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On Children

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Rachel Rakoff

On Children

When six year old Paige Grady dragged me upstairs to show me her favorite teddy bear and walked up to (what I didn't realize was) her parents' bedroom door, I should have seen it coming. She triumphantly flung the door open, revealing her dad draping his tie around his neck, wearing an unbuttoned striped shirt and white briefs. Immediately, his wife (fully dressed, applying her makeup in the mirror a few feet away from him) yelped, "Oh my God!" as I stood motionless and unable to speak for a fraction of a second, before coming to and slamming the door shut. The next six hours would prove to be equally...memorable.

Because I didn't know how to disable of the expensive alarm system wired throughout the house, I was forced to let the pizza delivery guy in through the garage. Within three minutes of sitting down for dinner, Paige and her two sisters, Emily (age five) and Madison (age nine) started a food fight. As a half eaten pizza crust whizzed by my right ear, I sent them upstairs with as much authority as my thirteen-year-old self could manage. An earsplitting screech drifted into the kitchen from the stairwell: Paige had Emily in a chokehold and Madison was shrieking at them to cut it out. Hours later, once they were asleep, I retreated to the living room to kill the remaining hours with TV—but only three channels were available: the Home Shopping Network (no, I don't want a collectable tea set with fairies on it), static-riddled black and white figure skating, and an Italian soap opera. Parental controls, be damned.

I never babysat again.

Before that day, I'd never babysat. Most of my friends loved babysitting, so I figured I'd give it a try. What could be so difficult? One of my close friends reassured me, saying, "Think back to when you were younger. What would you want to do? Just act like a little kid again!"

There was only one problem with this approach: growing up, while other young girls played with American Girl Dolls or dress up in their mother's clothing, I played with Thomas the Tank Engine sets and re-wrote Star Trek episodes with the boy down the street. I didn't know what to do with dolls, and got stressed out at the idea of playing "make believe" house. Interacting with young kids was like the process of speaking a foreign language: it's obvious if you're not a natural.

This includes interactions with babies. But with babies, it's not just a lack of knowing what to do, it's a failure to understand the allure of them. When shown a picture of a newborn fresh out of the womb with a newly cut umbilical cord, I generally respond with, "That's disgusting," whereas nearly every other woman dissolves to an "awww"-ing pile of mush. At family gatherings, while my relatives swarm around a new baby (whose hottest talent is to gurgle something which vaguely resembles the sound "uggaaa!") I sip my sparkling cider, develop an unnatural fixation on the various cheeses on the table and make awkward small talk with family that I see once every two and a half years. "You'll come around," my older cousin Meri said as her eight-month-old daughter, Lexie, zoomed by on her hands and knees, "When you have your own child, you'll understand."

The first time I heard this, I made the blasphemous mistake of explaining that I didn't want to have kids in the future – ever. My grandmother glared at me and reprimanded me for even thinking it; my mom (who would be cradling the new baby, lovingly gazing down at the ticking shit-bomb) would say, "Don't say that! I can't wait to be a grandmother someday." I'd sigh and return, temporarily defeated, to the cheese plate. Confronted with the same situation, my friends cry out, "You have no soul! She devil!" or insist that my "maternal instinct" just hasn't kicked in yet and laugh, promising to taunt my theoretical future kids with, "Your mommy never wanted you!"

Growing up as an only child, I never really dealt with younger kids. My mom had me when she was 40 and my dad was 33. I was raised amongst people significantly older than me; both my extended family and my suburban neighbors were primarily adults. I couldn't have cared less for children; I found them obnoxious and irritating. When I thought of babies, I had only one instant connotation: being on an airplane with a screaming, extraordinarily smelly baby a few rows ahead (despite this having only happened once or twice in a lifetime of flying).

When the neighborhood and family babies finally hit the scene, I was at least seven years old and hadn't learned the basics of "child play." Luckily for me, my mom adored children of all ages, and kept them occupied so I wouldn't have to. She'd scoop the babies up in her arms and swing them around as they flailed their arms laughing, or pretend to order a make-believe sandwich with the "older" children. I resented her ability to connect effortlessly with children of any age.

