Maybe It’s Morning Sickness
After our first round of insemination I was immediately convinced that I was pregnant. We spent the next few days pouring through What to Expect When You’re Expecting, trying to see whether I had any of the early signs. The days dripped. The house was full of bugs: ants, moths, and mosquitoes. Everything was lush from the rain, teeming with life, dense with it.

Connie made me drink a glass of milk, in case I needed the extra calcium. I immediately felt nauseous.

“Maybe it’s morning sickness,” Connie said hopefully.

“Maybe it’s milk,” I grumbled.

Or maybe, I thought, grimly, it was anxiety—if I wasn’t pregnant, we’d have to go through all this again. And if I was—well, there was all of Wellsboro to face and the possibility that by our own stupidity we were bringing a child into a world as welcoming as a snake pit.

The town of Wellsboro is the most picturesque in these parts. It’s the kind of town I used to dream of living in when I was a child. I used to fantasize about living in a neighborhood just like the one I live in now, with white houses and big front porches and shady backyards and lots and lots of children my age right next door.

Wellsboro is the county seat. It’s where the doctors and the lawyers live, though this is a medically underserved area, so there’s not too many of the former but a lot of the latter. It’s a quiet little town of four thousand, full of tree-lined streets, two-story houses with big front porches, and one department store, one diner, one movie theater (all owned by the same family), one liquor store, and four of the county’s eight stoplights. A chain of hills called the Endless Mountains encircles our town, hides the sun from our view, seeds our sky with clouds, and gives it a strange dark beauty that has slipped into my heart.

Ten years ago I drove into town and unloaded my pickup truck and carried my belongings up to my two-room apartment above one of the two antique stores that grace Main Street. I hung my lace curtains across my storefront windows overlooking the catalpa trees that weep their lush white flowers every summer and cover the sidewalk with petals. After I walked down the street to one of
the two hardware stores to buy screens for my windows, the guy at the cash register paused in ringing me up. He looked me up and down and said: "Oh, you're the new English professor that just moved into town."

It took me aback for a moment. I'd forgotten that in a town this size everybody knows everything, all the time. "Oh, you're the one that moved in above the antique store," they'd say down at the post office. "Noticed you got a lot of parking tickets last month," they'd say over at the sporting goods store. "Gotta watch the cops when the weather's nice. You can park anywhere you want when it's raining; they don't like to walk around then," they'd caution me as they rang me up.

I liked the discourse. It never left the surface. Living in this town seemed easy. I liked not having to worry about whether I'd locked my doors. I liked being able to go running any time of day or night. I liked that I could walk down any street I chose, even if I did find myself counting the lawn jockeys that nobody's ever even bothered to whitewash. I didn't have anything to fear. I was white, employed, and as far as everyone was concerned, I was straight. No one was ever going to hurt me. I liked the gas lamps that lined the streets, left over from another era. I liked the freedom here, the wildness of the landscape, the violet blue of the mountains in the winter time and the profusion of lakes in the summer, and that nobody else I knew seemed to have any idea that this place existed. So what if the nearest mall was fifty miles away? So what if public transportation didn't exist? There was a certain peace to this small town. I liked driving down dirt roads that slipped deep back into the hills where I could see deer and bear and wild turkey and, once, a golden eagle. One night I heard the shriek of a bobcat in the woods, splitting the air like the cry of a woman. I liked the fountain of Winken, Blinken, and Nod in the center of the town that doubled as a wishing well. I liked that when I worked out at the gym, I got to know the dentist who saw his patients at the Red Cross headquarters and the attorney who got elected judge and the minister over at the Lutheran church, whose parishioners worshipped on folding chairs and whose office occupied a trailer in the parking lot. I liked that people asked me how many miles I ran and how long it took me. Nothing ever got too personal. It never occurred to me that I might be a curiosity, thirty and living all alone with no kids, no apparent boyfriend. It never occurred to me that anybody might say any-
thing more than what they said to my face. Why would they, after all? What difference could it possibly make, how I lived my life?

