

## NO-SWEAR WEEK

*Susan Solomon*

For a week, my husband and I tried to avoid cussing. Out loud, anyway. Thinking about swearing was okay, so long as the thought didn't find its way to the larynx.

"If it moves from electrical impulse in your head to any form of spoken utterance, you lose," said John, adjusting the strap on his work bag.

"So, if I'm thinking, 'Shit!' but only the 'Sh' part comes out, then I still lose?"

"Yep." He nodded and loosened his tie. "Well, as long as your intent to swear was apparent from the context."

When we could, we tried to walk home together from work. A loud cheer arose from the nearby park and we watched as a tee ball player

sprinted to first. John leaned on the fence to get a better view of the next batter.

“That kid’s huge,” he said. “Outfielders better back up.”

John doesn’t really even like sports, but he’s had this thing about baseball lately, enjoying its nostalgic vibe as if he were a kid again, sitting in the bleachers wearing an over-sized jersey and crunching on Cracker Jacks.

He walked to one of the dugouts and started chatting with a coach. I sighed and continued walking, knowing it wouldn’t be a good time to remind him about the local police clearance he still needed to get for our adoption. That’s why we started this no-swear week anyway—to get ready to be parents.

I stopped near the corner of the park, in front of a white bicycle strapped to the fence. The same bicycle that had been there for three years. There were fresh flowers near the rear tire and a stuffed teddy wedged between the spokes. A sign on the basket read, “In Mandy’s Memory,” after a little girl whose folks still live a couple of blocks from us.

Mandy was hit en route to meet her friends in the park. Back then, the park had a large grassless swath spotted with lumps of hard-packed dirt—urban moguls—good for slaloming and skidding out. After school, kids used to flock there, ignoring the park’s entrance sign that read, “NO BIKES.” Witnesses said that at the moment of impact, Mandy was laughing in

excitement at seeing her friend's wheelie. After the incident, the city paved over the swath and installed picnic tables, benches and a new, bigger sign: "ABSOLUTELY NO BIKES."

At home, I considered again bringing up the police clearance, but didn't want to be labeled a nag. It wouldn't go too well with the label I'd prefer: Kim, a loving mother.

Upstairs, the hallway was crammed with John's high school memorabilia. He'd dumped it there a couple of months ago in a fit over my suggestion that maybe we use his office for the baby room.

"I didn't mean to clear it out now," I had said when I saw him furiously emptying the office of its contents.

"You didn't say for me to clear it out now, but that's what you meant."

"No, that's not what I meant," I replied, wondering how I had become a passive-aggressive personality in John's eyes. "Actually, I didn't mean for you to clear it out at all. I was just trying to figure out where the baby room would be and mentioned it. Geesh."

"Fine then," he had said, and walked past me down the stairs. Since that time, the stuff has stayed in the hallway and his office has been in disarray in a way not dissimilar to our lives—a kind of disheveled limbo in want of a framework that only time can give.

I lingered over the pile in the hallway—a green and gold varsity jacket, a few cycling trophies, newspaper clippings, and a little stuffed beagle sitting on the shoulder of the school’s mascot, a grizzly. John came upstairs.

“What’s with the beagle?” I asked him. It stood out on the pile with its still crisply contrasted bright white and dark brown markings, not muted in the way that the coloring on old plush animals usually looks.

He squatted and picked it up. “Cute isn’t he?” He petted its head. “Just got him.”

“Why?” I could hear its fur crackling from the static electricity generated by John’s strokes.

“Dunno. Just saw him in the alumni shop. He and the bear are buddies; he’s kind of a mascot’s mascot, you know?”

“Not really. Bears and beagles don’t normally hang out together.”

“Well, at our school they did,” he said, looking nostalgic and excited in a way I barely recognized in spite of our ten-year marriage. “They’d chase each other around on the football field, pretending to fight, and then break into a dance. It was hilarious.”

“Maybe that’s your problem, you’re suffering from mascot confusion,” I said, giving in to a subconscious urge to jab him. When he didn’t laugh, I smiled and kissed his cheek, trying to sweep away my comment in the

manner I might a smashed cornflake under the breakfast bar—brusquely and strained, as if annoyed by having to bend over.

I used to have a real sense of humor, the kind that was truly funny because it was mostly self-effacing and lacking any subversive subtext. I don't know what beat it out of me: our monumental quest for a child—six rounds of IVF, four years of wasted time, thousands of worthless dollars, and now the Herculean task of amassing the reams of documents for this adoption—or simply my aging self and the aches and pains that my body now seems more and more willing to host, in spite of my daily green teas and Vitamin D supplements.

