You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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She Should Keep It in the Bedroom
We have no reason to believe you’re infertile,” Dr. Gordon told me patiently over the phone. I had called him to request an infertility workup after the second insemination failed.

I hung up and paced the kitchen. Outside a light rain fell. A fog lifted off the street. A woman from up the hill sauntered down the sidewalk with her toddler. They held hands beneath their umbrella. I watched them through the window as they faded from view, a vision of what I wanted to be. Except, of course, that she belonged here. Except that she deserved a child.

“Listen,” Connie said. “We just have to trust them.” She put her hand on my arm. “Remember?” she said. “Didn’t we decide that?” I looked down at her hand. She was right. We had decided that. We had talked about this over and over. It was true—we had no reason to suspect infertility, but deep inside I was convinced. We were throwing our money away. Inside, my eggs felt like party goers at the end of an evening, cheerfully donning their coats and hats and heading out the door. “See ya!” they’d be calling, pulling the door shut behind them and putting their arms around each other on their way down the steps. Meanwhile, I was left inside an emptying room, endlessly mopping up, watching the ranks thin out, waiting for the moment when I was in there all alone, with no more eggs to party with. I knew we had to trust them. I wanted to trust them. I wanted to stop worrying about it. There was enough in this process to worry about without obsessing about infertility.

Connie moved behind me and massaged my shoulders gently. “Why don’t we set a deadline?” she said. Her hands worked my muscles. I could feel myself surrendering to them. “After three more tries we’ll insist on a fertility workup.”

I closed my eyes. For three more months we wouldn’t worry about it. I took a deep breath. “OK. It’s a deal.” I could feel something in me lift. We’d been granted a reprieve. We looked at each other for a moment, then Connie pushed back her chair. After all, our lives had other aspects besides the race for pregnancy. We had dinner to make, for example. The house needed to be cleaned. That load of whites just kept getting larger. The endless details of life kept mounting up, no matter how much our quest to become
parents kept crowding them out. The chores were all still there, just beneath the surface, threatening at any moment to break apart, really screw everything up, if we didn’t pay enough attention to them.

During the next insemination Dr. Gordon showed me the sperm under his microscope. “If you’ll look closely and just adjust this knob right here,” he said, guiding my hand, “it will bring the sperm into focus.”

I peered through the microscope, turned the knob a quarter turn, and waited patiently for the blur to clear. Margie and Julie had suggested that we ask to see the sperm, to make sure of their motility. “Beside,” Margie said. “It looks neat.” I wasn’t expecting much. To be honest, I didn’t really believe in our sperm. I didn’t really believe that anything was in that little vial, nothing capable of creating life, at any rate. I turned the knob another quarter turn and there they were, millions of tiny sperm, squirming around the petri dish like bugs that couldn’t get off their backs. “Wow,” I said aloud. I couldn’t help myself. They were so much more active than I’d imagined them. Up till now I hadn’t been entirely sure that they were moving at all.

“You’ve probably got eighty or ninety percent motility there,” Dr. Gordon said. He sounded proud, as if he were somehow responsible.

I looked back at the sperm. Some were actually moving across the slide as I watched, from one end to the other. I began to feel hopeful. If they could move like that under a bright light, think what they could do in the dark and secret caverns of my body. Millions wriggled around in circles, flopping like beached fish. “There’s a lot of them!” I said despite myself.

Dr. Gordon laughed and put his hand on my arm. “That was so innocent!” he said in a tone of pure appreciation. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye as I stepped back to let Connie take her turn. Dr. Gordon probably thought it was the first time I’d ever seen sperm. I fought the urge to set him straight. Let him think he was the first person to get sperm between my legs. What did I care? “I’ll leave the room so you can get undressed,” he said, removing himself discreetly.

Connie took my hand. “Look at them,” she said, awed. She looked back at me and squeezed my hand. “They’re really moving!”

I took off my clothes, climbed back up on the table, and spread my little paper napkin across my thighs just in time for Dr. Gordon
to come back into the room. He flipped to a new page on his clipboard and laid it on the sink, ready for his next notation. He turned to the table, pulled the stirrups out, took my feet, and carefully wedged them into place. I watched passively. I'd given up trying to move my limbs myself. Apparently once I was on this table, my body was his. He put my feet into the stirrups, he spread my knees apart, he opened up my vagina, and god knows he knew his way around my cervix. He took a syringe, aspirated the semen from the vial, pulled up his little stool, and bent toward his work. Connie stroked my hair and looked deep into my eyes. We'd given up having her do the inseminating. Who actually got the sperm inside me seemed irrelevant. I wanted Connie up with me. She took my hand and squeezed it in hers. Her touch was like a benediction. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” I whispered back. The fluorescent lights buzzed. I could feel Dr. Gordon slipping in his speculum, turning the screws. Connie’s eyes held mine as determinedly as if we had been toasting.