After a while I moved out of my apartment to a rented cabin on top of a mountain six miles out of town. Even the locals didn’t know about it. I chopped wood for my woodstove and drank water from my well. The minerals in it turned my hair orange when I showered. I took long walks down the road with a cup of coffee every morning at dawn. It was so deserted up there that grass grew down the center of the road. Only one other person lived up there, an old mountain man who let me ski on his property and canoe in his beaver pond, which never had any beavers in it. “There used to be two,” he told me, “but he died, and then she took up with some other beaver down the road.” At night I watched the sun set over the fields behind my cabin, burning them up before it sank behind the trees. I liked my life. I liked my job, I liked my cabin, and I liked this image of myself, alone, in blue jeans and hunting boots, wearing a flannel shirt to walk down my road, my hair cut so short even the breeze didn’t touch it.

For the two weeks after our first insemination attempt, all I thought about was my body. I taught my classes, met with students, read books, tried to write, but my mind was constantly elsewhere, watching my body like a hawk, mining it for signs that it no longer belonged to me alone, that I was sharing occupancy for a time with a tenant I really didn’t know, whose personal habits I had no idea how to gauge.

When Connie and I first decided to get an apartment together, a year and a half after we met, I told my mother about it nervously, at first implying that I was moving by myself back into town. “Oh, good,” she said. “I hated you being up there in that cabin, all alone.” During the next conversation I mentioned that Connie would be moving in with me, intimating that it was just to split the rent. “Oh, good,” she said. I could hear the surprise in her voice, the slightest hesitation. “Now if you could just meet a nice man,” she said. I could picture her with her lips pressed together, nodding her head, imagining me, no doubt, back in town, surrounded by two-story houses filled with eligible men, all of whom I could finally meet, now that I was no longer splitting firewood alone on
my mountaintop. I didn’t say anything else. There was no third conversation, no subsequent talk in which I let it drop that, in fact, there would be no Nice Man, that Connie and I were really moving in together in the most significant sense.

I didn’t say anything to anyone. I kept my mouth shut. I mentioned to my colleagues that I was moving but only vaguely mumbled something about a roommate. They regarded me evenly. Most hadn’t even seen my cabin. Except for Roger, with whom I seemed to have so much in common, I’d never even had a drink with most of them. Roger and I had spent many hours bellying up to the bar at Mark’s Brother’s with the good old boys, but with everyone else I’d kept my distance. I didn’t know anything about them.

Connie and I spent the day before we were to move in cleaning the house, a sagging two-story white house with an uninhabitable second floor and a sagging front porch. The elderly woman next door stopped by when she saw us sitting on the front steps sharing a sub. “So you’re the ones moving in,” she said, appraising us carefully through narrowed eyes. She pulled her coat tighter and held it closed at the neck. “Well,” she said. “I just hope there aren’t going to be any boys over.”

Connie and I avoided each other’s eyes. “Oh, no,” I said after a pause. “There won’t be any boys.”

Roger helped us move in. He was the only person from school I dared to ask to help us. He was annoyed by the task. “Why don’t you make an announcement in class?” he asked me. “Get some strong men to help.” I didn’t answer him, but inside my heart was beating hard at the thought of witnesses, Strong Men moving our things around, setting up our bed. What would they think? I was nervous enough about this move. I didn’t want to have to pretend in front of strangers that we were just roommates moving in together. As we were loading up the boxes from my cabin, I began to cry. I had loved this cabin. I’d lived here all alone, survived every season here. I had muscles in my arms and legs, visible badges of my competence. Connie and I had fallen in love up here, had the best sex I’d ever had on the floor of the kitchen, the couch beside the woodstove, the bed, the table, up against the walls, out in the fields during electrical storms, beneath the hot sun in the summertime. We’d taken off our shirts and walked bare-breasted, hand in hand, down our deserted dirt road. Only once did we get caught, by the mountain man driving back to his house. We dropped hands and ran, not
stopping until we were safe behind a tree, holding our sides and
gasping with laughter, clutching our shirts to our chests. The next
day he stopped by to make small talk. “I don’t know what you girls
got so modest about,” he drawled on his way out. “You can do what­
ever you want to up here, you know.”

