

Upfront

INSIDE

LOVE LETTERS: EMOTIONAL SPAM FROM AN EX P. 9

COOKING: A THAI MEAL THAT TASTES OF SUMMER P. 12

MISS CONDUCT: SAYING NO TO UNPAID WORK P. 14

“THE MORE SHE SMILED THE MORE TEMPTED I WAS TO WANT TO GET TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HER,” DINNER WITH CUPID, P. 15

PERSPECTIVE

Losing My Job, Taking a Breath

BY BROOKE HAUSER

My daughter wasn’t having it. She didn’t want to go to day care.

What she wanted was what any 4-year-old would want on a snowy day: to stay home and watch cartoons. When I nixed that plan and told her Mama had to work—I needed to create a syllabus for a college writing class I would soon be teaching—Sydney clenched her little fists. “I! Said! Nooooooo!” she wailed. “You work for ME!”

I stifled a laugh before telling her no, in fact, I don’t work for her; I am my own boss, and she is her own boss, but we still have to respect other people.

I have been thinking about personal autonomy quite a bit since I lost my job nearly two months ago. I was the editor in chief of my local newspaper, the first woman to be in that role on a permanent basis since the paper was founded in 1786. I loved my job, and I was proud to have it. My kids were proud, too. My 8-year-old son, Marlow, liked to call me Editor Hauser, and Sydney talked about visiting the *nooospaper* where Mama worked. But in late December, my position was eliminated, and soon I was applying for unemployment.



The writer’s 4-year-old daughter, Sydney, with her wish for the new year.

It was a double whammy. While my job loss stemmed from the economics of the journalism industry — and specifically the challenges facing local newspapers during COVID-19 — I also got swept up in a recession that is largely borne by women. Since the start of the pandemic, women have lost more than 5 million net jobs, according to a National Women’s Law Center analysis. As a white woman who lost a white-collar job, I am

not the face of the so-called She-cession that has disproportionately hurt women of color. I’m just another casualty of it in an industry that needs more women in leadership positions, not fewer.

My kids saw my painful experience in real time: my tears, the boxes I’d hastily packed up from the office, and me wearing my pajamas way more than usual during that first week. They also saw me buoyed by support. Reporters called and

texted. My husband and parents listened to me vent. Community members and friends even signed a petition to reinstate me, though I knew it was over.

It wasn’t easy—I felt like I had lost not only my job but my social standing. But there isn’t much time to sulk or stew when you have little kids, and at some level I wanted to model for my children what a strong woman looks like, whether she is a newspaper editor or a stay-at-home mom, which I suddenly found myself to be (with wonderful part-time child care).

I suppose there are countless ways women have tried to power through after losing their jobs last year. For me, it has meant taking a breath to recalibrate, which I recognize as a privilege and one I can afford thanks to part-time work and some financial stability. It also means showing my kids, and myself, that while I love what I do, I am more than my work.

When schools shut down, I was overwhelmed, like so many working parents: I felt that I should have been home when I was at work and that I should have been at work when I was home.

In those first few days of not working, I put in earbuds and took long walks in the woods. I started paying more attention to the world around me and stopped thinking about the office. But then I would see a morning paper still wrapped in plastic on someone’s lawn, and I’d feel a pang.

I miss being in the newsroom: the sound of the police scanner, the rush of breaking news. I miss having deep conversations with reporters about how, amid a pandemic and protests against police brutality, we should be covering certain beats differently than in the past. I miss sitting with the other editors and deciding which front-page stories to feature as the centerpiece or strip across the top — a topic that a local radio host liked to ask me about on a segment we did on

“how the fish wrap gets made.” I miss making the fish wrap.

But it turns out there’s plenty I don’t miss: spotting typos after deadline, dread-ing staff reductions, working on weekends, feeling the pressure to continuously prove myself after 20 years in journalism.

I still read the local paper and keep up with the news, but I no longer have the stress of worrying about a six-day paper seven days a week. Now, I spend that time doing other things: hiking with my dog, drawing with my son, checking job boards, yes, but also thinking about what I really want in life and in work.

And then there are the snow days—the first ones I’ve been able to take in years without worrying about what I’d be missing at the office.

One day, Sydney and I made snow angels in the yard. The snow was so white it looked like milk, she said. I sank back into it and waved my arms up and down, leaving an impression that was nice while it lasted.

Another day, we took a walk down a wooded path in our neighborhood. We were surprised to see that between the trees someone had strung up a wishing wall of sorts, made of twine. “What is your wish for the New Year?” read a sign nearby. Clothespins and paper clips were set out with permanent markers and squares of white cloth to write on. We saw wishes for peace and kindness, more chocolate, and in-person school.

I asked my daughter what she wished for. “You to be with me,” she said.

“That’s my wish, too,” I told her.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY BROOKE HAUSER