We sat in the November sun next door to the Café du Monde, eating beignets and sipping Louisiana coffee so thick and dark you could almost chew it. I licked the powdered sugar from my fingers and looked out at the river, then closed my eyes like a cat napping in the sun. I had come to New Orleans to deliver a paper at a conference for communication scholars. Carol had flown down to join me, and now, with my conference over, we had three days to enjoy New Orleans and each other. We were nearly five years into our relationship.

“What would you think,” Carol asked, “if I told you I wanted to have a baby?”

Suddenly I was wide awake, my heart going kerthunk. “A baby,” I repeated in amazement.

We had often talked about my disappointment at not being able to bear a child. Although Carol had never wanted children, each time she assured me she would never stand between me and my desire to be a mother. We could find a way to do it.

“No,” I would always say. “If we have a baby when it’s not what you really want to do, it could break us up. Now that I’ve found you, I’m not
going to take that chance. Raising a child will just have to be one of those things I wanted in my life but didn’t get. This is a good life. It’s enough.”

But now here we were, in the French Quarter, where the winter sunshine, French architecture, music, narrow streets, bright colors, and moist Gulf air always made me feel like I had entered a magical realm of outrageous possibility. Carol was describing how, as she waited to board her plane, she saw a tiny infant snuggled in its mama’s arms and knew, in a swift and sudden flash of insight, that she did not want to miss this.

“I’m thinking I want to be a mother,” she told me. “How would you feel about that?”

As if a gunshot had signaled the start of the Chicago Marathon, a whole throng of excited, sweaty feelings came pounding and stampeding into my consciousness from whatever locked-up place I had sequestered them. I felt a rush of longing and delight. I could immediately picture Carol and me and our baby. At the same time, I felt afraid. Too many times my hopes and plans had ended in heartbreak. I didn’t want to get back on that roller coaster of baby longing unless there was to be a baby at the end of the ride.

“I’d be ecstatic,” I said quietly. “But get back to me when you’ve made your mind up. I don’t even want to think about it unless we are actually going to do it. I can’t bear any more losses.” As if one could so easily set a limit on loss, as if you get to say when you’ve had enough.

Of course, this topic was not so easily vanquished. During the rest of our weekend and then back home in Chicago, I was appalled to see how much power Carol suddenly held over my future. I wanted to ask her every few minutes whether she had made her mind up, and yet I was afraid that if I pestered her, I would sabotage the possibility for fulfillment of my no longer dormant desires. Mercifully, she realized rather quickly that she was serious. We were going to be mothers.

With the question of whether settled, we were ready to move on to the question of how. In 1988, there were still relatively few gay and lesbian families that were deciding to become parents together, although there had always been gay parents with children from previous heterosexual relationships or marriages. We were aware that some lesbian and gay couples were becoming parents, via donor insemination, surrogacy, or adoption, but we didn’t actually know anyone who had done this. Most such
families, at that time, were in a handful of cities on the East and West Coasts. Basically, we saw two options: one of us could get pregnant or we could adopt. Either path would include some hurdles.

A pregnancy for me was out of the question. I had no intention of trying again. Although I often dreamed that I was pregnant or even that I had found a baby on my doorstep, in lucid moments I knew I would never bear a child.

Carol was a few days away from her forty-first birthday. If she wanted to get pregnant, she would have to hurry. For lesbians, pregnancy usually occurs via donor insemination. A decision to inseminate requires choosing between a friend who will agree to donate sperm (with the attendant decisions and legal documents regarding his degree of involvement in the child’s life) and an anonymous donor from a sperm bank. For perhaps two weeks, she thought hard about it. During that fortnight, we sized up nearly every man in our acquaintance as a potential donor, unbeknownst to them, of course. This led us to some highly comic considerations of their good and bad points.

Carol concluded that her desire to have a baby had little to do with bearing one and everything to do with caring for one. We decided to adopt not one baby but two. Neither of us could imagine life without siblings. And they would be girls. Although several of our lesbian friends had raised wonderful sons, we felt more confident of our ability to parent daughters.

