

Sure, single motherhood is
exhausting. What's
surprising is why.

Sugar Mama

BY ANDREA MCDOWELL

EVERY NIGHT I do the dishes by hand in the kitchen sink. My five-year-old daughter, Frances, sleeps upstairs, her arms wrapped around a sleep-time friend, while downstairs I put into practice those lessons I learned from Home Ec so long ago—glass, then silverware, then dishes, then pots. I suspect I am the only one from that class to be doing dishes by hand, because I am likely to be the only one who does not have a dishwasher.

The dishes done, the floor swept, the worst of the mud mopped from the front entryway, the toys returned to their rightful places, the school paperwork read over and dealt with appropriately, the kitchen table wiped, the counters scrubbed, and the leftovers refrigerated, I finally have five free minutes. Immediately a thought intrudes: My insulin pump told me three hours ago to change my infusion site—the location on my abdomen or hips where the insulin is delivered through a plastic catheter left in place for up to five days. Oops. I'd better do it now before I forget again.

I never forgot, before, when I was married. I never forgot to test my blood sugar or give myself an insulin dose or change my infusion site. My sugars never "went high" for days on end, because I always had time to check them after meals.

I change the infusion site. *Now* I have five free minutes. Real ones. Frances cries. I go upstairs to soothe her. So much for that.

Many things about single motherhood turned out to be surprising, mostly in good ways. For instance: It's often not anywhere near as hard as I had feared. Frances is a preternaturally easygoing child who demands a lot of affection and attention but never throws temper tantrums. I had thought the separation might cause her to regress—that she would need diapers again, maybe, or become angry or sad or sullen. But no. There is a lot of work to do, and it frequently takes everything I have in me to get it all done every day, but my little girl, thank the gods, seems to be handling the separation well.

Or: Losing the house was also not traumatic. Frances and I have considerably less than half the space we used to, and, commensurately, considerably less than half the stuff. It's fine. I don't miss it. I never liked lawn maintenance, and I'm just as happy not to have to shovel a driveway or clean snow from the car in the win-



ter. Empty space is just an invitation to spend money to fill it, as far as I'm concerned. Here, in our new little nest, I sit on the couch with the computer and watch Frances play with her toys beside me on the floor. It's cozy, I think. I don't watch cable, since I can't afford it, which gives us more time to spend together.

Also: It's lovely to live one subway stop from my office, to know that Frances is that close when she is at school, to spend so little time commuting, to be able to walk or ride my bike when the weather is nice and get in some extra exercise. It's lovely to live on the subway line and be able to forget for weeks at a time that I even own a car.

And: It's especially lovely, although potentially expensive, to have a nice big bookstore right across the street. These are reasons that I chose to move us here,

of course, but I hadn't expected to like them quite so much.

But then there are surprises that can't be described as lovely, such as realizing that married moms can screw up in ways that single moms can't. We are already assumed to be damaging our children just because we do not have a husband; we are under more scrutiny and more suspicion, or at least it feels like that.

Things I would never have done when I was married, I do now, even though I have so much less time and energy, because I am single and need to prove to the world that I can do this, that I am not hurting the most important person in my world, that she will be fine and I will be fine and I can handle all of this.

I never mopped when I was married. I changed the sheets on a seasonal

schedule when I was part of a couple; now I do it regular as clockwork, every two weeks. Sometimes, when I was married, Frances would watch more than the two hours of television that was our theoretical limit for a day, or her dinner would be pasta from a can. Now? Every dinner she has eaten in our new home has been made by me, from scratch, except for carrot soup.

I wonder if this is why single motherhood is so much more exhausting than the partnered kind: We have no permission to slack off, ever. Not from the world, and not from ourselves.

Christmas was more complicated this year, our first as a separated family. Previously I had a kind of self-righteous glow about our anti-consumerist gift stance. Frances would get a few

nice things that she asked for, but there was no mountain of presents under the tree, from Santa or anyone else. She had so many toys already, I said; I hated the materialism of it all and wanted her to value other things about the season.

