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River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative, Volume 11, Number 1,
Fall 2009, pp. 74-88 (Article)

Published by Ball State University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvt.0.0065>



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Beyond Assumption

Heather Killelea McEntarfer

I remember the first time I held a baby. Really held one. I was nine or ten, the baby perhaps three months. A member of the last little cluster of cousins, I knew nothing of diapers or snotty noses; babies were novelties to be cooed over in the grocery store. I don't know who that first baby was or how she ended up in my arms at a picnic. (I imagine I begged.)

I remember, vaguely, feeding her a bottle. We sat inside, in a blue recliner someone must have deemed safer than a picnic bench. I suppose someone helped me, told me to support her head and tilt the bottle upward. I suppose she ended up on my shoulder because I tried to burp her.

I remember clearly how the baby's breath grew slow and even. How I tried to sit perfectly still, awkward in the too-big chair. Outside the other kids squealed, careening down a pool slide. *Go play*, my mother urged.

I didn't want to.

What I remember most: the space that baby filled, draped warm and heavy on my upper chest, head lolling in the crook of my neck. She curled her head there naturally, found that crook, and in the dark living room I filled with a knowledge I could not have articulated: this was what that space was for.

Supporting heads, tilting bottles: these things I did not know. But when the grown-ups let us be, we figured this out on our own. The space, perfectly shaped as the fold of my own hand into my mother's. The space I never knew

was hollow, until a nameless baby filled it up.



Whether my mother and I watched *20/20* before or after that picnic, I don't remember. It's odd that we did watch, really; I was around nine, more into *DuckTails* than news programs. But there we sat, Mom and me, backed up against the pillows on my parents' wide bed. I curled into the crook of her arm. On the television, black-and-white images of a Romanian orphanage, images she might normally have turned off in front of me, but she didn't and now they cling. Rows and rows of cribs. Left-behind babies crying, reaching for arms that would not come.

"Orphanage" was our favorite neighborhood game. Orphans were romantic. Orphans escaped to live in the wild and pick berries and look out for Miss Hannigan.

Orphans were left behind. I snuggled deeper into my mother's arm.

"When I grow up," I vowed, "I'm going to adopt a Romanian baby."

My mother sighed. I was nine years old, always vowing something: stomping self-righteously across a plaza in the cold while my family drove. Global warming, after all.

I assumed I would bear children. I loved them, counted the *days* until I turned twelve and could baby-sit. Years later I would supplement my grad school stipend by teaching preschool. I'd discuss truth and language with my composition students, then race across town for a rousing chorus of the ABCs and a snack of Nilla Wafers.

This, though, was new. A baby not yet born, a baby I would save. Nine-year-olds believe they can save: orphans and hunger and holes in the ozone. How rarely they imagine—at least the lucky ones, like me—that they'll ever need saving themselves.

At nine years old, I imagined this baby. She'd reach her arms up from that crib, and there I'd be.



I remember Deena. My eighth-grade swim coach. Half motherly, half wild, blonde hair parted down the middle: a latter-day hippie with a loud laugh and a quick, uninhibited grin. One day before a race, she took my fingers into her own long hands. I'd twisted one finger over the next over the

next, a nervous habit. Nervous wreck. *Relax*. Deena smiled, untwisted them.

Deena, who rolled her eyes one day as my older teammates teased me. My shyness had earned me a coveted place on the inside of an inside team joke: *SCREAM, Heather!* my teammates would yell before practice, after practice, in the hallways. I'd giggle, liking the attention, loving what it implied: *you're one of us*.

But I could not scream.

And one day Deena looked up from her clipboard. "Stop that; she doesn't have to scream."

"But she has to learn!" someone said.

Deena looked at me. "She's perfect just the way she is. *I can always hear her.*"

I looked up. By eighth grade, I was getting better. Still, I hunched my shoulders in a way I probably always will. I'd grown accustomed to reminders: speak up, speak louder, stand taller. I liked my teammates' joking.

