

Breastfed

The first thing she told me was that she really, really wanted kids. She emphasized the plural with a sharp z-sound on the s: “kidz”. Wow, OK, I said. OK, OK – a breath – wow. On a first date and we were already talking about kids! Multiple!

Marina and I met on a dating app specifically for lesbians. She was, I’d say, my exact type. Light brown hair, hazel eyes, skinny but not alarmingly so. She was feminine and beautiful and all her pictures were perfectly posed in that candid sort of way. I took a liking to her almost immediately, which is to say I didn’t hesitate before swiping right. I always liked femmes, though I never considered myself a butch, I had no affinity for femininity. Maybe this was why I hated the idea of motherhood.

I was not religious and had no qualms about meeting women 'artificially', but she did. Her way of flirting was telling me I was the only girl she could possibly want to meet from a dating app. I was worth abandoning her morals for. I didn’t tell her she was not my first and probably not my last. I’m gonna ghost her, I thought. She had brought up kids and any talk of the future terrified me more than it should have. Marina spoke with a definitive tone, a voice that commanded more than it suggested. She knew everything about anything and would hold my hand to teach me too. She was very serious on matters of the future – our future, I suppose, but then again I thought she gave the same speech to all the girls she went on dates with – and her inflection suggested it had been something she had been dreaming of ever since she was a little girl. To be a wife, a mother, to watch her children leave her and be stranded in their absence. So of course I was surprised

when she said she had only been with two other girls before me. When she recounted her past (on our first date still, it was an incredibly long date) she knocked the underside of the table with her knuckles, following the drop of each syllable from her lipsticked mouth.

We followed all the lesbian stereotypes to a tee. We jumped into things with such ferocity it surprised even me. I moved into her apartment, an incredible upgrade from my own: cramped with three roommates, the size of a college dorm. Hers was a three-bedroom, two-bathroom gift from her parents. It was light and airy and though she had the money to overcrowd it, she chose not to. It was unnerving, but I threw away many of my things before the move, so as not to bother her carefully curated aesthetic. I soon learned she lived off her parents' money, but was trying her hardest not to.

One night, she took me out to a restaurant she had a reservation for. Already, I'd been anxious to attend, had gone through my potential outfits five times over before settling on something plain, unnoticeable. When we got there, I realized I'd never been to a place like it before. I hesitated at the front. Marina saw me and, almost immediately, turned around, grabbed my hand, and said she knew a better place. I told her it'd be a waste to go somewhere else dressed so nice. She was wearing a beautiful blue dress that swept down to her ankles and it felt like a prom I'd never had. She said it wasn't a waste because we were there together, and I kissed her, and it felt like everything was how it should be. She took me to McDonald's and we sat in a corner booth, just the two of us, holding hands under the table. I looked at her smiling at me, and knew I loved her.

I told her I didn't want kids and she said that was fine and we'd figure it out and she loved me enough to try and I said she really shouldn't not for me I can't give her what she wants and she just kept saying it was fine over and over again.

Marina spent her pregnancy watching, reading, and learning about babies. When to stop breastfeeding (how I learned some still breastfed their four-year-olds!), all the different types of sleeping methods (co-sleeping, on a crib, on a mattress sprawled out on the floor), and anything and everything that could possibly harm them (Vaccines are Poison! one title read; I watched her laugh as she read, careful not to read over her shoulder). I stayed far away from anything related to 'the baby' – which is what she referred to it as, careful not to give away the gender (a girl, but I didn't want to know then) – because it had nothing to do with me. As far as I knew, the baby was all hers. She was the one giving birth. She was the one who had gone to all the meetings with the sperm donor (I had never even seen him before, left it all up to her). She was the only one who talked to the OBGYN about the baby while I lingered outside the room, trying to distract myself from the hum of their voices across the door. She didn't mind much. She was grateful she was (we, technically) having a child after all of my assurances that I never wanted one. I had only said yes because I knew she would go out and have them anyway and I felt a protectiveness over her; I shuddered at the thought of her on her own, with children who would grow to hate her and leave.

