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2 Kids + 0 Husbands = Family

By EMILY BAZELON

At 5:45 a.m. on a recent weekday morning, Fran McElhill padded into her kitchen, in square-framed glasses and a knee-length cotton nightgown, and put on the day's first pot of coffee. While it brewed, she sorted laundry — pencil jeans for her slight 7-year-old daughter, Lili, Nike T-shirts for 10-year-old MeiLin. When the girls woke up, their long hair matted from sleep, Fran gave them each a mug of Campbell's vegetable soup and parked them in front of Nickelodeon so she could get dressed for her job as a lawyer at a regional New Jersey firm.

While MeiLin sipped her soup and watched TV, Lili pulled out a box of Polly Pocket dolls, stored in the family room between a soft and worn leather couch and a shelf of Fran's casebooks from law school. "This is the mom and this is the sister," Lili said, standing a doll with a ponytail next to another taller one. She laid a third doll gently on top of a large red plastic Lego block. "This is the little sister. She broke her leg, so the doctors are operating on her. They say a prayer first, and then they operate."

Lili reached back into the box for more dolls. "She is going to be O.K. Look, she has a lot of sisters. And friends. These are all sisters and friends," she said, scooping up a handful of dolls with all shades of hair. "They have to share clothes and hairbrushes. They say, 'That's mine!' "A few minutes later, Lili looked up and saw her own brush in the hands of her own sister. MeiLin was using it to pull her hair into a ponytail. "That's mine!" Lili said. MeiLin didn't hand it over. "You can use Mom's," MeiLin said.

Like Lili's dolls, the circle that radiates out from this two-bedroom ranch house in the New Jersey suburb of Moorestown is a largely female world. Fran and her daughters spend much of their time outside school and work with a small group of other single mothers and their girls. Among them is Fran's friend of 10 years, Nancy Clark. Fran is 49; Nancy is 50. Six years ago, they went together to China to adopt Lili and Nancy's daughter Katelei, whom they called "salt-and-pepper twins" because Lili had fair skin and Katelei is darker.

In the summers, Fran, Nancy, their friends Lynne Rose and Susan Bacso and the women's total of eight daughters, all adopted from China, drive south to North Carolina's Outer Banks. At the end of a day of taking turns watching the girls on the beach, Fran drives the group (or at least part of it) down back roads in a Toyota minivan that she bought for these trips. There's no contract for the women's nonromantic relationships. They are not binding. But Fran and her friends sometimes half-jestingly imagine a kind of semi-permanence. "We kid about how when we're old and decrepit, and we've sold our houses to pay for college, we'll buy a trailer by the side of the road," she says. "I'll go, 'Hey, Nance, how about that one?' and Susan or Lynne will say, 'We gotta get a double-wide, for all of us.' "

IN 1960, UNMARRIED MOTHERS accounted for about 5 percent of births in the United States. Now they are having almost 40 percent of the country's babies. About half of these women are on their own, and the other half are living with a man at the time of the birth, according to Pamela Smock, a sociology professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The stock characters of the explosion of out-of-wedlock births are feckless fathers and hapless young mothers. It's true that most unmarried mothers are still in their 20s — and less often in their teens — and have no more than a high-school education. But as television's Murphy Brown predicted in the 1990s, an increasing number of unmarried mothers look a lot more like Fran McElhill and Nancy Clark — they are college-educated, and they are in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

According to data compiled by Lucie Schmidt, an economist at Williams College, the birthrate for unmarried college-educated women has climbed 145 percent since 1980, compared with a 60 percent increase in the birthrate for non-college-educated unmarried women. The number of first births for unmarried college-educated women reached a high of 47,000 in 2005, the last year for which numbers are available, compared with about 670,000 first births to non-college-graduates. "Even though the absolute numbers are small, what's striking is how fast the birthrate to the college-educated group has increased," Schmidt says. Unmarried women also adopt thousands of children every year — about 13,000 from the U.S. child-welfare system, as well as thousands of private and international adoptions whose numbers aren't tracked well.