And that was how it felt. Like we could do anything we wanted,
and no one would ever know. But now we were giving all that up
and moving to the center of town, imprisoning ourselves in one of
those nice white houses surrounded on all sides by people we
didn’t know.

As we moved our things into the new house in Mansfield, I
escaped to the basement, sat on the stairs, and sobbed into my
hands. Connie found me down there and sat beside me, nervously
touching my shoulder. “I just want to go home!” I told her between
sobs.

Neither of us mentioned that this was home now.

After the move we took the keys to my cabin back to my landlady.
She asked me if I knew of anyone who might want to rent the place
next. I shook my head. I didn’t even know anyone, period, except
for Connie. She surveyed me mournfully. “You hate to advertise,”
she said, shaking her head. “You never know who might answer it.
Somebody colored might come, and then you’d have to rent to
them.”

I stared at her. This was the woman I’d been renting from for the
last year and a half, who’d helped me split a cord of wood and
showed me how to stack it? “Not that I’m prejudiced,” she said
quickly.

Oh, no? I thought, but she had already turned away, already
moved on in her head to the next task at hand. She’d lived in this
town all her life, as had the generations before her. She’d been
reluctant enough to rent to me. “You’re not from around here, are
you?” she’d asked me, sounding just the way you might expect her
to sound, like John Wayne in some cowboy movie, just before he
blows the guy from somewhere else away. But she had rented to me.
It never occurred to me that there might be people she wouldn’t
rent to, no matter what.

Neither Connie or I said anything to her. We just gave her the
keys and went back out to the truck, drove back to Mansfield, back
to our new life together, a conglomeration of boxes and paintings
and plants so profuse we could barely get in the door, barely make
a path to walk through.
Combining our households was easy—our pictures melted in together on the walls, our blankets nestled together on the beds, our sweaters soon found their way into one cupboard—though we had twice as many things as we needed: two sets of cooking utensils, two toasters, two mops, three litter boxes. What was harder was combining our lives. We were both anxious about living together—Connie because she had lived with a lover before and I because I hadn’t. I had always lived alone. Even in the years of sharing cooperative households with people, I’d always had my separate room. We both hung onto things, Connie to her four inoperable vacuum cleaners and her Hollywood frame and lumpy mattress, given to her by her last lover, just in case she might have to move back out again. I hung on to the idea of my separate space, a room that would be mine, the room, I figured, subconsciously if not consciously, that I could close myself into if things between us didn’t work out.

We hadn’t lived together two months before we began to have fights. Fights like neither of us had ever had before, fights in which some demon seemed to come to life inside me, raising its head and sending its fire roaring from my throat. We screamed at each other, slammed doors in each other’s faces. I shouted obscenities I never knew were in my vocabulary. I had never raised my voice to anyone before. I could feel my anger take me over, shake me in its grip till I feared I would lose my soul. I could see her through the anger, see the hurt in her face, but I couldn’t get to her, couldn’t move past the desperation that held me like a straitjacket. Inside me, it seemed my body, my solid oak door of a body, had turned to ash; there was nothing left for me to get my hands around.

One day at the end of the semester a friend of ours stopped by. Connie had known Rick for years; they’d gone on archaeology digs together, spent late nights drinking scotch and playing poker and smoking cigarettes together. They both saw me at the same time after I moved to town. “She’s something,” Rick said, according to Connie. “I’d like to sleep with her.”

“You’re not her type,” Connie said.

