My Son Wears Heels

Tarney, Julie, Ehrensaft, Diane

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Tarney, Julie and Diane Ehrensaft.
My Son Wears Heels: One Mom's Journey from Clueless to Kickass.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/48502.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/48502

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1885345
I was blinking a soft contact lens into position when Ken popped his head into the upstairs bathroom.

“I’m going to be out in the backyard with Harry,” he said, gently tossing the hardball his dad had sent Harry from his early days as a pitcher on a Minnesota minor league team. “I want to practice a little throwing and catching with him.”

Ken was usually at the studio Saturday mornings. Since we had Harry, he was the only one of us who still went to work on weekends. But today he’d taken the day off and wanted to spend time with Harry. I was excited they were going to have a morning together without me; something beyond our family bike rides or walks to the park.

“Oh, okay,” I said, dabbing my tear duct with a clean finger. “Have fun. And make sure he has his glasses on!”

I wanted to wish Ken good luck, too, but decided against it. Maybe it would be different this time. Harry, now eight years old, hadn’t shown much interest in playing ball. His eye doctor had
said it might not be as easy for him as other kids at first, because, with good vision only in one eye, he didn’t have typical depth perception.

Ken had asked Amy, this summer’s full-time babysitter, to do more sports-oriented activities with Harry. He did like the plastic whiffle ball set Ken had bought, she told me, but would lose interest after a few whacks. Harry preferred the bouncy dodge ball he used to play four square on the court the Marinos had painted in the street. But he opted for arts and crafts activities, imaginative play, and gymnastics over baseball or basketball.

I was putting on my workout clothes when I heard the back screen door slam shut. Then Harry’s footsteps pounded up the stairs. Next came the bang of his bedroom door. Soon after, the slow sound of Ken’s feet signaled he was on his way upstairs, too. He plopped down on the bed and ran a hand through his sandy hair. His mouth and eyes were both turned down.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Oh, jeez, I don’t know,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I was trying to give Harry some pointers on catching with a mitt when he threw it down and stormed off.”

I softly closed the door to our room and then stood opposite Ken, leaning my back against his tall dresser. “You know Harry doesn’t like to do things he’s not good at right away.”

“Well, I thought if he wasn’t interested in sports maybe it was because I wasn’t being a ‘guy’ enough dad.”

“You do so many creative things with him that not every dad can do,” I said. “Like those photograms of Barbie you made together in the darkroom.”

He looked up encouraged.
“And, besides,” I reminded him, “Harry wasn’t interested in sports with Amy either.”

“My dad didn’t teach me how to play ball,” he said. “He was a natural athlete and expected his kids would be, too. So as a teenager, I didn’t know how to swing a bat correctly, and I got teased for it.”

“You never told me that.”

“Yeah, I excelled at creative expression, the things other boys considered feminine,” Ken continued. “That stuff just came easier for me, like it does for Harry. But I got called ‘fairy’ and ‘homo.’ I didn’t want that to happen to Harry.”

I had no idea Ken had suffered at school. I’d always imagined him as the happy kid in the motorboat from his childhood photo album. There was comfort in knowing Ken and I shared some of the same fears and thoughts about not wanting Harry ridiculed. This was the first time in years, though, that we’d really talked about our feelings. Ken had seemed so distant. I felt hopeful this would help me open up about my worries.

“It was the cool, accepted boys who hit the home runs,” he continued. “So I thought if Harry had a little confidence, it would help him later on.”

“If there’s one thing Harry has, it’s confidence!” I laughed. Then I heard a rustling in the hallway. I put a finger to my lips, and signaled to Ken that I thought Harry was outside the room. I tiptoed a few steps to the door, but didn’t hear anything so I opened it. There on the floor was a small piece of paper. I recognized the shape from the notepad that sat with the small table and chairs in Harry’s room. Just as I bent to pick it up, Harry darted out of his room, grabbed it off the wooden floor and ran back to his bedroom. Even
though he didn’t look at me, I could see his eyes were swollen. I knocked gently on his door before opening it. He was standing in the middle of his room.

