Excerpt from “Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Innercity” by Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson
Three

The New Package Deal

Robert aka “Bear” Mallory earned his nickname in childhood. While on an errand for their father, he and his brother were jumped by three older boys. In self defense Bear started “biting and biting” one of his opponents and held on with his teeth—“like a bear,” according to the police officer called to the scene—until he tore off the other boy’s nipple. Bear revels in the retelling of this story and admires those who exhibit their toughness with violent exploits.

Despite the violent origins of his nickname, Bear reports an amazingly conventional adolescence for a white boy from Kensington. Surrounded by troubled peers, Bear nonetheless went to school regularly and earned solid Bs while working diligently at a number of after-school jobs, taking pride in the “possessions”—the sound system and small TV—he was able to accumulate with his earnings. Aspiring to a military career, Bear joined the Army Reserves at sixteen and completed the first half of his training in Basic Combat between his junior and senior year. To qualify for phase two of the training he had merely to finish high school.

Just three weeks shy of graduation, however, Bear had a violent fight with his stepfather, a sadistic man whose abusive behavior began the evening the two first met, when Bear was thirteen. During that encounter Bear had made the mistake of bringing an action figure—his prized toy—to the dinner table, and as punishment the man pushed Bear’s face into a plate of mashed potatoes. After years of being on the losing end of vicious beatings, Bear won this fight—Army training had left him physically fit—but lost the battle. In retaliation his stepfather kicked him out of the house, handing him a one-way bus ticket to North Carolina, where Bear’s father had kin, on the way out the door. But Bear didn’t board that bus right away. For the next three days, Bear, now homeless, struggled to stay in school. He showered surreptitiously in the neighbor’s backyard with a garden hose and made sure he woke in time for classes. “I propped myself up against this store door that opened up at 6 a.m. and for them to get in they had to wake me up. So it was like my own little alarm clock,” he recalls. But this grueling routine proved too hard. Admitting defeat, Bear boarded a Greyhound headed south, where his biological dad—recently dead from cancer—had a half brother.

As the bus lumbered down Interstate 95, Bear convinced himself that there was a bright side. Perhaps he could bring comfort to the family, as his uncle, a sanitary engineer and father of three young children, was struggling with the same disease his father had died from. Bear would do more than rise to that challenge; soon after he arrived the uncle died, and then “one thing just led to another”—he began having sex with his newly widowed aunt by marriage. Within a year of his arrival, Amber gave birth to Alyssa, Bear’s first and her fourth child.
Meanwhile, Bear was learning that jobs for high school dropouts were in short supply in rural North Carolina. A half dozen relatives back home offered him help finding work, and Bear decided the best way to fulfill his impending family responsibilities was to return to Philadelphia, where he secured a job at a print shop for eight dollars an hour. Eager to keep the family together, Amber decided to join him. The two even managed to buy a rattletrap row home at a rock-bottom price, courtesy of his uncle’s life insurance policy, just eight blocks southwest of his mother’s house. But the overwhelmingly poor and predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood they settled in was a world apart from Bear’s childhood home in largely white Kensington. Their new address was in North Philadelphia’s Harrogate section, not far from the infamous drug-infested “Badlands,” and the choice of location proved to be a fateful one. As Bear tells us later, “that was our downfall.”

Just a month or so after they had settled into their new home, Bear was laid off from his job. Then there was “nothing else to do but sell drugs,” or at least that’s what he told himself at the time. Truth be told, he had leads to some low-end jobs. Getting involved with the drug scene, which quite literally surrounded the small house just off G Street and Allegheny, was a youthful adventure and a rebellious rejection of the expectations suddenly foisted on this nineteen-year-old who had—more or less by accident—become “head of the house” of a family of six overnight. “There was just so much, well, kids mainly,” says Bear, identifying the main source of stress that spurred his descent into deviant activity.

Soon Bear had transformed this dwelling from the happy home of a newly formed family to a “weed house,” at least while Amber worked her four p.m. to midnight shift as a waitress at a diner a mile away. The home’s location was perfect. Whites who wanted to satisfy their addictions in drug-rich North Philadelphia had to venture only two blocks west of Kensington Avenue, which marked the boundary of the typical white’s comfort zone. And customers could do business with fellow whites, which added to the feeling of safety. Bear didn’t perceive much danger in the enterprise—after all, they didn’t sell “hard stuff,” only marijuana they purchased for under-market value from a twelve-year-old Puerto Rican kid who “wasn’t too bright.” So while Amber was waitressing full-time to supplement the monthly two thousand dollars in Social Security death benefits she received for herself and the children she had had with Bear’s uncle—Bear, who was supposed to be looking after the kids, carried his infant daughter strapped to his chest, letting the older kids run wild while he and a handful of childhood friends who lived nearby developed the business. Bear figured that he might as well blow the proceeds—on alcohol, drugs, and old cars, so he and his friends could stage their own “little crash-up derbies”—because he knew Amber wouldn’t approve of where the money came from.

Then the Phillies made it to the World Series and Bear decided to celebrate, gathering his buddies to watch the final game. They downed a shot of Canadian Windsor for every base hit and RBI. The Phillies were winning, and Bear’s friends—who were “so screwed up it’s unreal”—and the whole neighborhood went wild. “People are shooting guns ‘cause the Phillies are winning. . . . shootin’ in the air. We decide to take our clothes off and run around the block naked.” This is what pushed the street’s “old ladies” over the edge. A week later at a meeting of the neighborhood watch, they made sure Amber, who had been serving cheesesteaks and fries during that final game, got wind of what
happened. Suddenly, the truth about everything—the parties, the weed, and Bear’s own growing drug use—was revealed. Amber ejected Bear from the house.

But several months later, while Bear was serving an alternative sentence on a drug possession charge at Eagleville State Hospital, a rehabilitation center just outside of Philadelphia, Amber had a change of heart and came for a visit. Once the two were alone, one thing just led to another yet again. Bear had heard rumors that men are more potent when they are “cleaning their systems out,” so was not totally surprised when, upon his release, Amber had news. Despite the fact that he was, by his own admission, already overwhelmed by paternal responsibilities, learning the child would be a boy still made Bear giddy with anticipation—and determined to set things right with Amber. Upon release he talked his way back into the house and traded his fairly lucrative life as a low-level drug dealer for a part-time job at his mother’s brother’s salvage yard. This job paid only $50 a day, but he hoped he’d have better luck in the legitimate labor market eventually. He also stayed clean and tried to steer clear of his old friends—several had become addicts; some were even living on the streets. One close friend was dead, a victim of a lethal overdose, by this time.

