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Views: Next of Kin

It's easy to be lulled into letting down your guard and relaxing. It's a relief to drop that life-long, protective armor, now that everything's so much better. After all, Anna and I got married three years ago this September, celebrating our civil union with over a hundred family and friends at Anna's farm. My kids, Sophie and Noah, held two poles of the chuppa, Anna's family held the other two. Our guests gathered in a semi-circle so we all could see one another while we sang ancient Hebrew psalms of thanksgiving. We made our vows under the wedding canopy while the minister urged us to continue working for equal rights and then declared us married. We each smashed a glass while the guests yelled Mazel Tov! – then we ate and danced the night away. Everything was wonderful, right?

Right.

Anna and I celebrated our new status by sharing our news, having decided to assume people would be happy for us. After a lifetime of hiding, of constant vigilance, we told everyone – from the guys at the hardware store to Sophie's teachers. Mostly our announcement was met with smiles and congratulations – just like any other marriage, I hear you saying. Sometimes there was an awkward silence, but we just forged ahead. What could anyone say? It was legal: we were married.

Last fall I had to go to my twice-a-year mammogram appointment. A straightforward procedure that makes me more than a little anxious, as you can imagine, remembering that my mother died young from breast cancer. In fact, this year I am the age she was when she was diagnosed – just fifty-three. Which didn't seem so young then, but which is a terrifying possibility now.

Anna and I have this discussion twice a year: do I want her to come with me to the appointment? Every time I ask myself, will it be better if I go alone and try to ignore the emotional baggage? It's fine, it's no big deal, just another appointment. Or would it be better to have Anna come so when I emerge from the examining room she'd be sitting right there, reading a magazine, waiting?

laurie levinger

It's always the same conversation. Sometimes I decide one way, sometimes the other. This year I decided to go alone.

I got to the hospital early, because I like to have time to check in without rushing. I love the local hospital – it's so small and intimate. It's just over the state line in New Hampshire but so close we consider it our community hospital. The technicians who do the mammogram seem to really care when they squeeze so hard it hurts. They apologize while they squeeze even harder and tell you to hold your breath.

I know the routine at the appointment desk: name, address, insurance, next of kin ... The young woman stared at the computer screen while she asked the questions, verifying my informa-

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"Next of kin – Anna? Is this your sister?"

"No, she's my spouse. We're married."

"What? Oh, I understand. I know what you're saying. I'm really sorry to have to tell you this – I don't agree, but we can't use her name. The state doesn't allow it."

"But it's legal."

"I know. I'm really sorry. I'm in the same situation; I have a daughter with the man I've lived with for ten years, but I can't list

him as next of kin. Even though he knows my wishes better than anyone in my family, I have to use my aunt."

She paused, stuck. "But wait a minute, I'll ask my supervisor."

She called over the supervisor, another young woman. They conferred and then turned to me: "We asked the lawyer about this last time it came up and he checked with the State. We can't use your woman partner. It's the law – if you die at the hospital, we can't release your body to anybody but your next of kin. Don't you have someone else who you can list?"

"You mean, if I die during my mammogram you can't release my body?" thinking a joke might help.

"No."

Well, I think. Of course, I have other people I can list. I could give them the name of my 82-year-old father, or Noah who just turned eighteen. That'd really be fun for him to collect my body.

"I'm not mad at you," I said, hoping to defuse the situation. "But I won't give you any other name if you won't take Anna's. If she were a man and we were married she'd be my next of kin, right?"

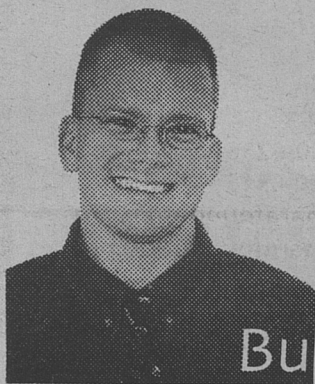
"I'm sorry to have to tell you this – I don't agree, but we can't use her name. The state doesn't allow it!"

She's my legal spouse. If you won't take her name, I won't give you a name."

You can keep my damn body.

The appointment clerk erased Anna's name off the screen and I walked down the hall toward Radiology. ▼

Laurie Levinger lives in Norwich with her daughter. Her spouse, Anna lives in northern VT – they commute between their two homes, enjoying their time separately and together.



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