“Go away,” he said, ripping up the note.

“Harry, honey, what is it?” I asked walking toward him.


“Let me, please, see your note,” I said. “I love you, and I want to know what it says.”

Reluctantly, he put the torn pieces in my hand. I reached to pet his head, but he turned away. I left him, closing the door behind me. I pieced the note together on top of Ken’s dresser. My eyes welled up as I read his perfectly printed words in pencil:

Dad I am not
like other boys. I am going
to stay away
from you because
you don’t like me

I sniffled. “Come read this, Ken. It’s addressed to you.”

Ken took one look at Harry’s note and stepped back, bewildered. “I don’t know what to do. I just want to be part of his life.”

“Go talk to him. Tell him that. Find something to do that would be fun for both of you.”

While Ken was in Harry’s room, I reread the words “not like other boys.” Our sweet, artistic, funny boy knew he was different. I felt the urge to scoop him up, squeeze him, and tell him that everything would be okay.

When Ken and Harry emerged, they were on their way to Ken’s workbench in the basement. With a huge grin on his face and a
sketch in his hand, Harry informed me they were going to make “a big Barbie bed out of real wood.”

“Come on, son,” Ken said, with his hand on Harry’s back. “Let’s go. We’ve got work to do!”

I smiled watching the two of them head downstairs together. I thought the Barbie bed could be the just the right project to rebond their connection. Since starting first grade, I’d been the one who tucked Harry in at night, made his lunch every day, and picked him up from the after-school program. I had taken over so much of Harry’s parenting that I didn’t leave Ken much room. Maybe I worried that Ken wouldn’t be as sensitive to Harry’s needs as I was. When Harry was a baby, I used to be afraid Ken would set Harry on top of the car and drive off, forgetting he was up there, as he’d done with a cup of coffee more than once. While I probably had overcompensated to some extent, it didn’t help that Ken often worked Saturdays and had frequent client dinners or deadlines that required late-night office hours.

I imagined them side by side in the workshop, finding the best piece of wood, drawing the shapes, using the saw and then going to the hardware store to pick out paint colors. I had a feeling they were going to find their way back to a happy place down there, and I felt good about that. Harry needed unconditional love. I’d thought Ken could provide that instinctively because his mother had loved him that way. I hadn’t realized his dad’s expectation for an athletic son was seeping into Ken’s dynamic with Harry. He wanted to give him an edge at baseball to protect him from teasing, but so quickly shifted to what Harry needed more: a chance to be himself. I felt less alone in my parenting and relieved that Ken and I were on the same team.
I was still scared to let myself relax, especially when life had a way of sideswiping us. A few weeks later, we got the call that our good friend Jerry’s father had died. Ken and I had gone to the funeral together that afternoon, but he had a meeting that night. So Harry and his sketchpad and markers came with me. He was happy to sit on the floor and draw while I mingled with people I hadn’t seen in a while. I spotted Patrick, an architect friend who had an office near the agency. He was one of the most cynical and sarcastic people I knew, and I loved him for it. But I didn’t see his partner Roger.

“His parents are in town staying with us,” Patrick told me, rolling his eyes.

I was surprised, because I knew Roger hadn’t come out yet to his family. “Really? How’s that going?”

“Three words,” Patrick said. “A living hell. We have to pretend we’re just roommates. Roger moves all his clothes into the guest room, sets his parents up in there, as if it’s his room, and then sleeps on the couch. I can’t wait until they leave.”

I felt sorry for both of them. Roger was a doll. I knew he wanted to tell his parents, but he was afraid they’d disown him.

“I sure hope Harry never has to face a situation like that.”

“You think Harry’s gay?”

“Well, I don’t know. He could be. He certainly hasn’t said anything to me. He’s eight.”

“I’d never guess he was gay,” Patrick said. “But I wouldn’t wish homosexuality on any child. It’s a horrible life of rejection, shame, and humiliation.”

My knees locked. “Tell me you don’t mean that.”
“But I do,” he said.

