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# if mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy

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## Outnumbered: Day One

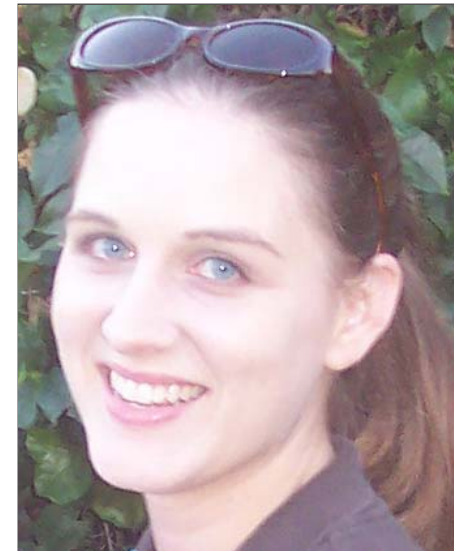
It's late in the afternoon, almost time for dinner. "Dinner! And then... Daddy come home from work!" says two-year-old Audrey. It's Sunday. The vagaries of the weekly schedule are lost on her.

"Not today," I say. "Daddy will come home another day." Dane has jetted off to Chicago for a week, something to do with work and training and blah blah blah. He left early this morning, and I think only Abigail, who's seven, understands that he's going to be gone a while. He never travels, really—maybe a couple of days at a time, maybe once or twice a year. This week he's staying in a hotel that brings hot coffee and breakfast pastries to his door every morning. I, on the other hand, am awoken each day at six a.m. by four-year-old Owen, fully dressed and making endearing slobbery noises with his tongue. Not that I'm keeping score.

I realize, as I help Audrey wash her hands for dinner, that my fingers are swollen in the early summer heat. I can't slide my wedding ring off. Or even around. And while I understand on some level that the swelling will go away after a while, that the ring will eventually be removable again, this does not quell my rising panic at being unable to move it right now. There's no metaphor here, I'm just freaked out by the idea of a hunk of platinum being permanently wedged into my skin. So I hold a bag of frozen peas to my hand, then run it under cold water for a minute until I can wrench the thing from my finger, and I can breathe again. And so it is that Dane's been gone twelve hours and I'm no longer wearing my wedding ring. I don't think that's considered appropriate behavior in most social circles. I think it may actually be frowned upon.

The kids have been clambering into chairs and jostling plates and forks about the table during my little anxiety attack over by the kitchen sink, and by the time I get the

*Melissa Wilkins*



Melissa Wilkins lives in Southern California with her husband, Dane, and their four children, Abigail, Owen, Audrey, and Sadie. Melissa blogs at [Making Things Up](#), and you can find more of Melissa's writing at [melissacamarawilkins.com](#).

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tomato-basil sauce on the pasta, they're ready to eat. Well, six-month-old Sadie is lying on a quilt on the floor, and Audrey is sitting on the table in approximately the spot where I need to set the dish of hot spaghetti. But Abigail and Owen are sitting in chairs. Owen has decided to practice being Mr. Polite; he says "please" and "thank you" and "May I have a towel to wipe up the water I spilled all over the table" and "That's okay, I don't need a new dish, I like water in my food just fine," and he says it all with a smile. "Did you know I could use such nice manners?" he asks repeatedly, and I'm feeling pretty good about this whole being-the-only-parent-at-home thing.

See, I have this plan. Our usual routine depends on having two parents around, so we're going to ditch the routine for the week. Oh, we'll still have regular meals and bedtimes and whatnot, but the dishes can sit in the sink if they need to, the crumbs can stay on the floor, and we can skip playgroup and dance lessons if we can't get out the door on time. Instead of the usual stuff, we'll just do fun kid things. We can wear costumes and sleep in an indoor tent and eat popcorn and play Yahtzee! (Except not the part about Yahtzee. I don't even know how to play.) And since I'll be focusing on the kids and not the daily routine, I will be able to remember—when they pull hair or upend flower pots or cry because we ran out of apple slices—that emotional outbursts are kind of par for the course when one parent is out of town. I will not need to stare at the children in amazement, wondering why on earth they are overreacting to everything. No, I will simply acquiesce to their insatiable need for mama attention. I will savor their foibles. I will enjoy the minutes.

This is an easy plan to have during a well-mannered dinner. It's another thing entirely to stick to the plan when the time comes to put on pajamas but *somebody* is emptying two hundred eighty billion board game pieces all over the bedroom, and *somebody else* starts a game of tag over and around clean stacks of folded sheets and towels. Suddenly I'm all about the "Hey! What happened on the bed? We don't play board games at bedtime!" and the "You! Stop that! Don't touch the laundry! Be still!" This was not part of my plan.

I also did not plan on putting all the kids to bed by 7:30, seeing as the sun won't set until 8:15. I was picturing sing-a-longs and a movie night, not the children bickering in bed while I check my email in the kitchen. But we'll see what the evening holds.

I can't fake an unflappable fun mommy façade for one whole day, and Dane's going to be gone *all week*? The panic is creeping up again, and there's no ill-fitting jewelry to take the blame this time.

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It's evening now, almost bedtime. I did finally wrestle all the kids into pajamas, and I'm getting myself ready for bed in case I fall asleep nursing the baby. Abigail is sitting on the floor of the bathroom just outside the shower, holding a fussy-but-not-quite-sleepy Sadie for me while I wash my hair. "I can't hold her," Abigail says. "She's too wiggly. I'm not strong enough."

"But you are holding her," I point out. "You're doing it now."

"She might get away from me." Abigail says, and she's more than a little worried.

"Don't worry about 'she might.' Just hold her," I say. "You're fine."

And she is. She's holding her sister and keeping her safe. She isn't doing it perfectly, I suppose, and she's clearly a little freaked out, but they're both just fine. The baby is happier than she would be otherwise, and anyway, it'll be over soon. And if I'm lucky, there might just be a metaphor in there for me.

*column added on 2008-05-11 :: [Comments \(10\)](#) :: [Trackback \(0\)](#)*

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