

The Twenty-first century edible woman

It wasn't supposed to be a perfect day. Still, I didn't expect it to be this awful. It started off really early with Freddie knocking at my bedroom door at 3am. My wonderful kid was sick and had made his whole bed dirty by throwing up all over the place. At this moment I understood why people say it is so hard to raise a child alone. I would have loved to have the possibility to send a husband to clean and take care of him, but unfortunately, my man left a long time ago, when he decided to follow his career far away from me and the new-born child.

So here I was, cleaning and comforting my kid in the middle of the night, even though I absolutely needed some rest to deal with the significant reunion that was planned this day. The future of my start-up probably depended on my ability to convince the major investors I was meeting tomorrow of our project's relevance.

Once I was done with Freddie, I did not manage to go back to my dreams. I was too concerned with my situation to be able to calm down. I never totally forgave my husband for leaving me, but what disturbed me the most was that everybody understood perfectly well the fact that he had left. Who would I be to prevent him from pursuing his dream of fame and glory?

That was definitely a good argument. The problem was that everybody would have been shocked if I had abandoned my husband and my son to get a job on the other side of the planet. Furthermore, I have a career too and not being able to sleep might seriously compromise it. Not only did he destroy our family, but his absence greatly increased the difficulty of my job.

The worst part about these events was that even the people who were supposed to be supportive were not. My parents for instance blamed me for having a kid at such a young age. In their days, ladies would never get pregnant before being settled with their husband. I guess they feel responsible because they did not manage to protect me enough. My mother is convinced that letting me follow my strange ambition of becoming a computer engineer has had awful consequences on my behaviour. Their generation is the one that reformed the mentalities in May 68, but whenever they have issues with their children, they take advices from their own parents who still have this vision of the couple as an unmodifiable scheme of the bread-winning father and care-giving mother. It has always been like this, they were convinced that changing the roles was not in any way a good idea, and my generation was going to demonstrate the terrible consequences of this social revolution.

My friends with whom I studied at the university couldn't understand me either. Even though they tried to be receptive, they all felt the need to ask whether the child was planned. Some even suggested abortion might be a relevant idea, as maternity was in conflict with the assignments of the engineer.

Nevertheless, I always felt designed for both roles. The world of studies and sciences attracted me strongly since my childhood. Every time I saw a peculiar phenomenon occurring, I immediately wanted to understand the physical interpretation behind it. I had the chance to be initiated to programming at the end of school by a devoted teacher who perceived my motivation. All this led me to pursue engineering studies, even though people defined me as 'not the kind of girl that does this kind of things'. Society had actually evolved from not finding it normal for girls to become engineer to accept only some types of women, forcing them to fit into the model of the reckless and nerdy girl. There isn't any actual barrier preventing the average woman to pursue this kind of studies,

but there are unspoken rules that seem to be here to make her feel uneasy. In the end, only the foolhardy and devoted remain, which explains why people believe this is the personality every feminine engineer has. Unfortunately, it might also explain why girls tend to be discouraged before even attempting.

I also wanted to become a mother at a young age, in order to be able to fully enjoy parenthood. Most people claim it is better to become a parent after the age of thirty, allowing one to savour the freedom of youth for as long as possible before having to assume responsibility for your clumsy and vulnerable child. I do not share their point of view, because I consider that one has more chance to understand and to have a better relation with the infant if one is not way older than his kid.

Even though I felt misunderstood by everyone, I was convinced by my choices. I managed to calm down with a satisfied smile on my lips and went back to sleep immediately.

When my alarm clock rang, I had only slept for about two hours and did not realise how late I was. I quickly swallowed a cup of coffee, gave some instructions to the au pair taking care of Freddie and ran to get my bus. I sat breathless in the rear part of the vehicle.

It was perhaps due to my tiredness, or to the anxiety preceding the meeting but I felt especially uncomfortable for the whole ride. It was not about people looking at me in an eerie way, of course, their attention was too absorbed by their phones, but after the reflexions of the night, I had the impression not to be part of this society.