Unmarried college-educated mothers tend to be older: close to 40 percent of them give birth for the first time after age 30, compared with only about 8 percent overall. Many of these women followed a similar and familiar pattern in having their first child: they planned to marry, found they hadn't by their 30s, looked some more and then decided to have a child without a husband.

What's less familiar is what these women do next. Increasingly, instead of giving their children a father, they give them a sibling. Schmidt's data show that second births to unmarried college-educated women have risen even more rapidly than first births — nearly sevenfold since 1980. For Fran and her friends, a second child, not a husband, becomes the path to normalcy. "This is exactly the difference between my generation of single mothers and the current one," says Jane Mattes, who founded the national organization Single Mothers by Choice after her son, Eric, was born in 1980. Mattes has written of her own regret about not having had a second child. "It seemed to me such an amazing, daring thing to try to pull off, I never seriously considered it," she says. "Now these women are saying, Why not? Why shouldn't I have the family I always wanted?"

For some single mothers by choice, that family eventually includes a boyfriend or two, if not a committed life partner. But many find that raising two children takes them out of the dating scene, and not just for their children's toddler years. They don't have the energy to meet men, or the opportunity. And they don't necessarily need the second income a mate could bring; many middle-class single mothers by choice plan ahead financially. Having a child can push women with high-school educations or less into poverty; having a second child increases that risk. But the same risks don't apply to most college-educated unmarried mothers, according to Child Trends, a research center.

Some single mothers like Fran forgo romantic and sexual relationships for extended stretches, turning to one another for the help and companionship that spouses normally provide — filling up one another's cellphone directories, thinking through whether to get speech therapy for a child who is talking late, snapping and sharing summer photos. They are friends, and also more than friends. The trips to the Outer Banks that Fran's group takes represent a step toward an all-female, platonic, chosen extended family.

At the same time, it's the kind of safe step that won't raise eyebrows in a suburb like Moorestown, where almost all the kids at MeiLin and Lili's schools come from two-parent families. Mostly, Fran blends in. She grew up in blue-collar Chester County, Pa., outside Philadelphia, and talks like a local girl (long O's). Her father was a World War II vet who worked for a union and took his kids to Mass most Sundays. Fran married her college boyfriend — she studied political science at St. Joseph's University — while they were both in law school. After they graduated, she and her husband each got a job at a big Philadelphia firm. They drove BMWs and flew to

Florida in the spring to watch the Phillies' spring training. They planned to have kids; they just couldn't; and then their marriage of 11 years fell apart.

In 2000, when MeiLin was a toddler and Fran got an award for serving as chairwoman of the local branch of Catholic Charities, her pastor at the time, who was also being honored, chose the occasion to rail against single mothers from the lectern. A generation back, when the first single mothers by choice started having kids in noticeable numbers, that sort of barb had real bite. Dan Quayle lambasted Murphy Brown 17 years ago for being a bad role model, and his message about irresponsibility resonated. For a woman of means to have a baby without a husband seemed to threaten the institution of marriage and, with it, family stability.

Today's single mothers by choice often do their utmost to prove that they're not a threat to anyone's social order, as Rosanna Hertz, a Wellesley College sociologist, points out in her study of 65 such women, "Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice." After the award ceremony, Fran didn't talk back to her pastor. For her, being a single mom isn't a form of rebellion. She wants to share in middle-class norms, not challenge them. To spend time with Fran and her friend Nancy is to appreciate them as a couple of anti-bohemians: two middle-aged women in high-waisted jeans and tennis shoes, sitting and talking on folding chairs while soft rock and a mix of sweat and Lysol fills the air during their daughters' Saturday-morning gymnastics class.