Luck didn’t strike until two years later when Bear, demoralized by his failed quest to secure a better job, got a tip from Amber’s aunt’s boyfriend and landed a position as an off-the-books roofer. The job paid relatively well—$125.00 a day—but was dangerous; it was also miserable in midsummer, when the blistering sun heated the asphalt shingles like a frying pan. But Bear’s primary lament was that he could only scale Philadelphia’s rooftops to do the work when it was not winter and not raining or when his boss, a recovering addict, didn’t suddenly feel the urge to take off a day to attend a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. He ended up earning only about $15,000 a year from that job. Those higher-up and “on the books” in the construction trade are often unionized and better paid. Plus, they can claim unemployment benefits when the weather gets cold. These perks were off-limits for Bear; he had no formal training, no valuable skills, and no union card; he didn’t even work on the books. He rued the fact that “my income ain’t that great” but managed to supplement his earnings by scoring side jobs on weekends. A friend owned a power washer, and the two developed a small referral chain among homeowners whose domiciles were encased in aging aluminum. Bear has just begun taking his son, nicknamed Cub, along on these weekend power-washing junkets, delighting in any opportunity to impart fatherly wisdom, such as “teaching my son to pee standing up in the bushes.” Meanwhile, Bear dreams of becoming a firefighter, a job where he can pull down real money, and fantasizes about becoming the father whose progeny respect him because he’s done something truly worthwhile, like rescuing a child from a burning building.

Bear is still clean and spends nearly all his leisure time with his family. And there is now a real spark in his relationship with Amber; they have just gotten engaged. But mainly it is Cub, now two, and, to a lesser extent, Alyssa, age five, who provide the motivation to stay on Amber’s good side and surrender to the demands of a relationship. As we will see, this fact is not lost on Amber.
“Doing Stupid Shit”

Bear strives to form an “ideal family unit” in the wake of the birth of a child. He is not alone. Despite the near ubiquity of unplanned conception, most fathers like Bear do make some effort to forge lasting relationships with their baby’s mother. Survey research shows that at birth, more than eight in ten men who have a child outside of marriage are romantically involved with the mother, and about the same proportion say there is least an even chance they’ll eventually marry her. Half have found a way to live together by the time the baby arrives, and even more have tried living together by the child’s first birthday. Many men in Bear’s situation are well intentioned. They want their relationships with the mothers of their children to work. But while good intentions may be a necessary foundation for stable family life, they are rarely sufficient. Of the men we spoke with, only a few were unambiguously “with” their child’s mother at the time—although hopes for reconciliation are common.

What goes wrong between the euphoria of a baby’s arrival and that child’s fifth birthday, when surveys reveal that only one in three men will still be in a relationship with their child’s mother? Our autopsy of relationship failure doesn’t focus on the proximal causes that feature again and again in the narratives that appear throughout this volume—substance abuse, serious conflict, infidelity, incarceration, and so on (see table 5 in the appendix). The corrosive effects of these factors have been well documented. Instead, we attend to the more subtle relationship dynamics that underlie the often-tawdry finales that blow their relationships apart.

Let’s return to the story of Bear, who like many economically disadvantaged men, began his career as a father young; he was only nineteen when Alyssa was born. In his teens, he kept his partying in check, stayed in school, and steered clear of the law even though his family tree offered any number of felons ready to serve as alternative role models. “Half . . . are on death row . . . , all derelicts, OK? Drug dealers, pimps, I mean, you name it,” he explains. In fact, among the fathers we spoke with, Bear’s adolescent years were unusually orthodox. But just a few months into fatherhood, and after losing the print-shop job, he began to behave like most of the other Kensington youth he’d grown up with—he “started doing stupid shit.” He whitewashed his act while Amber was around, but the farce was exposed by the neighborhood’s “old ladies,” who may have turned a blind eye to the drug dealing but stood firm against a gang of white drunks running naked in the street.

In these contexts both mothers like Amber and fathers like Bear often claim that their children have transformed their lives. But there is no denying that the men typically “rip and run” a lot before the baby comes and are far less likely than the mothers of their children to stay on the straight and narrow after the birth. Women usually see children as their chief source of meaning and identity and often hope—even if it is clearly against the odds—that their baby’s father will emerge from the crucible of pregnancy and birth as deeply transformed as they are, willing now to put the interests of his family ahead of his own. Men like Bear, though, often fail to fully embrace the new life or to cast off the old.

What happens next is illustrative. Just after Bear and Amber’s engagement, six years after their first child Alyssa was conceived, Bear injures his back and can’t work. Lacking health insurance, he decides to ease his pain by scoring a small quantity of the Percocets that are so readily available on the
streets of North Philadelphia. Amber is also uninsured and suffering from an abscessed tooth, so she
gives Bear money to purchase painkillers for her as well. Finances are tight, so the cash she entrusts to
Bear is especially precious. Things do not go as planned. While waiting for his contact to arrive, Bear
spots another dealer and decides that he has enough extra cash to purchase a small quantity of
cocaine—due to the pain, he tells himself. A police officer observes him making the buy, beats him up,
and locks him in a paddy wagon for several hours before releasing him—minus the cocaine and the rest
of money. When Bear finally drags himself back to the house, Amber takes a dim view of his story,
convinced he has wasted her hard-earned cash and that he has spent the intervening hours getting high.
And there is other evidence that Bear may be veering off the righteous path; just the other day he and
his brother had tried to score cocaine for resale to pay off his brother’s child-support debt. A rival drug
dealer confronted the pair and shattered a two-by-four over Bear’s head, only to be met by Bear’s irate
brother, who beat the assailant in the head with a cinder block, rendering him unconscious. “He messed
that guy up good,” Bear chuckles, with brotherly pride. But Amber fails to see the humor in either
situation. Not surprisingly, Bear ends up living back with his mother.

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We have chronicled how eagerly men anticipate children despite the fact they seldom plan them. We
have also shown how much they believe they have to lose if they break up with the mother of their
child—the chance to create the “ideal family unit” and the opportunity to enjoy “the whole fatherhood
experience.” Cub, especially, is clearly the apple of Bear’s eye. How do we then account for Bear’s failure
to fully shape up the way that a family man should? Why can’t these men try harder?

In many ways, we argue, the speed at which couples break up only reflects the essential truth of
these relationships—that beneath the facade of family like ties, these men seldom have a strong
attachment to their children’s mothers. We run into Amber after a lengthy final conversation with Bear,
and she confides that something vital has always been missing in the relationship: “I see the way he
looks at his son. I wish he would look at me that way some time,” she says poignantly. Amber has always
sensed what the trouble is: though he’s clearly attached to his children, she’s less sure that he’s devoted
to her.

Despite men’s apparent resolve to reform, weak attachment to one’s child’s mother is a key part
of their failure to do so. What can account for the shortfall in this basic ingredient of couplehood? First,
consider that young people across the class spectrum break up every day over any number of things,
from whether the toothpaste tube is squeezed in the middle or rolled up from the bottom to
dissimilarities in moral outlook. Conversely, even seemingly trivial things like similar tastes in music or
food or bits of common biography may form the glue that helps keep relationships together. One piece
to the puzzle of low attachment is the incredible brevity of most unions prior to conception; young
disadvantaged couples who have children together may emerge from the euphoria of the delivery room
only to find they have astoundingly little in common—a seemingly obvious, yet crucial fact.