Nepal is our last shot. John is getting too old for us to qualify for adoption in other countries, and we're not the best candidates to adopt domestically—John is a cancer survivor and I had a DUI a few years ago. One too many drinks during an after-work gathering and my chances of becoming a mother get sliced in half.

In bed, I reached for one of the parenting books taking up space on my nightstand and comforted myself by thinking that in a parallel universe somewhere, my alter ego would have walked over to her husband and yelled, "I won't cuss for seven straight days so long as you get your goddamned clearance tomorrow." Fortright. Direct. Giving the guy a

fleeting chance before deciding he doesn't care whether I ever become a mom.

The book's title, *Living Arrows*, was taken from the chapter in Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* called "On Children," in which the author very delicately and profoundly tells parents to stop being narcissistic assholes.

Tomorrow, I rolled my eyes, no-swear week begins.

I am not a pillar of character when it comes to keeping relatively inconsequential promises, such as this silly no profanity agreement. So, I have decided that I will allow myself to unabashedly spew expletives when alone. When only God and I will know, and maybe not even God, for surely there were far more distractions in this world than some forty-something, too-busy-to-have-a-baby-in-her-thirties woman, swearing at the bus driver for cutting her off on her way to work. Not to mention that I've had my blood analyzed, my mind evaluated, my pets inoculated and my home searched. And in all of the myriad forms I have had to complete for this adoption, there hasn't been one question about cussing—something that the Department of Child and Family Services, State of Illinois, Federal Government, and Ministry of Nepal has agreed as being completely irrelevant to my fitness as a parent. Everyone, that is, except for John.

We dessert at my friend Pamela's the first night. Pamela doesn't have dinner parties. Instead, she starts her parties around 8:30pm and serves sweets. Tonight, it's champagne with a buffet of profiteroles, éclairs, and berry skewers dipped into dark chocolate fondue.

"Who starts a party at 8:30pm?" John says. "On a Monday night?" He's right, of course. Pamela sometimes does things a bit off deliberately just to tout her originality. It's as if she's watched *Auntie Mame* one too many times and has decided there is meaningful worth in creating a legacy of whimsy and quirk.

I tell her about our no cuss week.

Her eyes wax into full moons. "Why in the hell would you do that?"

"John suggested it. We'd started to sound like a couple of truck drivers and he thought we'd better get a handle on it before the baby comes."

She puts her hand on her hip. "Truck drivers my ass."

John dips his head in to give Pamela a cheek-kiss hello.

"What the fuck, John?"

He looks confused.

"This no-swearing bullshit."

"Watch it young lady, or I'll have to wash your mouth out with soap."

She smiles and pats her back end, "There, no words. Is that better?"

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It's Tuesday morning, and I have postponed a conference call to get my fingerprints done for the adoption. The third time, so far. The fingerprint guy tells me that my prints have unusual vertical lines in them.

"Strange," he says. "They look like cracks. Not sure if the FBI will take them."

"I don't understand." *What the fuck does that mean?*

He shrugs. "They may be no good."

All I can think of is that somewhere right now in some small village near Katmandu, a young mother is carrying her newborn boy to a two-room cement building with a rusty corrugated roof. The boy is crying, and she is trying not to look at his face. At the door to the building, she takes a few swift breaths and barks, almost, when she deposits the boy onto the doorstep. Then she knocks loudly and scurries away, humming at a disturbing pitch—high and long, as if trying to prevent a full-on thrashing of her vocal chords. In a few moments, the little boy will be picked up by a lady dressed in white, and processed into the orphanage. He will be fed goat's milk which will give him gas, so he will cry even more. Sometimes, someone will pick him up. Sometimes, he'll be left alone. He'll yearn for comfort. Comfort a family could give. Comfort a mother could give.

But not a mother, apparently, with up-and-down hash marks on her fingertips.

“Un-fucking believable,” I say to myself when I get back into my car. I call our social worker. She asks me how I am. Not in a normal, “how are you” kind of way, but in a way that begs only a simple, “I’m fine” response. But in a social worker way, with a long pause at the end as if she wants me to burst open and let my feelings flow so she can listen attentively and tell me everything will be okay. I am sure I disappoint when I toss out a quick “great” and then get on with my question.

“Don’t worry. We’ll just have them do a name check.”

“Oh. Okay.” *Well, why the hell didn’t you have them run a name check in the first place, then?*

John is sipping a Chardonnay when I get home. The kind they sell in the extra big bottles.

“Make it through the day cussless?” I say.

“Totally swear-free.”

