

pamela
stone

Opting Out?

why
women
really
quit
careers
and head
home

"A fascinating, fine-grained look at the real reasons why many professional women with children leave the workplace."

Ann Crittenden,
author of
The Price of Motherhood



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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stone, Pamela.

Opting out? : why women really quit careers and head home / Pamela Stone.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-24435-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Stay-at-home mothers. 2. Work and family.
3. Choice (Psychology). 4. Life change events.

I. Title.

HQ759.46.s86 2007

306.874'—dc22

2007006566

Manufactured in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

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CHAPTER ONE

The Dream Team

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The Coxswain. Kate Hadley, thirty-nine and mother of three, was a coxswain. Not just a coxswain, but captain of the women's crew team and the first woman to be elected president of her Ivy League university's rowing club, which included the men's and women's teams. Knowing little about crew, I asked her what a coxswain did. The intensity and enthusiasm with which she answered made clear why Kate had won the confidence and vote of her fellow rowers. "The coxswain," she told me, "is the person who literally sits in the boat and bosses people around and gives commands, calls strategy, motivates them." Perhaps thinking that she was sounding a little boastful, Kate self-deprecatingly added that she was "the unathletic one." The coxswain is the brain not the brawn of the team, the strategist: "You're smart, you can think on your feet and you don't weigh too much because they're pulling you, you're dead weight." As dead weight, Kate explained to me, coxswains were not regarded as captain material, and she seemed prouder of having been elected captain as a coxswain than club president as a woman. Both were unprecedented achievements.

As we talked in the family room of her suburban Chicago home, it

was easy to envision Kate as a collegiate athlete. Tanned and trim, wearing a tee shirt, cotton skirt, and fashionable but functional sandals, she was articulate and reflective as she told me about her life growing up, a life she recognized was privileged and accomplished. The daughter of an international businessman, Kate described her mother as “a classic example of a corporate wife.” Kate was accepted early decision and graduated from her Ivy League college in the late 1980s. With a prestigious degree and the benefit of several summer internships, she established herself quickly at a leading research and consulting firm. After about two years there, she was expected to get her MBA, but Kate was not yet ready for that. Instead, she launched a major job search in Europe (where, unlike the U.S., “you could still work for a Fortune 100 company without an MBA”), landing a marketing job with a major brand-name company. Two years into this job, and looking ahead, Kate thought the time was now right for the MBA, “because I wouldn’t want to be turned down for a job ever because I didn’t have it and someone else did.” Accepted by several leading schools, she decided to attend her father’s alma mater, Wharton, one of the premier business schools in the country. She proposed to her boss that the firm pay for business school, and with his support, “for some miraculous reason,” as she modestly put it, they agreed to do so.

Kate is a star, as are the other women profiled in this chapter and throughout the book.¹ Like most of them, she graduated from a leading college, earned a graduate degree, and pursued a successful career in her chosen field. Full-time mothers when I talked with them, they may have arrived home from different starting points, but their early lives were remarkably similar. Most came from middle- or upper-middle-class homes and grew up in traditional families, their fathers working and their mothers at home, as was typical of women of their background and generation. Transitioning from youth to adulthood and school to work, their lives proceeded almost seamlessly, with little disjuncture or disruption. High-achieving, and coming of age in an era in which young

women like them were encouraged and expected to reach for the stars, these women, each in her own way, following her own star, did.

Pursuing an MBA at Wharton, Kate did the de rigueur business school summer internship not at her old firm, but at a different major consumer brands company, a company she found herself loving and which also offered her the possibility of returning home to the U.S. Departing amicably from her former employer (and paying them back for the tuition money), she launched her career in international marketing with the new firm. Clearly identified as a high flyer, Kate moved steadily upward, at one point easily sidestepping a transfer to another part of the country in order to stay at headquarters and closer to Nick, her soon-to-become husband, quickly becoming the marketing manager of the company's leading brand — the “mother brand” as she called it in her marketing lingo. At this point, newly married and wanting to move to Latin America in order to pursue a career opportunity for her husband, Kate was able to leverage her expertise and experience to transfer laterally to a new job overseas, ultimately getting a promotion to marketing director just before having her first baby.