Marina strictly veered away from learning anything about post-pregnancy. She savored the 39 weeks, 4 days, and (approximately) 3 hours she was pregnant. She did not like thinking about

what was after, and I didn't know you had to. I had placed too much of the burden on her. Neither of us thought too much about it.

We named her June, after Marina's mother. I say we but it was all her.

Though her pregnancy was no more difficult than what she expected, it was the after that neither of us had thought about. She, because she was attached to her pregnancy. And me, because I never thought it would end. I could never see myself with a baby of my own, and still thought it was impossible. I thought about continuing the same cycle that had worked for us but I didn't want to become one of those deadbeat parents – I'd never heard of a deadbeat mother; I could become the first – so I spent the few days Marina stayed in the hospital staring through the window where all the babies were lined out in a sort of grotesque display. Parents came through, new and old. They asked me which one was mine and sometimes I pointed to different ones, wondering if maybe I would feel some sudden appreciation for June. I did not. They nodded and told me congratulations and that I would be a great mother and some thought to ask me how come I wasn't holding her yet?

We took June home after three days of Marina's silence on the hospital bed. She wasn't angry with me, this I knew. When she got angry, which was infrequent but lasted for long stretches of time (three days was her personal best), the air around her electrified. You felt it. Her face did not change – this was very much intentional. For her, anger was best kept a secret. A begging to be found, and if it was not, it became fuel to the flame. But after June, she stopped caring enough to pretend. I didn't ask her about it. Didn't want to rouse the bull. It wasn't necessary, I thought, to

start something. She woke up when June did, went to sleep during the short stints of time she could spare. When my alarm rang, she kissed me on the lips like always. I left her breakfast on the counter. Everything was the same.

Once I had forgotten something for work. I drove back home. Through the window, I saw her breastfeed June and begin to eat. She threw her food away when June began to cry.

One night, I asked her why she didn't name June after my mother. It was stupid. Late night. Couldn't sleep. My mother crowded my head. Marina laughed a little, shook the bed. What are you talking about, she said. How could I have? I don't even know your mother's name. I muttered something about how I could have sworn I had told her on that first date of ours. Convinced myself it was the sleep deprivation talking.

Marina's obsessive qualities from her pregnancy dissipated into nothing. She became quiet, always watching. She only spoke when necessary. To calm June. Tell me to get something for June. Make a few snide comments. I had a sudden itching under my skin like a severe, yet non-fatal, disease. I was jealous. Of who became the question. June, maybe, for being the only one whom Marina seemed to care for. But no, no. I could go without it. She loved me enough. It only began to itch when June held onto Marina more than she ever did to me. It had been there ever since it seemed June was a perfect fit on top of Marina's chest. I thought of the umbilical cord. What it meant. A literal connection to the mother, something only severed with precision and care. Mine had been sawed off, maybe. Reasonable explanation. Nothing ever worked if it hadn't worked since birth.

I didn't talk about my mother (I still don't) because there was nothing to say. Nothing that deserved justification. She did not hit, not the kind that mattered anyway. Honestly, she did nothing at all. We existed not together, but like I was taking up her space – two people avoiding each other in an apartment of 1,000 square feet. It was fine. All fine. I had nothing to complain about. Besides, Marina never asked. She talked a lot about herself and her mother and father and her life all around the country and sometimes abroad and never asked about me. It was one of the first attractive traits of hers. I could do nothing and we would still be just fine. She would do the talking and I would do the listening and everything would be OK.

When Marina was gone, to the bathroom or to take a nap that was often interrupted by some irrational fear of hers, June waited. She did not cry, though sometimes she complained in the way babies complain. Quiet, easily ignorable.

June was down on the floor and I was on the sofa (I hated sitting on the ground, couldn't understand how Marina did it) when Marina said she'd be right back. I told her to go to sleep and she looked at me, distrustful. She just said OK, fine, then left. June was far from me, the space between her and I reserved for Marina – the only connection we had. She began to shift in her carrier, babbling a little. It was the first time I had heard her at all. I thought I should call Marina back but didn't. I waited for June to stop. She kept saying something and I wished I could understand her. I wanted to know what she was saying to me, what she wanted from me. Maybe it would help me figure out what I wanted from her.