But: *perfect the way I was?*

I don't know when things changed, when what could have been adolescent hero-worship became something else. I don't know when, as I turned my head to breathe in the pool, I first sought that streak of blonde hair. Nor when I began to daydream during math class, scenarios as ridiculous as they were fervent:

Deena sprains her ankle; I'm the only one around, confident and calm as she leans on me for help . . .

I learn that I'm dying, and inform her with all the chin-quivering courage of a movie star, until she pulls me close . . .

The change must have come quickly, because the day I finished a 500 free with all the flip turns, I did it for Deena. Or for me—so I'd have an excuse to run to her. To bask in her attention, in the grin so unlike my own.

Swim season, eighth grade: the beginning of any new crush. Exhilarating, giddy. Layered overtop a deep new dread. I reasoned with myself. I lived in a dinky rural town; what were the chances even *one* gay person lived there? Much less that that person was *me*? And teenage girls were supposed to have role models, right? That was normal.

But should your stomach do this when you see them?

No. No no no no.

At swim meets, I twisted my fingers on purpose.

At night, I closed my eyes and prayed. *Please, no.*



For ten years, I never once wrote the word *gay*. Half afraid someone would read my journals, half afraid the word itself possessed some sort of power, I wrote *It. Take it away; take it out; I don't want it.*

I did not fear my parents. Dad was an aging hippy, Mom a few years too young, but still. They dressed us in “Wage Peace” T-shirts, took us to hear Peter, Paul, and Mary.

Nor did I fear God. Dad believed in Bob Dylan; Mom took us to a liberal Catholic church. I learned in Religious Ed that God loved me, that heaven was pretty, that I should put my right hand over my left to take communion. That women should be priests and priests who did not agree should (and could) be run out of town.

I feared a life I did not believe I could live.

Tracing the roots of that fear is a tangled process, one that does not make sense. I've met people who seem so much braver than I was. People who knew their parents would disown them when they came out; people who *didn't* know and were devastated. I've met people raised in homes and churches where personal shame, even misplaced, would make some sort of *sense*. In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, the gay Mormon character Joe Pitt describes a picture from his childhood bible of Jacob wrestling an angel. “It's me,” Joe says. “In that struggle. Fierce and unfair. The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone human win, what kind of fight is that? . . . Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust . . . but you can't not lose.”

I did not fear my soul thrown in the dust. But when I read those words in grad school, three years after I'd come out, I ached. Joe Pitt's struggles far surpassed mine, but I found in his words a kernel of my own pain. I fought not for salvation but *normality*. “Normal” in the full sense of the word: first, *fitting in*; then, *right*. By eighth grade, I'd escaped the depths of the Elementary School Outcast. Wild carrot-top hair, plastic glasses, cotton pants instead of jeans—I brought the taunts on myself, and bent beneath their weight. For three years, my classmates tipped orange plastic chairs up against lunch tables: cafeteria language for *seat's saved*. Meanwhile I morphed from a chatty child into one paralyzed by shyness.

Then in middle school, things changed. I bought jeans, forced myself

not to read in the cafeteria, and found: friends. A cafeteria seat all my own. A place on the high school swim team; the inside of an inside joke. Not cool, by any stretch of the imagination—but not an outcast.

And, as if on cue, along came Deena. Then Courtney Cox, then others: a wisp of blonde hair curled just so on the school bus. I knew I'd never touch the hair, knew (as teenagers do) that I'd go crazy if I didn't—and despised myself for wanting to in the first place.

I desired; I hated the desire.

And *why*? I want not to place blame but to understand: *why*? Because *homo* served as the most commonly slung insult in the sixth grade? Because in high school “that’s gay” meant “that’s stupid?”

Or was it more a matter of absence? Of storybooks and movies and a liberal college town that still presented its children with one image? *When I get married, I'll carry Grandma's prayer book like Mom.* I can't remember the origins of this notion (the explanations given me? my own interpretations?), but I understood homophobia the same way I understood racism: we should not discriminate against them. *Them* being worthy of respect and fairness and protection, but never—natural as the knowledge that my Irish skin would never darken—never *us*. What if I had known in fourth grade that my favorite little league coach was gay? What if the English teacher kids whispered about had felt free to speak of her partner as other teachers spoke of their spouses? How much shame did I draw from the whispers themselves—the way my best friend lowered her head toward her locker before revealing the latest gossip?