Kate continued to work after her baby was born, but cut back to 80 percent time, reasoning that this “would be a good way to still be in the game and in the fast track and keep up my networks and reputation, but that it would also afford me a slice of normality or a little bit of balance.” “So the plan was I would be four days in the office, and then Fridays I would be at home. I would be accessible for phone calls, sometimes conference calls, and I would still travel and everything.” Given the long distances entailed in traveling in Latin America, Kate estimated that she was on the road two to three weeks a month. Despite the grueling schedule, Kate had a second child eighteen months after the first. Shortly thereafter, prompted by her husband's decision to return to the States for his career, the family moved back. Failing to line up a new job, and with family pressures mounting, Kate quit. When I talked with her, she had been home three years. Looking back on her decision, she took satisfac-

tion from how long she *had* been able to juggle career and family, musing “I probably in some ways lasted longer than maybe some people thought I would in terms of working until my second child was one.”

The CPA. The daughter of a police officer and a mother who “never worked,” Diane Childs, forty-one and the mother of two children, grew up in the big northeastern city where she still lived, and stayed close to home for college, choosing a local university that was affordable and accessible, and a major (accounting) that was practical. Diane, who had worked since she was seventeen years old, “mull[ed] around in liberal arts for maybe a year or so” before going into the business program, a move prompted by the realization that “I’m going to have to find a job when I get out, pay off school loans, things like that.” Graduating in the early 1980s, a time, she recalled, when “there was a big push for women,” Diane jumped at the opportunities opening up in her field. Recruited right out of college, Diane went to work for a major accounting firm. Although she recognized that this job gave her invaluable experience, Diane “didn’t love it.” She recalled that the partners “made good salaries, but all looked like they were fifteen years older than they really were.” Taking them as negative role models, and now a CPA, Diane decided not to pursue the traditional accountants’ career path to partner, and after three years moved instead to a job at a national real estate investment company. Here, she learned the ropes of the real estate and construction industries and found a work environment more in keeping with her style and values. After three years and wanting “to do something that was a little more needed,” Diane decided to make another change, transitioning seamlessly to a job where she was responsible for pulling together financing for a company that developed affordable housing. Having found her niche, Diane worked a lot and liked it, despite her realization that relative to the for-profit world, the non-profit side was stretched thin — short-staffed and under-resourced, with salaries that were “not pretty.” The fast pace of deal-making and doing good appealed to her, though, and she derived great satisfaction and

“fun” from what she was doing. Five years into this job, Diane had her first child, followed three years later by another. She continued working, changing to a part-time schedule. After twelve years in the position (seven of them working part-time with children), Diane quit and has been home one year.

The Consultant. Growing up in the South, with an engineer father and older brothers who also pursued scientific and technical careers, Elizabeth Brand, forty, who has one child with another on the way, followed in their footsteps, not in her stay-at-home mother's. Liking math and science, she “tended to gravitate where guys did,” one of only three women in the engineering program at the prestigious university from which she graduated. Quickly finding work in her field, she took a job with a multinational energy company, doing everything “from designing parts of pipelines to developing pipe specifications for a new plant that was going to be built.” Elizabeth's talents were soon recognized and after only a year and a half on the job, she was offered “a really terrific opportunity” to work at a plant “that had a lot of issues.” Located in a remote part of Idaho, a region of the country she had never even visited, this job gave her “nuts and bolts experience” at a very young age. Elizabeth was not only young, she was female, and she described the situation facing her as she started her new job: “I used to kid that I was the only professional woman in the whole town of twenty thousand people. Because anyone who ended up doing that left that town or the state.” Despite trepidation from the plant's workers, who had heard that “there is a woman coming from California, and she's going to tell us how to run our plant,” Elizabeth was able to win them over, and looked back on the job fondly: “It was a great learning experience. I learned a whole lot from the operators and the maintenance people. . . . So, on a personal level and a professional level, it was a tremendous growth experience.”