Except me. Her menopause and my adolescence collided; we argued about everything, and it resulted in constant fighting that ended in tears (on both ends). I made a promise to myself – to never have children of my own – because I refused to pass on the insanity that seemed to be hereditary. Her sadness leaked onto every memory of my youth, and I swore never to do the same. If when I got older I married a man who insisted on children, I'd compromise and adopt. But I would never pass these genes on.

I watched the way my mother looked wistfully at newborn babies and despite her protests, accused her of wishing she could trade me in for a “younger” model, and, that if that was the case, I wished to do the same. I screamed at my parents that they should have had another kid before me, someone to “break them in” – a starter child of sorts. Then the shouting stopped. “We tried,” my my mom said calmly, “twice.”

Turns out, I have two sisters, conceived within a year and a half of my birth. “Ghost siblings,” if you will, one older and one younger; both miscarried. I was technically the middle child, and the only one to survive. I wondered silently what would be different if they’d made it. One of them would have been Emma, my parents told me. Frank, if one had been a boy. I daydreamed about family vacations and going to school with my “sisters” and for a brief moment, I imagined what it would be like to feel comfortable around those younger than me. Even in these fantasies, it was still intangible. Over my teenage years, I gradually stopped wondering “what could have been” and focused more on the bewildering – why the middle child survived. I’d always imagined middle children to be naturally inclined to feel comfortable with those older and younger than them, more like a biological trait rather than one developed by an experience of growing up with others.

This has never been easy to understand: every other only child I knew hated being alone. They got along with people of any age, older or younger. Part of that applies to me: put me in a room with any number of complete strangers my age or older, and I have no problem interacting with any one of them. Put a single, small child in front of me, and my awkward level rivals that found on a middle school dance floor. When I try to talk to kids, I sound dumber than I’ve ever sounded in my entire life. I become temporarily incapable of formulating a solid, coherent sentence and more often than not, don’t know what to say at all.

There is, however, a loophole.

For two summers, despite already having firmly established that I was absolutely clueless with children, I was a counselor at the same camp I attended for 8 years when I was younger. As a camper at Chimney Corners, I’d had the most wonderful counselors and hoped to give back a small piece to a new generation. I was terribly unprepared. I was a counselor to Riding Cabin, which meant that the campers took care of the camp’s horses and rode every day for an hour. The Riding Cabin (ages 11-13) was known for acquiring the weirdest of the bunch (I myself had been in the Riding Cabin) which generally provided a number of entertaining stories upon my return to school.

Every day, at 5:30 PM, we’d have “unit assembly” which meant all the cabins in a certain area of the camp got together, did a roll call, made announcements concerning that evening’s activity, and went off to dinner. At 5:30, when two of my girls, Isabelle and Hayley, weren’t at assembly, I

went back to the cabin to find them. There was Isabelle, tugging violently on one end of an enormous tree branch that was taller than me, and Hayley pulling back on the other. As the “I found it first”s flew, I took the branch away, tossed it into the woods, and sent them to unit assembly. Isabelle sat on the opposite side of the semi-circle from her cabin mates, clenching her jaw (revealing a mean, crooked underbite) and muttering to herself. Once assembly broke, she sprinted off towards the woods. I followed her, motioning for my friend and co-counselor Libby to follow me (Isabelle was rarely easy to handle alone) and we called to her to come on out.

“I won’t come out unless you bring me a wolf!” Isabelle shouted out from amongst the trees. She crossed her skinny pale arms in front of her and from underneath her stick straight blonde hair, fixed her bug eyes coldly on mine. “Bring me a wolf!”

“Isabelle,” Libby says as she walks towards the woods, “have you ‘adopted’ a wolf from the Wildlife foundation? They’ll send you a picture of a wolf and –”

“— NO! I already did that and want a real wolf. NOW! I’m not going to come out!” Isabelle interrupts, and Libby stops in her tracks and whispers to me, “What did you do to her?”

