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Mother's Day

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MOTHER'S DAY by Maggie McKnight

In early May of 2004, I experienced my first Iowa hailstorm.

That same week I discovered a mother duck sitting on a nest by the river.

She sat so still and unblinking. I imagined her to possess a love so fierce that any predator who stalked her would be instantly turned to dust.

That Sunday, I asked a friend to join me in a Mother's Day ritual.

First we visited Sarah, who was sleeping.

Then we sat by the river snacking. I didn't want to get too New-Agey or dreamy but I wanted some way to honor my intention to parent.

Uh... I'm not exactly sure what to do—I haven't done many rituals....

Hm... me neither.

A few weeks earlier, at my annual exam, I had told my nurse practitioner about my parenting plans.

I'm going to start trying to get pregnant this summer. Also I'm single, and gay.

Okay, we'll get you a preconception packet. And you should start taking folic acid now.

She seemed unfazed, as if she heard this kind of thing all the time.

But after the exam, when she went to get some brochures, she came back with bad news.

Unfortunately we can't help you get pregnant because you're single.

Oh.

We only help couples—whether lesbian or straight...

I see.

... so we don't discriminate in that way.

It wasn't until later—after the appointment and the subsequent stop at the drugstore—that I started to feel angry at the clinic's refusal to serve single women.

itch relief

vitamins

What gave them the right to decide who gets to have a baby and who doesn't?

That night, I sat in the rocker in the living room and opened the prenatal vitamins.

Fuck the clinic, I thought. I don't need them.

If they thought they were helping protect the world against the scourge of single motherhood, they were wrong.

I swallowed my horse-sized vitamin with a big swig of water, sending it forth into the darkness of my body.

Saffron slept on the couch across from me.

Aside from Saffron, the best thing about being in Iowa was that for the first time, my dream of having a kid seemed possible.

morning routine:
writing over
toast and tea

My teaching job had flexible hours and summers off.
I had great health insurance and a big rental house that needed to be filled.

Sure I was single — but that seemed like a minor detail to me.

dishes
for
one

Girlfriends
are so much
work — I'd
much rather
have
a baby.

Besides,
as I approached
the ripe old age
of 30, I felt
less and less
like I could
imagine
being partnered.

I'd had a few
short relationships,
but obviously
none had stuck.

I'd never truly
fallen in love (Saffron excluded) — I knew
there was a good chance I never would.

And after moving 2000 miles from home — from California to Iowa no less — I felt a growing sense of courage and confidence.

I could do anything — just give me the chance.

I knew it would be an uphill battle convincing people a young single lesbian had as much a right to be a parent as anyone.

Even before my annual exam, it had already been a struggle.

I had started mentioning my desire to parent to my family some years earlier. My mom was initially very dismissive.

I don't know if she thought I wasn't serious or just hoped I wasn't — but it was clear her main concern was that I have a good (lucrative) career.

I knew it was her way of wanting my life to be better than hers had been. I just thought I should get to choose what "better" looked like.

Finally I had to call her out on it.

The year before I moved

I really don't want to end up supporting this kid....

If that's your attitude, believe me, you'll be the last person I ask if I ever need help.

Once she realized I was serious—and would make my choice regardless of her support—she started to ease up.

No one ever used the word "feminist" in my family, but I knew that for me, the revolutionary thing to do would be to choose family over work.

Though obviously as a single parent I'd be doing both.

Now, as I celebrated Mother's Day by the Iowa River, I was trying to do just that. I got out a few things I'd brought along:

A small Buddha statue.

A toy mouse to represent Saffron, my current "child."

And, because it was a sunny day, some sunscreen.

Nothing screams "mom" like a bottle of sunscreen.

We told stories about our own births. My friend's involved a lot of false alarm trips to the hospital.

Mine is short: whenever someone asked my parents how they'd named me, they always said I just popped right out and said, "Hi, I'm Maggie!"

My mom always told me I was independent from the day I was born.

I closed the ritual with a poem about kindness.

... even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so too with a boundless heart should we cherish all beings...

Some weeks later when I returned to visit Sarah, she was gone.

All that remained were some scattered eggshells and the round depression in the ground where she'd kept her vigil.