise not to stalk you or anything after."

She had to laugh; he sounded good, there was no denying that. For a moment she was actually tempted, which she experienced as a feeling of acute fatigue, an intense, almost unbearable wish to let go. Goddamn it, wasn't she entitled? At least enough to make her feel like a chump for saying no.

"Jared, that's very sweet of you, but I don't think so."

"Meems, come on, I'm not that bad. I'm basically decent, you can ask anybody here."

She laughed. "Sorry, dude. But I do appreciate it."

"Shoot, Meems, think about it. Don't you like to meet people? Don't you want a new friend?"

A new *something*, she thought. A *whatever*. She discerned a generous breadth in his offer.

"Thanks anyway, Jared. But no."

"Well, okay. But if you change your mind..."

"Sure," she said lightly. Maybe women were so easy for him that he'd become compulsive, grabbing at everything within reach. "But in the meantime I'll still get my prize, right?"

"Not to worry. Just remember where it came from, your buddy Jared at the Zone."

"Jared," she repeated, suddenly weary of the call—of his cuteness,

of the effort of saying no, of pretty much everything, in fact—“at the Zone. How could I forget.”

Two mornings later it arrived, a sleek, white, curvilinear object spiraling off the floor like a life-sized question mark. The courier also had a box for her. Inside, amid the flotsam of T-shirts, frisbees, stickers, and other assorted ZONE paraphernalia was an envelope with her name scrawled across the front.

“More free stuff,” read the enclosed note, “from your biggest fan. Live it up! Yours, Jared.” He’d also enclosed a strip of black-and-white head shots of himself, the kind obtained at \$2 photo booths. They showed a pale, slender man in his mid-twenties, with cropped black hair and skinny sideburns that trailed past his ears like racing stripes. Attitude, she thought, studying his kitschy swinger’s smirk. All attitude and mouth, plus a decent though somewhat marshmallowy nose. Life hadn’t allowed him to coast on his looks.

229

“What’s this?” Cassie wandered into the hall with her toothbrush. The girls were going to the dentist for checkups this morning.

“It’s a prize!”

“Another one?” Cassie reverently touched the rack. She couldn’t have been more awed had Mimi told her it came from outer space. “What is it?”

“A CD rack. For holding your CDs when you aren’t listening to them.”

“Wooooow.”

“You like it?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“See how lucky we are? Now run get your sister, we have to go.” She glanced over Jared’s photos again, and discovered he’d written something on the back. *See? No gross physical defects.* She laughed—the bastard, so he was coming on. She picked up the CD rack and carried it into the den, where she’d have to look at it the rest of the day as she came and went. She wanted to admire its utter cluelessness, the

Ben Fountain

forlorn outcome of what must have seemed at first like such a new and startling design idea. Then to the car: in ten minutes they were spinning along the freeway, Cassie and Megan chatting in the back-seat while Mimi weaved like a fighter pilot through traffic.

“Momma, what song is that?” The girls had surfaced for a moment from their conversation.

“‘Queen for a Day.’ By the Spasmodics.”

“It’s about a queen?”

“Well, sort of. But not the storybook kind.”

“Then what kind?”

“The confused kind.”

Confused, yes, and maybe just a little bit crazy. Mimi laughed at herself, and suddenly felt drained, washed out, as if she’d been through some sort of ordeal this morning. She supposed that Jared’s note scared her, the possibilities it presented—the possibility that she hadn’t yet made her choice. All along she’d been assuming she was the kind of woman who would stay in her marriage as long as there was hope, but maybe this was merely aspiration, not fact; wishful thinking minus anything resembling thought. Conventional wisdom said forego the easy pleasures and instead work toward building something real, as if reckless passion and ravenous sex weren’t as real as anything that ever was in this world. Mimi only had to look as far as her husband for proof of just how real they were.

Well, thank you Jared, she said to herself as she dodged a shaky semi. His glancing pass had brought certain things into focus: she knew what she wanted, which wasn’t to say she’d made her choice. Leaving for work this morning Richard told her to get a babysitter for tonight. “A surprise,” he said, smiling. “Be ready by eight. And dress up.” Lately he’d been sending her flowers too—if love was extravagance then it looked like he was coming around, though Mimi considered how even that part of it hurt, this business of trying to trust the signs. So maybe that’s love, she told herself, or one form of love, the sum tonnage of your carrying capacity for pain. As if it wasn’t really

love until it hurt in your bones. And how to endure—that was something else you had to figure out as you went along, though there were days when the white noise of mindless things—loud music, fast driving, a good stiff drink—seemed every bit as essential as whatever love was supposed to be.

She was braking now, gently juicing the pedal as traffic in her lane dragged to a stop. She turned up the radio to compensate, then saw a slot in the streaming traffic to her right. She stomped the gas, swung the wheel, and hooked into the crease, a surge that seemed to lift her out of the seat. Louder. She turned up the volume and gathered speed, and for a moment, that one sweet moment at least, she could pretend she was making a clean getaway.