I was relieved by Carol’s decision to adopt. After longing for children for so many years, I didn’t want to become the second-string mother, the one without any legal or biological claim. I had worried about what it would be like to watch Carol swell with the child I had been denied. There was no way to embark on motherhood without risking a broken heart, but I wanted, if I could, to protect my heart at least a little.

We researched adoption, contacting agencies and attending information sessions. We sat awkwardly in circles of heterosexual couples and introduced ourselves as single friends both considering adoption. While the other couples held hands or sat with their arms around each other, we carefully avoided sitting close enough to touch shoulders. We tried to remember to say “I” when all our thoughts and plans involved “we.” We learned that if we wanted to adopt an infant, and relatively soon, the likeliest route for success was international adoption.
Someone gave us the name of a lesbian couple in Boston who had adopted internationally. I remember the excitement with which I called them and the warm welcome they extended as they shared information about their experiences.

We explored the receptivity of social workers to lesbian parents. Illinois did not explicitly ban gay people from adopting, but the state did not allow both partners to adopt as a couple. One had to be the legal parent. We would have to do two single-parent adoptions. We were strongly advised by a social worker we spoke with against presenting ourselves as a couple.

By February of 1988, we had located an agency that could arrange an adoption of a Peruvian infant. We chose Peru because adoptions there were moving quickly. We probably would not wait long for a referral. Since it was easier for me, as a faculty member on a nine-month contract, to take the summer off, I would apply first. Carol would accompany me but could not stay for the entire six weeks we were told the adoption would take. Sometime after I had adopted our first child, Carol would adopt our second. Now that we had made our decision, I found any wait almost unbearable. I wanted our baby, and I wanted our baby now.

With these decisions made, it was time to tell our parents. Carol called Art and Betty. Her father, a retired high school basketball coach, hesitated then found his voice.

“Who’s going to take care of it? You two are—working girls.” His concern focused not on the idea of lesbian parents but on the idea of working moms. Someone, he believed, needed to stay at home to raise those children.

“Both of us,” Carol answered calmly. Betty, when she heard our surprising news, said little. Was that because she believed firmly that if you couldn’t say anything nice you shouldn’t say anything at all? Perhaps. But she was also a person who was warmly hospitable to anyone who entered her home. Even if our family came as a surprise to her, she would make our children welcome.

I steeled myself for the call to my parents. I didn’t expect them to be thrilled. I anticipated consternation. But my sister had firmly decided years before that she did not want children. I hoped the realization that this was their only hope of becoming grandparents would eventually
overcome their qualms. As I had often done before, I underestimated them.

I called on Saturday morning; they both got on the line. We began exchanging news about the weather. My mother knew I had not called to talk about the weather and was trying to get me to move to the reason for the call. I could tell she knew that I knew this. Still, we chatted on about snow and cold. Finally, I took a deep breath and plunged in.

“Carol and I have made a big decision. We’re really happy about it and we wanted to share our good news. We have decided that we are going to adopt two children.”

Mother spoke first. “Oh, Jackie, we’re so glad you have figured out a way to become a mother. We know how much you have wanted that.” Daddy chimed in immediately with his own enthusiasm for our decision.

I told them how relieved I was that they were happy. I confided my nervousness about calling. They wondered why I should be nervous to share “this glorious news.”

“Oh, I don’t know;” I said. Could they really find this surprising? “I guess I thought maybe the idea of two lesbians raising children might give you pause.”

“Why, Jackie,” Daddy instantly responded, “we think you and Carol will be wonderful parents.” I couldn’t have scripted a more soul-satisfying endorsement.

I had known interracial adoption would present my parents with no problems. Recently retired from his job with Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children, Daddy was wholehearted in his support for adoption and convinced that since God didn’t make distinctions based on skin color neither should we. But I had never guessed that my parents would so readily embrace the idea of their daughter becoming a lesbian mom. I was truly blessed.