“There we go,” he said. I imagined him whistling, dusting off his hands, another good day’s work completed, another batch of motile sperm sent off on its expedition. He brought my knees together gently. Connie squeezed my hand.

“I’ll just leave you alone now,” he said, closing the door behind him gently. Connie bent forward and kissed my lips. Her tongue touched my teeth. I caught hold of her hand and guided it between my legs.

“Come on,” I said, pressing her hand into place. “Make me pregnant.”

It was thirty minutes before anybody told us that it was time for us to go.

Branches swollen with green leaves waved triumphantly along the bike path, leaning out to brush our faces as we walked along it holding hands. The smell of them clung to the air, reminding us that the summer was nearly over, about to surrender to the fall, the start of our second year of living together. Crickets hummed along the trail. Beside us in the creek bed turtles sunned on a fallen tree. Connie was tall and strong; her hand held mine as if she had a right to. Now and then, when someone else appeared on the path, she dropped it. Each time I felt a pain in my heart, searing my chest.
Connie glanced at me as a few kids tore past on bicycles. “I’m sorry,” she said.

I didn’t answer her at first, just watched the squirrels rustling through the leaves in the woods beside the path. Clouds arched through the air. A light breeze touched our faces. I turned to Connie. “I don’t want you to let go,” I said.

“I know,” Connie said. We walked along in silence for a while, feeling the sun burn itself into our skin. “I don’t know what to do about it,” she said.

I looked at her. Her eyes were green in the sunlight, set off by her tan. “I just wonder what you’ll do,” I said carefully, “when we have a baby with us.” A bird trilled as if carried away by its own song. “I just want to know,” I said, “if you’re going to claim us.”

We stopped for a moment. A toad hopped out in front of us, then quickly turned back, losing itself in the leaves beside the path. “I don’t know how to do this,” Connie said, reaching for my hand again. A couple appeared on the trail ahead, coming toward us. I held her hand tight. I could feel her fingers tremble as they walked past. She didn’t let go. “I want to be able to claim you,” she said.

We walked along in silence for a while. “Straight people do things in a certain order,” I said, thinking out loud. “They get married first, in a public ceremony. They declare their commitment in front of everybody. They put on rings. Then they buy a house. They get some stability. Then they have kids.”

We looked at each other for a moment. A frog sang in the creek beside us, then stopped as suddenly as it started. “There’s a process to it,” Connie said.

“There’s a process for a reason,” I said. It made sense somehow. We turned to each other at the same time. “Let’s get married.”

As a child Connie had had visions of getting married, walking down the aisle in her long white dress, her bouquet gripped firmly in her hands, leaving in her wake a diaphanous trail of white, a wash of admiring onlookers, the pews packed with family and friends. I, on the other hand, was barely eight years old when I announced at a summer camp that I would never get married or have any kids. There was a moment of silence from the other children, an instant of held breath. The camp counselor, an athletic young woman with deeply tanned skin and short blond hair, looked at me admiringly. “Good for you,” she’d said.

I lived my life on the presumption that I would never marry. I notified every boyfriend in advance that this was temporary. I
don’t need that shit, I consoled myself through grade school, through high school, through college. I’d watched my mother deferring to my father through the years. My life is more than that, I thought. I’m going to be a writer—not somebody’s wife. Only with Sadie had I had a sudden vision of a life together, as we mixed our gin and tonics in her kitchen or cooked Thanksgiving dinner for our friends. The vision was so clear that for a moment I could taste it on my tongue, mixing with the gin, acrid as communion. I gazed at it longingly, shimmering before my eyes for a moment before it disappeared.

But now, after a year of living with Connie, I knew that this was what I did want. Marriage and kids.

