

## On Becoming A Mother

I don't want to be a mother any time soon. But 20-30 hours a week, it's my job to act as a motherly figure to kids that aren't my own.

For the last four years, I have picked up Lulu, now almost nine, at her school in the West Village. Everyday we go to the health food store across the street. When it's warm, we sit on the concrete outside, where customers tie up their dogs. Maybe a mother wouldn't do this, occasionally we get strange looks, but neither of us cares about our clothes as much as we care about this ritual we've established. The little space between the doors of Health and Harmony and Oscar's diner serves as our unlikely urban picnic grounds.

Every day Lulu gets two fruit leathers. I tell her she should switch it up-- I don't like when she eats too many sweets. She gets a little carton of Organic Valley Chocolate Milk. On days she has eaten less healthily, I encourage her to get plain milk, but for the most part, I let the chocolate slide. When her mother asks her what she's eaten that day, she says her snack was milk and never specifies what kind. I don't adjust her response.

She trusts me like no other. Her parents are divorced and her dad lives in Boston. She sees him for the weekend every other week and for the entirety of her vacations. He always lets her stay up late. With him, she's allowed to have a huge glass of Tru-Moo chocolate milk nightly that she likes to microwave. He seems like the fun one. Strict on the school-night routine, Lulu's mother is the disciplinarian. She juxtaposes her mother and father, and has begun to paint her mother so negatively that it breaks my heart. She can't see what I see just yet, though I try to tell her. In my nine years of watching over children, I have encountered lots of mothers, and I know that she has a damn-good mom. But she sees herself as a tennis ball, she tells me, she goes back

and forth. She tells me that I don't know what it's like to have divorced parents, and she's right-- she teaches me just as much as I try to teach her-- but I know that I bring her the consistency that she doesn't think her life has. I am her confidante and she is mine.

But the lines are blurred. Can I be both best friend and disciplinarian? She has come to learn (it doesn't take long), that I will usually say yes to whatever she asks. Sometimes she abuses this. She knows exactly how to push my buttons, and I am aware that sometimes I push hers. I try to teach her things, about the world and about values. She can ask me anything and I will answer. I am censored but honest. She asked me who I was voting for in the primaries and why. I answered as honestly as I could in a way that wouldn't, to her family, seem like I was brainwashing her with the liberal idealism of a college student while at the same time, wanting to brainwash her with these ideas. I hesitate-- what is too much?

I sometimes feel this weight on me knowing that there is *another human* that I influence, that I play a role in *shaping*, so heavily. Me, clumsy and awkward and goofy and only half sure of the person I am becoming. 22 is the number of years my mother will tell you I've lived but so often I feel like a child. I am, afterall, still her baby.

I tell Lulu that my mom still reminds me to pay my credit card bill. I tell her when I sleep through my alarm and when I pull all-nighters for homework that I've procrastinated. I tell her about the time I almost set the house on fire baking a cake and about horrible dates I've gone on (she gives excellent relationship advice). She's seen me trip over cracks in the sidewalk and water damage every book in my backpack. "It's like I'm the babysitter and you're the kid!" she tells me. I like to think our relationship is mutual. We work as a team-- with our two spoons we

tackle the peanut butter jar and it never goes unfinished. I let her (and myself) eat the whole thing.