Although she loved her job and the athletic, outdoorsy lifestyle of the Rocky Mountains, Elizabeth decided to apply to business school. Recognizing that her engineering background and unusual work experience

would distinguish her from many applicants, Elizabeth recalled (realistically, not boastfully), “Because I had a unique application, it was really easy to get in. I applied to, I think, MIT, Wharton, and Harvard, and got into all three, and decided to go to MIT because I thought it just seemed to be the right fit.” Moving to the East Coast to attend business school, to what she considered “another totally foreign place,” Elizabeth once again found herself in a male-dominated world, one with “a lot of very conservative, particularly economically conservative individuals.” “Sort of relying on those old strengths,” she took a lot of finance and technology classes and landed a summer internship with a leading management consulting firm, eventually joining them upon getting her MBA. Elizabeth worked for them during a period of rapid expansion and her own career progressed apace. In what she characterized as the “up or out” world of consulting, Elizabeth quickly moved up, from consultant to vice president in only seven years. Throughout her career, she worked on a variety of projects, many of them international in scope, in a range of industries, and made partner at age thirty-four. Two years later, Elizabeth had her first child, took maternity leave from which she never returned, and handed in her resignation. She has been home two years and, after undergoing a series of fertility treatments, is pregnant with her second child.

The Editor: Wendy Friedman, forty and the mother of two, grew up in “a little, little” town in western Ohio, the daughter of a businessman “who was always working” and a mother who was home and “around.” Loving books, she majored in English at the “public Ivy” university she attended. When Wendy graduated in the early 80s, “like everyone else who wasn’t going to medical school at the time,” she thought seriously about going to law school (even taking the LSAT), before realizing that she could pursue her love of literature professionally. Told by a hometown friend about a well-known publishing course, Wendy applied and was accepted. “And then I thought, well, if I still like it, I’ll move to New York, and get a job in publishing, because obviously you need to be in

New York.” True to her vision, Wendy arrived in the city on Labor Day weekend following her graduation, landing a job with a leading publisher. Although her title was editor, she quickly realized that she was little more than “a glorified clerk/secretary.” Her boss “needed someone who didn’t have any ambitions, who was happy to get the paycheck, who was very nine-to-five.” Wendy was not that someone; she was “dying to kind of be there longer and read manuscripts over my boss’s shoulder. I was really interested in learning this business.” With this goal in mind, she started interviewing and soon found the kind of job she was looking for at a smaller, highly respected press, again as an entry-level editor, but this time actually editing. She recalled her time there “working your way up, trying to convince agents to send you stuff and to acquire. What was good about being in that kind of a situation was there were so few hands, and there were so many books that still had to be published.”

While Wendy advanced to associate editor, the publishing industry was changing around her. She recalled that period: “At that point, it’s so sad, all these publishing houses were still independent. And then gradually [a major publishing company] took over, and they fired a lot of people, and then they moved us over into their building, and after about four years, they just killed the imprint, and we all lost our jobs.” Freelancing for a while, helped by “generous colleagues who kind of got me work here and there,” Wendy soon found another editing job, making a lateral move to what she felt was “a much better house.” Not only was this press a better house, it was a good fit, and Wendy settled in, advancing in just over a decade from full editor, where she had “half an assistant,” to senior editor (“where I got my own assistant”), to executive editor (“two assistants”). While moving up, Wendy had two children, after which she continued to work full-time, often working a day a week at home. Being home, Wendy longed to spend more time with her children, and was starting to question whether she could sustain the long hours of her job, reading manuscripts late at night and on weekends. She also started to burn out a bit, wondering whether she would “still be schlepping” manuscripts home in her fifties. Meanwhile, after she had

helped support her husband through school, his career began to take off and stabilize, making it possible for her to take some time out, both to be with her children and to rethink her own next steps. When we talked, Wendy had been a stay-at-home mom for one year.