AFTER GYMNASTICS ON SATURDAYS, Fran and Nancy often meet Susan and Lynne for lunch at a local Chick-fil-A, chosen for its indoor playscape. On the day I went along, MeiLin and Lili started hollering as we pulled into the parking lot, jumping out of the minivan to wave to Susan and Lynne's daughters, who were lined up on the other side of the restaurant's tall glass window. Fran followed MeiLin and Lili inside more slowly. At the Outer Banks several summers ago, when MeiLin was 4, Fran slipped on the way out of the house the group was renting and fractured both her legs. Because she didn't want to be off her feet entirely, Fran decided to have only one of her legs placed in a cast so she could walk on the other one. She still limps, in need of a knee replacement. She's uncomplaining about the experience — at the time, she didn't feel she had a choice. Who would have taken care of MeiLin while she was laid up for weeks?

Inside the Chick-fil-A, the mothers settled the girls down with fried chicken strips and French fries. Then the women sat in their own booth, back to back to the kids, except for Susan's 2-year-old, who was next to her mother in a high chair. The older ones helped the younger ones open ketchup packets and find straws and napkins. When they finished eating, Hannah, Susan's 9-year-old, came over to ask for ice cream

money and then went with Megan, Lynne's 10-year-old, to stand in line for all the kids.

The mothers are frank about their expectations for their daughters. The older sisters know they're supposed to help the younger ones, within and across families. The women are united around this ethic. Because all the girls are adopted, the families share the questions that come with that too. This summer, Fran and Nancy will take their daughters to China to visit the towns the girls came from.

The mothers also have one another's backs day to day. Nancy gets home from work by 4:30 and can pick up other kids from after-school care in a pinch. Fran has the day off on Friday and is on deck if a child is sick. "You have everyone on a speed-dial list, and you know who to call for what," she says.

The women agree that they are one another's primary asset. "If I had a great job opportunity somewhere else, I wouldn't move now," Fran says, to nods from around the table. "If I went somewhere else, I'd have to reform what we have here, and I don't know if I could."

The girls had left the table, and so I asked their mothers about dating and men. Fran had told me that when she started talking about having a second child, her father opposed the idea "because in his mind, this was, well, now no one will marry you." He loved MeiLin. But he raised Fran and her three younger siblings by himself after their mother died when Fran was 8, and he didn't want his oldest daughter to be alone too.

In the years since, Fran has decided for herself that her father's prediction was right: in the foreseeable future, she is not going to marry, or even look for a boyfriend. "We have serial lives," she says. "The next 8 to 10 years is my time for child-rearing. I'd like to keep that protected." As she sees it, her family is complete now. And so she is living side by side with her friends in a kind of monastic motherhood.

When I asked about men at the Chick-fil-A, there was a collective snort of laughter and a beat of pink-cheeked silence. Then Susan echoed what Fran told me earlier: "It's just not part of our lives. What's important is raising our children."

The group got quiet again, and then Fran volunteered, "Sometimes we talk about men from before we had kids." Susan grimaced. "You mean all the deadbeats?" she asked. No one picked up her cue, though, and later Fran assured me that when she talks with her daughters about her own marriage, she stresses the better moments. If her girls

can't see a good marriage or a romantic partnership in action every day, she wants them to be able to imagine one.

Other single mothers don't slam the door on dating. They just let it shut of its own accord. One woman I talked to, Eileen Fishman, is 44 and has two daughters, 5 years and 23 months (one conceived with a donor, the second adopted from Guatemala). She is a C.P.A. and an organizational consultant in Atlanta; in her off time, she advocates for state services for her younger daughter, who was late to walk and talk. Eileen is "a multi-tasking addict," as she put it when I heard water running while we were talking on the phone and asked if she was doing the dishes.

Even with all the juggling, Eileen seems like the kind of person who would want a partner. During her late 20s and early 30s, she was in a six-year relationship. After that man met someone else, and he and Eileen tried to make a clean break, he joked that he could still father her children (via "the miracles of modern medicine"). "God, no!" she says now. Still, she chose a sperm donor who shared some of her ex's characteristics, and she's wistful, for both her girls and herself. "As the mother of two, I wish there was a dad," she says.