Potential points of friction, both large and small, are often submerged in the months leading up
to delivery as the couple scrambles to get ready for the baby. Bear and Amber, for example, were too
busy arranging an interstate move for the very pregnant Amber and her three young children to think much about the large difference in their ages—not to mention maturity levels. But in the late stages of pregnancy or in aftermath of the birth, variations in background and outlook often come raging to the fore. What might have been little more than “togetherness” at the point of conception—at least from his point of view—has been prolonged and intensified, first by the news of the impending birth, then by midnight demands for pickles and ice cream (recall Byron Jones from chapter 2), followed by a flurry of activity to get ready for the baby, and then, finally, by the event itself. But as the day-to-day routine of being a “family” sets in, many fathers—and no doubt mothers—are often surprised by the fact that they’ve joined their lives with a veritable stranger’s.

Self, an African American twenty-one-year-old from North Philadelphia we met in chapter 2, earned his GED and certification as a nurse’s aide while in Gary, Indiana, where he was assigned to Job Corps after an expulsion from University City High. He’s never managed to find a full-time job in that trade (or any other) so he scrapes by working three nights a week as a nightclub waiter. Self is highly articulate and defines himself by his art (performance of the spoken word), his love of learning (treatises like Black Men, Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?), and his spiritual orientation (a blend of prayer and relaxation exercises). His story illustrates how the birth of a child often forces a young couple to consider important issues that they have avoided before.

Self met his first baby’s mother on her front stoop when he was eleven and she was thirteen. Seven years later, after Self returned from Job Corps in Pittsburg, the two reconnected and almost immediately conceived. But once mother and child came home from the hospital, the couple began to wrangle over “money issues,” and Self also suddenly became aware of how different her background and outlook were from his own.

Self considers himself a self-made artist and intellectual. His mother had struggled to put herself through college after he and his siblings were born, and his goal is to do likewise. Meanwhile, in his ample spare time, he sits in on public lectures at Temple University and performs spoken word at local clubs. His mother’s bachelor’s degree and her occupation—an administrative assistant at Drexel University—lends his family a certain level of status. In contrast, Self’s baby’s mother is an aimless high school dropout from a family with no such pretentions. After the baby was born, Self tried to provide the intellectual “uplift” he thought she would benefit from. She felt belittled by his efforts and a rift opened that rapidly widened.

“How did the birth of your first child affect your relationship?” we ask. “It’s crazy, man, because the birth of the child gave us more issues to approach. So that opened up the door to agree or disagree.” What kind of issues? “Money. Also, I think at that point, I started looking at her more as somebody I wanted to uplift. So after the child was born, since I took on that point of view, I would do things like get books for her and teach her the things that I was learning. And at the time, she may not have been as open to that, and I may have taken that personally. . . . So I think after the child was born, it created a certain bitterness in our relationship.”
Recall Ozzie and Dawn from chapter 2, who got pregnant only four months after exchanging phone numbers one night on South Street. When their daughter Roxanne entered the world after a protracted labor and painful cesarean section, Ozzie, who was forced to wait anxiously outside the delivery room during the surgery, was on top of the world. But over time the differences between Ozzie and his child’s mother emerged. He continued to flit between any number of low-level, part-time jobs—changing oil at Pep Boys, setting up and taking down shows at the convention center, washing dishes at an Italian restaurant—which combined seldom brought in more than two hundred dollars each week. He lived with his mother rent free, so had little motivation to work more. Dawn, though, was far more ambitious. She had enrolled in community college and was pursuing a nursing degree and, in addition to her studies, she had taken on the night shift at Kmart so the couple could get a place of their own. “She was mad ’cause I wasn’t working enough,” he recalls. “She said I was lazy, that I didn’t want to work.”

How did Ozzie respond to these taunts? “I started treating Dawn like crap, treating my family like crap, getting into fights with everybody—fistfights, like arguments with my mother and everybody. Pushing Dawn around—like I would hit her and stuff—I didn’t mean it. The next day I would feel really, really bad. . . . You don’t go and hit somebody if you love her, if you are going to marry her.” It was during one of these violent episodes that Dawn, after five years together, finally broke things off.

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Having too little in common isn’t the only source of friction that emerges soon after the baby is born. As new parents like these embark on the serious business of building a bond, certain expectations come into play—his and hers—and stark gender differences emerge in how each thinks a father ought to respond. Mothers are now thoroughly engrossed in the tasks of caring for a newborn and begin to set their sights on the “marriage bar”—standards regarding what it will take to make them ready for marriage. As Christina Gibson and her colleagues have shown, both parties agree that the relationship must be of suitable quality and that the couple’s finances have to be “right” before the wedding. These standards are fairly high, and new parents are aware it might require several years to meet them. Now that they share a child, the mother is often chomping at the bit to start making progress toward these objectives. After all, she reasons, isn’t this why they are together?

What effect does this have on the new father? Think back to the stories of Ozzie and Self, whose haphazard partnerships led to relationships with women they shared little in common with. Note that after the baby is born, Dawn promptly enrolls in school and takes a job to save money for an apartment of their own. Meanwhile, Ozzie’s desultory attitude toward work doesn’t change at all—he’s seems happy if he’s just getting by, content to remain living with his mother. No wonder she begins taunting him, charging that he’s lazy because he can’t get a full-time job. Similarly, when Self’s first child is born, he is also less than motivated to find full-time work. “I think I was more into performing at the time,” he admits. “You know, as an artist. I may have had a part-time job somewhere in there, but I don’t remember working really that much.” Meanwhile, his baby’s mother is forced to take on full-time employment at a clothing store. Is it any surprise that there are suddenly “money issues”? 
Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas have told the mother’s side of the story in this way: for her a baby is instant maturity—if she doesn’t get her life together and figure out a way to support the child, she could lose custody to the state. Plus, she, he, and the community at large assign her—not them—ultimate parental responsibility. She usually welcomes this opportunity to prove herself, because it is a chance to move away from the chaos of a life spinning out of control toward one that is ordered by the routine demands of a child. Once she becomes a mother though, she begins to evaluate her partner in a new light—where does he stand in relation to the marriage bar? A sharp sudden rise in expectations—both in terms of the relationship’s quality and financial viability—is the result. Suddenly, she’s set standards for his behavior that she may never have given voice to before, and he seldom sees this change coming.

Debuting in 1955, the television sitcom The Honeymooners kept American households in thrall for more than two decades. Alice Kramden is the grown-up in the relationship and keeps the family together, while her working-class husband Ralph bumbles hopelessly along, pursuing one get-rich scheme after another. In the 1960s American children were offered their own helping of the same theme; Wilma Flintstone and Betty Rubble had to constantly bring their foolish, accident-prone husbands up to speed in the important matters of life. For decades, even centuries, popular culture has served up the notion that wives must fix up their men. To the extent that this actually happens, most American husbands seem to be rising to their wives’ demands without too much resistance—after all, married men earn more, drink and carouse less, and commit less crime than their unmarried counterparts do.