This year, with less money, and much less space for new toys, the pile of gifts under our little tree was at least equivalent to what she'd received last year, once you considered it had been divided by two. Yet I felt only guilt. How could I deprive her?

At least the toys I chose were wholesome. From Mummy, there was: the Charlie Brown Christmas DVD because she loves Snoopy; a stack of foam paper; a pad of construction paper; a new large set of markers to replace the ones that are drying out; a picture book. From Santa, a small bin of Legos, the little yellow duckie she asked Santa for, and a set of toy tools—hammer, two screwdrivers, two bolts and nuts, a pair of pliers, and a little tool belt.

She loved them all. I don't think she considered herself deprived, wandering around the apartment, her new tool belt pulled snug around her Christmas pajamas. "Babies can't play with tools," she would say. "Only Mummies and Daddies and big girls like me."

I have tools. It's good for little girls to be comfortable with tools and learn how to use them. Especially when there's no guarantee that anyone more chromosomally inclined toward tooliness will be around when you need that shelf hung or leak fixed.

Diabetes is often the last thing on my mind.

This is how it goes: The pump vibrates. Two hours since bolus (the insulin dose given to metabolize a meal); time to check blood glucose.

Right! I think.

"Mummy," says Frances. "I'm thirsty. Can I have apple juice?"

I get her the apple juice. There are dishes that need to be put into the sink. I might as well put that toy away now while I'm looking at it; Frances won't play with it again until tomorrow. Better check my blood sugar—oh, that's the phone. That'll be her dad calling. Here you are, Frances; let's talk to your daddy and tell him all about your day. I'll check it now. No, I won't. Frances won't play with toys, she wants TV, we rehash our daily argument about how much TV is

Without another adult around to blunt the demands of child and housework, taking care of my disease slips aside. How can I make the blood test a priority when the person I love more than anyone else in the world is standing by my knees, pleading with me for apple juice and a story?

too much and why she can't watch any when it is fifteen minutes before bedtime. Soon it is bedtime. I'll check my sugars after I get her pajamas on, brush her teeth, read her a story, tuck her into bed.

Now I'll get changed into my work-out clothes, because I need that exercise physically and psychologically—it keeps me stable. I'll check when I'm done, no point doing it now, the exercise will only bring it down. But after that, there's the dishes in the sink ready to be washed, and I'm in my pajamas, and I'm finally sitting down and can check my blood

sugar. By then it is ten o'clock, four hours since my bolus—too late now to bring my levels down before breakfast.

Without another adult around to blunt the demands of child and housework, taking care of my disease slips aside. How can I make the blood test a priority when the person I love more than anyone else in the world is standing by my knees, pleading with me for apple juice and a story? There's no one else to get it for her. How can I say no this time, and the time after that, and the time after that?

I know I should. That is what all the experts would say, all the doctors and journalists and authors and celebrity spokespeople, and they are not wrong.

But I can't. Her big blue eyes, her little hands, those round cheeks, and the fact that I have already wounded her by taking her from her father. How can I deny her apple juice?

I was not surprised to read in the only medical study I found on the subject that single mothers with diabetes have significantly worse blood sugar control than married ones. I test when I can, I eat well, I exercise almost every day, and sometimes that's already more than I can handle. Just now I looked down and realized that while I'd remembered to put the new infusion site in, I'd forgotten to take the old one out, so I was sporting one on each side of my stomach. A matched set.

I can keep up with the big things, but the details sometimes get away from me.

There was a time when Frances was fascinated with my diabetes, especially with my glucose monitor. "Just a second," she would say, sitting at the kitchen table. "I have to check my blood sugar." And she would stick a used test strip backwards into the machine and hold the pricker to her arm without plunging it. "Beep! It's good! I can eat."

The first time she did that, I cried. How sweet and lovely that she so badly wanted to be like her mommy; though if the universe ever makes my little girl a diabetic, I'll rip its throat out, I swear.