This feeling got even stronger as I was walking towards my train. The flux of people rushing mechanically through the station, made it look like a giant clock, with its numerous pieces knowing exactly what to do in order to avoid the whole system to crash. Everyone had an objective in mind and they did not look away from it, except for checking that they were on time. Everything was carefully timed, which led even the slightest train delay to seem like the worst tragedy of the century. The regular noise of the heels touching the ground combined with the empty glance of these strangers strengthened the oppressive atmosphere to a point that made me feel sick. I was feeling some kind of pattern, as though the same people kept on passing near me with an exactly similar expressionless aspect. It began to be unbearable, my vision was spinning and my heartbeat way too fast. When I thought I would faint, I noticed an old hobo playing on an outdated and out of tune guitar. The joy on his face was so strong it cheered me up and allowed me to make my way to the train. I was immensely grateful to this man, who managed to give a bit of humanity to this mournful moment, solely by enjoying the simple action of playing music.

When I arrived at work, I was exhausted, stressed and mournful, but hopefully, the quietness of the empty office would help me to calm down. I am always the first to arrive at work, because I need some time to get myself prepared for the day. We are three co-founders of the start-up working together. Stephen is the one responsible for the algorithmic development of our project. I have to admit that his incredible skills have helped us in many situations. Lloyd takes care of the design part, his job is to allow the laymen to use our program without any knowledge in the topic. He was the president of the students' union when we were in university, so he has built a huge professional network around him, allowing our company to take a good start in the extremely demanding market of informatics. And as for me, I am supposed to spend my time visiting potential clients, advertising our company and more generally dealing with all the social parts of our job. I actually do way more than this, mostly keeping an eye on my collaborators, preventing them to follow their crazy ideas too far away from our objectives. They are both definitely geniuses, but their constant flux of new ideas, all more improbable than the last, is often difficult to contain.

Our PhDs were all in the field of data-analysis and, by bringing them together, we have managed to explore a new face of this subject. A professor noticed what our theses could lead to and suggested that we take part in a so called 'competition', where promising entrepreneurs present their ideas in order to gain visibility, economic support and advices. He suggested that either Stephen or Lloyd did the presentation, as he thought that letting me do it would be perceived as arrogant. He hadn't anything himself against it, but he knew that the observers still had this perception of the business-woman as presumptuous. He showed me many other subtle things about how to manage as a woman in this masculine world which is so extremely codified that it is really hard to change the mentalities. He mentioned also that as paradoxical as it seems, women had a great advantage of visibility on the market. As we were a minority, we tended to draw attention more easily than our masculine counterparts. His mentoring was really precious to me, but when I think about it, it seems really absurd to me that we have to teach women on how to behave in order for them to perform accordingly with what people expect.

My two colleagues burst in the office bringing with them some undesirable news, which restored my terrible mood from this morning. Even though I had briefed them on what I needed for the incoming reunion, they had managed to add new 'essential' features and to change the design of our program, because they felt that it was more appealing that way. As both modified it on their own side, the whole did not work as expected anymore and they were blaming each other for the issue. My nerves were not in the good state to endure such unpleasant news and I started to yell at them in such a severe way that they immediately cooperated and reverted all their modifications. I found it funny, because they gave me the exact same look as Freddie always does when I reprimand him. Seems like the leopard cannot change its spots.

After a last briefing with my co-workers on the guideline of the reunion, we were ready to face our fate. The investors arrived in our conference room, and the presence of almost all the board of directors of this important private banking institution was very impressive. Lloyd began to seem nervous, but hopefully, he hadn't much to do except performing the final demonstration.

I began by explaining them the global idea of our program and how it would be extremely beneficial for them to invest in it. I have put so many efforts in this project that I had no problem to be convincing about its many advantages. The difficult part was for our application to run well with a sample set of their own data. We obviously weren't able to test it on this specific configuration before, and it was supposed to prove the portability and adaptability of our program. There is a myth in the domain of IT that bug do not show up when you are in the testing phase, but only when you present it. I expected it so strongly to occur that I was almost disappointed to see the presentation going as intended. I felt relieved until the director of the bank asked Lloyd what the green square on the right side of the screen was. I personally had no idea what this button was, and as soon as I perceived the special look on my colleague's face, I immediately understood that it was one of his special ideas that he probably forgot to remove from his last update. When he tried to present the effect of the button, nothing happened on the screen. It had in fact been added on the visual side, but not implemented on the algorithmic part. I interrupted him and told our clients that it was here to show them we were ready to add additional features for them if they felt the need.

The remaining of the reunion went well. They didn't sign anything yet, but we were very close to reach an agreement. I congratulated my co-workers for the success of the demonstration and went directly home.

I hugged Freddie and closed my eyes.