Holy shit. No, what he was saying couldn’t be true. Patrick had to be overreacting. I knew he’d married early in life because that’s what was expected of an altar boy, but this was so extreme. We were two years from the start of a new millennium. I didn’t want to believe gay people still felt this way. I wondered if it was because we lived in the Midwest. Would Patrick feel differently if we lived in New York or L.A.?

In bed that night, I didn’t tell Ken what Patrick said. Even though Ken had shared his feelings so openly with me recently, I worried about letting my guard down with him. I’d felt shot down and dismissed before, as if my anxieties betrayed the makings of a hysterical woman. I just couldn’t deal with that amid my worries about Harry in the future Patrick had projected. I rolled over in bed without kissing Ken, which had become the norm these days.

In my office the next day, I pulled my chair up to the Wang computer that sat on a side extension of my mahogany desk. We’d been connected to the World Wide Web for almost two years, and there was a website I kept hearing people talk about for ordering books. I typed in the address for Amazon.com. Then I typed “gay children” in the search box and waited. I sat up as several books appeared, but then started a slow slump after reading the descriptions.

Anything that mentioned “shame” for the parents, the “healing” needed for homosexuals, or included quotes from the Bible was nixed. I did jot down a few new terms I hadn’t heard before, like “gender identity confusion” and “gender dysphoria.” But none of the books addressed young children; the focus was on teenagers.
So I typed in a new search, this time for “parents of gay children.” The same books popped up, along with a few more intended for parents whose teenagers had come out to them recently. None of those were going to be helpful. I felt discouraged as my fingers hovered over the keyboard. Then I decided to type in “gay kids early age.”

This time the list of search results included a fairly new book titled, *Passages of Pride: Lesbian and Gay Youth Come of Age*. Gay youth didn’t sound on target, but I recognized the author Kurt Chandler as a contributing editor for *Milwaukee Magazine*. According to Amazon, his book profiled six midwestern teenagers who’d realized at an early age that they were different. That was Harry! I put the book in my so-called shopping cart and proceeded to check out.

I hesitated at the box for shipping address. Where do I send it? I figured Ken would think I was just projecting unfounded fears onto Harry, so I typed in my work address. I wanted to read it privately. But then I wondered if privately didn’t mean secretly, and I felt a sudden sadness. I was distancing myself from Ken again on the question of Harry’s sexuality. But if I had to take this exploratory journey on my own, that’s what I was going to do. I wasn’t sure about typing my credit card information on the computer. It didn’t seem safe, but I did it anyway. And I paid for overnight shipping. I needed that book.

When the package arrived, I opened it immediately and wished I could absorb its contents by just holding it up to my temple. But I had to wait to dive in, so I tucked it into the bottom drawer of my credenza. At noon, I walked across the street to pick up my usual
lunch of a bag of popcorn and a bottle of cranberry juice and then closed the door to my fifth-floor office.

*Passages of Pride* was more than I’d hoped it would be. There were interviews with not only the kids but their mothers as well. My eyes watered reading more than one story of a mom who said she’d had ideas about her child’s sexual orientation from an early age. Other moms had felt something about their young children, too! Not only had they figured it out on their own before their kids came out to them, but they had wondered what the future would bring for their child.

Harry was only eight. Even though he’d talked about a closet, the chances were slim that he actually knew what that meant. Still, I didn’t ever want him to feel that he needed to hide. I wanted to be a good mom and a safe person for him to come out to if and when that day ever arrived. I didn’t feel fully equipped yet, and I wasn’t sure where to find the tools, but at least I wasn’t alone.

I speed-read through the book over consecutive lunch hours, taking my time with the chapters I related to most. I felt an enormous sense of relief reading the sidebar chapter on understanding “The Roots of Homosexuality.” It dispelled all of the widely held beliefs about parents somehow causing their kids to be gay. I remembered my fears the Halloween that Harry wanted to be Wendy and again two years later when he wanted to be the Pink Power Ranger. I’d redirected him on both occasions, afraid I’d be judged for a parenting style that had created a boy who wanted to be a girl. And if Harry did grow up to be gay, I knew some people would be sure to think my controlling personality and overprotective mothering was the cause. I wanted to make copies of this little
chapter to carry in my purse as a handout for anyone whose judgmental stare implied I was making my kid “too feminine.”