June didn't stop and I thought maybe if I left her alone she would eventually quiet down. Had that ever worked on me? I didn't know. There wasn't a memory I had where I needed

quieting down in the first place. No memory where my mother was not leaving me alone. So yes, maybe it had worked. It had worked so well I had stopped needing her.

I looked at June. She was stubbornly still going. Like mother, like daughter, I thought. For no reason except instinct, I sat down on the floor beside her. She became still again.

After a few months of awkward trading back and forth (like a pair of divorced parents who just couldn't love, not each other or anyone else) I told Marina I wanted to help more. I blurted it out. Fast so maybe she didn't hear and if she didn't hear it we didn't have to talk about it. But she was always quick and just said what? Huh? June cribbed a little from her chest. I repeated myself. Why? She asked. I wanted badly to laugh then but didn't want to wake June up. We were a pair of ridiculous people taking on a ridiculous task that neither of us was adept to handle. Instead, I said I was her mother too, very defensive, my mother's voice. Marina thought about it as if she had never considered it. I'm her mother too, I said again. Jeez, she said. OK, OK! I just thought you didn't want anything to do with it, with June. Had I said that? Those exact words? Probably. I just shook my head, she's still our daughter. Our. The word rang through the room until I took June up to her crib.

June did not cling as tightly to me as she did to Marina. It was partly my fault I suppose. I hadn't done as much as I was supposed to. Sleep with her, cradle her, breastfeed her. But I gave myself the benefit of biology. I could assert she was mine, just as I could say a number of desperately incorrect things, but it didn't change the fact that she was not. She was more the donor's than she was mine.

When I held June, people said we looked alike. Sure, I'd say. Marina had picked the donor well. Brown skin (like mine), hazel eyes (hers, but June had brown eyes anyway), brown hair (the happy middle of both of ours: black and light brown). I'd go home and stare at June and me in the mirror. Think, for a second, I was looking at my mother instead.

If Marina and I were together, people often stared down at June then back up at us a few times until they made up their minds. Most went with her as the mother. I was the sister, the sister-in-law (girl's night? people would ask), a very good friend. I was never even an option. I was an accompaniment. Not fit to be a mother. Even they agreed. And on the rare chance that they did ask, I'd be quick to say June was Marina's daughter. Cut Marina off mid-sentence (in which she just stumbled over her words because she did not really know what to say). She never said anything about it and I figured she knew it was true because it was.

As we settled into a routine, I began to suspect that she was having an affair. Not an actual one – she had emphasized once that she did not fuck around, lest with men – but one of those 'emotional affairs'. An affair that revolved around talking and conversation and everything that made up what it meant to be in love. It was a relationship without the sex. At first, I thought it was Marina's friends, the group of privileged humanities students she'd stuck with since college, but as much as I detested them, it was never in front of her. She would have no reason to lie. So I decided it was someone else entirely. I suspected the sperm donor whose name I did not know. She still had his contact, had even called him after the birth to tell him the news. Yay! I heard his tiny voice from her speaker. God, I thought. What an obnoxious man. Marina had been slinking off more lately: talking on the phone at night and leaving for hours during the day. But I didn't mention it, if only for the reason that she had more kisses to spare when she came home at night.

When I took care of June, I did so with mechanical motions, a detailed routine I repeated daily. Put her to bed and took her out of it, changed her, carried her when no one else could. I was more a nanny than a mother. I knew this, of course. I had no idea what it was I should do with her and was not the type of person to read a book about it. But I didn't need anyone to tell me about it. Not a therapist or Marina or random strangers on the internet. I knew very well what my problem was, it just wasn't a problem with a solution unless someone realized how to manipulate time itself.

I asked her to introduce us. Me and the donor. She asked me why, eyed me up and down with the suspicion of malice. I asked her if it was such a bad thing and she didn't answer, just shrugged, pulled up her phone, and began typing. I told her I wanted to meet him alone. Just the two of us, almost copies of each other. She looked offended, as though I was leaving her out of something. I wasn't supposed to know they had been together in the first place so she dropped it. I think she liked the idea of being a mother – the only one.

