SHERYL SANDBERG CAN LEAVE AT 5, BUT YOU CAN’T

It’s 6 pm in Silicon Valley and Christine Keefer is emptying the dishwasher in her kitchen and checking her iPhone as she stirs Pasta Roni on the stove with one hand and, with the other, carefully opens the fridge – its door littered with colorful plastic alphabet letters, bright crayon scrawlings and cheery photos - to retrieve the milk. Her four and a half year old son, dressed in Captain Underpants underwear, saunters into the kitchen.

“Can I have a sandwich?”

She brushes a wisp of her brunette hair out of her eyes and tells him dinner’s almost ready and shoves dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets into the oven. “Remember?” she tells him. “You like dinosaur chicken nuggets.”

The iPhone message she was checking is from her husband saying he’ll be working late. Again. The 42-year-old Keefer sighs. She knows this is the price she must pay for a modicum of sanity in the Valley, where pulling all-nighters in the office and having no life is not just a rite of passage, but a way of life. She rolls her eyes. Here, she says, the young, testosterone-fueled geek culture has revved up the Ideal Worker standard to a superhuman level. The Ultra Ideal Worker of Silicon Valley is to the Ideal Worker of corporate America as, say the Badwater Ultra-marathon runner, who slogs 135 miles in temperatures as high as 130 degrees through Death Valley, is to a mere marathoner. That extreme culture, she says, is what forced her out of a stable job she loved after she had kids. “I got run over,” she says. That extreme culture is also why her husband isn’t home. She’s doing contract work now. Which means that he has to have the stable job so the family can get health insurance. And that means working insane hours, sometimes until 2 am or later.

When she and her husband were young, the Silicon Valley lifestyle was a blast. The tech field was brand new, bursting with big ideas, high passion, life-changing technology, cool new stuff and loads of money. It was exciting. Start-up companies came and went. People to the right and left of you were becoming millionaires overnight and, she says, you thought maybe next time it could be you. She threw herself into the “pink ghetto” of marketing where most women in high-tech who aren’t in human resources or public relations usually wind up. He worked mad hours in the largely male product development sector as an engineer.[[1]](#endnote-1) Their companies were run by geek boy geniuses with few social skills. They couldn’t talk to people but they could code all night long. And because the CEO sets the culture, everyone began to work like obsessed boy geniuses. But, Keefer says, before kids, that was OK. Work was the place to be. That’s where things were happening. You didn’t want to feel you were missing out. That being-at-the-center-of-the-universe feeling was addictive. Plus, work was fun. There were ping pong tables, upscale cafes serving specialty coffees and services like valet parking and dry cleaning and vegetables from the nearby farmer’s market conveniently delivered to your desk, so you’d never have to leave. And Keefer and her husband didn’t leave, unless they were on the road for the company. “Then the kids came,” Keefer said. “And we knew we would never survive.”

But even as a new mother, Keefer still wanted to “lean in” to her career, to keep climbing, like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg advised in her famous 2011 commencement address to Barnard undergraduates.[[2]](#endnote-2) Sandberg advised young women not to “leave before you leave,” not to throttle back on their dreams in anticipation of having a family. She urged them to set high career goals. She promised they could both dream big and have a family if they married well, to a spouse who would share household and child-rearing so both partners could pursue a life in the wider world of work. They could do it, she said, because she had. Sandberg, after several years of keeping her schedule under wraps in the ultra-endurance culture of Silicon Valley culture, said she even left the office around 5 pm to be home for dinner with her two children.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The thing is, Keefer discovered, walking out the door at 5 pm is a whole lot easier to pull off when you’re the boss. For Keefer, 5 pm one day in September 2009 turned out to be the time she was finally slammed against the wall.

She remembers that the day started out like any other - endless meetings, emails that averaged 123 every 20 minutes, salad at her desk as she wondered if she should get the kids flu shots and worried that it was getting hot out and she perhaps shouldn’t have dressed them in long pants. She had a “big” meeting that afternoon with someone she refers to as “Mr. VP,” a man, she says, who single-handedly sabotaged a promotion she was about to get. She still loved her work. Her husband was working for a start-up company with extreme work hours, no benefits and a spotty paycheck at the time, so the family needed her to have the stable job. But she felt knocked flat. After being sidelined, she knew her career wasn’t going anywhere and that Mr. VP didn’t think much of her. And because she was primarily in charge of kids and home, she constantly fought traffic to shuttle kids to two different childcare centers, rushed to throw dinner together and felt like she was living her life in one of those whirling Spin Art machines where all the colors melt together.

