

Living *with* My Ex

In the space of two weeks, my wife came out as gay and told me she was pregnant. What could have been the end of our family turned into a new beginning.

By Richard Kelly Kemick

Photograph by Alana Paterson

LITIA AND I had been together for 10 years, almost to the day, when she came home from work and told me she was gay. I reacted with all the clichés: the gasp, the floor falling away, the sound of the ocean in my ears. At one point, I stopped crying long enough to say, “Then I will become a woman.” She replied, “That’s not how it works.” All I said was, “Of course,” but what I thought was, *Will someone please explain the goddamn rules to me?*

We were living in a small town in the Kootenays in B.C., where housing was like the local caribou: plentiful in a bygone era, now alive only in rumour. Both Litia and I knew everyone in our postal code; neither of us would be able to cut ties and move into a life absent the other. It seemed easier for the person moving out to relocate entirely. Since Litia had a good job and my job was writing (is that even a job?), we

decided I would go. “No rush,” she kept saying. “Live here as long as you like”—by which she meant not just our town, but our apartment.

During the day, while Litia was at work, our German shepherd sat on my lap and I’d scroll through rental listings across the country, the continent, the world. “What do we want?” I whispered to the dog, her velvet ear flickering against my lips. I made a list (Pittsburgh, Halifax, Paris) but the front-runner was Webb, Saskatchewan, a village of 71 people where my great-grandfather had homesteaded a hundred years ago. The place seemed cheap, desolate and lonely. If there wasn’t going to be fulfillment in my life, at least there’d be metaphor.

About two weeks later, Litia came home from work and told me about the two positive pregnancy tests she had taken in the staff washroom.

TO KEEP OR NOT TO KEEP? We agreed to make no decision for 10 days. When we spoke, we only whispered, even though there was no reason to: “Are you done with the ice cream?” “Where are the keys?” “You still gay?”

I kept thinking about a guy I once knew who went skiing out of bounds and got swept up in an avalanche. He said the worst part about it wasn’t the avalanche, even though it broke his arm. The worst part was wandering, lost and alone, for two days in the deep solitude of the backwoods in winter.

After eight days of deliberating, Litia said she wanted to have the baby, and I didn’t object. In truth, I wanted this avalanche to keep tumbling me a while longer, because it seemed better than being alone. The days spun wildly, one into the other: we divided our assets, attended prenatal classes, assembled a crib, told everyone.



One night, we invited our friends Andrew and Rosa over to break all the news. They were overjoyed at Litia's coming out, and overjoyed again at the soon-to-be addition to our family. Later that evening, Andrew pulled me aside and said, "Dude, this is like a fucking horror movie." *Exactly*, I thought. Who has time to reflect when there's a poltergeist on the loose?

It seemed impossible for me to move out while Litia was pregnant. What if something went wrong and I wasn't there? Or worse, what if everything went right, revealing how truly redundant I was? At night, from the spare bedroom, I would listen to her sleep. Pregnancy had given her a snore that could be described only as tectonic. The sound would grow and fade, grow and fade, then stop abruptly. I'd bolt upright. Just as panic set in, I would hear the bedsprings creak as she shifted positions. Soon returned the sound of the Earth rearranging itself.

IN MAY OF 2022, the kid was born; in August, I moved out of the apartment into a new house—with Litia and the baby. A few months later, Litia's job relocated her to Vancouver. So we moved again, and then into another apartment a few months after that, a two-bedroom duplex where the kid slept in a hallway closet. "He'll be fine," I said when we moved in. "Think of all the great people who've slept in lesser quarters."

"Like who?" she asked.

"Harry Potter," I replied. Scrambling, I added, "The Count of Monte Cristo."

When did we make the decision to keep living together? Both never and constantly. We didn't formally sit down and commit ourselves to sharing an address, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. But the question existed in the background of every argument. When we were together, and after any particularly acerbic fight, I would weigh the equation: whether the difficulty in unknitting our lives was greater than the promise of financial autonomy, or sexual promiscuity, or hair elastics not left willy-fucking-nilly all over the counter. Eventually, I would retreat. I'm not saying I wanted to leave. I'm saying I could never be sure that, to some degree, comfort was not enabling my stasis.