There was also a section about recent changes within the American Psychiatric Association, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics to revise diagnoses and policies regarding sexual orientation. I was shocked to learn it had been only four years earlier that the AMA reversed its support of “aversion therapy.” In another sidebar I became aware of an advocacy group called the Federation of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

There was so much I didn't know. I put down the book and turned again to my computer. I searched for PFLAG and learned they had chapters around the country. There was one in Milwaukee, but I felt let down when I read they worked with parents whose teenage kids had come out to them. That wasn’t me. I didn't learn until more than a decade later how much they could have helped me.

Then I looked up “gender identity confusion” and “gender dysphoria.” With one click I was directed to a page about a prominent child psychiatrist who still blamed a boy’s identification with the opposite sex on an overprotective mother and absent father. I clenched my teeth. That’s what my sister’s quack family therapist had said.

I leaned back in my chair and swiveled to look out the window that faced Gimbel’s and the Milwaukee River. No one would ever make me believe that a happy kid like Harry had any kind of a “disorder.” Harry was just being Harry. And I had to make sure he could be himself without letting anyone get in the way. Myself included.
On my drive to work the following Thursday, I heard the radio news announcer break in with a special report. Horrific phrases hit like punches to my gut: gay student . . . brutally beaten . . . tied to a fence . . . left to die. I turned up the volume. I knew I was steering a car, but my arms suddenly felt numb. I’d never heard of Laramie, Wyoming. But now a gay boy lay in a coma on life support. How could this have happened? I blotted the outside of each eye with the heel of my hand. Who would do such a thing? Then I thought of Harry. I wanted to turn around, go back to Atwater, and take him to Fun World for the day. Instead I pulled myself together for work, checked my mascara, and sat like a zombie in a meeting about an upcoming new business pitch to Corning Ware. I could not stop thinking about the boy in Laramie.

That night, while Ken packed for a short trip to visit his dad, I rolled our living room TV stand close to the couch and flipped channels for more news about what had happened in Wyoming. I tucked my legs underneath me and kept the volume low. The boy’s name was Matthew Shepard, and he’d been tied to that fence for over eighteen hours before a bike rider found him. I threw a crumpled tissue onto the floor and pulled out a fresh one. There was talk of a hate crime. Even though I’d barely touched my dinner, I felt sick to my stomach. I felt like I knew that boy and his parents. I’d sat in the same spot the previous August after Princess Diana’s death, but this was far worse. This was a twenty-one-year-old college kid. This was someone’s son.

My thoughts turned again to Harry, sleeping safely in his upper bunk, surrounded by stuffed animals. If he were gay, I didn’t know how I’d ever be able to protect him from something as unimaginable as a hate crime. I decided I wanted him to go to the University of
Wisconsin–Milwaukee, a few blocks away, for college and live at home.

During the candlelight vigils for Matthew Shepard over the weekend, I felt the urge to step back from my job and be more present for my son. Ignorance about gay people had moved from discrimination to violence. And the two men arrested for savagely beating Matthew Shepard and leaving him for dead were his age.

Ken arrived home from Florida the Monday that Matthew Shepard died. I talked to him that night about taking a “radical sabbatical” from my job of nearly fifteen years to reinvent myself. I’d been thinking about a change recently anyway. I was running the city’s top PR agency and had been able to travel internationally for clients. I’d done everything I wanted with my career there. I’d saved enough money to take off work for a year and figure out what I wanted to do next. I also thought it would be a good opportunity to spend more time with Harry. I knew he’d be too old for the after-school program next year. I picked January 31 as the last day I’d be pulling into a reserved parking spot.

When I shared the news with Ken, I couldn’t quite read his face. I wasn’t sure if he was happy for me, but he seemed somewhat supportive when he said, “Okay, if that’s what you want.” A few months later at the agency’s holiday party, I was excited to kick back and enjoy my last big company bash.