Rick just looked at her, Connie told me. “You want to bet?” he asked her.

“What did you say?” I asked Connie, fascinated, when she related the story to me over breakfast months after we’d gotten together. “Nothing,” she said, stirring cream into her coffee and lifting
the cup to her lips. “I didn’t think you’d want to be the object of a bet,” she said, surveying me above the brim.

“Of course not,” I said, turning away. Inside I felt mildly disappointed. Something in me kind of liked the idea, that two people would compete for me. It made me feel like a fairy-tale princess, watching the battle from the sidelines, marrying the victor. It just wasn’t a way I was accustomed to feeling.

Besides, both of us found Rick sexy. He was a Vietnam veteran with black hair and a thick moustache and a slow easy body. He used to wait for me at the door of the English building in the morning, smoking a cigarette outside on the steps. “Morning, Beautiful,” he’d say as I walked past, and I’d feel a flush of excitement roll through me, warm me somewhere deep inside. He’d taken one of my classes, and every time I turned to write something on the chalkboard, I was conscious of his watching me from behind. I wrote a lot of stuff on the board that semester.

On this visit he had a friend with him, Carl, whom he introduced as a gentleman. Carl was tall and gangly; the slightest southern accent graced his words. His hair was nearly white, his demeanor deferring. I offered them a beer; we shared a joint in the living room, waiting for Connie to come home. “Remember those tight jeans and high boots you used to wear?” Rick asked me, nearly moaning. “Why don’t you put them on?”

We often wondered, Connie and I, how we could find Rick so attractive.

When Connie got home that night, we went out to Mark’s Brother’s. Everyone was there, celebrating the end of the semester. Connie and Rick stood a little to one side, their arms around each other, both impossible flirts, while I sat at the bar drinking a glass of beer from the pitcher that we shared. Carl looked at me, his tongue just lightly stroking his upper lip. He looked like one of our cats, ready for a night of canned food and Pounce treats. “I think you’re hot, Louise,” he said. “I mean, really,” he added, as if I might have thought he would be lying.

I turned away. Maybe he’d just go away if I ignored him long enough.

Carl leaned slightly closer to me. Rick might have introduced him as a gentleman, but I knew it wasn’t true. “I’d really like to sleep with you,” Carl said. His hand touched my thigh, hesitant at first, then growing heavier, firmer, as if I were a piece of furniture he had every right to touch.
I pulled back. “No thanks,” I said.

He leaned closer, his hand caressing my thigh. “Why not?” he asked. “You’re really sexy.”

I looked down at his hand, then over at Connie, where she stood with Rick at the end of the bar. He had one arm slung across her shoulder, hers circled his waist. They resembled each other a little, dark, somehow Italian looking, though Rick was swarthier, older, coarser than Connie. He was full of edges, in his old faded blue jeans that had somehow grown to the shape of his body in that way that men’s jeans do, as if he never took them off. I knew that at home his wife was probably cooking his dinner, watching his kids. Neither of them looked at me. Their heads were so close together, they looked as if they might kiss, given another minute or two. I pushed Carl’s hand off my thigh. “I’m with her,” I wanted to say. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t claim her. Carl had more right to touch me in this bar, amid this crowd, than I had to touch Connie. I felt solid and heavy, rooted to the bar stool as if at any moment it might pull me through the floor and leave no visible sign that I had ever even been there, ever lived my life at all.

Carl followed my gaze. He poured himself another glass of beer from the pitcher on the bar and refilled my glass as well. I was losing count of my drinks. Was this my third? He took a sip, let it rest in his mouth and travel down his throat like brandy. He nodded over at Connie and Rick. “They’re real special friends, aren’t they?”

I felt the hair on the back of my neck prickle. A sense of deadly caution came over me, draped me like a second skin. A darkness seemed to fuse through the room. “Yeah,” I said slowly, taking another sip of beer. “As a matter of fact, they are.”