But once the logistical labour of the breakup was over with, there were no more equations to work through. *Do I want this?* I would ask myself. And I had to act in accordance with my answer.

Admittedly, the kid complicated this simplicity. Living apart would entail its own bureaucratic exasperations: synchronizing custody, bills, parenting approaches. Then there's the cold war one-upmanship in making your home the better one. Yes, I worried that if Litia and I lived apart the kid would like her place more, but I also knew that while Litia would give the kid candy if he asked, I would give him a flamethrower.

But why bother with all that, when living together every day as family offered up those small moments that feel as if you're digging in your pocket for spare change and coming up with a handful of rubies? Recently I was upstairs, playing chess online, but what I was really doing was listening to Litia and the kid building a fort downstairs. "Are you a knight?" she asked.

"No," he said, "I am the day."

OF COURSE THERE HAVE BEEN headwinds. But aside from those aforementioned hair elastics, the difficulties in living with your ex come largely from outside the home. The women Litia dates all think our living situation is a marvel. "Incredible," they say. "You two must have excellent communication."

Among my potential partners, enthusiasm is lacking. "I'd never date you," my friend Lindsay recently told me, apropos of nothing. We were at an Earls restaurant on a Wednesday, drinking. "But I have a job," I responded. "And a driver's licence." (Rare among single men in Vancouver in their thirties.) "I've read *King Lear*." Lindsay swayed in the booth, but her opinion did not.

Since the breakup, most first dates have involved listening to the same assertions from the other side of the table: "You two must still have sex." "That seems co-dependent." And, most of all, "It sounds messy."

"You're in an asexual polyamorous relationship," someone told me recently on a first date, which was not going well. At first, the label didn't bother me. In fact, I clung to it a little, with the hope

that it would deepen the "identity" section on future grant applications. But in time I admitted that the label doesn't stick. Because the intimacy—physical and emotional—that differentiates a relationship with a partner from relationships with the wider world is gone between Litia and me. We still carve pumpkins together, go to baseball games and gossip ruthlessly. We still exchange clothes (in hindsight, that should have been a red flag). But we rarely hug anymore. Our expressions of love are limited to birthday cards. The thought that we were once the opposite of such—intimate to the point of inappropriate—seems not only of a past year, but a past life.

Some time ago, the kid and I were planning a trip to Whistler for a fancy weekend. Just before we left, Litia expressed anxiety about our safety on the long drive. "You know I have this fear," she said, "when multiple people I care about are travelling together." I was taken aback. I knew of the fear; I didn't know I was still a subject of it.

LITIA WORKS NINE TO FIVE, and I'm not sure daycare even exists in this city anymore, so the kid and I have time on our hands. We take art class, swimming class, dance class. We careen from gymnastics to Mother Goose to something called Sportball, a gladiatorial training routine for children. The avalanche tumbles on.

At two years old, the kid is too young to be dropped off, so all of his activities require adult participation. I assumed I would hate this, but I've come to adore it. In swimming lessons, he launches himself with reckless abandon, surfacing coughing and blinded but undeterred. In the pool we spin like figure skaters; I raise him high above me, his arms outstretched as Ms. Kelly claps out the tempo.

I also love the classes because they're a reprieve from the pressures of courtship. Here, there is no possibility of romance. This is partly because the kid is a total vibe-killer—once, from across a crowded gymnasium, he addressed me by my first name and asked if I needed to "pee through my penis." But it's also because the classes are for very young children, and many of the parents still believe that having a baby will save their troubled marriage.

Nine times out of 10, I'm the lone father among the mothers. (There is occasionally a guest appearance by a dad who spends the entire class making hay of the fact that he's there since his wife is at the spa for her birthday.) I hear the confessions of the ones who live with their romantic halves, about the Venn diagram of their lives and their partners' eclipsing each other until all they're left with is an empty circle, where the only allowance of a moment entirely alone is sleep—which is the time most interrupted.