I don't know. I imagine I breathed shame the way the preschoolers I once taught breathed smog on hazy days: their parents packed lunch boxes with organic fruit and soy milk, but what more could they do? Pack gas masks? Shame permeated my skin, bonded with fear that took root in an elementary cafeteria, and I made my choice. Carefully crafted myself into the embodiment of a Good Girl. Quiet, sweet, successful at school; never needed a curfew because I never stayed out late. Someone nobody could object to. Shyness served as a shield later on, and I used it consciously; who expects a shy girl to flirt or date? Still, it was real. I was a girl who could not scream, because I possessed not a scream but a howl, and to have let *that* out: well, there would have gone the image of who I was. Who I wanted to be; who I believed I could be.

Over the years, the ferocity of my own shame surprised me in unexpected

moments. Like the school barbecue senior year, when my mother spoke with the mother of a boy everyone knew had just gone off to college and Come Out. “What’s Evan up to now?” Mom asked, the way parents do. Evan’s mother answered the way parents do: spoke proudly of his athletic accomplishments, a planned semester abroad.

I listened with a shock that surprised me. I was gay, had known for five years. I knew what I believed—or thought I believed. But when Evan’s mother spoke, all I could think was, *Doesn’t she know we know?* Wouldn’t a bow of the head, an *Oh, he’s fine* have been more . . . appropriate? My response did not make sense, but it was real; I regarded this mother’s pride in her son as misplaced, even arrogant—like a mother bragging about a son everyone knew had robbed a bank. A son who was fundamentally Bad.

Just as I believed, in a deep place, that the feelings welling up in me were Bad. Wrong—and threatening to pull me into a world I could not face. And away from everything I’d never known I so desired.

As a child, I begged my mother once for a baby-name book. I needed it, I said, to find names for the stories I wrote in black-and-white composition books. I meant to write those stories, and I probably began a few. But mostly my sister Caitlin and I made lists of names for our future children. First names, middle names, boys’ and girls’ names. *Caleb Michael. Shannon Elizabeth.* We would each have to have at least six children, to accommodate all the names we liked.

The lists did not reflect any burning desires. They were play. We burn for things we imagine we might not have. I burned to win Olympic gold, to be a famous author, to see Westminster Abbey (tombs, Dad said, in the very *floor*). Aside from that day at the picnic, I did not particularly burn for children. Cait and I created those lists based on something deeper. Assumption. I grew up Irish, assumed I would marry and have children the way most people assume they’ll grow up with all their limbs intact. Never a *certainty*—but who on earth considers the alternative?

Senior year of high school, my homeroom teacher became pregnant. Every morning, I watched her grow and felt within me the great void that would never grow like that. I began to burn. I wanted to know everything: what did it feel like before you began to show, the life inside you a secret jewel no one else could see? Could you *feel* it? How could you not? And if you could, was it a weight? A lightness? An intangible-but-always-there presence? Did you ever forget? And what about later—the kicks, the movement? These feelings,

this experience, seemed so utterly at the heart of *womanhood*. I was eighteen. Consumed by Key Club and college applications, but also these questions haunting me because I feared I'd never know the answers. Every morning Mrs. Zebraski stood at the front of the room: an assault. A reminder.

From the ages of twelve to twenty-two, I formed two people. Neither version was entirely an act. I was happy, silly, goofy; I collected frogs, stuck stickers to my flute case. I cared immensely about track meets and trigonometry and why everyone was mad at everyone else over the Winter Ball.