“I don’t want to invite my family,” Connie said, as we went through our invitation list. We were sitting at our dining room table, the cats asleep in our laps, the setting sun sending its last light shimmering through the window that overlooked our backyard. Connie’s parents were Irish Catholic, so Irish Catholic that they’d had thirteen children before her mother had had to have a hysterectomy. I could picture her uterus caving in on itself from the effort. Her parents had a long tradition of exiling their children, particularly their daughters, for transgressing the family dictates. Connie’s favorite sister had earned the first sentence by announcing at the age of eighteen, when Connie was eight, that she was a lesbian. Their parents forbade Connie to see her again. She was uneasily reclaimed into the fold when she renounced her lesbianism and married a man, was born again, and had two children. When Connie herself left home at age eighteen to join a Pentecostal church, her mother threw open the door dramatically. “If you walk out that door,” she said, “don’t ever come back.” When Connie renounced the church in favor of her lesbianism four years later, she went back home. A mutual silence assured her reception. Connie never mentioned being gay, and her parents turned a blind eye to the various girlfriends that she brought home with her for the holidays.

“OK,” I said. “Don’t invite them.” I went through my list, adding names and addresses. I was confident of my mother. She would come. I knew she would come. Finally, I was getting married, the one thing she’d always seemed to want for me. I wasn’t nearly as sure about the rest of my family. I wanted to invite them, but I didn’t know if they would come. Unlike Connie’s family, we didn’t have dramatic confrontations, only silences. My older brother
disappeared to Canada to avoid the draft in 1968 when I was eight. The waters closed above his head with barely a ripple. If there was talk in the town about it, there was none in our house.

“But I want to invite them,” Connie said, putting down her pen and looking at me.

“OK,” I said. “ Invite them.”

Connie wrote a letter to every member of her family and enclosed it with the wedding invitation. I just put my invitations in the envelopes alone and sent them off to my family with no explanation. That was my coming out—an invitation to my wedding. It reminded me, a little uneasily, of when I had first announced my vegetarianism to them when I was twenty, over Thanksgiving dinner.

I waited for my mother to mention the invitation on the phone. She didn’t. Connie waited for her parents to call and confront her. They didn’t. We regarded one another uneasily, across our silent telephone. “What now?” Connie asked.

I shrugged. I didn’t know. It felt like we’d just lobbed a ball into the other court, and our opponent had just walked away. We waited a few weeks and checked off the RSVPs as they began to come in from our friends, if not our families. Finally, I called my mother. “Are you coming to my wedding?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve been very busy lately.”

We had a hundred things to do before the ceremony. We had to order rings, arrange the flowers, and buy alcohol and paper plates and cups. We had to buy our dresses, though we’d also discussed twin tuxedos. We contacted a real estate agent at the same time and started looking at houses. We looked at houses right up until the day before the ceremony. We began to contact doctors about insemination. Everything was starting to come together.

“We want to order flowers for a—uh, ceremony that we’re having,” Connie said. I didn’t say anything, just stayed where I was, a little behind her, a little out of sight of the woman at the florist shop. A Ford pickup in the parking lot bore a bumper sticker. I could see it through the window. It said, “Buy American. Bring them to their Japa-knees.” I drew a little closer to Connie.

The woman took us over to her books and began to pull them out. “What kind of ceremony is it?” she asked, opening a book.


I waited, resisting the impulse to turn and run for the door. The
woman looked up at us and smiled. “I only meant formal or informal,” she said gently.

“Oh!” we said in unison. “Informal,” Connie said. “Formal,” I said. And all three of us laughed at the same time.

I called my mother every week or so as the wedding date approached, to ask whether she was coming. Her response was always the same.

“I haven’t had a minute to think about it,” she said. My older sister was expecting a baby, and I knew my mother wanted to be there when she gave birth. Still, I was conscious of an ache deep inside me, as if a wound had healed badly and left a lump of scar tissue that never really went away.

“Mom,” I said. I took a deep breath. I had months of therapy under my belt, months of practicing assertive wording, but it didn’t make it any easier. “I perceive you would be taking this a lot more seriously if I were marrying a man,” I said.

“Well, yes,” she snapped. “I probably would.”

I took another breath and reached deep down inside myself and screwed up all my courage. “Mom,” I said. My voice caught a little, climbing from my throat. “Mom, when you say that, I feel ... I feel ...” I started to sweat, my heart began its steady drumbeat, gradually picking up its tempo. Even after months of rehearsing my feelings it wasn’t getting any easier. “How you feel is not important,” my mother used to tell me again and again and again as I was growing up. “Other people are what’s important.” I took a deeper breath. My hand, clammy with sweat, slipped on the receiver. “Well,” I said. “I feel, I guess I feel—angry.” I closed my eyes. There. I’d said it. There it was—my anger with my mother—out on the table. I opened my eyes again and took a firmer grip on the receiver.