The Trader. Meg Romano, forty-one, has three children. Meg spent twenty years as a trader before leaving her career four years ago. Despite being one of the few women on the trading floor when she started out in an industry rife with sexism, Meg managed to rise rapidly in the ranks, becoming a head trader by the age of twenty-six. During her childhood outside New York City, Meg's "primary influence" was her mother, "a summa cum laude graduate of Mt. Holyoke, and she graduated college in 1958 when, you know, women just got married and had kids. And always as a kid, my mother's primary thing was 'You need to have your education and you need to think about what you want to do with your life. You need to be able to support yourself as a woman so that you can have lots of choices.'" Meg's mother did not work herself until she had to, when Meg's father, a banker, lost a series of jobs as a result of the collapse of the savings and loan industry during the 1970s. While Meg's mother was successful at what she did and was able to put her children through college on her earnings, Meg and her siblings recognized that they needed "to pay for as much as we could." Describing herself as "a mediocre student," Meg attended a public university in a neighboring state, majored in economics and political science, and "got out of school [in the early 1980s] not really knowing what I wanted to do."

Meg's job during college made her realize "that I wasn't ready for that really locked-in sort of corporate world." Her mother pointed her toward Wall Street, where many male relatives worked: "You know, I know a lot of people who aren't that smart who've made a lot of money in Wall Street and you're pretty savvy. You were never a good student, but you're pretty savvy. Why don't you give it a try?" Calling on a family contact, Meg found work as a clerk on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and "the rest, as they say, is history. That was 1982 and

that was the first leg of this major twenty-year bull market that we've had. And so it was very exciting."

Meg moved up rapidly, first by quickly "schmoozing" her way into a better job at a bigger firm, where she was taken under the wing of a senior trader who soon realized how little she knew. "So basically," Meg recalled with gratitude, "he demoted me," having her do low-level jobs that gave her the chance to learn the ropes of this high-stakes field. Within the year, she "got a lucky break" and another promotion, her boss sending her off with the tough love admonition, "Here you go, kid, sink or swim." Recalling the learning curve as "enormous," Meg swam and was soon training others on the floor. After about three years, however, she "knew that this wasn't where I was going to make my career. I didn't want to stay in that environment of all those men all the time every day. It's a very tense environment. You're screaming and yelling all day long. You're on your feet all day. Everything is a curse word. Everything is 'You f— a—.'" Once again taking the initiative, but wanting to stay in trading ("my strength"), Meg decided to move to the (relatively) quieter institutional trading desk, where trading was in blocs of upward of 25,000 shares of stock. Meg liked it "upstairs" off the floor and once more she was taken under wing by supportive mentors. Her next opportunity arose after two years when she was offered the job of head trader, an offer her mentors counseled her she could not refuse because it would not only afford her "exposure to all of Wall Street," but double her salary. "So they said to me, 'You know, for a woman of your age,' and at the time I was all of twenty-six years old, 'this is a great opportunity, and there's no downside to it.'"

Meg met her husband on the exchange and when he wanted to return to Philadelphia, his hometown, to go to law school, she moved willingly. When the job she had originally lined up disappeared in the crash of 1989, Meg found another one in what was then a small firm. Today it is one of the largest investment funds in the country, and Meg's fortunes prospered with the company's. Along the way she had three children, and was able to move between working part-time and full-time as the

situation demanded. When her youngest child was diagnosed with a serious congenital medical problem, Meg took a leave of absence to oversee his treatment. Ready to return, she lined up a part-time position so that she would still be able to keep an eye on her son's condition, which was improving, but still not out of the woods. At the last minute, after eight years with the firm, the part-time option evaporated and she was told she would have to return full-time. She quit instead.