Carl leaned in close. I could feel his breath, stale with beer, against my cheek. “Does it piss you off?” he asked softly.

I took another sip of beer, then drained the glass. Carl poured me another. I wanted to throw it in his face. I wanted to walk down the bar and put my arm around Connie, pull her to me. I wanted to hold her, the way that Rick could hold her, in that easy sensuous way. As if I were entitled to. But I didn’t. I just took hold of my glass again, to lift it to my lips. It trembled in my grip. “No,” I said. “It doesn’t.”

Carl nodded, took a long slow sip of his beer. “I’ve been watching you,” he said. His face was so close to mine that his hair, gray with middle age, brushed my forehead. “Trying to ignore them.”
I pulled back as far as I could before I bumped into the person on the next stool. “I’ve been giving them space,” I said.

Carl looked at me anxiously, worry creasing his brow like a stain. “Gee,” he said. “I hope I didn’t piss you off.”

Go fuck yourself, I wanted to say. Get away from me. I wanted to push him off his stool, stride past him the length of the bar, grab Connie, and take her with me, out of the bar, back into our life together. But I didn’t. I only put down my glass and got up. The floor tilted a little beneath my feet. I steadied myself on somebody’s shoulder, summoned up my balance, and made myself walk over to where Connie stood. “I’m leaving,” I said. I could hear my voice trembling. “I’m getting out of here.” Connie looked at me with surprise, then back at Rick. I turned, left the bar, and stomped out into the snow. I could hear her footsteps behind me, slipping a little on the ice.

“Wait a minute,” she said, catching up to me. “What’s the matter?” Her words slurred. She reached for my shoulder and missed.

I couldn’t even answer her. My jaw was so tense it ached. I felt full of fury. I wanted to hit something. I got to the truck and tried to open the door. It was locked. I wanted to put my fist through the glass.

“Hold on,” Connie said, digging in her pocket. “I’ve got the key.”

“Forget it,” I said. “I’m walking home.” I turned and left her in the snow beside the truck and made my way through the snow and slush on the sidewalks. I felt dead inside, like I wanted to cry but had run out of tears.

Connie was home when I got there, waiting on the front porch. “What the fuck is going on?” she said. I pushed past her, tried to open the door. It was locked too.

“Open the fucking door,” I said.

“You open it,” she said, throwing me the key.

I threw open the door and stomped back to my room, the place where I had set up my computer, the place I tried to call my own. But none of the doors shut tightly in this house. I had nowhere to go, no place that was safe to hide. I began to cry. I cried until I couldn’t breathe. I cried myself to sleep that night after hours of fighting with Connie. The next morning my head ached. I couldn’t quite remember everything that had happened. But I remembered the feeling, that helpless feeling of having to be someone else in public, someone not in love with Connie.
We fought all the time. The more we drank, the worse we fought. “Fine,” I’d say. “Let’s just break up.”

“You always want to break up!” Connie would say. “You’re always ready to give up.”

It was true. I was always ready. All I could think was that if I could just get back to my cabin, things would be OK. I’d been wrong about this love. It wasn’t blessed. It wasn’t magic. I couldn’t do it, and I didn’t know why I had ever thought I could.

One day Connie brought home the business card of a therapist who had been hired to do workshops with the staff of the agency where she worked. “He’s really good,” she told me, watching me earnestly. Her eyes on mine were steady. “You could talk to him.”

I could talk to him. Just the thought of talking to him made my stomach churn. I kept the card in my room, on top of my desk. Now and then I fingered it cautiously, as if just to touch it might suck me into therapy and never let me go. Deep inside I was afraid that if I went to see him, I’d have to come to grips with being crazy, that all this fighting was because I was insane, unable to live in the regular world, conduct normal relationships. I thought if I walked into his office I might never come out again. But I kept the card anyway, looked at it every single day, imagined dialing his number, giving myself over into his hands.