I recognized him almost immediately. And it wasn't because of my predisposed notions about what he looked like, but because I saw June's face in his. It was quite jarring; he was what June would be in the future, just a little sharper. Oh my god, he said aloud when I sat down. Then, sorry, sorry I didn't mean to say that. I just laughed, a bit offended. Deserved though.

Didn't think I would ever meet you, he said.

Well, I'm the mother too, I said. He nodded a hundred times and I hoped June wouldn't be so submissive.

He liked to name-drop, very conceited. Columbia, then Harvard, then Google. A small stint at Microsoft. Another at a friend's start-up. Finally at Apple. He was not the type of man I imagined. He laughed while saying all this as though it was so incredibly funny to him, recounting all the achievements he had no problem flaunting.

He finally asked me what I did and it felt wrong to say I was a mother but I knew Marina would have. I said marketing. I didn't say at a small start-up because, though I tried not to, I cared deeply about what he thought of me. He was not interested. Probably forgot the moment I said it.

We made awkward small talk until he finally asked me what the hell I was doing here (only he said it much nicer, in a condescending kind of way). I said, trying to know June's father. He cringed at the word and I asked why.

I don't think you can call me the father, he said. Just a donor.

I said that's stupid, she has your DNA.

He said it didn't matter whose DNA she had. That she was very much mine and not his regardless of what her blood said about it. I did not agree.

Then, I asked, why did you do it? He was average. Not for the money, surely.

He didn't quite know either. To give back, he said. But this was stupid, generic; he had no reason to give back to us.

Then, as dramatic as a climax in a film, I said seriously without any humor: Why have you been seeing my wife?

He looked very startled and I was glad about it. We're not...she's just...friends, friends! I began to laugh and he laughed and I glared because this was not his moment to laugh, there was nothing funny about any of this. OK, I said. I don't care why. Just, what is she telling you?

Nothing really, he said. Just – she’s struggling. This, I knew. Anyone would have known. Then he leaned in like we were children and he was going to tell me a secret: she doesn’t know where you stand on all this.

I wanted to answer but had none of my own. I don’t know, I admitted.

Well, you have to, he said, very matter-of-fact. Not for Marina. Or you. For your daughter.

I asked him if he knew her name. He said no, said he asked specifically not to be told. I said OK, glad I knew something he did not. I asked if he wanted to know and he said he did not. I never planned on telling him anyway.

Marina asked me if I was going to see him again and I said no, that’s OK, I know everything I need to know.

I was the one to notice when June did not talk as much. She was a very quiet baby and only babbled when necessary, which was not often because I did everything for her before she even asked for it. I remembered one of Marina’s articles, something about talking and the brain, and basically that June should have been talking a lot more than she was. The two of us finally came together in our panic for her: a melody and its harmony. I did not linger outside the doctor’s room anymore. I came in, brazen, and as what one might interpret as the role of the father. The doctor said we were worried about nothing at all, a miracle really. Quiet baby. Happy baby. Happy life. We said wow, OK. Went back to the car and buckled her up; Marina came over to the passenger’s side for the first time in months. We looked at each other and she laughed. I asked her why it had been so long and she said because of me and we kissed.

I think Marina stopped seeing him sometime after that. And though I should have been happy, I was not. Because for once, she was seeing all of me. I had kept my mechanical qualities as a mother a secret and now I stood nude, brandishing them to the wind. I still could not answer her question. Especially as she settled back as June's mother. Yes, I was jealous, but yes I was also incapable of doing anything about it. I scolded myself a thousand times and it did not change anything. I laughed after I did it too. When has that ever worked?

I remember my mother once told me she did not want to be a mother. I hadn't even known that was an option. I said oh, OK. She said yeah, yeah, I'm only one because of you. I said sorry and she told me not to do that. Later, she'll tell me she thinks I shouldn't be one too and I'll take her advice like the word of God.

I did not think I struggled with intimacy until Marina had June. And no, by ley terms I did not. Marina and I – at least before June – had sex almost every other night. Not something I would ever admit. Maybe to my mother, just to see her face. But with June, I was extra careful around her, unable to do the things that came innate to mothers. She was made of glass. Born with a FRAGILE label. When I held her, I held on tight. I always gripped the handle of her stroller as though we were atop a steep hill and any second a runaway rock would send her flying out. I watched as Marina rocked her in her arms, held her high above her head. I thought I could never do that. And in the next moment, I wish I could. Perhaps things would have been different if my mother held me more (which I imagined she did not, only when absolutely necessary) but wasn't that the case for anything? Things would have been different if even the smallest thing had been.