He is reading a *Business Week*. He’s got a pen in his shirt pocket and his hair length is in that corporate zone—somewhere between military brush cut and local TV sportscaster. If I asked him for details on the magazine, he’d rattle off detailed thoughts on how, in a macro-economical sense, deficits are good during a recession or summarize the latest developments in the

technology wars. *Christ how am I gonna be able to stop our child from becoming a corporate drone?*

“I got my clearance today.” He hands it to me, grinning and clearly proud of himself, as if he just scored the winning basket in a championship game.

“Oh, good,” I reply, deliberately holding back any further praise. But I hear a muffled boom in my head, like a thick, hardcover book closing. We finally have everything we need.

“I’ve gotta finish up some work,” I say, grabbing my laptop. “Gotta contract to finish up for a client.” The client had called me at 5pm saying she needed it by tomorrow morning.

I settle into bed with my laptop and decide to ease into work by first surfing the net a bit.

After about an hour, I hear John’s footsteps. I haven’t actually done any work yet, but I have discovered that there are at least six different devices to baby-proof an electrical outlet. John comes into the bedroom.

“Still working?”

“Yeah.” I lie.

He pulls off his shirt, then his pants and underwear and walks naked into the bathroom. I hear him peeing as I turn my attention to baby gates. The toilet flushes, the water runs and the whiz of his electric toothbrush starts.

There must be over forty different kinds of gates. My mind starts to fog over.

He plops into bed next to me and sighs.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. Just tired.”

I close my computer and put it on the nightstand. Then move in close to him, and nuzzle my head near his armpit.

“Ek raatiko kati ho?” I say, hoping I pronounced it right. According to my Nepalese phrase book, it means, “How much for one night?”

John turns his head in my direction. “You know, swearing in Nepalese is also against the rules.”

I laugh. “I didn’t swear. I swear.”

On Wednesday morning, I get up early to finish up the contract for my client. Then I assemble our dossier:

Photos of our home

Photos of us

Letter to the Ministry of Nepal

An information form about us, our child preferences and whether we think we can handle a child who is malnourished and has dark skin

Copies of our passports

Copies of our birth certificates

Copies of our marriage certificate

A letter from my employer; a letter from John's employer

Reference letters from our friends

A health examination form

A physician's report on our physical health, including any allergies and  
STDs

A physician's report on our mental health

A financial statement

Copies of our recent tax returns

A letter from our bank saying our accounts are in good standing

A recent bank statement

A form from the State of Illinois approving us as parents

Our resumes

Our home study report by a local social worker containing information  
about our pets' inoculations, fire escapes, fingerprints, childhoods, habits,  
and religious beliefs

A guardianship designation

A guardianship statement

A post-adoption agreement, in which we contractually agree to send annual reports back to the Nepalese Ministry with photos of our adopted Nepalese child and a narrative of his/her past year

Police clearances

I place the documents in a banker's box and deposit the box into my car. En route to meeting John at the bank, I think of how I made my college boyfriend wear a condom and pull out early for three months until I went on The Pill. And how I laughed at the *Seinfeld* about The Sponge contraceptive device, because I was Elaine, hunting from drugstore to drugstore to find the last few. Little did I know then that my baby-making experience wouldn't entail a penis at all, but a mound of paper, unctuous social workers, and the harsh white lights of a bank.

John and I sit down with a notary, and spend about an hour signing and having each page notarized. I feel like I am at a closing for a multi-billion dollar merger. Then I FedEx the original dossier and two copies to our agency. Someone, in a small office in Katmandu will eventually peruse the file, letting his fingers run along each page to ensure it has been properly notarized. Someone else will look and see what kind of child we are looking for. And we will wait some more, hoping for a match.

I never used to impose a gender on God. But I think a Goddess would be more capable than her masculine counterpart to step-in at this point—like a cosmic yenta—and find, among the sheep and terraced rice paddies in a small Himalayan village, the child that was meant to be ours. And she might go easier on me when I am asked at the Pearly Gates to explain why I took a baby from his homeland. No, it wasn't purely selfish, I would say. I wanted to give him a better life, a better education. I'd point out that he had learned French, earned his varsity letter in lacrosse and now makes a fine living depreciating the cost of major equipment purchases to minimize tax consequences on his employer's business. And then, depending on the kind of spiritual vibe I was getting from her, I'd either whip off a few Buddhist quotes to show that I had even tried to teach the boy the religion of his birth place, or I'd quote a few psalms to show my facility with the Bible, which would imply I'd given the boy a proper Christian upbringing. Somehow, we'd connect, she and I.

It's now four days into our no-swear week, and I have not yet been caught cussing. John has been spending more and more time in our garage, experimenting with masonry on the pocked cinder-block wall to the east. He's determined to brick-and-mortar a short, flower-bed wall around the front corner of our house this summer.

