Waiting for the Call
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With the move back to Chicago, Lucy and Gracie had begun public preschool at Chicago’s Inter-American Magnet School, a wonderful place with a bilingual Spanish-English curriculum and an emphasis on Central and South American culture and history. It seemed ideal for our girls, and we were thrilled that they would have the opportunity to attend. They were thrilled to be riding the bus with the big kids, where they had a chance to learn a whole range of vocabulary and behaviors we probably weren’t ready for them to know.

Not quite two months after Lucy and Gracie started school, the girls and I were crammed into our small bathroom getting ready for bed. Gracie and I were brushing our teeth, while Lucy finished up her bath.

“Mom,” Gracie asked me, from her perch atop the toilet seat, “are you a lesbian?” She couldn’t say her els yet, so “lesbian” came out as “wesbian.”

I spit out a mouthful of toothpaste and looked at her. I was surprised but feigned nonchalance. “Yes,” I nodded, “I am.”

Gracie looked pleased.

“Who asked?” I said, as neutrally as I could manage. “Someone at school?”
“A boy on the bus.”
“A big boy?” I asked. My heart was pounding.
Gracie nodded. “He asked me if my moms were lesbians.”
“What did you tell him?”
Gracie gave me a self-satisfied look. “I said yes.”
“Well, you were right!” I took a deep breath and tried for a look of tranquil interest that my inner turmoil belied. I was interested, all right, but definitely not tranquil. I kept my voice calm. “And what did he say then?”
“Nothing.”
Phew, I thought to myself.
“Was it the big boy who helps you off the bus?” He was the one, I figured, who got the best look at the two middle-aged, short-haired women in comfortable shoes who took turns waiting at the bus stop.
“Yes.”
“Gracie,” I asked then, “what does it mean, to be a lesbian?”
Gracie thought for only a second. “It means you’re magic!” she pronounced triumphantly.
Well, I admit it; I was pleased. “Good answer,” I said. “What else does it mean?”
Gracie fixed her face in the happy expression of a girl who knows she knows. “It means you’re smart.”
I took proper note of this fleeting moment when my three year old thought both of her moms were magic and smart. Such confidence in our powers was bound to fade. Before another ten years rolled by, she would lose her belief in our magical powers and develop serious doubts about our intelligence.
“Oh, Gracie, I love your definitions. Let me tell you another one. When people say that I’m a lesbian, they mean that I’m a woman who fell in love with . . .” In the brief pause in which I searched for the next word, Gracie triumphantly completed my sentence. “Carol!”
“Well, yes, precisely. I fell in love with Carol. A lesbian is a woman who falls in love with a woman. A gay man is a man who falls in love with a man. A heterosexual is a man who falls in love with a woman or a woman who falls in love with a man.”
“I’m a lesbian,” Gracie announced.
“How do you know?” I asked.

“Lucy!” Gracie replied. “I’m married to Lucy. Lucy, do you want to pretend that we’re married?”

“I don’t know,” said Lucy languidly from the bathtub. “I might marry Ana. Then again, I might marry Raul.”

I knew Ana, a dear friend with the most immense Barbie collection Lucy had ever seen. “Who is Raul?”

“Someone in my class,” Lucy replied breezily.

“Well, there you are. You can’t tell whether you’re a lesbian or not until you see who you fall in love with.”

Gracie thought about it some more. “I can’t marry Kame or Julia Frances,” she stated confidently. These girls had been her two dearest friends in Madison.

“Why not?” I asked. Because they’re girls? I thought to myself. Different religious backgrounds?

“Because they’re in Madison,” Gracie sensibly replied, extending her palms and shrugging her shoulders in a “why else?” gesture from her perch atop the toilet seat lid. She leaned over the sink and rinsed her toothbrush clean.

“Come to your mama,” I said, and I held my arms out to Gracie. She jumped into them and wrapped her arms and legs around me in a big hug.

“My magic, smart mama,” she said as she cuddled close.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

A few days later I was in the kitchen pouring the last of the Cheerios into two cereal bowls. Somehow, we had omitted this staple from the grocery list. As I fished around in the Cheerio dust at the bottom of the package, trying to sift out a few strays, the girls protested loudly.

“That’s not enough!” wailed Lucy, indignantly.

“I need some more!” Gracie complained.

“I’ll give you whatever I can find here,” I said, still excavating the bottom of the package. “We’re out,” I concluded in defeat, and fixed them with a sorrowful look.

