You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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I’m Gay!!!
We paid an extra $15 that month for the privilege of making a special trip up to the airport, an hour and a half away, to pick up the sperm, because Federal Express didn’t deliver to Remote Areas on Saturday, when my LH surge had decided to appear. After we got back, the tank of semen sat in the living room, its HUMAN TISSUE sticker cheerfully plastered down its side. I sat down on the couch and stared at it. Why was I even doing this? Who wanted a fucking kid? What was the fucking point? I wondered if Connie and I should talk about it, sit down and figure out once and for all whether we really wanted to keep this up. There was no support for us. We had no legal protection by way of marriage laws. No one supported us in this—not our parents, not our society. Even my best friend, Deborah, gave me a hard time about it. “It’s really hard to write once you have a child,” she said again and again, until I had to ask her not to. “It’s hard enough to write now,” she cautioned. In front of me the tank seemed to glow with its own light. Inside were semen, frozen midswim, packed in dry ice, waiting to be brought to life. I wondered why we were doing this. I thought of our friends’ children, with their eating disorders and learning disabilities and criminal records, dropping out of school, holding up convenience stores, getting pregnant, attempting suicide. My stomach churned. My shoulders ached. The tank just sat there. It had no answers. It just was. Outside, birds fluttered through the trees, and squirrels sought nuts among the leaves. A chickadee hovered in the window for a moment, then disappeared. In front of me, the tank sat, squat and gray. I sighed and got up. I didn’t know why we were doing it. We just were. I looked back at the tank. The hell with it.

Connie and I stayed in the closet for a year after we moved in together, seemingly invisible people in the center of town. I taught classes as if I were a paper cutout, someone with no life at all. While my colleagues regularly speckled their discussions with references to their spouses and children and relationships, I built a fortress around myself. I taught courses in creative writing, where
students would read aloud terribly personal, often painful things that they had written. A moment of silence always followed. I ached to tell them something about myself, to respond to them from my heart. But empty spaces punctuated my presence. It was as if I’d led them to a cliff and then just pushed them over, without ever teaching them to fly.

Empty spaces filled my writing too. I was going to write great books. Now it seemed I had nothing to say. The computer screen blinked back at me, dark and empty. My writing hand felt leaden. I could barely make the pen move across the paper. Suddenly, everything was dangerous. What could I write about, when there were so many things I couldn’t say?

I tried the words out in my head, trying to make them fit. Gay. Lesbian. Bisexual. None felt right. “Do you think I’m gay?” I asked Connie over dinner, not for the first time.

“What do you think?” she asked me seriously. To her credit she never laughed.

I had no idea what to think. All I knew was that the word lesbian scared the shit out of me. I hadn’t told anyone but Roger about Connie. I had decided not to tell my mother. She doesn’t want to be close to me anyway, I told myself. I didn’t have to tell her anything.

Then one day I tried to show a film in class, I Heard the Mermaids Singing. The sound quality was bad; students heckled the screen when they couldn’t understand the words. By the time we got to a scene in which two women kiss, I couldn’t stand it anymore. One of the boys whistled in derision. “Whoa!” another one said, as if this might be a porno flick we were all going to watch together. With shaking hands I shut off the VCR and dismissed the class. I couldn’t look at them as they left. My heart was beating too hard.

The next day one of the students came to my office and, shutting the door behind him, sat down beside my desk. Scott was a quiet student, an excellent writer. I knew from his writing that he was bright. His eyes blazed at me across the classroom, full of the things he had to say, even though he never opened his mouth in class. “I wanted to talk to you,” he said, and then he stopped and looked down at his hands spread out across his knees. “I’m gay,” he said, looking up at me. His eyes were huge, so dark brown they were nearly black. “And when you tried to show us that movie, I guessed that you are too.” His face shone with expectation. His
lower lip quivered, just a little. It was as if he’d given me a gift, laid it out on the desk between us, waiting to see if I’d accept it.

I took a breath, the kind that expands your entire rib cage. “Yes,” I said. I cleared my throat and glanced at the door. It stayed resolutely closed. No one else was around. There was no way out of this. “I’m gay too,” I said. And there it was, out there on the table. I glanced around me tentatively. Nothing had changed. I’m gay, I repeated, to myself. I’m gay. It felt like a load had lifted from my shoulders. Of course. I was gay!

“Oh, god,” Scott said, exhaling explosively. “I’ve been here four years and I’ve never met anybody who was gay. Do you know any other students I might be able to talk to? Anybody I could get to know?”

