

FOR ME, THE economic crisis began last April 2nd. “We’re letting you go,” the office manager announced while standing in my doorway, on his way to another, more important meeting. Had it been a day earlier, I would’ve thought he was kidding.

Actually, I wasn’t all that surprised. I’d been expecting it. Please don’t confuse that with dreading it: I hated my job. In this particular job’s defense, I’ve hated all my jobs. As an advertising copywriter—“With 14 vitamins and minerals, you can trust Cheerios for a lifetime of wholesome goodness for your whole family!”—that comes with the territory.

Plus, the guy I shared an office with smelled like 1965—and not in a good, Don Draper sort-of way. (Well, not in the way I imagine Don Draper smells, and yes, I imagine how Don Draper smells a little more often than any heterosexual married man should.) This was a noxious combination of cigarettes, cologne, leather and red wine.

Prior to my dismissal, I’d been working mainly on ads for a major financial services company, thus I was somewhat privy to the coming trouble. Granted, I didn’t see it escalating to the dire state we’re now in (humbled CEOs standing before Congress, hat in hand; out-of-work copywriters, head in hands, resorting to writing editorial pieces). If I had, I would’ve liquidated my portfolio and bought an Alpaca farm—I hear they’re quite lucrative, provided you deworm them frequently.

As the office manager walked away—if he had any decency, he would’ve skulked—I spun my chair around to face “1965,” who’d also been, in Draper-speak, canned. He sat in disbelief, shaking his head. Apparently, he hadn’t seen the writing on the wall. And I don’t mean that figuratively: A newspaper article thumb-tacked to the wall in front of him stated—in bold 36-point type—that our client’s share price was headed down the toilet.

I gave him a sympathetic look—what was there to say?—and began packing up my few possessions (along with some Post-It pads, push pins and a stapler—in your face, corporate America!). I made it a point to travel light from job to job—never more than one box of stuff. A couple spiral-bound notebooks, family photos and a thesaurus. No ironic tchotchkes. No blank-a-day calendars. You never want your office to be too comfortable. Too comfortable and you won’t be in any rush to get out of there each night. I want to be uncomfortable, borderline miserable, so come the end of the day, I can’t wait to head home. Nowadays, more than ever. You see, I had something new waiting for me at home: my then 6-

month-old son, Luke.

Holding my solitary box while hailing a cab (not an easy task), I couldn’t help but smile. Free at last, I was finally going to have time to spend with my boy. Real time, not just a few hurried minutes in the morning and a few cranky minutes in the evening. We’re talking serious middle-of-the-day, middle-of-the-week time. We were going to spend all day, every day together. And, as the only stay-at-home dad on the Upper West Side and someone who read Tom Perrotta’s *Little Children*, saw the film adaptation in the theater and bought the DVD, I was going to be worshipped by every hot mom in the neighborhood while I was at it.

Nor a tepid one, for that matter. You hear all these stories about how a baby’s arrival changes and challenges your marriage and that husbands—and wives—stray as a result. While I have no problem believing that, my experience has been the opposite. And if I’m being completely honest, my fidelity has less to do with my wife and more to do with my son. Once something so profound enters your life, you’d have to be a total dick to jeopardize it by giving in to the whims of your, ahem, dick.

No, I was merely looking to flirt with some hot moms and be objectified by them. That was all. While my wife was off “saving babies” (as she and her fellow pediatricians half-joked), I had visions

of thousands of jobs. Dads began popping up everywhere. At the park. At the library for Storytime. At Baby Gap. (What? \$24 for a Star Wars tee? I would never pay that much... if my son’s name wasn’t Luke.) Those who weren’t pushing Bugaboos were wearing Baby Bjorns. No matter where we turned, they just kept appearing. Like the liquidy silver guy in Terminator 2. And they all looked the same. Short hair, perfectly parted on the side. Clean-shaven. Button-down shirt. Always dressed properly in case a call or email about that bank job showed up on the BlackBerrys they were constantly checking.

I didn’t have a BlackBerry. It would’ve clashed with my shaggy, uncombed hair, week’s growth of stubble, track pants and T-shirt. Still, as alien as these guys seemed to me, there was one thing we—and all new dads—had in common, in addition to our kids: We had absolutely no interest in becoming buddies with one another.