But they were unresigned. They roared their disapproval. I grew exasperated. “I can’t make Cheerios out of thin air!” I barked. This line had echoes of my own mother and was tinged with the same indignation
she must have felt when she had done her best for us and come up short. For some reason, this statement struck Lucy’s funny bone.

“Yes, you can,” she said, laughing. Her laughter shifted the mood.

“Oh, well, maybe I can. After all, Gracie tells me I’m magic. She told me a few days ago, and I’ve been feeling special ever since.”

Gracie beamed. “You’re a lesbian!”

“That’s right. I’m a lesbian. I’m a lesbian because I love Carol.”

“And I’m a lesbian because I love Jackie,” Carol chimed in from the sink, where she was mixing the orange juice.

“What would you be if you were a man and you loved Carol?” Lucy wanted to know.

I resisted the impulse to reply “On the way to divorce court” and said instead, “I’d be a heterosexual.”

“And if you were a man and Carol was a man?” Lucy continued.

“If there are two men? Gay men.”

Lucy thought this over. I continued. “But, whether you’re a gay man or a lesbian or a heterosexual, when you see the person you love you see hearts.”

Lucy looked pleased at this image. “Just like I see every time I look at you,” I added.

“I don’t see any real hearts,” Lucy said.

Ah, an empiricist. “They’re not real hearts,” I explained. “They’re metaphorical hearts, hearts in your heart.”

In the pause that followed, I asked myself whether it was time to mention that not everyone would be as thrilled about lesbians as we are in our family. What can you say to protect your children from prejudice, I wondered, and when do you say it? How do black or Jewish parents talk to their children about the comments or ridicule they might encounter from classmates? Do they have models for this sort of talk learned from their parents? Or do they just make it up as they go along, always improvising? I have a recurrent dream in which I am driving but I cannot see the road. I steer madly and hope for the best. It is, I suppose, a metaphor for modern life, especially the modern life I am living on a road far different from the one on which I first learned to drive. This felt just like that dream.

“You know,” I ventured, “sometimes when people hear that your
moms are lesbians they won’t think it’s wonderful. Some people might say mean things about lesbians.”

“Why?” Lucy wanted to know.

“Because they’re ignorant,” Carol explained, as she poured the third can of water into the orange juice pitcher.

“Sometimes they might say ‘Ugh,’” Gracie suggested.

“Did someone on the bus say ‘Ugh?’” I asked. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up, a vestigial trace of an ancient protective instinct.

“No,” said Gracie.

“Some of my friends said ‘Ugh,'” Lucy told us, “but they’re still my friends.”

“They can be your friends whether they say ‘ugh’ or not,” I assured her.

“That’s right,” Carol said. “Some people are ignorant about some things, but that doesn’t keep us from being friends with them.”

For the moment, everyone seemed satisfied. Carol poured the juice.

The following year Lucy was in kindergarten. One Friday afternoon the girls invited two sisters home to spend the night, a classmate and close friend of Gracie’s and her older sister, who was in second grade. Carol picked them up, and they arrived full of excitement at the adventure before them. Gracie’s friend had met both Carol and me during previous visits, but her older sister had not spent any time with us. When the seven year old walked into the living room and I came out to greet them, she began what would prove to be a major struggle to get her bearings in our household. “Which one is your mom?” she asked Lucy.

“They’re both my moms,” Lucy explained. “I’m adopted.”

This didn’t clear up much for our visitor. She had never before encountered either two-mom households or adoption. The questions kept coming.

“Where is your real mom?”

“These are my real moms, but I have a birth mom in Peru. I’m adopted.”

“Why did your mom give you away?”

“She didn’t have very much money and she wasn’t married and she made a plan to find me a family that could take care of me.”
The puzzled seven year old could not have been comforted by this explanation. Her mother was not married and had very little money. Lucy forged ahead, trying, time and again, to provide a satisfactory explanation. At last, she grew exasperated. She marched over to me and placed her short, brown arm beside my longer, paler one.

“Look,” she commanded. Do you see our skin tones?” She gestured emphatically with her free arm. “I’m dark; she’s light. Do you see our hair? She has brown hair; I have black hair. Do you see how we don’t look alike? I’M ADOPTED.”

I’m not sure, even after that, if this new family configuration made any sense to our overnight guest. Her life had done nothing to prepare her for this moment, and her skin was a shade or two darker and her hair considerably curlier than her biological and only mother’s. But I saw I could have absolute confidence in Lucy’s grasp of who and where she was.