June would look different if the donor was the next guy over. June might not have been June if Marina had waited to meet someone naturally. She would hold no resemblance to me and I would not even know her name. Sometimes I wished that was reality, in which I had nothing to worry about except my next first date with another girl that swiped right. And yet, here I was. Here we were. The three of us in our home: a tragically laughable make-up of a family. Fuck, I often thought. This is it.

June was weaning. Marina decided so after extensive research online and from books and had even resorted to calling her aunt, who told us some garbage about never stopping breastfeeding and we quickly hung up. June was a quiet baby, very good in all aspects a baby can be. She wasn't too difficult, and she adjusted easily. Marina told me a mommy blogger she saw said to not 'indulge in their every whim'. That's ridiculous, I said. She's saying it like this isn't a baby but a grown man-child. Marina said yeah, OK, I guess, but it makes sense and we don't want her to be a spoiled brat, do we? I said yes but I didn't know what I wanted and let her vouch for us.

I did not listen to that woman's advice. I didn't know anything about parenting. Not indulgence nor attention. I knew you had a list of rules to follow to ensure your child was decent but I didn't know about any of that. The only love I knew was to indulge.

June cribbed a lot at night. We heard it on the baby monitor, which I had moved to my side of the bed. I went to sleep listening to the sound of her murmurs, found it was the only thing that could do it those days. And yes, yes, I knew it was all part of the process and the process would make her a better person and her being a better person would inherently make me one too but I didn't care.

Once, when Marina was sleeping, I got up in the middle of the night to check on June. The monitor was silent but I had woken up with a cold sweat and had to make sure she was fine. Just in case.

The nursery, which I rarely frequented and only just realized, was a coalition of the two of us. It was both pink and blue because of my insistence to not push gender roles onto our child, one of the only things I'd ever said about it. It had Marina's effortless sweep of affection one could only recognize after having lived with her for so long: the stuffed animals lined so June could see them all (and choose her favorite! Marina had said), the softest side of the blanket left up, the mess she left behind because she knew I hated all the empty space. It had my knickknacks and tendency toward art: my art, hers, our friends'. It was colorful and so incredibly distinct from all the other neat rooms in our apartment it was like stepping into a foreign world.

June was rolling around a bit, cranky because, like me, she knew nothing. Only six months in, I whispered. You still have a long way to go. I picked her up and held her against my chest. Bounced her a bit. Tapped her back a few times. She was grabbing at my hair and I let her. She made faces at me and I thought I should call Marina inside. But she grabbed at me. My shirt, my hair. Brought her face closer to mine.

I set her down, pulled off my shirt, and held her on my chest. It was all unnatural; Marina should be here, I thought. She had done it a hundred times before and had no shame. I was blushing a little. June calmed down against me. She was warm, our skin on each other's. Very soft. Nothing like I had felt before and, I knew this intrinsically, nothing like I would ever feel again. I sat down on the floor, back against the crib, and waited as June went to sleep against my bare chest.

I let Marina sleep in. She looked so kind when she slept and I couldn't bear to disturb her. I had been stealing away with June, taking her on walks or to the store, or giving her a tour of her home. I held her closer to my chest, let her little fingers run away with my hair and poke my face and do whatever it was they wanted because she was very much mine. I looked at her, and back at myself, and I saw my eyes staring back at me. I wanted to commend Marina on the excellent donor choice but we didn't talk about him much.

It was early in the morning and the two of us were on a walk down the street when an old woman approached us. She said something about that being the best age and I said, isn't it? Then she pinched June's cheeks, kissed her a little, told me about how she was so cute and she missed that so much and if only she could go back! I laughed. Saw myself in her a bit. Didn't say much.

Is she yours? She said, looking me up and down.

I hesitated. Marina's name was on my lips. I looked down at June who rested her head on my collarbone. I said yes, yes she's mine.