On February 15, I mailed my application for adoption to the agency. I got physical and psychological exams, submitted financial records, updated my passport, got fingerprinted, filled out endless forms, and wrote a fifteen-page autobiography. It mentioned my divorces and the fact that Carol (described as my friend) and I jointly owned our home.

By April, it was time to meet my caseworker. I was nervous. I had learned that the married couple that headed this adoption agency were
religious fundamentalists. They had founded the agency somewhere in the midst of the adoption of their own eight children. I was understand-ably concerned about a lesbian’s chances of adopting through this particular organization. What happened next was too improbable for fiction.

At her home in a small town an hour and a half south of Chicago, the caseworker, a friendly woman maybe half a dozen years younger than I, opened the door. She was an adoptive mother herself, with a year-old daughter from Guatemala. She pulled out a photo album and began showing me pictures of her trip to bring home her baby.

She interviewed me about my house, work, child care plans, theories about child rearing and discipline, and much else. After about forty-five minutes, she stopped her tape recorder.

“I’m going to turn this off now for the next part of this interview,” she said.

I waited.

“My boss thought after reading your autobiography that you might be a lesbian. She told me that was one of the things I would need to find out in this interview.” I braced myself, fearing what might come next. “I told her I didn’t know how I could find that out unless you told me, and I didn’t know why you’d do that. I said to her, ‘That’s not really what you want me to find out, is it? I thought what you wanted me to find out is whether or not she would be a good parent.’ ‘Oh, well, yes,’ she said. ‘I guess that is what I need you to find out.’” Inside I was shouting hallelu-jah and doing backflips. It took all my self-control to maintain an expression of pleasant attentiveness. “So now I want to ask you a few questions as if you were a lesbian.”

“OK,” I agreed.

“I need to know how committed you and Carol are to each other and whether you think the two of you would ever separate.”

I had no idea how to negotiate this land mine of a question. “Carol and I are both happy with the situation we are in right now. Neither of us has any intention of changing it. We can’t see ourselves in any other situ-ation.”

“Let me tell you what I want to hear you say,” my interviewer prompted. “I want to hear you say, ‘Carol and I are going to be together until we die.’”
“Carol and I are going to be together until we die.”
“If you were a lesbian, and Carol were your partner, which one of you
would be the mother?”
“We both would be mothers,” I said. “We would raise the child
together.”
“But would one of you be the main mother?” she pressed.
“No, I don’t think so. We would mother together.”
“But wouldn’t the child need to know which one of you was really the
mother?”
I explained that we wouldn’t dictate to the child how she should relate
to us, but we would care for her together. If when she grew older she
wanted to have only one of us show up at school, we would respect her
wishes. We wouldn’t want our child to have to carry some sort of banner
for us. But we would both be mothers.
“What would the child call each of you?”
“Mama-Jackie and Mama-Carol.”
“Would you tell your child that you are lesbians?”
“We wouldn’t have to tell her because she would just grow up know-
ing it. We don’t think it is good for children to grow up with a secret in
the family, and so we would just be ourselves.”
“Would you show affection in front of the child?”
“I don’t think parents should engage in hot and steamy behavior in
front of the children, and neither would we. But if you mean would we
ever hold hands or hug each other or kiss each other hello or good-bye,
yes, we would.”

Each of these questions led to a fuller discussion. We disagreed on a
number of points, including whether or nor it was a good idea to spank
children (she said yes, I said no) and whether or not children needed
their gay parents to be out (she said no, I said yes). This was a conversa-
tion on which Carol’s and my future hung. The social worker and I did
our best. But we were constrained by the hypothetical nature of our con-
versation and her apparent dif‌culty in imagining a world in which a les-
bian parent could be matter-of-factly visible in her own family.

I liked this smart, gutsy woman who didn’t have to stick her neck out
for me but did. When her employer told her she needed to find out
whether or not I was a lesbian, she could have just agreed. But she acted
on her principles to reframe the employer’s goals and then signaled me with perfect clarity what could and could not be said on the record and off.