I tucked the fear away like a note, folded inside your jeans pocket: the kind you want to ignore. Invisible but there, and you know it. Behind my bedroom door I lived a different life. Sometimes, like any teenage girl, I created the same inane scenarios I'd once imagined with Deena. Other times, I curled perfectly still on my bed, light on, enveloped by fear. I envisioned my future. Living with another woman seemed impossible; pretending to love a man, unconscionable. And children? The lens of adolescence was strict, allowing only for Right and Wrong. In-vitro fertilization: Wrong. Selfish. There were children waiting to be adopted. Not by *me*: I would only prove a heartache as a mother, a cause for the same taunts I'd undergone not long ago.

And so. Throughout childhood, I'd saved favorite books and toys *for my kids, someday*. My *Little House* books, which I knew by heart; my doll Suzie, whose head I'd secured in place with a pink satin ribbon. High school was a sort of limbo, most options rejected, none completely ruled out. So I continued to set toys and books into the cedar chest at the foot of my bed. In the same moment, I'd rebuke myself with a harshness that rose unbidden, as if bracing for the deepest cut of all. *Idiot—there's no one to save these for*.

I prayed at night. I didn't believe the rhetoric about God hating me. But I believed in God. Ask and You Shall Receive. Right? And there was that woman in a magazine who said she prayed and prayed and God *did* change her. The changes, she said, started small. Moisturizer; I remember that. She started going to church, and suddenly she became interested in moisturizer and now here she was in the magazine, married with two kids and a dog, which was all I wanted in the world.

So I prayed, and I asked my mother for some moisturizer.

But the years passed. Knock and the door shall be opened—only it never did, and how long can you knock? One day before college started, driving my parents' car, I stopped at a red light and thought *all I have to do is hit the gas*.

I lifted my foot ever so slightly off the brake. Shoved it back down. Imag-

ined blood and glass and wheelchairs.

I knew I was too scared. Knew as well that I'd take my parents' lives with my own. Years earlier at the breakfast table, my mother had stumbled over her words, voice tight with the knowledge that maybe this isn't something you tell your children but she couldn't help it: a news report, a school bus accident, a child dead. A father haunted by the fact that he kissed her on the cheek that last morning but didn't hug her. And our mornings could get so hectic, rushing and snapping and *who moved my shoes?* and well: could we just fit a hug and kiss into that daily mess?

In the years to come, I'd remember the fear that gripped my mother so hard she had to speak it. I'd think of Dad—the rational one, the nonworrier—leaving the room as I popped in a thriller about a kidnapped child. “I just don't like stories like that,” he said.

Desperation, I know, can form a barrier impenetrable even by loved ones. My despair never reached those depths. But it ran deep, and my parents met me there—helped keep suicide a fantasy, enticing but impossible. I saw that obligation as a trap. In college I would find the irony. I'd kick stones bitterly on my way to class, when no one was looking: *loved so much I can't even fucking kill myself.*

That day at the red light, eighteen years old, irony was the last thing on my mind. It happened so fast: the light turned green, I turned left, headed toward Wal-Mart shaking. The closest I ever came, and I knew I wouldn't do it. I didn't have the guts. Nor did I even really want to die. I just couldn't see a way to live.



In the lobby of my freshman dorm one night, my dorm mates gathered after one of a series of required freshman “diversity dialogues.” The programs scared me silly—we only *dialogued* about sexuality. Kids slung Bible quotes like grenades; others yelled back. I curled my knees to my chest and sank into the lobby's cinder-block wall. In the days following the dialogues, I'd escape on aimless runs along lonely Ohio highways lined with cornfields. One day I stopped alongside the stalks, still breathing hard. My hometown grew grapes; cornfields were exotic. I stepped off the pavement onto stubbly, uneven earth. Stuck my hand into the corn. Pictured James Earl Jones in *Field of Dreams*.

I didn't want to press the gas pedal. I didn't want the pain, the blood, the

blame.

But to disappear? To never-have-been?

That night, we gathered again, anger still venting. I'd have given anything to be anywhere else, but this was home now: privacy precious, and the possibility of arousing suspicion everywhere, lurking.

In the dorm lobby, one girl leaned confidently against a worn couch. "I don't have a problem with people being gay," she said. "I mean, you want to be gay, that's your business. But don't go raising a child. Now, that ain't right. That I don't believe in. You're just gonna *screw* that kid up."