After work, I pass by the small, white bicycle. Today, there are fresh pink roses encircling the tires—beauty near drab functionality, like flamingos loitering in a trailer park. Someone put a new sign on the basket: “Mandy Forever.”

The bicycle has become a hot topic at alderman meetings. One camp of locals want the bicycle removed, saying it’s distracting and likely to cause more accidents and besides, Mandy’s memory has been celebrated long enough. Another camp argues that Mandy’s memory must be preserved and that it serves as a stark reminder to all drivers of the consequences of being careless. Once, my clever husband offered a compromise: remove the bike from the corner and place it, instead, inside the park as a permanent memorial. But his suggestion never even came to vote. The city’s Parks & Recreation Division effectively nixed its implementation by slapping all sorts of requirements on it, making the project exorbitantly costly. “Extortion,” John had called it. Such a simple fix quashed by a governmental machine over which we had no control.

There is a present on my pillow when I climb into bed that night. The gift card simply says, “love, me.”

Inside is a tour book of Nepal, a small, locally-crafted doll, and a baby-sized Nepalese knit sweater.

I find John in our garage just as I hear a crashing sound, then an “Ah!” He’s just dropped a package of dry cement on his toe.

“I’d’ve allowed a good four-letter word there—just for the record.”

He musters a smile, grabbing his toe. “You better be pretty impressed at my restraint.”

“I don’t impress too easily.”

“I know.”

Then I hold up the items. “This though...not bad.” He knows me well enough to know this is my way of saying thank you. I hope.

Later in bed, I look at an email from our agency, confirming receipt of our dossier. All systems are go. We could get a baby referral anytime in the next several months. The whole thing seems real now, in the way a diver must feel once he’s geared up and skimming the sea’s surface for the deeper blue.

I pick up a child-rearing magazine and leaf through the pages. Lots of dos and don’ts. One mom insists you have to let kids cry it out at nighttime, or else they’ll never learn to go to sleep on their own. Another mom says “no way” to thumb-sucking because it’s hard to break a kid of it later. I visualize Pamela last week at the gym. “I’ll let you in on a little secret,” she had told me after seeing me mount a parenting book on the Stairmaster stand. “There are a lot of right ways to parent. Throw away that bullshit.”

“We should go shopping soon,” I say to John.

He raises his eyebrows.

“For baby stuff. You know, a crib, stroller. Stuff.”

He nods. “And a glove and a baseball cap and maybe some cleats—can never start using them too soon.”

I give him a little push and then look into his eyes. “Ma timilai maya garchhu,” I say—Nepalese for “I love you.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing.”

People forget quickly how life used to be. You used to get mail once a day, and phone calls only during waking hours when you were alert and less inclined to be caught off guard. Even the opening of the envelope—no matter what horrible message might lay inside—created a ceremonial framework for the intake of news that psychologically poised the mind to receive it.

The same is not true of emails. A click and a glance isn’t enough time to prepare, especially these days, when emails arrive on your cell phone and you can get pinged indiscriminately in the wee hours of the morning. Take, for instance, this morning. Friday, 3:46am. I had just gone to the bathroom

and petted our cats, who were lying in a lump at the foot of our bed. Ping. Up pops the following message glowing into my still-dilated eye:

Dear Nepal Adoption Parents, We regret to inform you that the Hague Bureau, U.S. Department of State, and certain non-governmental watch-dog groups have finished their year-long review of Nepal's adoption procedures and have found them to be unsatisfactory. Therefore, our agency is suspending its operations there. We will, of course, offer you a full refund of your dossier fee.

And like that, it's over.

There will be no French-speaking, letter-wearing accountant. Not even a corporate drone.

I quietly whisper, "Shit," as I rest my head back down on the pillow and stare at the cat's ears, gently lowered to dampen the hum of John's heavy inhalations. John stirs and says, "What?" I look at him, and visualize him thirty years from now, thin-lipped and bald, looking out over a silver sea of seniors at a golf course—comfortably-dressed and neat—not complaining about having to wait for the father-son tournament ahead of him. But staring, instead, a little too long, at one of the father-son pairs as they pat each other on the back and laugh.

“Go back to sleep.”

John is in a great mood when he comes home from work Friday evening. He’s picked up some gorgonzola-stuffed angus burgers and mango-habanero salsa. I hear him whistling in the pantry as he searches for chips and buns.

We get a couple of beers and sit outside to enjoy the lovely spring night.

“You can train your kid to like spicy food,” he says, scooping a mound of the hot salsa onto a chip. “At like two, even.”