“Tarney!” our IT whiz yelled.

It was hard to hear her over the band on stage.

“I just want to tell you how happy I am for you,” she said, leaning in. “Congratulations!”

“Thanks, Carol!” I said, hugging her. “I’m pretty pumped.”
“Yeah, well I hope Ken can come to grips with it for you eventually.”

My mind did a double take. “What do you mean?”

“I told him how glad I was that you were taking time off and that you really deserved it. And he said, ‘We all do’ and then walked away.”

“Huh!”

Was Ken jealous? I’d never considered that before. But why would he be? His design business was the city’s hot new firm. He was doing great work and was even getting back into the darkroom again. I brushed off the comment and headed to the open bar for another dirty martini.

Those first few months of 1999 I became Harry’s full-time personal manager and chauffeur. I got to chaperone a field trip for the first time with Harry’s third-grade class. I drove him to and from summer art classes and swim lessons, with the stereo blasting. In the fall I volunteered to help organize the fourth grade’s big family night event. And I picked up Harry every day after school, where he’d tell me why flamingos are pink or how his first-grade buddy wanted to be an artist like he was. I loved our car time.

Turning into our driveway one afternoon, a pop song playing on Harry’s favorite radio station segued to a dramatic piano instrumental. A commercial advertised TV Channel 18’s special report on runaways that week. I quickly shut off the engine.

“What’s a runaway?” Harry asked.

*Damn. Of course you caught that.*

“It’s what people call a child who runs away from home,” I replied, reaching for my purse on the floor.
Harry’s mouth fell open. “Why would anyone want to do that?”
I stopped moving. I wanted to put my hand over my heart, but decided to act unaffected. Harry didn’t know it, but he had just crowned me Mother of the Year. He couldn’t even imagine wanting to run away from home. By his age, I was already a repeat runaway. I was never gone overnight, because the Whitefish Bay Police knew my hiding places, but I remembered the urge to find safety from the name-calling and face slaps at home.

“Well, Harry, some kids have bad situations with their parents, where they don’t feel safe.”

“Huh,” he said, popping the door handle.
I sat in the car for an extra couple of seconds. A warm mix of love and validation bubbled inside me. I didn’t have to worry about being the kind of mother a child wanted to run away from. This was real confirmation that I was not like my mother. Harry loved me. I was doing something really right for my son, who counted on me to help him.

Harry was at a sleepover the Saturday night Ken wanted to have a talk out on the front porch. Sitting side by side on the yellow Adirondack loveseat, Ken turned to me and said, “We haven’t been close for a while. I’m really not happy. I want to move out.”

His words echoed in reverb. I didn’t want to believe I’d heard him correctly. I felt my insides shrink and then expand back. As much as I was shocked, I wasn’t really shocked. I knew I had distanced myself from Ken so much that we weren’t connected anymore. I hadn’t shared how I felt with him for a very long time. We were no longer lovers. We were no longer best friends. We were
more like roommates. We coexisted. And that’s not a marriage. He was the one with the courage to do something about it. I felt adrenaline rush to my head and down my shoulders. *How was I going to do this? Manage everything on my own after all this time? Wait, I can handle this. I’m a successful businesswoman. I can do anything. Ken and I don’t need to live in the same house to co-parent. We just need to be cool for Harry.*

Ken and I agreed we wouldn’t say a word to Harry until we had a plan. Then he got up to go for a ride in the 1990 Miata he’d bought recently. I watched the silver convertible back out the driveway with Lenny Kravitz blaring on the stereo. I sat still on the porch in the dark, while my mind went into crisis communications overdrive.

While Ken spent his free time looking for a flat close to the house, I put together a three-page damage control document that could have served as a case study for parents on how to minimize emotional trauma when you tell your kid you’re splitting up. Harry was only nine, and he was going to be shocked. Ken and I never argued or yelled. We didn’t get mad, and we didn’t slam doors. Harry wouldn’t understand the subtleties of coexisting in a disconnected marriage. That was too mature a subject to talk about with him. We needed to do this right so he wouldn’t feel he was to blame, because it had nothing to do with him.