But men at the bottom have a sharply different reaction. Her new mandates are not met with the begrudging acceptance of a Ralph Kramden—or those of the typical American husband, who has become increasingly involved in the day-to-day activities of family life in recent decades.1 Instead, our men become bewildered, aggrieved, and enraged—one mark of a deep fragility that has its roots in men’s often-troubled families of origin and will manifest itself again and again as this book tells the rest of its story. The sudden change in her expectations may, in fact, be read as a betrayal, conclusive evidence that she is lacking in commitment, willing to throw him over as soon as he fails to meet her mounting demands. Men often counter with the charge that their new baby’s mother is an overbearing know-it-all.

Dayton is thirty, black, and has three children aged four, five, and seven. Donald is also African American, and is a thirty-seven-year-old substitute teacher’s aide. What the printed page does not reveal is the sharp emotion both Dayton and Donald expressed as they shared this part of their stories. Dayton, a day laborer, says that he broke it off with his youngest child’s mother “because she is the type of female that don’t want to listen. She think she know everything. . . . But I am not that type of guy that tolerates things like that.” Donald and the mother of his seventeen-year-old child tried living together for a short time when his child was young, but “it ain’t’ work,” he states bluntly. “It lasted about three or four weeks. I couldn’t take it.” What went wrong? “I couldn’t deal with her ‘I’m the boss’ attitude. She is a very controlling person, always trying to run my life and everybody else’s life.”
Thus, as soon as a woman has the baby, she can easily be perceived as just one more authority figure—the kind they’ve been rebelling against all their lives—who insists that he shape up and toe the line. And on the financial end she may be viewed as a mere mercenary, just out for his money—Boy Boy, a black twenty–year–old father of a four–year–old child, sums up the sentiments of many when he tells us, “it’s all about the Benjamin’s now. If you don’t got no hundred dollar bills, you don’t got no woman.” He responds grudgingly, in part, because this all comes as a surprise—it is remarkable how men consistently fail to anticipate that their children’s mother’s expectations will rise after a birth, even if this baby is not their first. Some, like Dayton and Donald, break things off quickly for this reason, while others labor for several years under the weight of her expectations, as Bear did, only to falter later on.

The one-sided revolution in expectations, which places women in the judgment seat and men in the supplicant’s role, makes it easy for him to blame the relationship’s demise on her “I’m the boss attitude”—and even to extend the character assassination to the entire female half of the population. Jeff is a forty–six–year–old African American father of a two–year–old boy and an eighteen–year–old daughter. He works as a cook at Essene Market and Cafe on South Street and says that participating in the birth of both of his children was a “blessing.” “I was stunned! I was just at a loss for words. It was so beautiful just to see my daughter coming out of her mother’s womb. With both of my children, I was the first one to hold them.” Clearly relishing the memory, Jeff continues, “I really felt good. With my youngest, my son, I asked the nurse to take pictures of him, the whole nine yards. And I have all of this in a little folder. I’m talking about before and after he came home—down to the bracelet, with his name, the name card on his crib—I kept all of that, because it was such a wonderful feeling.”

Jeff is only tentatively attached to the mother of that boy, though they live together in a tiny apartment in North Philadelphia. His hesitancy is due in part to a philosophy he’s derived from the hard knocks he received from the mother of his first child, who he feels treated him as little more than a paycheck—pressuring him to turn his earnings over to her. Reflecting on this situation, Jeff says, “I don’t have no trust, no faith in women, behind the fact that to me, a woman is like a snake. They’ll try to manipulate you; they use whatever they have to use to take advantage of you. My daughter’s mother taught me that love is like running water. It turns off and on. I really believe that behind the fact of so many breakups is that they can love you when you’re doing—providing financially—but when you don’t do, they don’t love.” Now Jeff sees this same characteristic in his eighteen–year–old daughter. Despite the fact that he has always paid child support whenever he has had work, “My daughter had told me on numerous occasions that her mother’s boyfriend does more for her than I do, and I felt hurt. Irregardless, if this person is doing something for you or not, he can’t fill my shoes. I’m still your father. If I give you a million dollars or I give you a penny, I’m still your father.”

Men on the economic edge, even in multiyear partnerships with several children together, often obsess about the younger guy with the nicer car who has a better job and might turn their girlfriend’s head. Bill, a white thirty–one–year–old father of six, emphasizes the nearly universal belief that love is not enough; when the money is gone, love disappears. He is haunted by the fear that a younger man with a better job will woo his children’s mother, Michelle. “I hear a lot of people say that love is good, but I am telling you, money will rule over a relationship real quick. If the money is gone, the love is gone, and a lot of women will do that to you. . . . Don’t get me wrong; there might be maybe two relationships out
of a hundred that will survive without money. . . . Even if a man works part-time and he is doing what he has to do—he could be the greatest man in the world—and a woman will overlook that for somebody driving in a new car, a young guy. That guy might have a little bit of money now, but sooner or later down the line he could wind up like I am at any time, no guarantees at all. Yo, that concerns me a lot. I love my girlfriend a lot. I call her my wife because we have been together for twelve years off and on, and we have six kids.”

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But there is more to both of the stories we’ve just told. Jeff was using drugs when his first child was born, a habit that presumably consumed a lot of his cash, and Bill is an alcoholic who falls off the wagon of sobriety at regular intervals—the couple conflicts his drinking provokes can be dangerously fierce: “Since we moved at this house . . . four years ago, there has been cops at my house maybe thirty, forty times because we were fighting,” he confides. So we are still left with the question of why so many of our men can’t just find a decent job, settle down, and bring their money home? Bear’s narrative is another case in point—after all, how much is Amber really asking of him? Fleshing out this part of the story requires us to consider what kind of bond these men really think they are building and how they react to the family like relationships they suddenly find themselves in when their children are born. On the surface it may appear that the new father is fully on board—Bear’s attempts to build a relationship with Amber, to steer clear of drugs and “stay legit” despite the paltry wages from salvage and roofing work, are actually quite typical of men’s efforts in the wake of a birth. But dig just beneath the surface and you will uncover a deeper truth: Bear’s primary attachment has always been to his children, and never to their mother.

This is not how things used to be. American men were partners—usually husbands—first and parents second. Fatherhood was a “package deal.” And it was the tie with the mother that bound men to their obligations to children, obligations they might otherwise have ignored. Scholars studying the lives of men living apart from their children in the fifties, sixties, seventies, and early eighties argued that the “package deal” version of family life worked reasonably well as long as the mother and the father remained together. But when couples broke up, men seemed unwilling, or even unable, to engage with their children. “It is as if men only know how to be fathers indirectly, through the actions of their wives. . . . If the marriage breaks up, the indirect ties between the fathers and children are also broken,” wrote family scholars Frank Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin to explain the paltry rates of father involvement among divorced men in the 1970s and early 1980s. Similarly, Elliot Liebow, the ethnographer of poor black street-corner men of the 1960s, wrote, “It is almost as if the men have no direct relationship with their children independent of their relationship with the mother.”