Connie and I fought about everything. We fought about things we’d despised in former lovers, about fears we didn’t know enough to voice. And as we fought, we grieved everything we’d ever lost, every sacrifice we’d ever made. We grieved our pasts. And most of all we grieved the silence, the inability to tell anyone what was happening with us. “My god,” we would say to each other after each fight, our eyes red, our faces bloated from tears. “If we were straight, we could go out and say to the neighbors, the waitress at the diner, people at work: ‘I’m upset because I had a fight with my husband.’ And everybody would understand. Everyone would empathize.” But as it was, we could tell no one, and I used to pull my grief around me like a blanket, use it to cloak myself as I left the house, tried to hide within its folds, suffer my life in silence. If I were a man, I used to think, I could go to Mark’s Brother’s and order a drink and say: “Oh, women!” And every man there would understand. But we didn’t have that consolation, and, in the end, as I watched my straight friends’ relationships fall apart as easily as ripe fruit, I think that that was the thing that saved us.
My period that first month came like a geyser. My uterus felt like someone was wreaking havoc in there, ripping unused lining from the walls like wallpaper and hurling it out through the cervix. The days were dark and full of rain. I was so menstrual I felt like a gasoline tank waddling down the road—one misplaced match and I’d burst into flame, explode all over the street, detonate the entire town.

I wasn’t pregnant. There was no baby inside me, no new life taking hold and kicking its way into the world. I wasn’t pregnant.

It felt like my fault, somehow.

“You need to have a ritual,” said Deborah, one of my colleagues as she bought me a martini that afternoon. Deborah was one of my best friends, one of the first people I’d come out to after I realized I was gay. “Something to mark your completeness as a couple.” She clicked her glass with mine. I raised it to my lips, felt its burn in my throat. I thought it could never burn enough to take away the pain I felt inside. “You know,” Deborah said. Her eyes were full of sympathy, soft and blue and completely surrounded by the folds of her skin. “How you don’t need a baby to make you whole.”

I took another sip of my drink and nodded glumly. “It should be the opposite of planting and growing,” I said. “More like tearing something out and burning it.”

Deborah nodded. “In a sense that’s what menstruation does,” she said.

I nodded again. The day dripped down around us, a faucet you couldn’t close tight enough. Deborah touched my hand. “You could weed,” she said.

Connie and I bought a bottle of champagne, lit the candles at the kitchen table, and toasted our two-ness. “To us,” Connie said.

I touched her glass. “To us,” I echoed. We drank, not taking our eyes from each other. To look away was a Slovenian curse. We took our rituals from many cultures. The champagne filled my mouth, warmed my throat as I swallowed. Eleven days until we could start the ovulation kit again. The champagne soothed my stomach, rippled through my limbs. This time it would work. I set down my glass, worked my finger around its rim. Somewhere deep inside I knew that that this time it would work. This time, for sure, I would get pregnant.

For a while we had considered asking male friends to give us sperm. I balked at spending the money on something that might
never even work. Besides, there was so much sperm in the world. Did we really have to pay for it?

Every male friend became a potential donor. We drew up lists, tallying up our friends’ good points (appearance, intelligence, etc.), then charting out the bad. “Count him out,” one of us would say, drawing a line through a name. “High blood pressure.” “Scratch him off the list,” the other would say. “Manic depression in his family.” Our male friends began to avoid us, crossing the street when they saw us coming. I found myself weighing every man I met in terms of sperm potential. “He’s attractive,” I’d think, shaking someone’s hand. “I wonder what his sperm count is.”

Sometimes men would volunteer information, nervously, it seemed to me. “I had a vasectomy,” one friend told me, quite unsolicited. “But I’ll be glad to put in a word to somebody else for you.” Even our women friends became edgy around us. “My husband’s not on your list, is he?” Deborah asked us, her jaw set. I wasn’t sure which response would be more offensive. None of the men we knew felt comfortable just giving us sperm. “Why?” I asked Connie with annoyance. “They think nothing of spreading it all over the place, but when somebody actually wants to put it to use, they get all territorial!”