The four of us challenged people’s notions of what a family should look like. A couple of years after Carol and I became mothers, I was ranting to one of my lesbian friends about the ignorant, insensitive, and sometimes downright obnoxious and offensive things that strangers would say to us—regarding adoption, skin color, ethnicity, or the curious spectacle of two mothers mothering together. My friend gave me an indulgent smile. “Jackie,” she said, “you’re exactly right. And, of course, I agree with you completely. But you must admit you are asking people to take in an awful lot all at once.” She was right, of course, and her gentle dose of reality helped me temper my impatience at the ignorant responses we encountered. And yet, I still insisted, I was right, too. We’re here, we are one of many answers to the question of what a family looks like, and whether or not that pleases everyone we encounter the world is going to have to make room for us.

We knew this would mean that we would have to help Lucy and Gra-cie find ways to talk about these differences. We couldn’t always anticipate what others might say, but we worked at giving them a vocabulary and a consciousness that would equip them for whatever might be coming next. Often our efforts seemed to be working.

One Sunday, after church, we went to a favorite Indian restaurant. The girls loaded their plates with naan and tandoori chicken. They pulled up to the table and tucked in with gusto. After a few moments,
Gracie had taken the edge off of her hunger sufficiently to have a look around. The restaurant bustled with families and waiters. Indian people predominated, although there were several African American families as well. Gracie surveyed the crowd. “There aren’t too many plain people in here,” she observed.

“Plain people?” we asked.

“Like you,” she explained, indicating both moms with a nod across the table. Gracie’s strong interest in visual detail had already become manifest. She loved to draw, and she didn’t think anything should ever be left plain if it could possibly be decorated with designs or brightened up with color. It was clear, in that moment, that she had come to regard brown skin as a wonderful alternative to the plain, pale condition of her moms.

“You know, you’re right,” Carol agreed. “There are hardly any plain people in here except for Mama-Jackie and me. Almost everyone else has beautiful brown skin.”

The girls complained to us at dinner one night that their classmates sometimes asked them questions they didn’t want to answer. We asked for examples. They had plenty. Is that really your mom? She doesn’t look like you. Where were you born? Where is your real mom/dad? Why don’t you live with her/them? Why did your mom give you away? Don’t you want to see your relatives? How can you have two moms?

Sometimes we don’t know what to say, they told us. Sometimes we don’t want to answer these stupid questions. You don’t have to, we told them. It’s your story, and you can tell it or not. And so, for the next half hour, we invented possible answers to intrusive questions.

“Where were you born?” we asked Lucy.

“I was born on Pluto,” Lucy replied. “Or maybe it was Mars. I was born into a royal family there. I arrived here in a spaceship.”

“Who is your real mom?” we asked Gracie. “Where is she?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Gracie, “but not today. Ask me again tomorrow.”

“OK, it’s the next day. Where’s your real mom?”

“Ask me tomorrow,” Gracie said again. She liked the potentially endless loop of this polite demurral. Tomorrow never comes, so you never have to answer if you don’t want to.

Gracie, with her great gift for living in the moment, said much less
than Lucy about her biological mother. She had little desire to discuss her status as an adopted child. Her one expressed curiosity was to know what her birth mother looked like. This was a natural question, but one with no answer. We don’t know what she looked like, we would tell her, but we know she was beautiful. Gracie was the evidence for this claim.

One afternoon Lucy climbed off the bus shaking with laughter. We wanted to know what was so funny.

“A girl on the bus wanted to know which one of you was my mother.?”
“What did you tell her?”
“I told her you were both my mothers.”
“What did she say?”
“She wanted to know which one of you I live with,” Lucy said, laughing again at the memory of these questions. “So I told her I live with you both.”
“What did she say then?”
“She wanted to know which one of you I liked best. I told her I liked you both the best.” Lucy’s voice rose higher and higher in amazement at the absurdity of these questions.

“Then,” Lucy said, with a “you’re really not going to believe this one” air, “she asked me how you got together.”
“And you told her?”
“I told her, ‘I don’t know. I wasn’t there when they fell in love and got married.’”

It was abundantly clear from Lucy’s demeanor as she told this story that the joke was on this silly girl and her ridiculous questions.

Lucy discovered the Meg Christian recording of “Leaping Lesbians” tucked away in some forgotten stash of women’s music tapes. She found this spoof of the irrational fear of lesbians as hilarious as I had more than a decade earlier when I was first coming out. Christian warns the listener to beware of the dreaded leaping lesbians because “We want your loving, that’s our plan.” Her teasing send-up echoes the cadences of spooky Halloween music.

\[AH-ah-ah \]
\[Don’t look in the closet. \]
\[AH-ah-ah \]
\[We’re creeping down the stairs. \]
The juxtaposition of people’s fears with her own familiar mommies was hilarious to Lucy. She played the tape again and again.