Two visits to the candy jar, two more cups of coffee and 549 emails later, Keefer wrote later in a blog about the day, she walked into the meeting room. She’d been in her new, lesser position for two weeks. Her co-workers, clearly looking to impress Mr. VP, gave their presentations first. Then it was her turn. She checked the clock on the wall. 4:35 pm. Oh my God, she recalls thinking, how am I ever going to do this and make it to pick up my kids?

“We’re kind of out of time,” Keefer’s manager said to Mr. VP.

“Oh no,” he said calmly, “I have time.”

“Well,” Keefer swallowed hard, “I have a hard stop at 5. Just to warn you.”

She launched into her presentation, trying not to be too obvious as she kept glancing at the clock. “I think I did okay,” she wrote on her blog. “I argue my points and put on a good show of being engaged. And I would be engaged if it were not 4:53.” She rushed through her summary and next steps as she closed her laptop.

“Well, thank you for a first attempt at what is completely new to you,” Mr. VP said icily. “I am sure eventually you will be up to speed.”

“Absolutely,” she said.

Because, she wrote later, when it is 4:55 and pick up is at 5:30 and 40 minutes away, “you have no time for an ego. No time for argument. No time for this bullshit. And so you keep your mouth shut and you move.”

She dashed to her mini-van, even though she really had to go to the bathroom. The freeway, she wrote “is anything BUT free,” and she was stuck. She texted “traffic bad” to the daycare center. Her gas was running low. Knuckles white, heart pounding, she inched to the exit, flew down the ramp and, tires squealing, screeched into the parking lot at 5:32. She was late. All the other parents had come and gone. Head pounding, sweat pooling under her arms, she ran into the daycare. Mercifully, she wrote, the clock inside was running slow. “I love you!” she told the teacher as she grabbed her son, shoes in hand, tossed him in his car seat and raced off to make the 6 pm pickup for her other son. She checked for work emails at the stoplight, realized she’d forgotten to bring the hungry child a snack, wondered if there were any vegetables in the house for dinner and noticed that the button at her chest line was unbuttoned. She had enough time to wonder how long it has been that way when, at 5:46, she saw flashing lights behind her. “Pull over to the curb!” a police officer called out. She went through a mental checklist. Speeding? No. Did I signal? Yes. Seatbelt? Yes. Her son started to cry. As she dug through her purse and handed over what she thought were her license, registration and insurance, she asked why she was pulled over.

“Your tags are six months expired, you have handed me an insurance card that is out of date and your registration has expired and is this the most current address on your drivers’ license?” she remembers the cop asking. “Don’t you even know that?”

She sat in her mini-van and waited for a panic attack. Or tears. But she was too shocked to move. It was all just too much. The minutes ticked by. And then, even though she knew she’d never make it to pick up her other son on time, she felt calm. “Suddenly, like a rush of fresh air, I get it,” she wrote. “I understand what is going on now. That this is not how I want things to be. I don’t want to do this anymore, no matter what the cost. I glance down at my lap and happen to see the button again. It is undone, completely falling off, hanging on by one thin thread. And I am so thankful for the sign, the kick in the ass I needed on this otherwise ordinary day.”

She knew she had the stable job with health coverage, her husband the financially precarious one. But she was through. A few weeks later, after she and her husband agreed he’d look for the job with benefits, she quit.

Did Keefer’s afternoon meeting *have* to be scheduled that late in the day? No. Or even on that particular day? No. There was no deadline looming, Keefer says. Even if there were, do workers in Silicon Valley *really* need to kill themselves with intense work hours to do a good job? Of course not. In a number of interviews with both men and women who work in Silicon Valley, I heard again and again that many of these long hours are wasted. Those boy genius managers don’t know how to manage. They often don’t plan well. They set false deadlines, fail to define clear goals, they don’t communicate, don’t delegate nor know how to adapt as contingencies arise, as contingencies always do. So the workload, instead of running in a steady, manageable stream, dumps on you like an unpredictable avalanche that can bury you alive. And those deemed the best workers are the ones with the stamina to flail against the onslaught the longest. The outcome is sometimes a great product. But more often, it results in exhaustion, resentment, sleep-deprived errors, burn-out and overwhelmed workers and stressed-out families pushed to the brink. Either both partners struggle to stay alive in the avalanche and, with the money they earn, outsource virtually every other aspect of their lives. Or one gives out and quits. And, I learned in my interviews, that’s usually the wife.