I nod, feigning interest and stare at my glass for a minute.

Then I decide to get it out.

“John,” I swallow. “I got an email from our agency.” I wait, hoping that my silence will discretely elevate the importance of what I’m about to say. He raises his eyebrows.

“Nepal’s out,” I say, then mumble something about corruption and how awful it would have been if we had unwittingly adopted a child whose parents never willfully gave him up. “So,” I say, “they’re giving us a refund.”

John stares at me while a squirrel sniffs the spicy salsa and scampers away. Then he nods. “Well, it’s good they’re giving us a refund. Reputable agency.”

“Yeah.”

He peers into the smoke pluming from the grill. “It’s so insane isn’t it?” He laughs and shakes his head. “Our fate determined by a band of ne’er do well bureaucrats looking to make a buck.” The grill flairs from hamburger grease. He tests the burgers for doneness, scoops them onto the buns, and plunks one in front of me. Then he heads toward the patio door. “I’ll be back,” he says, and he walks into the house.

I gaze at the setting sun. It looks like a flame on the horizon—a jagged streak of burnt orange. Or a red-hot hacksaw, maybe, upside-down with the prickly parts jutting upwards like dozens of little fuck-yous.

It’s Saturday morning now, and no one has heard either of us utter a nasty word for almost a week. I wake up early and notice that John is already gone. He’s left a note on the counter: “Working out. Home soon.” So, I call Pamela to see if she’s up for a walk.

I tell her about Nepal as we head towards the park.

“That sucks,” she says.

Maybe it’s the way she says it, or something in the pureness of her sincerity that touches me, but I start to cry. I sense her trying to hug me and I jerk away. Why the fuck do people always do that? I wonder. Why isn’t the more natural impulse to back away, give a kid some air, let ‘em bawl unto themselves like a babe in the woods?

“I’m sorry,” I say, not very clearly, no doubt, because I am still crying. “I think I need to be alone.”

“You got it, *sista*.” She zips up her hoodie. “Call me when you’re up for it.” She starts to leave, and then stops. “But just remember—there are a lot of ways to live your life, okay? Parenting is just one of those ways.”

I wander along the sidewalk, crossing my arms against the crisp wind. I can’t be far from Mandy’s white bicycle now, I think, peering over to the corner of the park. I thought I saw Mandy’s mother at the grocery store last week. Looked like her anyway, from the picture in the paper. Not too tall. Brunette. She was buying hash browns from the frozen section. I should have said hello, dammit. That would have been a nice thing to do.

I notice John’s little Nepalese doll in my coat pocket. I pull it out and study the face—a round, brown face with a Mona Lisa smile. Or a Mona Lisa frown. Nobody ever calls it that, but it makes just as much sense as a Mona Lisa smile. I mean, we don’t know if Mona Lisa is smiling or frowning or indifferent, right? A Mona Lisa indifferent expression. Ha. I touch the doll’s face, and then walk towards the corner where Mandy’s white bicycle is, ready to lean it against a tire. But the bicycle is gone.

I scurry over to get a closer look. A lock lays broken on the spot where the bicycle used to be, and dried flowers and a little stuffed heart lay strewn on the ground nearby.

Then I hear a loud crash followed by a, “Fuck!” It’s John. He is inside the park. I enter the gate and walk over to him. He’s dropped a trowel on his foot. “Goddammit!” he yells. The white bicycle is standing near the picnic tables where the urban mogul course used to be, each wheel secured in a slot carved into the middle of a beautifully-rendered brick-and-mortar cone.

“Holy shit,” I say. “You okay? That must’ve hurt like a bitch.”

“It did,” he says. His knuckles are white from his hand being wrapped tightly around the trowel. I let my fingers run across them, then pick up his hand and kiss the middle knuckle—the biggest, boniest one of them all.

I can feel him gently caress my cheek. And the world is silent for a moment.

Then he picks up the trowel, twists it sideways and starts skillfully excising a layer of oozing cement between two bricks.

He’ll do a beautiful job on the retaining wall this summer, I think, as I move closer and begin adjusting the sign on the bicycle’s basket.

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**Susan Solomon** is a writer and lawyer living in Chicago. Her fiction has appeared in a number of online and print publications including the *Men Undressed* anthology (Other Voices Books, 2011), *Polluto*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and *Pebble Lake Review*. Her story, "Smile Catchers," placed "Commended" (top ten) in *Writelink's* 2004 Weekender Challenge (United Kingdom), and her story, "Medici, For Beginners," was selected as an Editor's Choice story for 2005 by *Pulse Magazine*.