My social worker friend Barbara recommended a child therapist who specialized in children of divorcing parents to be our advocate for Harry. Ken and I met with her to write up key messages, anticipated questions with prepared answers, a timeline, and rules of engagement for us with regard to Harry. I covered everything. We
were going to wait until after Halloween to tell him. There was no way I’d ruin his favorite holiday. He’d been planning his vampire geisha costume for months.

The waiting period for me was an emotional flipbook through events past, present, and future. One night before bed I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and saw my eyes get glassy. I fought back tears that sometimes ended as fast as they’d begin. Maybe Ken felt alone, too. I wondered if maybe he wasn’t just the braver of us. He’d had the guts to act on his unhappiness. But by the next day I was fuming about my upcoming status change to single mom who had just quit her job. My divorce lawyer said judges liked working moms.

I was still trying to figure out my next move when my former employer called. The agency partners wanted me to come back and head up new business development for the entire firm, not just PR. I did a high Tae-Bo front kick and then negotiated a sweet deal for myself at only ten hours a week. Things were picking up.

I stood in my workout clothes at the tall oak radiator cover in our front entryway separating letters and catalogs I’d scooped out of the mailbox. I shuffled past the utility bill and the postcard for gutter cleaning services to open a square envelope from the Waukesha Women’s Center. It was an invitation to their anniversary fundraiser luncheon coming up in mid-October. The keynote speaker was going to be Gloria Steinem. “Yes!” I said, pumping a power-to-the-people fist close to my chest.

Gloria Steinem was my feminist hero and role model. I knew that stashed away in a file folder somewhere I still had the first issue of Ms. magazine I’d bought in college. And I remembered how extraordinary I thought she was when I learned she’d gone
undercover as a Playboy bunny in the ’60s to expose how women were treated in Hugh Hefner’s club world of celebrity-like sex objects. I read her essay on that experience while I waitressed in college two nights a week at an upscale, bordello-styled restaurant. My so-called uniform was also sold in Halloween and fetish stores as the Naughty French Maid.

I recalled, too, getting an important All Points Bulletin from Gloria the spring Harry was five. I was organizing my jewelry box when the radio news reported a controversy over remarks she’d made in her commencement speech at Smith. Apparently some people were outraged when she said that women needed to raise their sons more like their daughters. They thought she was suggesting we raise our boys to be “girly sissies.” But I knew what she meant that day. Her words gave me a shot of courage and hope that Harry’s blend of masculine and feminine traits meant he was going to grow up a whole person. Those ideas were back in the news, because she’d repeated them in an essay about white supremacy crimes in the current issue of Ms. magazine as a follow-up to the Columbine High School massacre in April.

I grabbed a pen to fill out the RSVP card. Then I noticed a box that said a limited number of tickets were available that included a post-lunch reception with Ms. Steinem. The additional fifty dollars for that ticket also included a photo op. I marked a big X in the box, wrote a check for the full-priced ticket, and sealed the reply envelope. I wasn’t only going to see Gloria Steinem, I was going to meet her.

I felt enormous relief after reading Chandler’s Passages of Pride and finding Harriet Lerner’s The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life, too. I’d finally found comfort from outside
sources, something I’d longed for, ever since the “I’m a girl” conversation with Harry seven years ago. But chapters in a book couldn’t compare to a face-to-face with a cultural icon like Gloria Steinem.

I knew I’d only have a minute or two with her, but surely she’d have some silver-bullet secret answer she could share. I was desperate for a pat on the back and “You can do this!” and “By the way, try this!” Not having my own parents as guides, I found myself in search of someone to show me the way. All I had to do was figure out exactly how to sum up everything I wanted to know in one all-encompassing question.

The event was held in the spacious atrium of the Waukesha Women’s Center’s new building. I arrived early and waved hello to my friend Anne who was on the steering committee for the luncheon and a past board president. Her son David was Harry’s age. I kissed her on the cheek and congratulated her on getting Gloria for the keynote. Then I asked which room was set up for the private reception.