Marianne Cooper, a sociologist who has studied extreme work hours in Silicon Valley, says there’s more than just poor management and a young industry driving the insanity. What’s at stake, she said, is nothing less than proving one’s manhood in the Ultra Ideal Worker culture. In a blue collar world, a real man shows his mettle with his gnarled hands, brute strength and his sweat-stained shirt, she argues. In the clean, well-lit, keyboard-clicking, white collar Silicon Valley, showing manliness means working, not with brilliance or even efficiency, but to the point of collapse. Impossible deadlines – the consequences of poor planning – become a test of manhood to prove you can make them. Having pizza delivered to the office at midnight becomes a way to show status as an elite warrior. “There’s a lot of … He’s a real man; he works 90-hour weeks. He’s a slacker, he works 50 hours a week,” one engineer told Cooper. “It is kind of a machismo thing: I’m tough,” said another. “The people who conspicuously overwork are guys, and I think it’s usually for the benefit of the other guys.”[[4]](#endnote-4) It’s the kind of culture that applauded when pregnant Marissa Mayer announced she wouldn’t take maternity leave after being appointed CEO and president of Yahoo.

You can have as many hand-wringing sessions about why more women aren’t in science and technology, why more women aren’t computer programmers and engineers and in management in Silicon Valley as you like. But as long as the ultimate face-time warrior culture prevails, that won’t change.

Keefer now works out of her house as a marketing consultant. She does the same work, often for the very same company she left, only for less pay, no benefits and no hope of promotion. I talked to a number of once high-flying women who’ve become mothers in Silicon Valley who have done the same. But they do have a measure of control over their schedules. And they can work at home. Which is why Keefer is in her kitchen at 6 pm instead of stuck in traffic on the freeway or locked away in another endless meeting, as her husband is. She feels relief that she has jumped off what felt like a treadmill rammed to the highest setting. But this is not the life she’d planned for herself and her dreams. This is not the life she wanted for her family. She takes leftover sushi from lunch out of the fridge for herself. She pulls the dinosaur chicken nuggets out of the oven, plops heaping spoonfuls of the Pasta Roni onto two plastic plates and calls out to her young sons, “Dinner!”

1. SHERYL SANDBERG CAN LEAVE AT 5 BUT YOU CAN’T

   For more statistics on the pink collar ghetto and the culture of engineers being men, see Annalee Newitz, “Geek Women in Bondage / The New Pink Collar Ghetto,” *San Francisco Gate*, August 5, 1999,

   <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Geek-Women-in-Bondage-The-new-pink-collar-ghetto-2914436.php>. Steven C. Currall, an organizational behavior specialist, and dean of the UC Davis Graduate School of Management cites the school’s studies on the number of women in top executive and board positions in California’s biggest publicly traded companies and notes that it will take 100 years for women to catch up. The innovative tech sector, he notes, is the “most male-dominated of all. And Silicon Valley is the most male-dominated of any region.” See Steven C. Curall, “Tech Sector’s Glass Ceiling,” *San Francisco Gate*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/Tech-sector-s-glass-ceiling-3721210.php>. For the relevant study, see Amanda Kimball, *2011 UC Davis Study of California Women Business Leaders: A Census of Women Directors and Highest-Paid Executives* (Davis: UC Davis Graduate School of Management, 2011), <http://gsm.ucdavis.edu/digital-publication/2011-uc-davis-study-california-women-business-leaders>. For an article about the UC Davis study, see Meredith Lepore, “The Lack of Women in Silicon Valley is Apparent in Facebook’s Recent Appointments,” *The Grindstone*, Dec 9, 2011, <http://thegrindstone.com/career-management/the-lack-of-women-in-silicon-valley-is-apparent-in-facebooks-recent-appointments-951/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sheryl Sandberg, “Barnard College Commencement,” (speech and transcript, May 17, 2011) New York City, Barnard College, <http://barnard.edu/headlines/transcript-and-video-speech-sheryl-sandberg-chief-operating-officer-facebook>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Sheryl Sandberg: Facebook COO,” *Makers Profile* video, accessed November 2, 2012, <http://www.makers.com/sheryl-sandberg>. For more coverage, see Laura Donovan, “Sheryl Sandberg Leaves Work at 5:30 Every Day—And You Should Too,” *Mashable*, April 5, 2012, <http://mashable.com/2012/04/05/sheryl-sandberg-leaves-work-at-530/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For the quotation, which are from engineers Scott Webster and Kirk Sinclair, see Marianne Cooper, “Being the ‘Go-To-Guy’: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley,” in *Families at Work: Expanding the Boundaries.* Naomi Gerstel et al. eds., (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002.) 7 and 9. See also Joan C. Williams, “Jumpstarting the Stalled Gender Revolution: Justice Ginsburg and Reconstructive Feminism,” *Hastings Law Journal* 63 (June, 2012): 1267-1297, <http://www.hastingslawjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Williams_63-HLJ-1267.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)