“SHE TOOK AWAY MY MAGIC STICK!” Isabelle screeched. Libby looks at me in disbelief. “You did what now?”

Perhaps my first mistake was being a counselor at all.

After a few hours (and notifying Camp authorities that we needed “backup”) we got Isabelle out and on her way to dinner. No matter what I did or said, she never seemed to listen. I was quietly powerless to each and every one of my campers every moment of every day, except for a small glistening hour: when I was their riding instructor.

The rules of nature shift in the riding ring: my inability to function around children morphs into an unshakable confidence. My rambunctious and sometimes spiteful campers transform into driven, eager-to-learn equestrians. Isabelle, afraid of everything save authority, struggled to master fundamental concepts; I walked alongside her, taking her step-by-step until the faintest signs of a smile crept onto her face as she had mastered a new skill. Even in the three-hour afternoon lessons with non-Riding Cabin campers, my ineptness with children simply dissipates. I taught lessons to all ages, seven to sixteen, and all levels. I connected effortlessly with each of them, often helping them through their anxieties of falling off, or being devoured by a horse, and watched as sooner or later, each girl conquered their fears or learned something new. In this dusty new world, I not only tolerated children—I enjoyed them. But once the helmets were off and the muddy boots were strewn about the cabin floor, I returned to a pathetic shell of counselor, unable to find the comfortable rhythm which every other counselor seemed to have.

No matter what I do, the connection created through horseback riding is impossible to duplicate. Riding instruction provides a gateway that none of my other passions could. I wouldn't teach photography—you can't teach someone how to have an "eye", and I wouldn't teach writing—you can't teach a voice. Riding presents somewhat of a paradox: you can't teach a rider how to truly connect to the horse, but if they have an unmistakable passion for horses or riding, it doesn't matter. It didn't matter how young or old my students were – if they wanted to learn, I wanted to help. I liked being able to finally connect to those younger than me in the ring – which, on occasion – was so great that during the day (away from the ring) I'd suddenly find myself being tackle-hugged by a girl I'd helped earlier. That made all the other awkward moments worth it.

Eventually my discomfort around children morphed, from a mild jealousy of those who were able to do what I could not (even something as simple as sitting in a room with a small child and not feeling uncomfortable), to a general dislike towards anyone drastically younger than myself. Family events are painful since most of my cousins have young children now and every event turns into a celebration of their lives. Even my high school graduation party, which I wasn't allowed to invite friends to as it was a "family only" event, turned into Gabriel and Lexie's early birthday parties complete with presents from my grandma, two cousins, and both parents. The cake was nondescript.

When introduced to a new baby, I'm forced to fake a smile and say how adorable they are. I can't tell you how many babies I've been introduced to that will, totally change the way I feel about babies because this one is just the cutest damned thing. Maybe someday my long hibernating maternal instinct will kick in, and I'll find simple joy in watching a baby laugh, or running around with kids in the park. I don't see anything when I look towards the future; I'm perfectly satisfied with being surprised. It doesn't matter to me what my friends, family, or society say. If the best laid plans go awry, I'd rather not bank on anything too specific. I've got plenty of time.

A few weeks after the nightmare at the Grady's, my mom told me to pick up the phone. "Rachel? Hi, how are you, it's Mrs. Grady. Listen, I was wondering if you were available to babysit the girls this upcoming Sunday night. They had a wonderful time with you last time." In that moment, I saw a flash of possibilities: letting Paige braid my hair, teaching Madison how to draw horses, and reading bedtime stories to Emily until she fell asleep. I saw sitting down to dinner playing silly games and laughing as we each tried to make a funny face.

"Rachel? Are you there?"

I spoke hesitantly. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Grady, but I'm actually going to work on a group project for school that night. I know a friend who could babysit instead, though."

And the images vanished as quickly as they'd come.