As I drove back to Chicago, I found myself giving thanks to a God I hoped, in the absence of the gift of unshakable faith, was listening. If there were no miracles, then where did this woman come from, the evangelical Christian from the little country town who was not afraid to champion the out lesbian feminist Christian from the big city?

At the end of June, we received our referral. There was a baby waiting for us, an eleven-month-old girl named Laura. I was told to book a flight to Peru for five days later and to pack my bags.

Our friends had helped us prepare by giving us two baby showers. From our freshly stocked nursery, we culled baby clothes big enough for an eleven month old. We loaded an entire suitcase with large diapers. We set aside most of the bottles and all the formula, for this baby was already beginning to drink milk from a cup. We located the various gifts we had been instructed to bring to encourage our Peruvian attorney, the judge, and anyone else to expedite our adoption. We packed and repacked, trying to cram into the limited space everything we might need.

Then the agency called again. “There has been a slight change,” we were told. “Laura is no longer available for adoption. Her mother changed her mind. We’ve assigned another baby to you, a three-month-old girl who weighs about ten pounds. She’s waiting for you, so get here as soon as you can.”

We unpacked and repacked, replacing large clothes with smaller ones, adding formula and bags of smaller diapers. I was secretly happy about this change. I didn’t want to miss any more of my baby’s life than I absolutely had to. At the same time, I worried about Laura. Would she be all right? Had her mother made the right decision? And I worried about our new baby. Would she really be the one we got? Would her mother change her mind?

I hoped with all my heart that some higher power was at work in this, guaranteeing that the baby we would receive was intended for us all along. I wanted to believe, and I did believe, that we were all in the hands of destiny. I hoped destiny wasn’t just a story we told ourselves.

At 5:00 am on July 7, 1989, we headed for the airport. Our bags
bulged with diapers, formula, bottles, clothes for the baby, clothes for ourselves, and a small library of books we hoped would tell us everything we needed to know about how to take care of a baby. Between us, we had about seven thousand dollars tucked into money belts strapped under our clothes. Most of this would go to the Lima lawyer handling the adoption. The rest would cover living expenses while we remained in Peru.

Sometime after 11:00 pm, we cleared customs and were greeted by Pepe, whose sister Ana Maria would be our Peruvian attorney. He ushered us quickly past small children with their hands out, tiny children who worked the streets until well after dark trying to earn a few cents to help feed their families. We brushed past dozens of eager young men offering us rides in the rusting and decrepit Volkswagens that served as taxis. Pepe whisked us to our apartment in Miraflores, on the outskirts of Lima, where another American mother and her Peruvian baby were already asleep in the other bedroom. Worn out from the trip, we soon slept, too, despite our excitement.

Around noon the next day, Pepe drove us to the home where our baby waited. The foster parents supplemented their income by caring for several babies, all awaiting adoption. They brought out our daughter and laid her in my arms.

“Here you are, Mom,” they told me. The bright-eyed baby (Maricruz was the name her mother had given her) looked me right in the eye and smiled a great big, dancing smile. She was a charmer. She seemed to know it was time to shine. Her scrumptious-looking round cheeks begged to be kissed. “Cachetes,” said the foster father, giving one of those beautiful cheeks a gentle pinch.

As I held her, I felt my heart melting into hers. By my side, Carol reached over to take her hand. Our daughter curled a tight fist around Carol’s long finger.

“Doesn’t your friend have a beautiful baby?” the attorney asked Carol. I passed little Lucia Maricruz (for we had added our name to the name her birth mother had given her) over to Carol. She held Lucy close and covered her with kisses. She, too, was meeting her baby for the first time. But no one called her mother.