For men across the bleak terrain of Camden and the economically distressed neighborhoods in Philadelphia, the package deal has been turned upside down. Here it is often the child who is at the center and who binds men to their obligations to their children’s mother. Usually, shared children, and not couple affection or commitment, are the glue, at least in the men’s minds. For men like Self, there is little direct relationship with their child’s mother independent of their relationship with their child (Bear’s union with Amber, which began as a mere relationship of convenience, has only recently
generated a real spark). Yet the purest expression of the desire to parent their children well and get what one man called “the whole fatherhood experience” is their willingness to try to make a go of it with their baby’s mother—to try and form the “ideal family unit” that they view as supreme. They believe it is vital to participate in “all of it”—to witness the first words spoken, the first steps taken, and other crucial milestones. But will a shared child be sufficient to transform these more-or-less coincidental unions into lasting bonds?

The stories we turn to now—of Lavelle and Bruce—show how the couple-level “togetherness” that the “real relationship” suddenly imposes on him can begin to chafe quickly, turning from an itch to a terminal disease almost overnight. The first symptom of the malady is often quite subtle—in the weeks and months following the birth of the child, men are often profoundly vexed by one of the fundamental expectations that usually accompany the transition to family life: the comonitoring of routine activities. Overnight he’s accountable to another person 24-7, when he would rather merely revel in the bond he is forming with his new baby girl or boy. Suddenly, he feels smothered by the weight of this basic expectation. He just can’t stand “all that togetherness.”

Lavelle and Big Toya share a pixieish four-year-old with a shy but mischievous grin. This thirty-four-year-old black man hails from East Camden, but he grew up in rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the middle child of a baker’s dozen born to a stable African American, working-class, two-parent family. When we meet Lavelle, he has been working for four years in the shipping department of a local electronics warehouse and has just gotten a raise to just over nine dollars an hour. His goal is to move further up the ladder, and he works hard to look the part of an aspiring manager, cultivating a clean-cut, conservative look.

Little Toya’s mother, Big Toya, is someone Lavelle knew from the neighborhood—five years ahead of him in school—who walked into a bar where he was drinking one day, handed him a slip of paper with her phone number on it, kissed him on the cheek, and left. The two were barely together when Lavelle was informed he was about to become a father. Once the baby was born, Lavelle fell head over heels in love—with the infant, Little Toya. Lavelle and Big Toya then experimented with being a couple by moving in together, but the way he tells it, Big Toya was so possessive and jealous that he could barely leave the house to get to his job as a door-to-door salesman. Suffocated by the situation, Lavelle abruptly fled, moving from Bucks County to Camden, where he had just found the warehouse job he now holds.

Lavelle had no intention of letting the breakup, or the geographic distance, get in the way of his relationship with Little Toya. But soon Big Toya—an unsmiling woman whose toughness and rough origins are broadcast in her manner and style—made it clear that she was going to restrict Lavelle’s access to his daughter unless he included her in the relationship. She “wanted to play it off as a package deal,” Lavelle complains, mocking her manner and tone, “you can’t take her here without me. You can’t take her there without me.”

Once he resigned to Big Toya’s insistence on the mother-daughter “package deal,” Lavelle began to make considerable efforts to invest once again in a relationship he had run away from just a short
time earlier. He proposed marriage but she turned him down flat, saying that she didn’t want to lose her freedom, her food stamps, or her subsidized apartment. Recently, he has persuaded her to let him call her his fiancée. What has he gotten out of the deal? She is now willing to spend weekends with him in Camden with Little Toya in tow. “She’s fun to be with,” a smiling Lavelle says about his daughter before his countenance clouds and he adds, “She’s better than her mother.” Lavelle readily admits to us that he would never have chosen to stay with big Toya if she hadn’t happened to be the mother of his child, and then hadn’t insisted on making Lavelle’s parental relationship contingent on his connection with her. “Big Toya feels that she gave birth to her, so it’s her way or the highway,” he explains.

Bruce, a white father of two-year-old twins who works day labor and sells blood for extra cash, ends up in a similar situation. Seven weeks after Bruce and Debbie started seeing each other, she declared that she was pregnant. This required a significant mental adjustment for Bruce who, at forty-three, was resigned to childlessness (“I thought I was shooting blanks!”). Then came the second bit of unexpected news: Debbie was carrying twins. Bruce didn’t have much time to recover from this one-two punch before the babies were born. Bruce gloried in fatherhood, but in the weeks that followed he realized that living with the mother of his newborns entailed more constraints than he was prepared to submit to. Despite his age, he had never been in a long-term relationship, and he found that Debbie’s growing claims on his time and attention were driving him wild. “If I would go someplace, she would want to go with me. And that is the main reason that broke us up. I would go to the bathroom, and she wanted to know what I am doing. Why should I have to answer to her . . . ? I just couldn’t put up with it.” Not having Lavelle’s fortitude, Bruce managed to stick it out for only a little while; he packed up and left right after the twins’ second birthday.

Thus far, this chapter has asked why new fathers’ romantic bonds are so fragile and why so many can’t seem to stop engaging in the “stupid shit” that breaks their relationships apart. In 1969 criminologist Travis Hirschi famously turned the tables on the study of delinquency: rather than asking why individuals deviate from conventional norms, he posited that criminologists should focus on why most people don’t. According to this view, life is a vast cafeteria of appetizing temptation. Thus, people need a strong reason—a stake in conformity—to abide by society’s rules.

The key to desistance from deviant activity, Hirschi argued, lies in the strength of one’s social bonds: the depth of one’s attachments, involvements, beliefs, and commitments to mainstream endeavors. Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub have taken this idea one step further, arguing that key moments in young adulthood, such as the transition to marriage, stable work, or even parenthood, can alter one’s trajectory—they can become a “turning point” where one can “knife off” the past and start fresh. But the transforming power of these key life events is contingent on the strength of one’s social bonds.

But even in the “real relationship’s” earliest days, there are multiple signs that the bonds of disadvantaged fathers with the mothers of their children are not strong. First, at the same time these fathers are attempting to form a relationship with the mother of their child, their attachment to their partner is often remarkably low. As we have seen, this is in part because they don’t know each other that well and may have little in common, but there are also other dynamics at work. Second, her rising
expectations are often met not with begrudging acceptance, but with bewilderment and anger. Here, men seem to be actively resisting the notion that they ought to invest more of their time and energy in the activities generally associated with becoming a family man—getting full-time work, settling down, and the like. Third, and perhaps most important, these men reject traditional beliefs about the enterprise they are supposed to be engaged in. They’ve turned conventional beliefs about family life—the package deal—upside down and have embraced a radical alternative, where the child is at the center and the mother is peripheral at best.

And as we show in the pages that follow, their commitment to their child’s mother—the decision-oriented part of the bond—is also often low. We demonstrate that while on the one hand, most men at least go through the motions of forming real family ties, many are actually trying not to make a real choice. While they hold on to one relationship, they simultaneously hold out for something better—the soul mate they believe marriage requires. We show that aspirations for marriage, which seem to have endured even among the segment of the American population least likely to engage in it, as well as men’s high standards for the institution may, in fact, be a driving force behind their unwillingness to fully commit themselves to the women they find themselves having children with.