The Retailer. Vivian Osterman, forty-three, was sporty and put together, crackling with energy and enthusiasm as we talked. The daughter of a business owner and at-home mother, Vivian was raised in a suburb-like section of greater New York City and went from there to Dartmouth, where she majored in botany. Offered two jobs upon graduating, she opted for the one that gave her the opportunity to explore a new part of the country, moving to Boulder, Colorado, to take a job teaching science at a progressive high school. Out West, within a year she met and married her husband, Jack. While still teaching, Vivian was approached by a landscaping firm that wanted to start a retail operation. Vivian let them know that "I did not have a lot of retail experience," but despite her protestations, they wanted to hire her anyway and she finally took a job with them that was more science than selling. Within about six months, however, they approached her again about working with someone else to start the retail operation. This time she said yes, and, moving into the retailing job, discovered that she "loved and enjoyed it." Meanwhile, her husband applied to law schools on the East Coast, finally settling on one in New York where he thought he could best pursue a career in corporate law.

Vivian fully supported their move back East and decided to continue in retail, her decision informed by her desire to support her husband: "I'd been working in retail — didn't explore teaching because I knew there was probably more flexibility in retail, number one, and definitely more money in retail, and Jack and I had decided that I was going to be

[supporting him].” Immediately she found work with a major retailer: “I was there about a week and I landed a position with a well-known hard goods store as an assistant buyer in dinnerware.” Within about six months, she became the fine gifts buyer, a position she held for the next four years. As buyer for an upscale retailer, “which had huge volume and gave me a tremendous amount of freedom,” Vivian’s job involved a great deal of traveling, much of it international, and long hours, both of which were “fine because number one, we didn’t have children and Jack could be doing schoolwork twenty-four hours a day and when you work in retail you can work as much as you want. They love it; the more you work, the happier they are, especially in this age when stores are open all hours, all days, holidays.” Responsible for a budget of about five to six million dollars, Vivian thrived in the job, honing her negotiating skills and finding even the pressure of making the numbers for her department “no problem, an easy skill for me. I loved what I was doing.”

Meanwhile, with her husband still in law school, the couple decided to try having a baby. Although Vivian was only thirty-four, they “didn’t get pregnant as quickly as we had hoped.” In fact, she suffered a number of early-term miscarriages and her doctor, allowing that it wasn’t an exact science, “recommended that [she] slow down.” Vivian had few regrets about quitting her job: “I just felt that this job was too many hours, too much traveling overseas, and just too stressful in light of the fact that we were probably not in the best situation for my health.” Rather than give up work altogether, however, Vivian took a job near the new home they had recently built in the suburbs, a no-stress job “with very set hours.” Shortly thereafter she became pregnant with twins, but again medical circumstances intervened. During the first trimester of this pregnancy, “the doctor suggested that because of my age, my past history, and just that they were multiples, that I stop working, which I did.” This was not a problem for Vivian, who, unlike the other women profiled, had “always had the philosophy that if indeed you were financially able that one of us would stay home with our children and

once Jack decided to go to law school, which was a joint decision, it obviously was going to be me.” Vivian was “perfectly content” and “happy” with this plan, which she also characterized as a “joint decision.” When Jack was offered a new job that represented a big promotion, the family moved to Portland, Maine, where Vivian has been home with her twin boys ever since, nine years at the time of our interview.