As time passed, she began to understand that even her own dearly beloved grandparents had struggled with the notion of a lesbian daughter. On a trip to Kentucky, not long after she had begun to make this connection, she popped “Leaping Lesbians” into her tape player as our car approached the bridge over the Ohio River that led into Louisville. Here was courage from an unexpected quarter: my own daughter providing the ironic soundtrack for my visit home. She liked the joke so much that she played the tape again the next time we crossed the river into my home state.

We longed, as I suppose parents always long, to protect our girls from any pain. We didn’t want them to ever have to fight our battles or take a beating from peers because of their moms. Yet, as I worried about what might lie ahead for them, I couldn’t help thinking about the pain and social ostracism I had experienced as the preacher’s daughter. Despite the well-known difficulties of the preacher’s kid role, it is unlikely that my parents ever questioned whether they should bring a child into a situation in which she would have to encounter that kind of prejudice. They just counted on providing me with the necessary strength of character to play the hand I’d been dealt. And they rested easy in their right to become parents.

There is no such tolerance for lesbian and gay parents. In some states, it is still illegal for lesbian and gay parents to adopt at all; in most others, we cannot adopt as a couple. Hefty percentages of the U.S. population do not believe gay people should raise children. Some believe gay people are living immoral lives. Others simply don’t think that children should be subjected to homophobia. The fact that the homophobia comes not from the family but from society is not considered an indictment of society but of the couple that wishes to become parents.

Had Carol and I not been possessed of a rock-solid belief in our right to be parents and ample confidence in our ability to be good ones, we
never would have had the courage to commence. For me, I think some of that confidence came from the knowledge that I had been well loved by two fine parents and would know how to pass on my own version of what was given to me. However we came by our audacity, Carol and I never doubted that we could make a family by heart. But we realized that at times all four of us would be up against it. Although the number and visibility of gay families has grown dramatically in the past decade, at the time we adopted Lucy and Gracie we knew no other families like ours in Chicago. We kept talking to our girls about who we were and what we believed and hoped that when the time came Lucy and Gracie would have the resources they needed to carry them through.

The more the girls moved out into the broader world the more complicated became the situations they faced. Carol spent a year interviewing gay and lesbian parents and researching the kinds of support that various families managed to put in place. She wrote an article reporting on some of this and proposed a book to several publishers, but a book on lesbian families had come out the year before, and most publishers felt that the one already out there had, if not covered the subject, saturated the market.

Determined to use some of what she had learned to help others, Carol offered to do a presentation for the Inter-American teachers on how to provide support for children who have gay families or might themselves turn out to be gay. Not long after her presentation to the school, Lucy’s first-grade teacher reported the following encounter.

Lucy and her classmates were seated at their tables working on a project. Apropos of nothing, one of the little boys in the class, whom we will call Miguel, suddenly piped up with an announcement: “Lucy, I know something really bad about your two moms.”

“What?” Lucy asked.

“Your two moms have sex.” A hush fell over the room. Lucy, rarely at a loss for words, looked puzzled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said quietly, when she found her voice.

At this point, the teacher came to Lucy’s rescue. “Miguel,” she said gently, “everybody’s parents have sex.” If Miguel’s announcement had created a shocked silence, the teacher’s claim was even more startling. Who knew? All of them?
“Well,” Miguel said, trying to regain his lost footing, “I know one thing. Your moms can’t get married.”

“Yes, they can,” Lucy said. The fine points of legalized marriage were not yet clear to her, but she had seen the pictures of our cake with the two brides on top. She had helped us celebrate our anniversary. She figured she knew all she needed to know.

“Well, anyway,” said poor Miguel, backtracking yet again, “two men can’t get married.”

“Of course they can,” said Lucy, with a look of exasperation. “I know lots of men who are married to each other.”

That night at the dinner table, Lucy recounted her version of this exchange. Then she turned to me. “Here’s the thing I still don’t get. What’s sex?”

“That’s when two people who love each other and want to be partners with each other kiss and cuddle and use their bodies to express their love,” I said, hoping this would be enough detail for a first grader.

Lucy had seen something like this in the movies. “Like in The Sound of Music, when Maria and Captain Von Trapp are in the garden under that little shelter and he asks her to marry him and they kiss?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling with relief. “Like that.”