* Many Americans assume that the institution of marriage has no relevance in the inner-city neighborhoods our men hail from. This is not so. We asked for men’s opinions on several aspects of marriage, including what he thought the ideal marriage relationship was like, how the ideal husband and wife performed their respective roles, the circumstances in which one should get married, and if they could identify any marriage relationships they admired. The answers are illuminating, not only for what they say about men’s attitudes toward marriage itself, but also what they reveal about the true state of their relationships with their children’s mothers.

Thomas, an unemployed white twenty-eight-year-old father of two children, ages six and nine, says he is holding out hope for marriage and longing to find that special “somebody who wants to be with me for the rest of their entire life.” White fathers like Thomas have generally not lacked exposure to marriage; a substantial minority of those we talked to had short-lived marital unions themselves, and many have witnessed the marriages (and the divorces) of kin and friends. But they have seldom seen a marriage they admire. Thus, most conclude that marriage ought to be approached with great care.

Black fathers, by contrast, have almost never had any firsthand experience with marriage, which is also less uncommon among their parents or close kin. Yet this does not mean that it is something they don’t someday aspire to. Michael, a black twenty-seven-year-old stock clerk and the father of a seven-year-old child, says, “I dream about marriage. I dream about like me going to work, me going to work and coming home, and like my daughter and my wife and eating and talking and watching TV, playing. That would be like my day. Just being together.” Michael’s vision of the day-to-day realities of marriage is striking in its simplicity. Yet the conclusion that he and other black fathers like him draw from their lack of experience with marriage are remarkably similar to those of their white counterparts: achieving
the status of marriage is an exceedingly lofty goal and should be contemplated only when one is absolutely sure that he’s ready and only when he’s certain he’s found the right woman.

Men assess their readiness for marriage the way a patient checks his temperature. Being ready is not a matter of will; he must instead observe the symptoms of his own desires and behavior. “Am I really ready to settle down?” is the first question he asks of himself. “Settling down”—limiting sexual activity to just one woman, is a challenge many fathers feel men are congenitally unable to accomplish in their twenties; as one father said, “you gotta get all of the whoring and the hoochie mamas out of your system first.” Boy Boy, a twenty-year-old black father of one, became a father at sixteen—with a thirty-two-year-old relative who seduced him at a family reunion. He says it’s good to have children fairly young, since young men like him are “dropping like flies.” He grew up “on the rough side of things” in the heart of West Kensington, and Boy Boy’s childhood memories are punctuated with shootouts between the local dealers and the police. He was raised by parents who were so embroiled in the drug trade that they didn’t pay their six kids much mind. He’s got a girlfriend his age now and says he is in love; thoughts of marriage have even entered his mind. But he claims he can’t get married to Danea just yet because he’s just got too many “needs” for one woman to satisfy. “The girl can treat me nice and everything. . . . I may love her, but I ain’t gonna get married if I know I am going to still be cheating on her. I like different things, man. Some things she don’t do right. Some things the other girl might do.”

The difficulty of finding sexual satisfaction with just one woman is a common complaint among our younger black fathers, and some of their white counterparts too. But there is often more to these declarations than meets the eye. As a deeper exploration of Boy Boy’s story will show, giving license to one’s “needs” in this domain may salve deeper anxieties about one’s ability to meet a larger set of mainstream expectations. After nearly two years with Danea, the two have taken the relationship to the next level—they have even moved in together. But Boy Boy, who has always tried to stay on the right side of the law, has recently been laid off from his $7.50-an-hour job at a box factory and hasn’t been able to find another job, despite considerable effort. To shore up the family finances, he has begun selling drugs for his father, a longtime neighborhood dealer. Danea has been pressuring him to leave the streets and search harder for legitimate employment. He cites his ninth-grade education as the reason he’s been unable to secure any formal sector work. Meanwhile, how does he deal with her growing reproach? “When we argue and stuff, I go outside and get more phone numbers from girls so that it can ease my mind.”

Young men like Boy Boy are often eager to claim their status as men, yet have little to show for themselves, a state of affairs that can continue for years. “Talking to girls”—which can mean anything from flirting to sex—is a chance to claim some regard for his looks, his wit, his “game,” from a woman who knows only what he has told her about himself, who isn’t aware of his financial situation, his less than stellar past, or the child he has done little to support lately. Likewise, keeping multiple women on a string—as Boy Boy was prone to do before moving in with Danea—dramatically increases the chance that at any given time he will be able to find at least one woman who will be in the mood to put up with him (“ease his mind”) and make him feel like a man. Thus, marriage entails not only disciplining one’s sexual desire but forfeiting a significant source of esteem as well. Sometimes a marginal young man may simply need someone to believe that he is better than he really is, particularly when the level of his
finances or his resolve to resist the “stupid shit” begins to fall short of the escalating demands of his child’s mother, who may come to view him as a disappointment.

But readiness for marriage is more than being able to settle for one woman. To be marriageable a man must have reached the point where he knows how his economic prospects are going to turn out—he’s got to be settled. He doesn’t simply want to go for the best woman he can manage to attract; it is a matter of fit between a potential partner’s characteristics and his own—he doesn’t want to overshoot and end up being a disappointment. Paul’s opinion on the matter is an interesting case in point. His prospects looked relatively good in his twenties—he worked the entire decade as an under-the-table delivery truck driver in “the food industry,” bringing in ninety dollars a day. In addition, the route facilitated a lucrative illegal sideline; currently, he is finishing up a sentence for drug distribution in a prison halfway house.

This black father of a four-year-old child is firm in his belief that “you should only get married when you are like thirty-five,” because by then “you know what you are going to do and what you want will accomplish in life.” At twenty-one talk is cheap, he says. “You said that you would accomplish this thing and that thing, but now you are thirty-five. . . . You know whether you are on that track . . . , and you see a light at the end of the tunnel in the future: ‘OK, this is where I am going to go.’” Paul believes marrying in his twenties might have been promising too much, and a man who weds while in this hopeful phase might prove a disappointment a decade later. At the age of thirty-four Paul is now finally “open to” marriage and believes that if he can manage to secure employment, he’ll have more to offer than most; his grandmother recently died and left him her home in the Mill Creek section of West Philadelphia where he was raised, and the once—heavily blighted neighborhood (and site of the worst mass murder in the city’s history) is now gentrifying.

Holloway Middleton, a thirty-nine-year-old black father of a six-year-old daughter from the Nicetown section of North Philadelphia, expresses similar concerns. He had a good job cleaning office buildings before he was laid off. Since then he has only found work through temporary agencies. He is adamant that “the only way that marriage works is when two people make the same amount. Like if you got a job making $20,000, and she’s got a job making $20,000, then everyone’s happy. If she’s got $20,000, and you making . . . $1,200, you know what I mean? It’s like she takes care of you, and that’s not going to work.”

One study of a cohort of low-skilled men who were first identified while in high school and then followed over time reveals that for men at the bottom of the skills distribution, it is often not until their late twenties or early thirties that they enter into “careers”—a stable pattern of employment. This was particularly true for African Americans.2 In our study African American men are the most likely to say that marriage ought to be put off until the thirties, the forties, or even beyond.