After a few moments, the foster mom took Lucy back to diaper her afresh for the trip to our Miraflores apartment. The foster papa demon-
strated how Lucy liked to be bounced before going to sleep and how she liked to have her head scratched. We hoped all these kind attentions meant that she had known only the best of care during her stay with them. They placed her in my arms, telling her good-bye over and over. Then we were on our own. We headed back to the apartment to begin the process of turning ourselves into a family.

Lucy arrived in our lives with an air of authority and presence I have never seen in another baby. She was three and a half months old but had none of the vagueness, the out-of-focus fuzziness of most infants. Babies often seem to occupy a blurry kind of dream world. They blink around in a befuddled way, their little fuzzy heads wobbling on their necks, not quite sure what’s going on. Only gradually do they wake up and enter into the life buzzing around them.

Not Lucy.

She had a head of thick black hair, already so long it looked like the hair of a two year old. But her expression also made her look old and wise. She would fix you with a penetrating stare that seemed to say, “I’m back, and I’m in charge.” She was here on a mission. She couldn’t say yet just what it was, but she was sizing you up to see what your place in it would be.

Within the first two days, Lucy learned to roll from her back to her stomach. This made her happy for a moment, but then she noticed that she couldn’t crawl. This aggravated her. Later, when she learned to crawl, she was frustrated because she couldn’t walk. When she walked, she wanted to run. And when I plucked her from the top of a six-foot stepladder at twelve months I could have sworn she was on her way to higher ground so she could turn around and tell everyone in the hardware store a thing or two about how it was going to be from now on.

Carol and I spent two wonderful weeks together in Peru caring for Lucy. Although having to pretend in public to be the helpful friend instead of the parent was a strain, in private Carol was a full-fledged mom and we were knitting ourselves into a family. We could see we made a great team. Reluctantly, after two weeks, Carol returned to work. She cuddled Lucy close and kissed her good-bye, then caught a late evening plane for the States.

The next day Lucy was disconsolate. She slept that Sunday in fits and
starts. When she did manage to drift off, she would startle awake after a few minutes, as if terrified. Awakened, she would fuss and cry until she eventually fell briefly asleep again. In this way, she managed, through a series of twelve or more agitated naps, to sleep for about an hour and a half. When she cried, she wrung her little hands and tiny sweat beads formed on her forehead. It was an exhausting day for both of us, and I was convinced that her obvious distress was related to the pain of separating from Carol.

Fortunately, the next morning my parents arrived at our little apartment in Peru. Almost immediately, Lucy calmed. She seemed to recognize Granddaddy and Grandmama as family from the beginning. She stretched out and napped on my father as if he were her favorite La-Z-Boy recliner. He tossed her gently into the air, and she shrieked with delight. When Mother sat Lucy on her knee, raised her eyebrows, and talked to her new granddaughter, Lucy gazed into my mother’s eyes with such a look of eagerness and understanding that I almost expected her to reply in complete sentences.

Daddy worked tirelessly to help me with the shopping, cleaning, and baby care. I was surprised to see that my mother was unable to be of much help. She tired easily and preferred sitting and talking to all other activities. Although she was only sixty-eight, she had become an old woman. She dozed off frequently and would sit upright in a chair, snoring softly, her head bobbing down toward her chest. When she lay down to nap, the snores grew louder, rattling the loose windowpanes. This was a revelation to me. Over all the years and Mother’s difficulties and illnesses, I had persisted in thinking of her as my all-powerful mother, the one who would swoop in whenever I had a child of my own and, with an air of calm authority, teach me what I needed to know. When she pinned a cloth diaper on Lucy so loosely that my robust little kicker had flung it off within ten minutes, I began to wonder about my version of the past. Mother had always laughed about the time Jeannie, at age two, walked right out of her diapers on the streets of Cleveland at the Southern Baptist Convention. In Mother’s recounting, this was a funny caper of Jeannie’s. Now, I wondered. Had she never known how to pin a diaper on? Had I partly made her up? Yet her sweet, calm, loving presence and her confidence in my capacity to mother were enormous comforts. She beamed love, sympathy, and encouragement my way and sweet talked
and cuddled Lucy while Daddy and I buzzed around cooking, cleaning, shopping, and fixing bottles. Nor was Daddy content to stop with housework and child care. He located two families of Southern Baptist missionaries who worked in Lima. We took them out to dinner, and he secured their promises to help when he was gone. I was grateful to have help from any quarter.