You see, dads are a different breed than moms. Most dads barely acknowledge one another. Not in a rude way. We’re just not all that interested. Any eye contact is made inadvertently and warily. New moms, isolated from the adult world, lacking adult contact and conversation for so many months, are desperate to connect with other moms. Dads, until they lost their jobs, had been interacting with adults on a daily basis since college. Now they had a chance to not interact with adults. To not talk about tax breaks or marketing proposals or whatever bullshit they specialized in. And from what I could see (and felt), we all relished it.

Much preferred talking gibberish to our 6-month-olds than talking stocks and derivatives to the guy next to us. With dads, there would be no exchanging of contact information. (Unlike moms, who pass out their phone numbers like floozies at a singles bar.)

All that being said, it’s not like there was animosity between the dads. More like indifference, I’d say. Until adorable 8-month-old Jack and his also adorable dad, Steve (think Tom Freaking Brady, but shorter), showed up at our Wednesday play date. In matching cargo pants.

Oh, how the moms cooed at them while I simmered. I’d only recently come to grips with the fact that play dates do not consist of wine and adult naptime as I had imagined. Now this?

Of course, that wasn’t the worst of it. Every day, as the financial crisis deepened downtown, more and more traders and bankers, i.e., dads, migrated uptown—infiltrating everything from gym class to music class. The charming sight of me singing, “Wiggle, Wiggle, Wiggle” to my baby boy was diluted by the fact there were



Welcome to **DADHATTAN**

HOW THE RECESSION CREATED A NEW BREED OF STAY-AT-HOME DADS (AND WHY THAT’S CRAMPING MY STYLE). BY CHUCK PAGANO

In case you’re unfamiliar with the reference (shame on you), *Little Children* focuses on Brad, an uninspired aspiring lawyer rearing his son by day and (not) studying for the bar at night, while his wife toils away as a documentary filmmaker. All the other moms, watching him in the park with his boy, label him “The Prom King.” All except Sarah, played by Kate Winslet in the film. She’ll have none of it. She identifies more with him as the interloper than with the other moms. Soon enough, they begin a torrid affair.

I wasn’t looking to have a torrid affair.

of gallivanting about Manhattan with Luke, hot moms in tow, batting their eyelashes at us. Reminding myself to stay away from the actual Kate Winslet should I run into her—judging by the frequency with which she plays unhappy spouses in her films, the last thing I needed was her chasing me around the city.

Fortunately for Ms. Winslet, her options expanded soon enough. Because when the economy finally collapsed a few months back, my short-lived run as the only stay-at-home dad in the neighborhood evaporated along with tens

five other dads doing the same thing. To make matters worse, these “Super Dads” knew every word to the song. (Disclosure: The song consists of nothing more than the words in its title repeated approximately 500 times.)

Swim class was a different story. Since it was on a Sunday, it was mostly dads anyway. Even had the class not begun before the crisis, I don’t think there were a lot of post-partum moms anxious to put on a bathing suit and hop in the pool with nine other men—no matter how fat, hairy, pasty, out of shape and balding those men were. I liked swim class because, yes, it was a hoot to see my boy kicking and paddling and giggling, but also because it felt like it did back when everything was normal: Dads doing dad things on a weekend.

The most recent Sunday, we were running a bit late. We skipped the locker room and undressed poolside, ignoring the shower-first policy. After reluctantly putting on our matching swim caps (Daddy more so than son), Luke and I plopped into the pool. Dads and babies were lined up like gondolas at the shallow end of the pool. “OK, partner up,” said the instructor whose name I could never remember. I silently groaned, but put on a brave face as we sidled up next to a little boy and a dad who looked unnervingly like JFK Jr.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

“This is Dylan,” he said, holding up his boy.

“Hi, Dylan. This is Luke.” The boys began splashing and laughing at each other. We followed suit, minus the splashing (babies splashing, cute; adult males splashing, uncomfortably homoerotic), talking proudly of the good (blowing bubbles!) and bad (drinking water!) stuff our boys did.