Her words sank in differently from the words slung at the diversity dialogues. I did not run from them. For years, I'd mourned the future I saw as childless based on my own reasoning: fear of the taunts my child might face, aversion to in-vitro fertilization. I suppose the notion that I might be a bad mother—that I held within me some wrongness I might pass down, like a genetic trait—also claimed some shadowy space in my psyche. But in my family and in my town, I had not heard that notion expressed aloud. Now here was this classmate, a funny, pleasant girl who had made me laugh during those first nervous days, labeling me unfit to raise a child. Ideologically, I could not have disagreed more. But eight years later, her words stick, the only ones I remember from the deluge of criticisms I shrank from that week. The diversity dialogues, combined with the anxious first days of college, had left me raw. I opened up a space inside and carried those words, an empty weight.

I thought, *She's right. I would screw a kid up.*



I don't know what changed, exactly, or when. Most of my college years were like most of my high school years: private fear, intensified as Real Life drew nearer. My college was small and cliquish, and I could not see a place where I fit: the lesbians, or the ones I could see, wore hippy skirts and pierced tongues and seemed sophisticated and rebellious and, in every other way, Not Me. I kept my distance. Drifted to kids in striped Old Navy shirts, kids like me except for this one lie. In American Lit sophomore year, I read a phrase by Faulkner: *deep-down falling*. I repeated the words on my tongue, pictured the part of myself that fell silently every day, a secret shadow, desperate and down so far nobody could see.

I don't know what changed. Maybe it was the gay professor for whom I worked as a teaching assistant senior year: this professor I'd never known, had

been assigned to, but whose students clearly loved her.

Mostly, I think, it was time. Ten years of fear and, mostly, loneliness. When you cannot share with anyone the anxieties that consume you more than anything on earth, how close can you be with anyone? You end up talking about schoolwork. Weather.

Somehow, toward the end of senior year, life as a gay person became: Not Impossible. Frightening, yes—frightening as hell. But not as frightening as an entire life like the last ten years. So at college graduation, I set the summer before me as a deadline. This Summer. Before Grad School. After Ireland: one last normal vacation.

But Ireland was in August; the trip came and went, the deadline swooped down the way deadlines do, and one night I thought, *Oh, God*.

The next evening, I stood at the entrance to my parents' bedroom. They sat on the bed together, playing with the dogs. Normally I'd have hopped up and joined them.

Instead, I watched from the threshold. I tried to save the moment. Hated to ruin it. My parents would accept me, I knew that. They would support me, love me. But would things be the *same*? I was about to take so much away from them. A white dress, a walk down an aisle. Grandchildren. Besides, there is a difference between intellectual belief and emotional acceptance: between anonymous "people" and *your daughter*. At the threshold of their bedroom, that difference widened before me, held me back.

What if, on some deep level, my parents were *disgusted* by me?

I stepped into the room.

"Um . . . guys?"

They looked up. I drew my arms around my chest and kept my distance.

"Um . . . there's something I wanted to tell you, and, um . . . it's kinda big."

My mother's brow furrowed, my father's rose, they sat up from the dogs. My mother and I are practically the same person; in the moments that passed, as I tried to make my mouth work, I'm sure she'd diagnosed me with cancer and moved on to the list of words for which she should prepare herself: *lump, mole, tumor*.

I'm . . . um . . .

Ten years I hadn't written the word, and now it threatened not to come. For a moment, I truly believed I wouldn't be able to say it.

And then I did. Then it was out: *I'm gay, is that . . . okay?*

And then there I was on the bed, crying, folded into the tent of their arms

as they hugged me, pulled me in. Taught me about love beyond assumption.

They had questions, of course: how long had I known, why hadn't I told them? Was I okay? They said they hoped I met someone, that if I did, she would be family. I don't know how long we stayed on that bed. The evening is a blur of tears and hugs and questions and more tears.

A blur punctuated by moments I'll never forget. By the kind of words I imagine we all carry, tucked away like secret notes: the good kind. Words we return to, when we need them.