COMPOSING THEIR LIVES²

Like Kate in her scull, the women I interviewed flew across the water. While making it look easy, they navigated early lives that were complex and high-achieving, and they did so purposefully and strategically. Ambitious and accomplished, they encountered little resistance or drag; life was full speed ahead. The grace and ease — and yes, pride and pleasure — with which they recounted those earlier lives was striking. And even women who started from less lofty heights, such as Diane who attended a local commuter college or Meg who was “not much of a student” and graduated from a state university, were propelled forward in their careers by their focus, by forward-looking vision, and by a drive to learn and be successful in what they did, their goals realized through their capacity, savvy, and hard work. They were highly directed, indicating little vacillation at major turning points such as college graduation, and they took advantage of opportunities or made their own. Over half graduated from highly selective undergraduate schools — Ivy League, Seven Sisters, public Ivies, and other “name” schools — and equally or more prestigious graduate and professional schools. Their accomplishments spoke for themselves: these women did not shy away from high-pressure, competitive environments; in fact, they sought them out. Just as Elizabeth Brand applied only to the top business schools in the country, so another woman, Denise Hortas, a scientist and drug development executive, applied only to the best programs at major research universities to pursue her PhD. Over half the women had post-graduate degrees. MBAs and JDs were the most popular, but many had master’s

degrees in their fields, and two had MDs. These credentials, the reflection of their own purposefulness and drive, opened many doors.

NOT PIONEERS

Women like Kate and Elizabeth did not hesitate to enter business school, just as Denise never thought twice about pursuing a career in science. When most of these women were planning for their future careers, women made up significant shares of professional and business school enrollments, even at leading business schools such as Harvard (which did not admit women to its two-year MBA program until 1963³), Stanford, and Wharton. It was only a woman such as Naomi Osborn, forty-nine, one of the oldest women I interviewed, who remarked on the novelty of being a woman at the Ivy League university where she earned her MBA (the same school where she had gotten her BA). Recollecting that she was “one of only eighty women in a class of eight hundred,” she nonetheless revealed in this atmosphere: “I really enjoyed it, the women banded together, it was tough, but I learned a lot.” Thus women approached their chosen fields with confidence and relish, not trepidation. They did not remark on being unusual because they weren’t. Instead, if anything, they felt much the way Diane did about accounting, which she went into because opportunities for women were expanding. A few were true tokens — small in number, but highly visible. When they encountered adversity because of their gender, they typically handled it head-on and full speed ahead. Meg, who worked on Wall Street, for example, was one of forty women among two thousand men. She described life on the trading floor, a work environment where affairs and sexual innuendo were rampant. Her attitude: “I didn’t take all that — I mean, sexual harassment, it was there. I mean, you know, people would look right at you and say, ‘Oh, nice set of tits you’ve got there,’ but for me it was like, ‘What’s the matter with you?’”

While some of these women may have been relatively early entrants to their fields, they were not pioneering trailblazers. Moreover, they were armed with impressive credentials equal to any of their male coun-

terparts'. As they transitioned from school to work and over the course of their early careers, they pursued a path very like, in fact almost indistinguishable from, men's. Not surprisingly for women with their elite educational backgrounds who were prepared for the top, they aimed for the most esteemed and high-status professions. Over half entered prestigious, historically male-dominated fields such as investment banking, management consulting, law, and medicine, while around a third entered fields that were not so strongly sex-typed, nor so lucrative, such as publishing, health care, and marketing. Only four women in my sample (and these women's educational credentials were not as strong, at least in the reputations of the schools from which they graduated) entered the traditionally and relatively lower-paying and less prestigious "female" professions such as teaching and social work. Most, like Vivian who left teaching for retail, eschewed the historically feminine professions for what they and others perceived to be greener pastures.

ALL THE BEST PLACES

These high-achieving women worked at places that befit their impressive credentials. It was not unusual for firms to actively and aggressively court these graduates of leading colleges and graduate and professional schools for summer internships and plum jobs that put them on the fast track to promotions, partnerships, and the like. Most found employment in firms and organizations that were as sought after in their own way as the schools they had left behind. Even those whose educational credentials were not as prestigious readily found jobs with employers whose reputations, if not gilt-edged, were rock solid. They worked for leading law, financial services, and management consulting firms, major corporations, and premier health, education, and non-profit institutions. In human resource parlance, these are "employers of choice," places people want to work, places known for high salaries, interesting and challenging jobs, relatively secure employment, good prospects for career growth, and, more recently, places known for promoting family

friendliness and women's advancement, the kinds of employers that show up on the "Best Places to Work" lists compiled by magazines such as *Working Mother* and *Fortune*.