Now I watch her play actual games with actual toys, which is a relief. A popular one after Christmas was Keep the Little Yellow Duckie Away from Frances's Tools. That naughty baby duck will touch the screwdriver, which is sharp, and she'll hurt her wing. "Then I have to kiss it better, like this," says Frances, demonstrating. "Then she sits down over here to let it dry. Then she feels better. Because babies can't play with tools."

"No, they can't," I say.

"Only Mummies and Daddies, and big girls like me!"

I nod, and she plays with her nuts and bolts and pliers. "What are you going to build?" I ask her.

"The old house," she replies.

I'd half hoped she might have forgotten our old house by now, or at least found it as easy to cast off as I did, a repository of unwelcome memories and too much space to pay for and maintain. Not so, I find; she wants it back, and thinks she has now the tools to make it. Our apartment is not the old house; she isn't fooled.

There are dozens of these little ambushes, small reminders that no matter how much of an improvement the separation is for me, this is the end of a world for her, sometimes; I know what she wants, all three of us living together in the old house again, and I wish I could give it to her. It kills me that I can't. So I give her everything else I can instead, even when it costs me physically and emotionally.

I am always tired. There is so much to do, so little time to get it done. My hobbies fell off singly or in groups so almost none of them remains. It goes without saying that, without cable, I no longer

watch television. Even if I wanted to get out I couldn't, much, since Frances needs to be in bed by seven-thirty (and if I had sense, sometimes I would follow her). Is there a mother, single or otherwise, who does not share some of these complaints? No. Perhaps it's more extreme for me, but none of this can be laid solely at the feet of my disease.

Still, I have fears that other mothers don't. What if I fall into a diabetic coma while I sleep, and one morning Frances wakes to find me in my bed, unable to wake? What would she do? She is too young to feed herself, or get a drink, or open the door and go for help. She can't use the toilet on her own. How can I prepare her? There isn't a friend or family member I would choose to burden with the task of being my diabetes monitor, making sure I am conscious and coma-free. Whatever we do has to be something we can do, just the two of us.

I program her father's cell-phone number into the speed dial of our phone, and I teach her how to use it, and we practice a few times a week. Worst-case scenario, she can call her dad. He is not my husband anymore for a lot of good reasons, but he is still Frances's father.

Diabetes is invisible, until complications set in. All of the damage is under the surface, waiting until later to surprise you. You can't see diabetes. The broken pancreas and the high and low blood sugars are hidden, internal, until one day your vision starts to go, your kidneys begin to fail, the nerves deaden, the plaque lays down its first layers in the arteries around the heart, and the expensive, painful, and potentially fatal complications set in.

I worry that it's the same with Frances and her parents' divorce. You can't see it on the surface, but underneath is she laying down an expectation for aban-

donment, a fatalism about romance, a scathing loneliness?

On the outside, everything looks perfect—happy daughter, competent mother, acceptable house; underneath, it's all powered by a neglected medical condition.

My arms are full. That's the problem. Too many things that I carry (the job, the daughter, the house) cannot be dropped, even for a moment, because I am running as hard as I can to stay in place. The job, the daughter, the house: Even for healthy women, single motherhood can be overwhelming, so why should it be any different for me? Sometimes something drops, and it's almost always the diabetes—a test, a site, an insulin dose. They add up, I know, and it's not my intention, but if I stop I'll only fall further behind. I keep running, and tell myself I'll go back for them later.

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I'm still single and still—obviously—a diabetic, but since writing this essay in 2007, two incredible things have happened: The Ontario government has become one of the first in the world to cover the costs of insulin pumps and related supplies for type 1 diabetics, which eliminates two hundred dollars of my monthly medical costs. And I bought a used countertop dishwasher, freeing myself from the drudgery of daily dishwashing. Neither change has been revolutionary, but they've been significant enough that my blood sugar control has measurably improved.

Other things haven't changed. Some days, Frances still wants to move back into the old house. And I still don't have cable.