“I don’t know what the big deal is,” Patrick wrote to me. “If I weren’t HIV positive, I’d give you mine.” I couldn’t think of anyone’s sperm I’d rather have.

“What about Jesse?” Connie asked. Jesse was a gay man who worked with Connie down at human services. He had two children, both beautiful; he was HIV negative. He was intelligent and handsome. “He’d be great,” Connie said, putting down her pen.

I thought about it. He was tall and dark-haired. He had always reminded me of Connie, had the same expansiveness about him, the same love of attention. Having his genes would be like having Connie’s. Besides, he was a great father. Not that that mattered. All we wanted were his genes. “I’ll talk to him at work,” Connie said, “and see if he’ll come talk to us.”

We invited him over for lunch, sat him down in our kitchen while I served him chili and cornbread. I had spent all day making lunch. It felt like the old days of trying to impress boyfriends with my domesticity. I felt a little uncomfortable about it. It was the first time in a long time that I’d wanted something from a man. One of the best things about being a lesbian was that I felt at ease now with men, able to be friends with them, able to appreciate them for who
they were without wanting them to be something they weren’t. Now that was gone. The balance of power had shifted in their favor, and I didn’t like the feeling.

He sat at the end of our kitchen table, big and male, eating our chili. I sat at the other end toying with my spoon. We talked about the weather, about Clinton, about the situation in Bosnia, till I couldn’t stand it anymore. “What about the sperm?” I asked.

Jesse put down his spoon. “I think I’d want to be involved,” he said. “I don’t think I’d feel right about it otherwise.” We all paused for a moment, the chili cooling in our dishes. “And I don’t know if I want another child.” He looked at us, his eyes large and dark. “I need more time to think about it.”

After he left, Connie and I went for a walk. It was spring in Wellsboro. The snow was gone from the yards. Crocuses peeked out around front walks. Neighbors planted bulbs around their trees. The bite was gone from the air, replaced by a soft warmth, a gentle breeze. It hadn’t occurred to me that the baby might have a father. I wasn’t sure I wanted that. “What would it mean?” I asked Connie. “Does that mean his partner would want to be involved too?” I shivered, even in the warmth from the sun. Jesse was one thing. I could almost imagine him involved with our baby. But his partner was another. I didn’t know him at all. Besides, four people, all with equal say in the baby’s welfare, all making decisions, all having to consult each other first. It reminded me of living in cooperative households, deciding everything by consensus. It used to take hours just to determine whether the windows should be open or closed. Did I really want to take the already stressful situation of having a child and make it even more complicated?

“I can’t eat anything,” Margie said, pushing her pizza away and sitting back. She looked terrible, drawn and tired and, at four months, barely appeared to be pregnant. “The nausea just never stops.”

“Margie lost fifteen pounds,” Julie said. “The doctor threatened to put her in the hospital.”

I looked at them uneasily. This was the first time we had met Margie and Julie face to face. They were a lesbian couple from a nearby city and they’d heard we were trying to get pregnant. They had gone through six months of insemination, and now they were finally pregnant. We were sitting at a Pizza Hut. It was packed with
kids racing through the aisles, crowding the tables. I felt out of place. This was a family restaurant. We didn’t belong here, Connie and I. I fingered my pizza. It was cold. I reached over and put my hand on Connie’s thigh. She reached down and squeezed my fingers. A child pushed past me, putting its greasy hand on my arm for a moment to steady itself. I resisted the urge to shudder.

Across the table Margie was shaking Tums out of a roll. She put one hand on her chest. “You wouldn’t believe the heartburn,” she said confessionally, popping half the roll into her mouth. “I just can’t wait till this is over.” I watched her surreptitiously. I felt pity for her somehow. I would never say I couldn’t wait till my pregnancy was over. This was my first and last shot at it. We’d already agreed that Connie was going to go next. I was going to enjoy my pregnancy, treasure every day of it. I took a sip of my diet Pepsi.