What most men are seeking in a marital partner is someone who is on “the same level.” Listen to how Lee, a forty-two-year-old black father with three children, enumerates the “minimum criteria” for a marriage partner. “You each have to have a job, your own home, your own finances. I don’t have a car, so you don’t have to have a car, but, you know, we’re meeting on the same level.” Lee’s ideas about
the importance of equal status extend to the smallest detail. “I want a ring too—a diamond. I don’t want no wedding band. If you’re getting a diamond, I want one too. That way, if we break up, then both of us have a rock.”

While it is vital to have settled down, and to have become settled, before marriage, men emphasize that it’s critical not to settle—to marry without being absolutely certain that they have found the right partner. First, there are certain status considerations that must be addressed. As outlined earlier, men don’t want to overshoot, but they don’t want to undershoot either. In the neighborhoods we studied, it is marriage and not childbearing that signals one’s status in the community. To the degree that pregnancy can be deemed “accidental,” the characteristics of the woman he has children with says nothing about a man. But one can’t exactly get married by accident, and it is this aspect of choice that makes the wife’s attributes weigh heavily on a husband’s social standing.

Ultimately though, men’s demands in the status domain turn out to be rather modest because their own situations are also modest. Usually, they end up simply wanting to find a woman who is “decent”—doesn’t do drugs, drink too much or run around, has a job and an asset or two. The job is particularly vital, since most men insist they shouldn’t be expected to support a family on their own; in fact, men often avoid attachments to women who hold the expectation that the man will be the sole provider.

More important, they say, a man shouldn’t settle for someone who has not absolutely proven that she is trustworthy. It is at this moment in fathers’ narratives that the generalized mistrust of women they have developed over the years comes through loud and clear. Byron Jones is the black forty-six-year-old Mantua native who washes store windows and cars for a living. We ask this father of a young adult son and twelve-year-old child what kind of woman he would consider marrying. “A woman that I can trust. They all lied to me. I want a woman I can trust, an honest woman. And I don’t think they make them anymore.” Lee, the man who says he’ll insist on his-and-her diamond rings, is just as adamant in his description of his “ideal woman.” For him she is “somebody who’s in my corner whether I’m right or wrong. Good or bad. Like I could lose my job, and she’s still there for me. If I’m sick, to be in my corner and help me get better. . . . Don’t leave me. If I’m dying or whatnot, be there for me.” We ask Bob, a twenty-two-year-old white father of a fourteen-month-old baby, about who would make an ideal wife for him. He says, “Someone who is caring and trustworthy. Someone that’s not going to dick you over, you know. Someone that’s going to be there through thick and thin, no matter what happens. ‘Cause that’s the vow, through sickness and health and richer and poorer.”

Why do men like Byron, Lee, and Bob feel that this level of commitment and trustworthiness is so vital in a potential partner? Because marriage makes a man enormously vulnerable. Marriage involves asking a woman to accept him as he is, with whatever he has to offer. Hill is a thirty-year-old father of a four-year-old and works part-time at an art-supply store. When we bring up the topic of marriage, Hill says, “A lot of men are terrified of it.” When we ask what’s so scary about marriage, Hill replies, “The fear comes in that you get stuck with a wife, she feeds you a game that she loves you and then next thing you know, you’re in court because she doesn’t like you anymore. She’s found something better.” “She’s cheated on you?” we ask. “Either she’s cheated on you,” Hill says, “or you’re not good
enough. You know, you haven’t reached the potential that she felt you could’ve reached.” Hill believes that it is simply impossible for most men to live up to a woman’s expectations. “You can’t do it,” he states emphatically, “and a lot of men spend their whole life trying to measure up to what they consider the level that their woman would appreciate them more.

While trustworthiness is an indispensable foundation for a marriage, it is far from sufficient in men’s minds. Ultimately, a bride ought to be one’s “soul mate” or “best friend.” As Bob puts it, “That’s your mate, you know. That’s supposed to be your other half.” Q., a twenty-four-year-old black father of a three-year-old child who may or may not be his, and another baby with a different woman on the way, says, “I would like to get married and stuff, but the way it is going I don’t think I ever will.” His pessimism stems from the fact that he is looking for someone “willing to be my best friend. Not only be my girl, but you have to be my best friend.” Kensington-resident William, a white thirty-three–year-old “picker” at a warehouse that stocks dollar stores, is the father of an eleven-year-old and expecting another child with a new partner in July. He explains that for two people to marry, “they got to care about one another. . . . The more you’re friends, the more you can open up to one another and talk to one another and be there for one another. When you got something on your mind you got to be able to talk to your mate, because if you don’t, it’s just going to drive you nuts, and you’re going to explode, you know what I mean?” William feels lucky that he’s finally found a woman who satisfies this requirement—his pregnant girlfriend—and he is about to propose; he envisions a June wedding just ahead of the arrival of the baby.

Ernest is currently in rehab at the Salvation Army. This black thirty-two-year-old father of a twelve-year-old son offers his diagnosis for why marriage in his neighborhood has become rare. “I mean people . . . really don’t know nothing about love. Oh, they know about the four-letter word. They know that’s what they supposed to say . . . , you know, ‘I love you . . . ’ But I am talking about that insane love. . . . The love to where you will do anything for this person. You will stand out in the rain until she stand at the window, until the lights go out. That’s how much you love this person. Just unconditional love to where there is nothing, nothing that you wouldn’t do for this person.”

Like William, Ernest too feels that he’s finally discovered that undying devotion, and from a surprising source—his twelve-year-old son’s mother. She’s stuck by him through thick and thin, even ending a marriage that had occurred while he was in prison once he was released and wanted her back. While one might question Lynn’s judgment, it is her willingness to stand by him for more than a decade, despite all that he’s put her through that has convinced Ernest that she is trustworthy enough for marriage. “I love her. I love my son’s mother, man,” Ernest says.

While the process of “getting together” is usually described in vague, bureaucratic terms—any mentions of love are often conspicuously absent—discussions of marriage are often rife with the kind of love language Ernest employs. This is what exposes the “real relationship” with the child’s mother, a union contracted primarily for the sake of a shared baby, as being not all that real after all. The “soul mate” relationship that he believes is the key to true fulfillment casts his baby’s mother in a very unflattering light. Holding out hope for eventual marriage seems to keep many of our men “in the market” for a wife even while trying to make a go of it with their children’s mothers. Thus, the younger
guy in the flashy car isn’t the only threat to the relationship—there is also the soul mate who can make your marriage dreams come true.

The New Package Deal

Ultimately, fathers’ rejection of the old package deal—where the mother-father relationship is central and binds men to their progeny—seems to be the core cause of breakup. If men hold to this view, it is reasonable to speculate that they may be more willing to risk having children with virtual strangers who they then have trouble getting along with, are less motivated to step up to the plate when her expectations rise, and are more able to justify holding on to their current relationship while holding out for a better one later on. So how successful are these low-income, inner-city fathers at forging an “ideal family unit” while operating under the logic of the new package deal? As we showed in the prior chapter, only about a third will still be together by the time their child turns five, and only a handful—less than one in five, will marry the mother. This chapter has examined what happens to the other two-thirds.