When Mother and Daddy left after ten days, Lucy and I entered the longest, hardest stretch of the adoption. In the end, we would spend sixty-one days in Peru as we continued to work our way through the bureaucratic process of completing the adoption. Sometimes the mom with whom I shared the apartment and I walked the neighborhood together, our babies resting on our chests in their Snuglis. On other days, Lucy and I went to the courthouse or the police station or the doctor’s office or the social worker’s office pursuing the various steps of the adoption. We could not leave the city because, although I had temporary custody of Lucy, her birth mother, Maria Chacpa, had not yet fully relinquished her.

I longed for Carol and grew tired of trying to communicate in my fractured Spanish. I wearied of the uncertainty about how much longer all this would take. Despite the loneliness and hardships, it was wonderful to have so much uninterrupted time with my new baby. It was also a gift to learn a little bit about the country where my daughter was born. When we were not busy, we would wander around, strolling through shops. As I practiced my Spanish, I began to be able to make myself understood and to understand in turn.

In the last few weeks of our Peruvian stay, I secured the remaining paperwork. In the final days, someone had to take the adoption decree back to Huasahuasi, where Lucy was born, and secure a new birth certificate with my name on it. Esperanza, a relative of the birth mother, Maria Chacpa, made this trip. Esperanza had spoken to me at the courthouse one day to say that Lucy looked happier than she had ever seen her. When she was with her mother, she said, she had cried all the time. It was Esperanza, I learned, who had brought Maria Chacpa down from Huasahuasi and introduced her to the attorney, Ana Maria.

Carol returned for the last week and a half of our stay. When she arrived in Lima, Lucy crowed with delight and leaped into her arms. Within the next two hours, she began to cry and wring her hands with the
same pattern of distress she had exhibited the day after Carol left. But this time Carol comforted her. Pained at the separation, Lucy was ecstatic to have her other mama back.

The adoption papers were signed, but we still had to wait for the new birth certificate and Lucy’s green card. During the wait, we took a four-day trip to Cuzco and Machu Picchu. We were thrilled to be together again at last, and this part of Peru is beautiful beyond description. Yet Carol was no more capable of stepping into the part I had scripted for her than my mother had been. I wanted a perfectly joyous reunion, one in which we would all instantly meld into a perfectly happy family. Instead Carol grew annoyed at my attempts to proffer too much advice about how to care for Lucy. She described, with what seemed to me altogether too much satisfaction, her own personal growth during our weeks apart. I began to repeat stories I had already told her about some of the difficulties Lucy and I had lived through, believing that she did not yet realize how hard and lonely it had been and how much I had done for us all. We grew cross with one another.

The physical and emotional separation we had endured during these crucial weeks of our new life had exacted a price, although we didn’t yet fully understand this. While the heterosexual parents around us had been nourished as couples throughout their adoption struggles, our partnership had been driven underground; the impact of this new life on our relationship had been denied. In a way that had the potential to become either a blessing or a curse, we found we had no scripted parenting roles to guide us in the division of labor. Both of us fully expected and intended to be Lucy’s mom, with all the primary responsibility that the role implies. But we saw right away that figuring all this out would take some adjustment. At times, then, and for the next several months, I wondered if we had traveled across an ocean and into another hemisphere in search of our daughter only to lose one another.

When we deplaned in Miami on September 6, I wanted to kiss the airport carpet. In Peru, I had insisted I would never complain again if I could just eat a salad without getting sick, mix formula with water straight from the tap, wash clothes in my own machine, and get my diapers from the diaper service. That promise, of course, would be quickly broken, but it was more than good to be safely home.