The phone rang. When I picked it up, it was Connie, her voice a little breathless. “Hi,” she said. I could almost feel her breath through the phone curling seductively around my ear.

“Hi,” I replied, without even thinking about it, in that telephone voice reserved for lovers. I glanced at Scott. He smiled and looked away, as if to give me privacy. “I’ll call you back,” I told her. I looked at Scott after I hung up. “My lover,” I said. My lover. I was talking to my lover. He nodded. While I was talking to a student, I got a call from my lover and I didn’t have to pretend that it was anybody else. I felt light-headed from the freedom of it.

At home that night I felt reborn. I was gay. “I’m gay,” I told Connie exultantly over dinner.

She nodded. “Congratulations.”

Connie had always planned to go to grad school, to pursue a doctoral degree in anthropology. Originally, she had planned to go right after getting her bachelor’s, but getting involved with me had put that on hold.

As we took a walk down our street one day, we talked about our future. Now that I knew I was gay, it seemed like the next thing we should do was leave. Wasn’t that what gay people did, after all? Figure out they were gay and then pack up and move to San Francisco or New York or at least Northampton, Massachusetts? They didn’t stay in God’s Country.

We walked along our street, past tiny ranch homes that grew smaller and newer the farther we walked from the college. Four blocks was all it took to get to the end of any street in Mansfield. Could we really stay here, knowing we were gay? Could we even be gay in Mansfield? Not many people were, as far as I could tell.
“I don’t know,” I told Connie. “It just seems like we should go somewhere else.” I thought of all the people I knew—the judge and the minister at the fitness center, the guy who changed our oil, our insurance agent. I thought fondly of my gym, our mountain bars, these streets where I could walk at any time of day or night, of the miles and miles of countryside that lay only a few minutes away, waiting for us to plunge deep into their depths, full of trees and streams and mountains and lakes. My tenure-track union job, which paid me more than anyone else I knew was earning. I liked it here. I liked the challenge of this mountain place. Even now that I was gay. It took guts to live here, didn’t it? Not like all those women in Northampton, who were interviewed on 20/20.

“I’m not ready for grad school right now, anyway,” Connie said. “Let’s not move right away. Let’s stay here for a while.”

I thought of Patrick, back in our little private college deep in the farmlands of Ohio and how he used to have to take a deep breath every single time he went into the cafeteria. I thought of how much courage it must have taken him just to live his life. He couldn’t have hidden his sexuality. He wouldn’t have. It was who he was. And all of a sudden I understood. I understood the marches, the support groups, the activism. “Patrick just lived his life,” I said. “People harassed him all the time and he didn’t care. He lived his life anyway.”

Beside me Connie was silent. I thought of Patrick, striding into that cafeteria day after day after day, even when he must have wanted to run in the other direction. I thought of his dark blond hair and his deep brown eyes, how he’d confided to me as we stood in line how much easier it was when he didn’t have to walk in there alone. I could be like Patrick. I could walk into that cafeteria too. I didn’t have to eat alone in the safety of our dining room. Patrick had survived. I could too.

When we got home from our walk, I got out a bumper sticker I’d hidden away some time before, “Action = Life, Silence = Death,” a pink triangle on each end. I looked at the back of my truck, bare except for a fairly innocuous Amnesty International bumper sticker. I looked at Connie. The pink triangles burned my hands. I’d never seen one on any car in God’s Country. “I’m doing it,” I said. I stepped forward, pasted it on the back of my truck, then stepped back and looked at it. The pink triangles glistened in the sunlight, slightly crooked there on the back of my truck. My
stomach went a little soft. I wondered, suddenly, where this truck might take me now. Connie watched me nervously.

“What if I don’t want to come out the way you do?” she asked me. Her voice shook a little.

I put my arm around her, there in front of our house in Mansfield, in full view of our neighbors. “I don’t know,” I told her, tightening my grip around her waist. My heart beat a steady rhythm in my chest. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

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I got my period a week or so after the insemination, as the flash floods from Hurricane Chris tore through the area, submerging the fields. Hurricane Chris. What a wimpy name for a storm, I thought, not like Agnes or Camille. I went to sleep and dreamed that a crowd of people was storming the house. We tried to lock the door but because of the rain none of our doors and windows shut properly anymore. As the crowd kicked away the screens and tore the doors from their hinges, I realized there was no way we could ever make the house secure, we could never be safe from them, no matter what.