I sat on the edge of my folding chair throughout the lunch and all of the speakers. My fork pushed around pieces of chicken divan on my plate. I was too excited to eat. After Gloria’s speech and a round of applause, the executive director thanked her and wrapped up the event with a few announcements. I said goodbye to the women around me and pushed away from the table. Then I power-walked into the reception room in less time than it takes to say Equal Rights Amendment. I was the first guest in the room.

Gloria was talking to one of the Center’s staff members. I lingered close by. As a photographer shot pictures of them, I strolled backwards to a display table of Gloria’s books and purchased
Not Like Other Boys

a second-edition copy of *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellion*, which included several essays that had raised my consciousness in college. I put away my wallet and took out a black ballpoint, just in case Gloria didn’t have anything to write with.

As other people entered the room, I made my way back over to the guest of honor and introduced myself. I offered my hand. She shook it, and I relaxed when no jolt of supercharged icon electricity blasted up my arm. Her grip was unremarkable, humble almost. She accepted my copy of her book along with the pen and opened it to the first page.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you ever since your commencement speech at Smith,” I said, trying to speak without sounding like a 911 caller.

“Yes,” she said, without looking up.

“I have a nine-year-old son who told his dad and me last year that he wasn’t like other boys.”

She glanced at me, simultaneously pushing up the bottom edge of her glasses with her pen hand.

“Those were his words,” I told her. “I’ve tried to raise him without stereotyping, but I’m not sure how successful I’ve been.”

I took a breath before my big question.

“How exactly does one do that?”

She finished writing my name and signing hers. She looked up at me and smiled. “It isn’t easy.”

What? That’s it, Gloria? That’s all you’ve got for me?

I pressed on. “No, it isn’t easy, but . . .”

My voice trailed off as the photographer motioned for us to face the camera. I took my book from her, which was replaced immediately with the book of someone else eager to meet and
greet Ms. Steinem. I let her keep the pen and stepped to the side, feeling like the girl who lingered too long in the reception line at a former boyfriend’s wedding. I realized that my time with Gloria was over.

I stood dazed, searching for hidden meaning in those three words that played over in my head. I straightened up as Anne tapped me on the shoulder.

“There’s Gloria,” she said, nodding in the direction of my role model being photographed with someone new.

“I know. I talked to her.”

“You did? That was fast!”

“Too fast, I’m afraid.”

Then the photographer approached to snap a picture of Anne and me.

“I’m going to want copies of all these shots,” I told her when she lowered the camera. I pulled out one of the personal business cards Ken had designed for me on my fortieth birthday. “There’s one of me with Gloria in there, and I’d be happy to pay you for it.”

I mingled with women I hadn’t seen since the days I’d last had on a skirt suit and heels. Then I carried my newly signed book to the parking lot. It was time to pick up Harry from school.

I turned off the car stereo and gripped the steering wheel on my drive east along the freeway. Gloria’s voice played on continuous loop in my head. I’d hoped for a simple answer, but “It isn’t easy”? I already knew that! I needed profound wisdom or some feminist inspiration. “You’re Gloria Steinem, for God’s sake!” I said aloud to no one. Then I realized I was being ridiculous. She didn’t know anything about my situation or me or Harry. She was probably
barraged by thousands of people at receptions like this. I should have known better than to think I was going to get any kind of magic answer or support from her in two minutes while she signed my book.

After a snack pack of some Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, Harry wanted to go play at Allison’s. I changed into my sweats and went upstairs to the attic to check email on my blueberry iMac. I picked up the talking Executive Teddy Bear that sat on the top of the cabinet behind my desk. I’d had two of them, one for my home office and one at work. I left the one at the agency for my successor. Teddy always knew just what to say after a challenging day.

I smoothed his red felt tie and yanked the pull string straight out from the back of his navy-and-white pinstriped suit. Pffft. “There’s nothing you can’t do!” Teddy told me. I pulled again. Pffft. “You’ve got what it takes!” he assured me.

I wanted to believe Teddy. I had to trust that I really could handle whatever might come next being Harry’s mom, and now a single mom, too.
Harry, age 10