Mom leaned back from the triangle we formed and looked at me, tripping over her words the way we all did that night but *saying* them, at last. "You know," she said, "even if I could change this, I wouldn't. Because . . . it's . . . you. I mean, I wish you hadn't gone through this, I wish we could have helped you, but . . . this is a part of *you*, and I'm so proud of you, and I don't want anyone else as my daughter."

My mind reeled; it had never occurred to me to ask for anything but tolerance.

Beside her, Dad nodded in agreement. The next day, Mom told me that Dad—Mr. Pacifist Himself, Mr. *No-you-can't-have-a-water-gun, it's-a-gun*—said as they readied for bed that night, *I am not a violent man, but if anybody ever says a word to her . . .*

I had imagined this moment for years, always with a sense of finality. Telling meant making a decision. Accepting once and for all everything I would never have. But that night, the future expanded from that bed so fast I could barely keep up, and I began—began—to realize the ways in which I'd been blessed from the very beginning. How instead of setting a trap, my parents had woven me a net. Threads thick with love, woven in the course of everyday life: *Bread with butter and sugar; No, the house won't catch on fire; Yes, you can sleep downstairs in case it does. Track meets, buddled in the rain.*

Further back, three years old, four: Will you always love me? Even if? Even if?
Yes.

They wove the threads of that net never knowing how desperately I needed them.

And that night, they kept offering. More words to keep.

You know, my mother said, *you could adopt.*



Could I?

At first, I resisted. Of course I still wanted a child, but the same old worries plagued me: what if I (or, hopefully, a *we*?) adopted a child, only to subject her to the same childhood of taunts I'd faced? What if she grew up to resent me? (*Us*?)

I didn't have answers. I had, suddenly, permission to wonder. *Could I?*

That night on my parents' bed, and in the months that followed, my thoughts returned to those Romanian orphanages. Which was silly—that had been a childhood fancy, nothing I'd considered seriously for years. Yet the idea clung, a wisp of possibility that grew to something solid, and then to something more like need.

And like: excitement. Soon I would learn that many in the gay community, which would welcome me so openly, had adopted from China. I had family from Vietnam. An image would form, fast and fierce: an Asian child. A daughter—since childhood, I have imagined myself mother to a girl.

None of which erased, entirely, the desire to be pregnant. Sometimes I watch a pregnant woman, lowering herself into a seat on the bus, say, or lifting a child above her belly at the preschool. Normally, I'm fine. Sometimes I catch my breath and something sinks inward, a kind of emptiness that aches in my hip bones.

That desire flares and passes. Someday that may change, and I can't say what I'll do then.

Right now, adoption fills a void pregnancy doesn't. I can't entirely say why, except: there are children without parents. In the face of the love with which I grew up, that notion gnaws at me. Besides, one way I've rationalized my place in this world is that perhaps I am a sort of check-and-balance. Population control. If so, adoption places me inside a larger scheme. Not a neat-and-clean one, not some elegant equation uncluttered by birth mothers who remember and children who want to—but an equation that exists nonetheless. If I adopt, the world opens up and offers me a place. A reason for who I am: a gay woman, and a mother in my bones.

A few days after I came out to my parents, I moved to my first city. I met gay people. Gay parents—and the children of gay parents. Five-year-old Kate from China, whose two dads brought her to the preschool. Eight-year-old Sarah, also from China, who attended my church. The church was small and inclusive; during communion, families gathered arm-in-arm for a short blessing. I never could keep my eyes off that family: Sarah cocooned between her

mothers, arms around their backs, an embrace both familiar and profound.

Love, the parents told me—what matters is whether a child is loved.

Could it be so simple?

I read up on the subject. I've read about crowded orphanages and adult adoptees longing for roots. I've read the American Psychological Association's conclusion that children raised by gay parents are psychologically healthy. I've read the dilemmas these children face nonetheless—when do they “come out” about their parents? How, and to whom?