“What have they got you on?” Margie said, chewing her Tums. “Clomid?”

I looked at her blankly. “Nothing,” I said. I felt uncertain, suddenly. Should I be on something?

Margie stared at me. “Nothing?” she said. Her eyes narrowed. “Huh.”

“Margie was on Clomid,” Julie said unperturbed as she poured herself another diet soda from the pitcher between us. “We had a friend doing this in Florida. She didn’t have any money to waste, so she got the doctor to give her a shot of HCG.” She reached across the table and refilled our glasses. “She got pregnant the first time.”

Margie nodded and pushed the roll of Tums back into her pocket. “Get ’em to give you an HCG shot!” I glanced at Connie. I didn’t even know what an HCG shot was. “Have they done a fertility workup on you?” Margie asked. I shook my head. She stared at me in horror. “But how do you know you’re fertile?” she asked.

“Margie had hostile mucous,” Julie said, placidly sipping her soda. “They finally did an intrauterine insemination and she got pregnant right away.”

“Get ’em to do it intrauterine,” Margie said, nodding her head. “Don’t waste any money!”

“Intrauterine?” I said weakly. “They take an extra long tube and stick it right into your uterus,” Margie said. She shuddereded vigorously. “It hurt like hell!”

“And it costs more too,” Julie said, “because you have to get the semen washed. And that’s, like, what? Another hundred dollars, hon?” she asked, turning to Margie.
I could feel the panic rising in my stomach. Maybe I wasn’t even fertile. We could be throwing all this money away. We had only so much saved up. What if we ran out and then they found out I was infertile? I pushed my plate away. Now I felt as if I might be sick.

“With an HCG shot, your egg’ll be right there,” Margie said, shaking a few more Tums out of her roll.

I could feel myself sweating. The Pizza Hut seemed incredibly warm. The press of kids was overwhelming.

“We were committed to this,” Julie said. “We didn’t know if we’d have enough money, so the last time we were at the doctor’s we stole angiocatheters in case we ran out of money and had to do it ourselves.”

I nodded, dazed. What were they going to do—hold a man hostage and force him to jerk off? I imagined us kidnapping a man and forcing Dr. Gordon to come in and test him for HIV and genetic diseases. I imagined it on the evening news, the reporters interviewing Dr. Gordon as he came out, snapping his little bag shut. “They’re two desperate women,” he’d say, shaking his head. “Two good girls gone bad.” The lesbian hostage crisis, they’d call it. We could get the lesbian avengers to come in and fight for us. Women everywhere would start forcing men to come at gunpoint. “Just empty it into this little jar,” they’d say, “and you won’t get hurt.”

Margie shook her head. “I’ve got to go,” she said, putting her hand back on her heart. Beside her, Julie swept up the check.

“We’ll get this one,” she said, pulling out her purse. “I know it’s hard when you’re going through the process.”

Margie staggered to her feet, one hand on the small of her back. She stopped for a moment and laid a hand on my arm. “Are you using Ovuquick?” she asked.

“No,” I said hesitantly. It sounded like something you might mix with milk.

“It’s what the sperm bank recommends to test for your ovulation,” Julie said, scrawling her signature across the check and tossing it down on the table. “It’s supposed to be more accurate.”

More accurate. I wondered what she meant. I mean, either you were ovulating or you weren’t. There either was a blue line or there wasn’t. Right?

“Wal-Mart will order it for you for only fifty dollars,” Julie said. “Much cheaper than anywhere else.”

“We’ll call you,” Margie said, “and see how you’re making out.”
We watched them leave. Connie exhaled sharply. “Wow,” she said.
I looked at her. My stomach ached. I wondered, not for the first time, just what we were in for.