“Well, don’t,” my mother said.

And that was it. I stared at the telephone. One thing I’d never learned from therapy was what to do with the other person’s response. I guess that’s not the point.

My parents didn’t come to our wedding. Neither did Connie’s. I called my brother in Canada to invite him but told him almost in the same breath that I didn’t expect him to come all the way out. Connie did the same with her sister in Texas. She turned to me after hanging up the phone. “I told her I knew she wouldn’t be able to come,” she said. She looked puzzled. “Now why did I say that? I’d expect her to fly out for anybody else’s wedding.”
It was hard to take our own wedding seriously at times. Though it felt more real and more crucially important to me than any other wedding I’d ever been invited to, I simultaneously felt like apologizing for it, adding the footnote: “Of course, it isn’t really legal.” On the invitations we had put commitment ceremony, not wedding. As I looked down at our copy now, I wondered why. Why was it so hard for me to claim this wedding? And if I couldn’t fully claim it, how could I expect my family to?

My father never responded to the invitation. I never called him on it. I thought about it every day, then put it at the bottom of my list of priorities. I knew in the back of my mind that if I let it go long enough, eventually it would be too late. And, eventually, it was.

On May 15, 1993, three years after we met, we exchanged vows before seventy friends and family members at a ceremony officiated by our couples counselors. I liked the irony of it—the ’90s version of shamans and priests. Or maybe the gay and lesbian version.

Two members of my family did come. My oldest brother, Bob, drove from Ohio with one of his sons, a twenty-one-year-old man I realized I didn’t even know. I felt a swell of pride when I saw them. I did have family after all. Mrs. Kovac, the eighty-year-old who’d lived across the street while I was growing up, came on the arm of her daughter, Carol. “Your mom wanted to come,” Carol told me the moment she saw me. I turned away. I didn’t want to believe her. I was convinced my mother could have come, if only she had wanted to.

I invited nearly all my department colleagues—and all of them came. Friends came from as far away as Boston and Milwaukee. I hadn’t even realized that we had so many friends between us, but we did, nearly all a product of coming out. All seven of Connie’s brothers came, if none of her sisters, all with their wives or girlfriends. Her parents didn’t come, and in the end she only felt relief. “Mom and Dad said they disapproved,” one brother told her seriously, taking her aside just before the ceremony began, “but that they understood if the other kids wanted to go.” My emotions fought with each other. As happy as I was with the people who were there, I still felt full of grief at the absences. When we lit a candle for those friends and family who were unable to attend, I couldn’t stop myself from remarking caustically, “Of course, whose fault was that?” One of my colleagues laughed appreciatively, even as I cursed myself for allowing sarcasm to intrude on one of the most important moments of my life. Some people, after all, really hadn’t
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been able to attend. My sister, for instance, happened to be in labor throughout the ceremony, surely a valid excuse. Those friends and family who were there overflowed the house, spilled out onto the porch, and down into the yard. I wondered when it would be enough for me, when I’d just be able to be happy with what I had.

When I slid the ring on Connie’s finger, I almost expected it not to fit, though we’d tried them on a dozen times before this moment. But it slid on smoothly, and after Connie had slipped on mine we looked at each other. Her eyes shone. A breath of wind moved the wind chimes gently on the porch. The breeze ruffled the curtains, filled the room with clean spring air. Crying, we kissed each other, then turned to the rest of the room. A friend who’d spent the morning programming our new CD player hit the button, and Bonnie Raitt flooded the room: “Let’s give ’em something to talk about.” People began to congratulate us as we moved through the room. We had done it. We had gotten married. We’d come out to our families. We’d taken one huge step in the process, one huge step into the rest of our lives.

We spent hours outside posing for the family photos. I stood there on the front lawn with my arms around Connie, surrounded by her brothers and their wives and girlfriends. I felt a rush of excitement; my face burned with it. These were my in-laws now. I was one of the family. They considered me family. At least some of them did. We posed with Bob and my nephew and pulled Mrs. Kovac and Carol into the picture. I’d grown up with them. Mrs. Kovac had taught me to make bread when I was ten and had followed the progress of my writing through my life. I felt a surge of love for them, swiftly followed by a wash of grief. I’d wanted my mother to be here. I’d wanted her to witness this, this success I’d achieved with my life.