“I still don’t get it,” said Gracie.

“You will,” I said.

Gracie’s kindergarten teacher asked us if we could recommend a book about a lesbian family she could read to the class. We recommended Asha’s Mums. In this picture book, a little girl is reprimanded by her teacher when she brings her field trip permission slip back signed by two moms. The teacher tells Asha that she can’t possibly have two moms and that she must get the form signed correctly. Asha’s moms eventually show up and straighten the whole thing out, the teacher apologizes, and order is restored to Asha’s world. In the storybook classroom, the children quickly accept Asha’s family. When one of Asha’s moms shows up at school, a boy from the class asks, “Which mom are you?” and she replies, “Mom number one.” A few days later, the second mom visits the class and the boy repeats his question, “Mom number one,” the other mom cheerily replies.

Gracie’s teacher asked her if it would be OK for her to read this book
to her class, and Gracie agreed that it would. We really appreciated the teacher’s effort to make Gracie’s family visible and ordinary. The children took their cues from the teacher. Not long after they had listened to the story, Carol visited the classroom. “Which mom are you?” asked Santino, one of the boys in Gracie’s class. “Mom number one,” answered Carol. From that day on the joke was set. Year after year, Santino would greet us on the playground or at the door of the classroom with this ritual question, and each time whichever one of us had stopped in would laughingly reply, “Mom number one.”

We could see that such complex negotiations of the encounter between our family and the school were bound to continue. In the third grade, Lucy’s classmates would begin a new game. As they sat in the noisy lunchroom, someone would call out, “If you’re gay, sit down.” All the children within earshot would stand up, and then the instigator would point and laugh at the still-seated children. Lucy would be appalled. She would go to her teacher, Mr. Emmer, to tell him about this development. All year long the class had studied discrimination and the civil rights movement. Lucy’s sense of justice and fair play, already finely honed, had grown even stronger under Mr. Emmer’s instruction.

When the class reconvened, Lucy would raise her hand, intending to say, “I don’t think some of you know that my moms are gay, and when you make jokes about gay people in the lunchroom it makes me feel really bad and makes me feel like I don’t want to be here anymore.” But before she could say any of this, Mr. Emmer would speak.

He would tell the class that he understood some of them had been making jokes about who was gay or not gay. He had been teaching them about social justice all year. This, he would explain, was no different. Maybe not everyone in the class realized that Lucy had two moms who were gay. They had a right to be a family and love each other. When the class made jokes like that, it didn’t make Lucy feel very welcome. These jokes were not going to be acceptable, and if he heard of another incident there would be an automatic parent-teacher conference. As he spoke, Lucy would begin to relax. She would pull her hand down.

That same year, just before school let out, we would read one morning in the Chicago Tribune and the New York Times that the Southern Baptist Convention had passed a resolution demanding that wives gra-
ciously submit to their husbands. It was not enough that they had to submit, but they had to be gracious about it. Uncertain whether to laugh or cry, I would choose to laugh.

“What does it mean to submit?” Lucy would ask.

“I’m not surprised you would ask,” I would say, “since not a single person in this family has a working knowledge of the word. It means you let another person be in charge of you.”

“I submitted to you,” she would claim.

“What? When? Was I asleep? I have no memory of this.”

I would call my father to see if he had read the story. He would not share my amusement, sick at the direction his beloved denomination was taking. More and more he distanced himself from the national denomination’s machinations, focusing his energy on the Kentucky Baptist Convention and the work of his own church.

That evening, I would return from work to find a message from Mr. Emmer: “Well, there’s another Lucy story every day, and this one was just too good to keep. At school this morning, Lucy sidled up to me and said, ‘Mr. Emmer, did you hear that the Southern Baptists have passed a rule that wives must graciously submit to their husbands?’ I told her, ‘No, Lucy, I hadn’t heard that.’ ‘Well, they have,’ she told me, and then she gave a big pause for dramatic effect. I waited. ‘Fortunately, at our house, this is not a problem, because we have all girls.’”

Later, when I talked to Mr. Emmer, I would say, “Lucy is an incipient feminist.”

“Check again,” he would tell me. “There’s nothing incipient about it.”