Alas, our civility extended no farther than the confines of the pool. Once the “Clean Up” song began (an opus compared to “Wiggle, Wiggle, Wiggle”), signifying the end of class, the swim caps were off and the niceties were gone. It was again every man and baby for himself—due, more than anything, to the lack of changing tables in the locker room. Funny how our innate competitiveness didn’t kick in until we got out of the pool.

Here’s the thing: Try getting you and your baby undressed, dried and changed without a changing table. Seriously, find a baby and a swim class in your neighborhood and try it.

You’ll learn that, on a difficulty scale of 1 to 10—one being petting a dog and 10 being getting one of those little model ships into one of those little bottles—it comes in somewhere around a 14.

Dried and dressed, I scooped Luke up and exited the locker room. It never ceased

to amaze me how perfectly he fit on my hip—like he was molded specifically to fit there. It felt so natural that whenever I picked up another child—be it one of my nieces or a friend’s kid—it never felt quite as right. The fit was always just a little off.

Even without a job, Mondays still feel like Mondays. But, instead of heading to the office, Mondays mean a trip to Buy Buy Baby in Chelsea. When the oh-so-chipper greeter asks if we need help, I’m tempted to respond, “Can you tell me what aisle the babies are in?” but I bite my tongue.

America’s most overtly named baby store would be dad free, right? I mean, it’s in Chelsea, for chrissake. (I met a gay friend of mine for lunch after one such outing. Spying my Buy Buy Baby shopping bag, he said, “You know they can kick you out of Manhattan for carrying that around, right?”) Surely, amidst the stacks of diaper bags and racks of sippy cups, I’d get some love from

the ever-buxom new and prospective moms. Hell, I’d take grandmotherly attention, at this point. But, even that was not meant to be: Like locusts, Dads had descended upon the store. Not just the toy section or furniture department, either. They were ambling down the breast pump aisle (!), shopping carts piled high with nursing bra pads atop Yankees onesies (just what the world needs: another Yankee fan), thinking they were the cock of the walk.

Luke and I ignored them, grabbing our diapers and heading to the register. It was a big day for us: We were graduating to Pampers Cruisers. Phase Two in the Pampers Swaddler>Cruiser>Trainer hierarchy. I love how fun and aspirational the names are, though I often wonder what they’re named on the adult diaper end of the spectrum. Pissers? Crappers? Faulty Bladders? As the cashier rings us up, she gestures to the display behind her.

“Yankee onesie?” she asks. “They’re only \$7.99.”

“No thanks,” I bristled, poorly masking my hatred of the Bombers. “We’re Mets fans,” I say, looking down at Luke, blissfully unaware I just set him up for a lifetime of misery.

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But that misery could wait until another day (most likely, Opening Day). It was a beautiful afternoon and we were stroll(er)ing through Riverside Park. It’s one of our afternoon rituals, provided it’s not freezing out. We stop at a bench with our backs to the Hudson and survey the scene. Not another dad in sight.

Oh, and what have we here? Hot mom alert! Across the promenade and headed straight for us. Gorgeous. Looks like an actress. Could it be? She approaches, looking adoringly at us. It’s her, all right. “Why did I have those garlic chips with lunch?” I wonder, before gathering myself and whispering to Luke, “Mommy’s here...” His eyes light up and he blurts out, “Ma-ma!” as we clap in unison.

“Hi, guys!” she says, giving us each a kiss on the cheek before sitting down next to us. Finally, some much-deserved, -craved, -needed female attention! Granted, her eyes are so locked on Luke I could moonwalk around the bench and she wouldn’t notice.

That was when it hit me, my eureka moment: There was no need to feel threatened by all these other dads. Because all these moms—including Luke’s—didn’t have eyes for us anyway. We’re old news. The past. (“Thanks for the sperm! Let’s reconnect in a year or two...when it’s time for another baby. Just leave your email address, OK?”) The babies—the round, gleeful, screaming babies—represented tomorrow. And looking at my beautiful boy—all eyelashes and dimpled cheeks—who could blame them? ☹

Chuck Pagano is currently working on a collection of short stories and is the author of the imaginary syndicated dog advice column, “Life Is Ruff!”