FLUIDITY AND FOCUS

Women segued easily from undergraduate to graduate or professional school and then into careers, with virtually none of them reporting any significant redirection or interruption in the transition from schooling to work. Their early career trajectories were linear, uninterrupted, and on course. If they trained to be lawyers, they *were* lawyers, to be doctors, they *were* doctors. Women who did not have the benefit of an Ivy League or comparable education made the most of what they did have. Growing up the daughter of working-class parents, Tess Waverly's formal schooling ended with an associate's degree, but she did not let this slow her down, and eventually made one of the biggest leaps in corporate America — from support staff to management:

I got my foot in the door there. It was a real hard company to get into, but I knew somebody in there, and they helped me get in without a [bachelor's] degree. So that was like a huge thing. Started out as a secretary and worked my way all the way up to management by the time I left.

Tess aimed to break the glass ceiling, as did Maeve Turner, a lawyer who worked harder and more productively than anyone else in order to secure a job that was beyond her credentials:

I fell in love with the U.S. Attorney's office and the people that were there, but I knew I didn't have a fighting chance of being hired because I didn't graduate from Harvard [Maeve's degree was from a regional law school with a solid but not a national reputation], and I didn't have the credentials . . . I mean, because they could pick anybody at this office. . . . And I literally set out to make myself indispensable on one case as a paralegal knowing down the road that hopefully they're going to hire me. Because nobody else is going to know this

case the way I did. And that's what I did. And they did. So I ended up working there as an assistant U.S. attorney against all the odds.

Women were insightful about their strengths and weaknesses, correcting course as necessary to play to the former. Denise, the PhD scientist, was a case in point: "I realized in graduate school that — having been at two extremely good research universities — I did not have the best hands for research." While still a post-doctoral fellow, Denise discovered that while she "did not love doing the research," she did love "the broader sense of being at the university and making the connections. I found that I was very good at talking to people in Lab X and figuring out how what they did in Lab X could help me in my lab," skills she eventually parlayed into a successful career as a biotech executive.

Many women, like Kate, were identified as having high potential early on in their careers. Patricia Lambert was a particularly striking example. From an internship in the state legislature, Patricia became the research director of a Senate campaign while still in her junior year at Columbia. Her candidate won the race, and Patricia managed to graduate — on time and magna cum laude — by fashioning a curriculum heavy on independent study, all the while working for the now-Senator. At the ripe old age of twenty-five, she became "one of two women legislative directors in the Senate, and the youngest one by a very long shot." Patricia eventually left the Senate to pursue an MBA at one of the top business schools in the country and then a career in marketing.

Amanda Taylor, thirty-eight, was a banking executive with a gentle yet straightforward manner, whose trajectory was a bit more typical than Patricia's, but still high-flying. Following graduation from college, Amanda described her speedy and sure-footed upward ascent:

- A: I was in marketing research and information management at the start. Moved into product management, which I saw as both broadening and upward. And then when I moved to [a new bank], I started managing people.
- Q: You're about how old [at this point]?
- A: I'm twenty-six.

Almost without exception, women ascended rapidly in their careers, with three-quarters reporting recognition and success, in the form of promotions and the like, throughout their careers. Like Meg and the other women profiled, they knew to make use of mentors; like Patricia, to seek out challenges and opportunities for professional growth and advancement. Even in relocating, as Kate, Meg, and Vivian did in pursuit of advancing their husbands' careers, women were able to rely on their credentials and experience to land good jobs. Associates at leading law firms, executives at major corporations, and well-respected professionals in other fields, most were women on the fast track and moving upward.