Like the shotgun marriages of old that were initiated to legitimate a premarital pregnancy, these relationships fail in droves. Part of the problem is that, in some sense, nearly all these men see themselves, through circumstances they haven’t done much (if anything) to try to control, as “just getting stuck with” the mothers of their children—these are the words John Carr, from Fishtown, used to describe the onset of his relationship with his child’s mother, Rayann.

Here, we must ask whether these for-the-sake-of-the-baby liaisons are really the modern equivalents of shotgun relationships. The answer is not really. In the shotgun marriages of old, marriage was supposed to be prompted by the enraged girlfriend’s father forcing the man who impregnated his daughter to the altar. In truth, it was the strong social norms shared by all parties involved. Today, there is virtually no support, much less pressure, from either his or her side for these young couple to stay together and form a family unit around their child. Often, it is much the opposite; the mother’s kin often warn that the baby’s father may be “no good” and may even advise their daughter to “get away from him,” while the father’s kin may dismiss the girl as “trifling” and not worthy of their boy. They may even urge him to get a paternity test, warning “you know what they say, ‘momma baby, daddy maybe.’” If these young couples are going to make it, it is going to be entirely because of their own resolve. Indeed, the only one holding the shotgun is the baby itself—and the father’s own desire to have the “whole fatherhood experience” by living with his child. But this norm is not a mandate, as the shotgun metaphor would imply, so perhaps the best imagery is not a shotgun but a slingshot.

Beyond the new package deal, what else can account for these distressingly low levels of relational commitment, especially given how much these men believe they have to lose? A notably common theme in their narratives—particularly the black men we spoke with—is a profound, abiding mistrust of women. This seems to be driven, at least in part, by a deep division of expectations and goals that emerge after mom brings baby home. Suddenly, he’s potential marriage material, and the
relationship becomes a “project” as she tries to create enough momentum to spur him to begin to do what it takes—both in the relational and financial domains—to clear the marriage bar. Men seldom share this sense of urgency. “What’s the hurry?” he asks. “Can’t I simply enjoy the baby right now?” Over time, he comes to read these efforts as rejection and evidence that she’s merely an opportunist incapable of unconditional love. These men’s mantra is, “If men don’t do, women don’t love.” There is “no source of commitment in a relationship,” they claim. And surveys do show that unmarried fathers’ economic troubles are, in fact, associated with breakups. The “men don’t do, women don’t love” narrative is especially strong when men talk about what is keeping them from marrying. Ultimately, they say, it is the lack of trustworthy women that is killing marriage.

As for the specter of the younger guy in the flashy car, here fathers’ fears might not be entirely unfounded. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a survey of parents with nonmarital births, shows that when unmarried women do break up with the fathers of their children, those who find new partners often manage to trade up and find men with fewer personal problems and better jobs, the sought-after characteristics that the flashy-car fear symbolically speaks to. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that these new relationships will prove more stable than the old.

But even in the earliest days of the relationship, men often manifest their underlying discomfort with the familylke bonds that suddenly ensnare them. They just can’t seem to tolerate all the “togetherness” and are irritated by the idea that they are accountable to their partner for their time. The underlying motivation behind women’s desire to monitor and men’s desire to evade it, is, when one gets right down to it, a central norm borrowed from marriage: fidelity. Relationships between unmarried couples only rarely take on the full set of normative expectations that marital relationships do—for example, they seldom embrace the ethos of “till death do us part” or even pool their finances. But both partners recognize that two people who have decided to forge a real relationship to raise a child in an “ideal family unit” shouldn’t really stray; the norm of sexual fidelity is stronger here than in the “together” phase.

But there is a good deal of subtle ambiguity still. On the one hand, new fathers certainly know what is expected of them and recognize that the revelation of “cheating” is an almost certain trigger for breakup. On the other hand, and unlike their female partners, they only strongly associate fidelity with marriage, not the onset of parenthood or even living together. As we will show, the belief that a man should forgo marriage until he is ready to “settle down”—that is, be satisfied with just one partner—is nearly ubiquitous. Thus, the simple fact that the couple isn’t married yet offers the tacit leeway that often gets men in a bind. And when the relationship is “all about the baby” and the mother is viewed as a mere complement to the father-child bond, temptation has a much stronger pull.

Finally, there are men’s views about marriage, and the kind of relationship a lasting marriage is going to require. Men seldom get lucky enough to stumble into a soul mate through the haphazard partnering process that so often produces children. And their observations of their own behaviors and desires tell them that they’re not even close to being able to settle down, or to find themselves settled, during their early twenties. Thus for men, even more than for the women that Edin and Kefalas interviewed in many of these same neighborhoods, childbearing and marriage have become radically
separated. It is almost difficult to imagine that one’s soul mate—the woman a man might envision meeting and marrying is his thirties or forties—will end up being the mother of one’s child.

Taken together, each of these factors plays a role in creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: if a man suddenly finds himself thrown together with a woman he barely knows and may not even like, if her rising expectations in the wake of the birth leave him feeling it’s impossible to please her, and if he believes she views him as expendable if a better catch comes along, she will be seen as a poor source of commitment. Such a man will likely fail to invest—shape up, overlook differences, and be content at home—to the degree required. And when it’s only the baby who is holding the shotgun—or the slingshot—while kin often war against the couple’s survival, a man’s own desire to live with his child is very nearly the sole source of relationship stability.

In sum, when men assign a high value to their relationships with their children but are hesitant to invest too much in the relationship with their children’s mother—the new package deal—a perilous situation results. Many disadvantaged men prove eager to capitalize on unplanned births as a pathway to fatherhood—though they will readily admit it is family on the cheap and not the “right way” to go about things. They do so because they fear that a discount version of fatherhood is all they may ever be able to afford. Being the baby’s daddy gives them certain leverage with the child’s mother—suddenly they have something (a biological tie) that the next guy doesn’t. This is a reason for her to give him more of a chance than she otherwise would. Meanwhile, her leverage—control over the child—is sufficient to motivate him to try to turn mere togetherness into something more. But there is seldom anyone in the larger community who is really “for” this young couple and works to ensure their survival. In the end, the expected payoff of the partner relationship is just too uncertain, the normative pressure is too low, and visions of the soul mate he has not yet encountered too compelling, and he fails to give himself fully. While men try to convince themselves that the partner relationship will work—observe the desperate efforts of Lavelle and Self and especially John in this regard—they know deep down it probably won’t.

Following the dictates of the new package deal, at the same time couples are making the effort to get the relationship together for the sake of the baby, men embrace the belief that in the end, their relationship with their child is pure and unassailable and should have nothing to do with their relationship to the mother of that child. As we’ll show in chapter 6, the dramatic falloff in father involvement in the aftermath of breakup should warn that this belief is a profound form of self-deception.