Last year, Eileen put an ad on Craig's List, describing herself as a professional with two small children and saying that she was looking for a life partner. "It was a whim, like going out for ice cream," she says. Many of the responses came from prisoners. Eileen concluded that posting on Craig's List isn't the way to meet men and settled back into the companionship of family members who live nearby and of another single mother, Tammy, whose daughters play well with her daughters. The women have different parenting styles (Eileen is stricter, Tammy more relaxed about discipline) and different politics (Eileen voted for Obama, Tammy for McCain). But they also have an easy routine. "She calls at 6, and I'll bring my kids over in their pajamas, or they'll all take a bath together," Eileen says. "It's like what I'd do if my sister who has kids lived here."

Eileen isn't sure when she might try to date again. "I have actually asked myself, when is a good time?" she says. "When my younger daughter is in grammar school? Later? You know how when you're single, if you meet someone, you ask yourself, Could I be with this person, not sexually, but in general? I don't make those mental notes. I've gotten to a place where I don't have somebody, and I'm not looking."

There are indications that in choosing platonic intimacy with female friends over the romantic version with male ones, Fran in New Jersey and Eileen in Atlanta may be making the better bet for their children. Sara McLanahan, a sociologist at Princeton,

has been studying the effects of divorce and single parenting on kids since the 1980s. Fundamentally, her work reveals the risks of instability. The biggest reason that children born to unmarried mothers tend to have problems — they're more likely to drop out of school and commit crimes — is that they tend to grow up poor. Children of divorce may also experience a drop in income, and their mothers are at a heightened risk for depression, which in turn raises the risk of mental-health troubles for the kids.

No one has shown, however, that there are similar risks for the children of college-educated single mothers by choice. In research that's not yet published, McLanahan has found that college-educated single mothers generally experience less instability and stress related to men than other single mothers. But at the same time, when college-educated mothers do have relationships with men that prove unstable, she says, their children experience a greater drop than the children of less-educated women in "literacy activities" — playing games and reading books with their mothers. "This is partly because the educated moms normally do a lot of these activities," McLanahan says. "Now they're doing a lot less. When they're in the relationship, that's a competing activity. Then if it breaks up, they are sad and distracted."

In other words, breakups can function like mini-divorces. Some single mothers intuit the risk. Since the mid-1990s, in England, Susan Golombok of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge has been conducting a longitudinal study of middle-class single mothers. She is comparing the children of 38 two-parent heterosexual couples with those of 25 lesbian couples and 38 single mothers. Most of the mothers have a university degree and a professional or managerial job.

When the children turned 12, Golombok measured their emotional and behavioral development, school adjustment, peer relationships and self-esteem and found no differences among the groups. That held true in the latest round of interviews with the kids, who are now 18. The major new finding from the data is that the majority of the mothers have remained single over the course of the study. And deliberately so. "Qualitatively, what was quite striking to me was that it was very rare for the mothers to engage in or pursue any relationship," Shirlene Badger, Golombok's co-investigator, wrote in an e-mail message. "In fact, many of the mothers talked about purposefully not pursuing any relationship for the sake of their child."

Curious about how the same questions play out in the United States, Golombok and Badger and a colleague surveyed 330 self-identified "choice moms" who signed up through a Web site run by Mikki Morrissette, author of the book "Choosing Single Motherhood." The vast majority (86 percent) had a college degree or higher. Ninety-

one percent of the mothers said they were not in a relationship. Almost 30 percent of that group said that was a conscious choice.

Does having a second child make middle-class single mothers more likely to swear off dating? Given the demands of parenthood, that might seem almost inevitable, at least for a time. Two kids means more sleepless nights, more years spent in the routine of school carpool, sports and Girl Scouts, where single men don't abound. "To be honest, if I wanted to be looking, I'd have to dress differently," Eileen Fishman says. "I go out with my kids in the morning in sweat pants and a T-shirt and with my hair up." Fran said that after she adopted Lili, her father's warning that she'd taken herself out of the marriage market "just came to seem like the natural evolution."