LIVING LARGE

As the comments in the opening profiles illustrate, these women loved their jobs. Elizabeth Brand said about her job as a management consultant, "And I guess I was an impact junkie, being able to work with big companies making big changes . . . Those are things that really got me going." Brooke Coakley, a health care executive, described with relish her job orchestrating major hospital mergers:

On the street we were known as the Dream Team. That's the name that was given to us — the Dream Team. Now that I look back at it, it's amusing in some ways. . . . We were all gung ho and in there and the ideas were flowing and the lights were burning late at night and we were going to do this merger and save the world and create the biggest hospital that [a leading competitor] had ever seen.

LUCKY IN LOVE

These women were as successful in the marriage market as they were in the job market. Many met their husbands as undergraduates or during professional or graduate school. Three-quarters were married by the time they were thirty, and very eligibly, to men who were their professional equals — lawyers, executives, doctors, and business owners among

them. In line with general trends among educated women, they delayed childbearing. On average, married at age twenty-seven, they did not have their first child until they were thirty-three. There was a difference, however, between the younger (under forty) and older (over forty) at-home mothers. Although both groups married at the same age, the younger at-home moms started having kids earlier, a full three years before their older counterparts. The “young” at-home professionals typically had their first child at thirty, while their “older” counterparts waited until they were thirty-three.⁴

NOT THEIR MOTHERS’ DAUGHTERS

Although three-quarters of these bright, high-achieving women were raised in so-called “traditional” families, with a father who worked and a mother who stayed at home, all but a handful imagined that their own paths would be different from their mothers’. That handful, about one in ten, represented by women like Vivian, always planned on following in their mothers’ footsteps. These women actively sought to emulate and recreate the lives they had known growing up. Since college, Sarah Bernheim, a senior marketing manager, knew that she wanted to stay home when she had children: “I hadn’t even met [my husband] yet. I just knew. I think my mom — I mean I loved the fact that my mom was home with us. And I just felt that that’s what I wanted to do for my kids.” Tess Waverly, the secretary turned manager, who in her early thirties left her job to stay home with her first child, “knew forever” that she wanted to stay home because “that’s how I was raised. And my husband.”⁵

The overwhelming majority of women, however, embraced, even took for granted, the vision that they would do it all.⁶ Diane Childs never expected *not* to work: “It was something I wanted to do. And you never thought about not working.” Women wanted children, but motherhood, especially full-time, did not loom large in their aspirations or in their sense of who they would become. Elizabeth, the management consultant, reflected on how she had seen herself: “But I had never really

envisioned myself being a stay-at-home mom. I think it's just not part of the persona that I ever had." Patricia, the political prodigy, was not all that unusual in regarding children as somewhat alien creatures:

I never envisioned myself being a full-time mom, a homemaker. I hate that term. I just never saw myself that way. Kids were kind of weird to me. They were sort of sausages with clothes on. I didn't have younger siblings. I didn't do babysitting.

Elizabeth and Patricia found the prospect of being full-time mothers especially foreign; more typical was Emily Mitchell, a manager overseeing customer service for an insurance company, for whom combining work and family was "just what I assumed I would do." Similarly, Jessica Beckman, a marketing manager in a high-tech firm, recalled how "I don't think when I was younger that I had any kind of vision of being a full-time stay-at-home mom. I think I probably had the image in my mind to be one of those working moms, doing it all." Marina Isherwood, a former HMO manager, expressed especially crisply how most women envisioned their future lives: "I had always assumed that I was going to work when I had children. And I didn't understand why somebody wouldn't." Having worked hard to earn their credentials, many women, especially those who had pursued advanced degrees, were mindful of making use of their education as they envisioned their life plans. Denise, the PhD scientist turned biotech executive, reflected: "I didn't view my training as something I'd give up for family."

So what happened to change Denise's mind and to cause Elizabeth to embrace a persona that had at one time seemed alien? Against this backdrop of high aspirations and realized accomplishment, why did these women leave careers in which they had enjoyed considerable success? What led them to take the step to become the at-home mothers that most had never envisioned they would be, a step that had seemed incomprehensible when they were moving onward and upward with their lives, when they, like Kate, the crew coxswain, flew effortlessly over the water?