I used to think it was a case of cosmic bad luck that Litia discovered she was pregnant *after* we'd broken up. Now, I see how lucky we were. There is a version of our lives in which Litia took those pregnancy tests two weeks earlier, lost her nerve to come out and today we're living a life more fiction than fact, leasing a Toyota and spending weekends picking out baseboards instead of discussing why we no longer have sex.

One recent afternoon at the nearby community centre, the city had set up some bouncy castles, and a mother and I were watching our kids through the mesh. I'd known her for a few months, and I leaned against the inflatable pillar and tested the solidity of her marriage. "You thinking about having more children?"

She sighed. "I don't think so. But Ken has started floating the idea." I nodded knowingly, and then some homeschooled preteen double-bounced inside and the pillar buckled, taking me along with it.

LATELY, MY FAVOURITE question to ask couples is, "How have you two changed from when you met?" The most common reply: "We haven't." But they've painted themselves into a corner. Change is required when explaining the collapse of a relationship, but not its endurance? I point this out and let the equivocating begin. Why should I be made to justify a life of flux when change is the most natural state of existence?

When we moved to the city, I joined a Single Dads of Vancouver group, assuming that in a metropolis of millions, someone else would be in a similar living situation. In hindsight, my mistake was obvious: no one is more aghast at the thought of living with their ex than a man scorned.

"I can't imagine living with that woman," one of the guys told me (he used a different word than "woman"). "Like, I literally cannot even imagine it." I asked how long they were together. The answer: 22 years. "But she wasn't doing other dudes that whole time."

My other friend Lindsey once asked me if my and Litia's living situation is only tenable because she dates women. Maybe, partly. I confess that I was most frustrated when she dated a transgender man or a transgender woman, and I wasn't sure how much phallic insecurity to have.

But my frustrations would be dulled, not sharpened, if Litia were straight. It's one thing to admit you tried and lost. There's dignity there. It's another thing to realize you weren't playing the right game

I replied, "Isn't that like asking, 'When you're playing the lottery, do you want to win a jackpot you already hit, or win a new jackpot entirely?'"

"I suppose," she said, "that would be revealed if you're playing the same numbers or not." I burned with envy at how deft she'd proven with the simile.

At home I flopped face-down on the couch. Litia asked why I wanted to date at all. Because, of course, without the validation of others, I'd have to gather it myself.

LITIA SAID it took her two years between realizing she was gay and telling me. At first that made me sad, because it seemed like an awfully long time to be lonely. But aloneness is the basis of transformation. Ever since the kid was born, I've never

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in the first place. All that's inside of that is embarrassment.

We are where we are, and where we are is the kitchen table, the kid napping on the couch as we check our dating profiles. I show her someone I've matched with, and she goes back to her phone, scrolls up and up, and shows me she's matched with the same person.

"On mine," I say, "it says she's straight." "Same with mine," Litia replies. "But there are a lot of photos of her playing softball." I close my eyes. Can someone please explain the fucking rules to me?

"Do you want to date because you want a new life, or to re-create the one you had?" This question came from a first date while we waited to pay. She'd made the mistake of telling me she thought my situation was too messy after we asked for the bill but before it arrived, meaning we were beholden to a 19-year-old kid with knuckle tattoos to bring the receipts and release us.

been more surrounded by people. I have also never felt more alone. Parenthood is a process of such embarrassment and shortcoming, of revelation and ardour, so intimate and exposing that it demands to be experienced alone. There is no one who can understand what is happening to you, because you will never be able to convey what you are becoming. It is the aloneness of interpreting dreams, por-tending the shape of yourself: I dream of an oven that cannot be turned off, a chandelier so large it blocks the doorway, of standing in a clearcut.

Last night I woke from jumping into an orca tank and couldn't fall back asleep. I got up and walked past Litia's room. The door was closed, but I could see from the glow around the hinges that she was on her phone. I heard her fingers tapping out a text. I walked past the kid's bedroom, and paused to listen to his breath, like the surf across stones.

There are no rules. ■