A FEW WEEKS AFTER talking to Fran and her friends at the Chick-fil-A, I took the train to Princeton for lunch with another group of single mothers. None of them were dating, either. But they objected to the idea that there was a relationship between having a second child and being alone. "I've been chewing over that question, and to tell the truth I'm incensed by it," said Anne-Marie, whose talkative and frisky boys, who are 6 and 4, were conceived with sperm donors. Anne-Marie, who asked that I not use her last name to protect her privacy, had been laughing, but now she leaned forward. "The idea that by having a second child, you make yourself less datable — honestly, that never crossed my mind. I don't find the two things to be connected."

Anne-Marie runs a local single-mothers group, and she invited two other single mothers, Susanna and Carole, when I asked to meet some of her friends. Carole (her middle name) was on her lunch break from a marketing job. She darted me a wary look. "There's always the assumption that there's a gap," she said. "That you want to be dating, and you're not because of your kids."

"It comes up all the time in online discussions," Anne-Marie continued, referring to list-serve Q. and A.'s about the consequences of having a second child. "But I just don't feel like I have this hole." Then she gave a throaty chuckle. "Then again, maybe I've forgotten what I'm missing. I haven't been on a date since [her older son] was born."

Carole turned to Susanna, an artist whose kids are the same ages as Anne-Marie's. "You were making a big effort to go out last spring, weren't you?"

"Yeah, I was online for a while," Susanna said. "I was really trying. But you know, it's a lot of work. You have to get yourself out the door, pay for a baby sitter, and then you come home tired."

Carole tucked a piece of long red hair behind her ear. “It’s a constant job interview,” she said.

Anne-Marie did make a big change in her life when her first son was born: she moved from Boston back to Princeton, her hometown, and bought a white Victorian a few blocks away from the house where she grew up and where her parents still live. When Anne-Marie drives her sons to school, she passes the river where she caught her first largemouth bass. This wasn’t where she intended to end up. But when her older son was 9 months old, she realized that she needed her parents. They travel for part of the year, but when they are home, they’re the adults Anne-Marie spends the most time with. “When I feel like I need adult companionship, I take the boys and spend the night,” she says. She also has an au pair who takes care of the children after school while Anne-Marie runs the medical-device business she owns. Carole is even more intertwined with her parents; she shares a duplex with them. Her parents pick up her 8-year-old from school most days and help cook dinner and manage feedings for her 20-month-old toddler, whom she adopted in October.

It’s a strategy different from Fran and Eileen’s. But there’s a common thread; these women, too, have the autonomy to raise their kids the way they want to. Their primary relationships with adults support them without interfering with them as parents. (At least, for the most part — once in a while, Carole says, she has to remind her father not to correct her older daughter’s table manners because “that’s not his job. It’s mine.”)

All the single mothers I met talked about the satisfaction of being able to make decisions about their kids, from when they are excused from the table to where they go to school, and how hard it would be to share that authority. Though they acknowledged some of the advantages of marriage, they mainly saw it, at this point in their lives, as an entry into constant and mostly unwelcome negotiation over all of this terrain.

In treating co-parenting as the alien and potentially harder state, Anne-Marie and her friends say they are different from the divorced women they know. “I have a few friends who are divorced, and they are more interested in getting married than I am,” Anne-Marie said. “For them, it’s going back to the couple’s life they’ve known. For me, it seems like adding on a big mess to something that’s comparatively stable.”

On the way to lunch, Anne-Marie and I circled the parking lot of a strip mall looking for the right restaurant. When I suggested stopping to ask for directions, she turned around her light green VW Passat for another tour of the lot. “Independence, it’s my

blessing and my curse," she joked. Now she tilted her head, imagined being married and said: "I'd have to give up my independence. I don't always want to admit it, but that's a lot of what's stopping me."