A neighbor strolled by, pretending to be out for a walk. He pointed at me. “Is she getting married?” he asked Deborah’s husband, Wayne.

“Yes,” Wayne said, smiling over at me.

As Connie joined me on the lawn, the neighbor squinted over at us. “Is she getting married too?” he asked.

Wayne hesitated. “Yes,” he said, turning quickly away.

Rain fell off and on through the day, weighing down our unsteady porch roof and trickling slowly into the gutters. “It’s good luck,” somebody said, “to have rain on your wedding day.” We stood there on our porch, toasting with champagne, laughing with
our guests, until the rain on the roof reached a pivotal weight and crashed through the rotted ceiling, drenching our family and friends.

Julie and Margie sent us down a handful of pregnancy test kits that Julie had lifted from the doctor’s office where she worked. “You don’t have to wait till your period’s due,” Margie told me enthusiastically. “We started testing the week afterward.” I repressed a surge of annoyance. I felt envious of Margie, with her baby deep inside her belly. I felt envious of their nursery, which they had showed us proudly on our last visit. I felt envious of their lives, secure in their pregnancy, about to change in ways I couldn’t fathom, couldn’t even begin to predict.

I tried to wait for Connie to come home from work before I did the test, but I couldn’t. I put my cup of urine on the sink, dropped a drop into the test circle, and waited. It was a long two minutes. I felt a quickening within me, a hope as clear as prayer. I couldn’t leave the room. I stayed right next to the test, as if my very proximity might somehow influence the results. I looked at my face in the mirror. I thought of the mothers that I saw in the supermarket every time I went. They looked different than I did somehow, older, more mature. I didn’t look like a mother. I looked like Louise. I felt like I was only just figuring out my own life. How could I think of starting someone else’s? I had shadows beneath my eyes. My face looked tired. I glanced down at the pregnancy test, the tiny circle still blank. I had thought I’d be immune to this. I never thought I’d get obsessed with this insemination process, entirely and absolutely obsessed, letting it take over my life the way it had. I thought I could stand apart from it all and watch the waters rage around me without ever getting wet myself. But I had. I lived my life for these tests of my urine—in the middle of my cycle for my ovulation, at the end for the possibility of my pregnancy. I spent my life counting down the days either to or from the first day of my period. I could no more keep my head above this process than I could if a river were roaring all around me, carrying me to the falls. I wondered for another moment, before I looked down at the test again, what other things I was going to be susceptible to, what other things I thought I’d never do that I would end up doing.

When I looked down at the test, it was negative. I closed my eyes
and let the sorrow roll through me. In its wake I felt relief. I had stood behind a screaming little boy in a shopping cart earlier that day and felt only horror. I had been spared again. It was over for another month. I dropped the test in the wastebasket. One more month under our belt. I wondered how many more we’d have to go through before the inevitable came to pass.

The rains continued, bringing us from summer right into fall with no discernible difference. It was like living on the ark. Rain fell every day, as regular as a promise. I leaned back in my chair, poured myself another glass of wine, and looked around the room at my colleagues. We were celebrating the Labor Day holiday by not laboring. We all had the day off, and Rhoda, another member of the department, had invited us over to her house for dinner. I took a sip and felt myself relax. One thing about a negative pregnancy test was that it meant that I could drink. I was always menstruating, ovulating, or counting down the days between the two. I felt the calmest after I’d gotten my period, when the press of despair was lifted and I still had a few days before it was time to start the process over again.

Rhoda came into the room with another bottle of wine and set it down on the coffee table. In the kitchen I could hear Deborah asking whether the girlfriend of one of the male professors was coming.

“I don’t know,” Rhoda called back, filling her wine glass. “I’m just afraid she’ll call and want to bring her kids.”

I set down my wine glass. I could feel something in me catch and tighten warily, as if my sentries were on post. Rhoda doesn’t want her to bring her kids, I thought. I looked at Rhoda, who was taking a sip of her wine and turning to talk to someone else. The realization hit me like a wave of nausea. When I had kids, I would lose these friends. I took a swallow of wine. It burned in my throat. I’d rather have kids, I thought, determinedly, but the realization clung to me uneasily. What was this going to mean? Things would change that I couldn’t possibly foresee. There would be no way to plan for this. Rhoda smiled over at me. “More wine?”

I gave her my glass, watched her as she filled it, wondered when to tell her that it would be enough.