



(step) mother's day

There's no rule book for step-parenthood, so **KATE RAE** and her family are making it up as they go along.

THE FIRST TIME IT HAPPENED, I WAS PICKING UP MY BOYFRIEND'S two kids from after-care. "Happy Mother's Day," said one of the caregivers, and I tripped and stumbled to clarify: "Oh nononononono, I'm just their dad's girlfriend," I sputtered. "I know, but it's your day, too, honey," she said. I nodded meekly, shamefully appropriating what wasn't mine, but tucking the idea into my pocket nonetheless.

My own single father had many girlfriends. Some nice, like the one who left her chequebook behind when she went away for the weekend (helping forge her signature was what passed for arts and crafts with a drunk dad in the '70s). There was the weird blonde lady who made my sister and me Wonder Woman costumes, complete with massive foam boobs. There was the one I hated who laughed nervously as our dad spanked us. None of them lasted long. I wanted to be a great girlfriend. I wanted to last.

But god, it's hard dating a dad. You're not just falling in love with one person, you're falling in love with three, and not to sound like a *Bachelor* contestant, but it's awfully tricky to let your guard down with that kind of pressure. If things didn't work out between him and me, my relationships with the kids would end, too. Sometimes I would forget to breathe under the weight of it all.

A year later, I had stopped using "I'm their dad's girlfriend," and started trying out "I'm their stepmom." We weren't yet married, but I appreciated the shorthand of the word. But the transition is bizarre—when does it happen? The first time you care for them when they're sick? The third day you pick them up from school in tears? The 20th time you make their lunches?

I tried out the word like a pair of old-timey lady gloves, waving it around, drenched in Imposter Syndrome.

It was on our second Mother's Day together, our first one living together (we split custody with their mom), when things got messy. We were so busy figuring out how to share a home that we hadn't even begun to work out becoming a family. So with absolutely zero discussion around how we would handle the day, I woke up that morning and somehow decided, "He is buying me flowers and there will be handmade cards." I had been handling most of the child care for months because his work hours were so crazy, and I was feeling frantic for thanks and recognition. But there were no flowers or cards or adorably, clumsily prepared breakfast items on a tray. So I cried and went for a walk while he fretted and had the kids reluctantly drag crayons over construction paper for me. It felt weird to be trying to shove myself inside a space that wasn't really mine in the first place, so I can't begin to understand how it must have felt for them to be asked to participate.

The next year, our third, I have no memories of, which I guess means things weren't particularly good or bad, which, when you're becoming a stepmom, is A-OK.

This year, our fourth together and first officially married, we're finally starting to figure some stuff out, including how to celebrate Mother's Day: We're not. Instead, we're celebrating Stepmother's Day, on a yet-to-be-determined date (just as long as it doesn't coincide with Aunt's Day, which I made up a few years ago and make my sisters celebrate). I'm no longer awkwardly squatting on their mom's day, and I have a day of my own.

Life is getting easier. I finally feel less like the woman at the beginning of a movie about stepmoms, and more like the woman in the middle of a movie about stepmoms.

I know that no one is going anywhere, and they know I'm staying put. The tricky process of becoming a family involves new expectations, strange feelings, guilty thoughts, uncertain boundaries, pasted-on smiles and hot tears. But things change. Eventually, we all sank in, unfurled and learned how to breathe each other's air. Eventually, we became a family. ❧