SOONER OR LATER, most women who decide not to look for a father for their children confront a question: How are their kids going to learn about men and masculinity? Are they missing out in some fundamental way?

In their survey of American single-by-choice moms, Susan Golombok and Shirlene Badger found that almost 60 percent thought that it was very important for their children to have a male role model and 38 percent thought it was moderately important. But finding men for the job can be difficult. In her book "Raising Boys Without Men," Peggy Drexler, a psychologist, writes that "single moms by choice are on the desperate lookout for male role models for their sons."

Drexler insists that much of the anxiety about finding a father substitute is misplaced. "Good fathering, like good mothering, may be no more important than simply good parenting," she writes, pointing out that lesbian couples contend with the same issues and that several studies have confirmed that their kids fare no worse than other children.

But much of the literature on single motherhood and lesbian co-parenting emphasizes that it's crucial for children to have the regular presence of a man in their lives. In his book "Fatherneed," Kyle Pruett, a clinical professor of child psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine, argues that "it's practically impossible" for a mother by herself to provide the kind of care men give kids. According to the research Pruett cites, men tend to spend more time playing with children in a way that encourages exploration — they use fewer toys as props and offer more pure entertainment. Women on the other hand typically tend to emphasize instruction and self-control more and spend more time taking care of kids' physical needs. "To have loving, trusting, challenging, teasing relationships with adults of both genders is a way of fleshing out, quite literally, the whole person you can become," Pruett says.

If dating seems like the wrong way to incorporate a man into their families, single mothers seek other openings. Fran ticked off a list for me. There is her brother, who visits monthly. There is a male neighbor who throws the girls into his leaf pile. The baby sitter's husband taught Lili how to ride a bike without training wheels. And the husband of the one married couple in Fran's circle plays with the girls. Still, Fran frets that her older daughter has a deeper need that's going unmet. As she moves toward

adolescence, she sometimes treats men as unusual and too-fascinating creatures. About the helpful men on her list, Fran said: “They aren’t in our lives in the same way a father would be. But this is the best I can do. And my children don’t worry, Will Mommy get married, will he love us, does he like us, will he want to stay?”

BEFORE HE DIED, Fran’s father came around to the idea that she wanted a second child. He told his daughter that as he thought about his own aging and passing, it gave him a sense of peace to think of the relationships among Fran and her brothers and sister. If she had two children, they would also have each other, when someday they faced a similar moment. “Before dad died, he told me he’d thought long and hard about it, and he’d decided it was the best thing for MeiLin to have a sister, especially after I go.”

There’s a more immediate advantage too. Siblings can turn a family into a sturdier, three-legged stool. Along with a sense of normalcy, they can diffuse the intensity of the one-on-one mother-child bond, a prospect some single mothers welcome. “Being a single mother with a single child — for me personally, it seems oppressive for the child,” Anne-Marie says. “All the expectations are on one child, and that just feels so heavy. So I had a second child partly to improve the dynamics of the family as we age together.”

To watch MeiLin and Lili together is to see the elements of the ordinary that the single mothers I talked to wanted for their families. At lunch, the girls ate each other’s French fries without asking (just as they’d borrowed each other’s hairbrushes). Afterward, on the way from the Chick-fil-A to a swim meet, they scrapped over which CD to play in the minivan. Then inside, Fran and I sat on the bleachers while Lili stood at the guardrail, watching MeiLin swim backstroke, crookedly but with determination. When her sister pulled herself out of the pool, Lili bounced on the toes of her pink Crocs. “Do you know how many laps she swam, Mom?” she said. “Did you count? Can we ask?” It was the kind of moment parents savor — one sibling curious about the other. “Let’s go find out,” Fran said. They reached the side of the pool, and Lili hopped around, twirling MeiLin’s goggles, while her mother helped towel off her sister.

Emily Bazelon, a contributing writer, is a senior editor at Slate. Her last article for the magazine was about a new kind of integration in schools.