On a sweltering day in July 1995, I picked up a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* and started to toss it into the back seat. My eye snagged on the headline: “State Court Says Gays Have Right to Adopt.” Two women had decided to have a child together. One mother gave birth, and the other, her partner, raised the child with her but had no legal standing in relation to the child or her partner. Thus, the second mother could not legally make decisions for or represent the child in school or medical settings, nor would she have any recourse if the partners broke up and she was denied access to her daughter. They had petitioned the court to allow the nonbiological mother to legally adopt the child as a second
mother. This is called a coparent adoption, and stepparents engage in this sort of adoption regularly. The judge who heard their case turned them down, but they had appealed. The headline announced an appellate court ruling holding that the best interests of the child, not the parents’ marital status or sexual orientation, should be the basis of any adoption decision. The women’s coparent adoption petition had been approved. The newspaper didn’t name the family involved, but we later learned that two lesbian couples had joined in this appeal. One of these families was the one in our neighborhood that we had passed on our way home from church the day of their daughter’s birth.

What this meant for our family is that for the first time it might be possible for each of us to adopt the daughter originally adopted by the other mother. I quickly called Carol and then our attorney. She assured us that with our long history as a couple and as mothers, and with our original adoptions long since complete, we made what she considered an ideal test case. Ever the careful lawyer, she warned us that, although the door for coparent adoptions appeared to be open, the state legislature or a ruling by a higher appellate court could close that door at any time.

“Then let’s move quickly,” we told her.

“OK,” she said, “but I want to be sure you understand that a positive ruling now could be reversed in the future.”

“We’ll take that chance,” Carol insisted.

“We don’t know how long this opportunity will last,” I said. “The door is open. Let’s see if we can get through it.” Within days, our attorney entered our petition for coparent adoptions for each of our daughters, a petition that, if successful, would convert our two single-parent adoptions into two-parent adoptions.

Although we had completed the required home studies (to determine the suitability of the adoptive parents and home) when we originally adopted our daughters, the court appointed a guardian ad litem to make a recommendation on the basis of the children’s best interest. This court-appointed attorney contacted us and arranged a time to drop by our house and meet all of us.

To say that we cleaned the house and spruced ourselves up would be a grave understatement. We cleaned that house right down to the inside of the cupboards, the backs of the closets, and the dust-bunnies under the
beds. We were shameless in our blatant emotional appeals. We filled the living room and dining room with fresh flowers. Carol, whose homemade piecrusts are legendary, baked an apple pie. By the time the attorney arrived, our house was filled with the irresistible aroma of cinnamon, apples, and butter. He stayed just long enough to have a piece of the still-hot pie and to meet us all. He never even peeked into our closets or under our beds. He was warm and friendly and seemed relaxed with our family, so we felt optimistic. To the extent, that is, that lesbians approaching any sort of adoption proceeding can ever be said to feel optimistic.

We knew we were a family before we arrived at the Daley Center shortly after lunch on a hot August afternoon and made our way to family court. We knew we were both mothers to both girls, we knew they were sisters, and we knew we were forever joined. We knew it because our hearts told us. We believed it was the daily act of mothering that made us mothers and the daily acts of sisterhood that made our girls sisters on a level more fundamental than any law can reach. Still, when we entered Daley Center dressed in our best, it was with a powerful sense of excitement and anticipation and, yes, anxiety. What if the judge saw our petitions for coparent adoptions and decided to block them? Our attorney assured us we had little to fear, but paranoia dies hard for lesbians used to dealing with a homophobic world and for adoptive parents who have weathered the vagaries of Peruvian adoptions.

Along with several other families awaiting their turn, we gathered in a toy-filled waiting room that adjoins Family Court. After twenty anxious minutes, our names were called. We stepped into the courtroom, each mom holding a daughter by the hand. The judge was a kind and intelligent-looking African American woman about our age. After a brief conversation with Carol and me, she began to talk to the girls. To get the conversation started, she asked them what school they attended. “Inter-American Magnet School,” they answered solemnly. “Are you girls sisters?” she asked next. Carol and I stopped breathing. She was trying to find out whether they understood themselves to be related to one another. “Yes,” Lucy and Gracie answered clearly and firmly. Of this answer both girls were comfortably, happily certain, so certain, in fact, that a year later Lucy recalled the judge’s query with the words, “What a ridiculous question! Why would a judge ask such a ridiculous question?”
And yet it was not until we walked from the court a few minutes later with our temporary custody orders that the law began to catch up with reality.

A few weeks later our final adoption orders for each girl arrived in the mail. We lit candles and cooked a special dinner to celebrate. We were each moms to each; they were sisters to one another. Our hearts had told it, and now the law declared it.

Family of the heart, family by the state’s decree.