And the conservative senator, the one who tells Tim Russert he's not sure whether people are born gay or not, points out that whenever we consider adoption, we ask not what's best for the parent but for the child. He cloaks his bigotry in tones of soft concern—and he is, of course, right. The child.

I no longer believe I'll screw a child up in any moral sense. Still, life with me might be hard. I do not want to assume every child in an orphanage so needy that any life must be better. I don't want to say, “Well, I can give her a life that's *less* bad.”

But children without parents do have needs—specific ones. So do children who feel “different,” for any reason. My child might feel different, whether I adopt her or not. And *difference*, I know. I do not know, specifically, the feelings that accompany adoption or life with a gay parent. But what if I could follow those feelings down to their deepest roots? Find the place where the roots of my child's life diverge from those of my own—and then go deeper? Maybe I could raise her from the deep soil of that shared place. Anticipate the parts of her life we will not and cannot share; understand the parts we just might.

I don't claim to know where this leaves me in any practical sense—with what words I'll answer questions, ease a pain I can't prevent. I'm not sure I *should* know, now. As the senator says, it's about the child, and I don't know her yet.

But about the place from where those answers spring, I think back to what parents of adopted children have told me. *Love*. And when, after all, has love ever been simple? Perhaps love *is* that shared place, the place from where answers spring—even when we never imagined the questions.

I don't want anyone else as my daughter.

I want to offer a child love without condition, love beyond assumption. The kind of love that saved my life. We—me, my parents, my child, hopefully a partner—will form a layered bond. A net strengthened by previous struggles, fortified for those to come. I cannot be my parents, my child will

not be me, the specifics will all be different. But I want more than anything to be *for* her what my parents were for me.



At the preschool, several children had been adopted, almost all from China. I found myself drawn to them. I tried not to let on. Because teachers should not have favorites, and because on the List of Things a Teacher Should Not Do, I was pretty sure favoring a student because of ethnic origin ranked fairly high.

I tried not to let on that I saw in their faces what my own child might look like someday.

During my last years of grad school, I subbed at the preschool—moved from room to room, knew the youngest children vaguely and the older ones well. I met a toddler named Ella there, adopted from China by a mother and a father, the youngest and most recently adopted child I'd met. One afternoon, after she'd been at the preschool a matter of months, Ella wandered about the playground whimpering and pointing. Several classes shared the playground that day; I was with the two-year-olds, not even technically in charge of Ella.

I didn't care. I grabbed a toy vacuum with red and blue balls that popped when you pushed it. *Look.*

Ella ignored the vacuum. Wound her entire hand instead around my forefinger and pulled me about the playground. I followed. Finally, though I assumed she could not answer, I knelt beside her: *Ella, what do you want?*

The child collapsed onto my knees and then, as I fell backward in surprise, into my lap. She leaned back against me, pointing toward, I finally realized, the school's parking lot. *Mama*, she said, and whimpered some more: *Mama*, again and again.

Ella rested her hooded head in the crook of my chin and kept pointing. *I know*, I whispered, no idea what she understood; *I know, she loves you so much, she'll be here so soon*. When her mother showed up at the gate, Ella jumped from my lap: *Mama!* in a whole new tone. I watched her run, watched her mother scoop her up.

I thought, Less than a year they've been mother and daughter, and look. Something near the back of my throat stirred.

I want that. I want it more than anything on earth. I want to scoop a child up in my arms, hear her cry *Mama*.

Now I can imagine that cry. Imagine that life.

The night I told my parents I was gay, I went to my room and prayed for the first time in years. And while my previous prayers had all been pleas, suddenly I could only think: *Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you.* The empty space filled so fast and so completely, I could not imagine any problem not having been solved.

I know now that that night offered something far more lasting. An invitation to Real Life—with all its complications. The nine-year-old in me still wants to be the arms that lift a child from a crib. The adult knows that my child will save me just as surely as I will save her.

Adoption offers me a way to be a mother. Adoption is my *reason*. And when I think of a child without a parent, of her needs and of my own, reason moves beyond anything rational: moves, like a baby's head into the hollow of a neck, into a sphere as right as anything I've ever known.