The Guys at the Sporting Goods Store Think You’re the Greatest
People are just bored,” Roger said of the letters to the editor. “When spring comes, they’ll get busy in their gardens and stop writing letters.” He had stopped by my office to see how I was doing. I told him I was fine. It was what I told everyone, as if anything other than that would be unacceptable, open me up to something worse than anonymous phone calls and community meetings. Everyone knew where we lived. The paper had published a full-page picture of us walking our dog up Pearl Street. I was conscious of that, all the time. He turned to go, then stopped at the door. “By the way,” he said, glancing back at me. “The guys at the sporting goods store think you’re the greatest.”

Spring, which didn’t come to our part of Pennsylvania till early May, brought with it a sense of softness. Blocks of snow broke up as the temperatures rose, melted beneath the sun, and disappeared down the streets in muddy rivers. Grass began to stretch tentatively toward the light. People emerged from their houses slowly, hesitantly, like bears taking their first halting steps after months of hibernation. Someone left a batch of hot cross buns in our mailbox for Easter, along with a photocopy of the relevant Bible passage, “He has risen,” highlighted in yellow. I made myself eat them, one after the other, after testing a bite on the dog to check for poison. I choked down every bite while standing on my front porch in full view of every car that went by, until my stomach bulged from the effort. Rebirth was on everyone’s mind. Christ had risen. So could we. I was standing across the street chatting with our neighbor Leon, when he cleared his throat and looked at me. “Looks like you’ll be wanting to paint soon,” he said, indicating our house.

“Really?” I replied, glancing over at it. The yellow shone in the spring sunlight, the five-foot freedom flag on the front porch waving gently in the wind. Looking at it, my heart beat a little faster. Our house. Our little yellow house sparkling in the sun. Our refuge from the world. Paint it? Why would we need to paint it?

“Look up above the porch roof,” Leon said, gesturing at it. His hand was wrinkled, covered with age spots. I wondered how he’d gotten to be so open-minded, talking to me out in the street like
this, in full view of everyone, as if the past few months of warfare hadn’t even existed. We never said anything about it, but he and Effie had continued to invite us over for drinks, if anything, even more than before.

I looked at the house dubiously. It did look like the paint was peeling, now that he mentioned it. From over here in front of his house, in fact, it looked pretty bad. “Mrs. Dolliver painted a side a year,” Leon told me. “Looks like this side’s ready.”

“Huh,” I said. A truck barreled past, sending a spray of slush up over the sidewalk. We both took a step back to avoid it. “When do you think we need to paint it?” I asked.

Leon looked at me. His eyes were dark, slightly watery with age. “Yesterday,” he said, not breaking my gaze.

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Ernest Henninger strode into the conference room of his offices on Main Street and shook our hands in greeting. He looked like an old-time Protestant minister, slightly frightening, standing there at the head of his boardroom table with his wire-rimmed glasses, solid and austere. I felt a tightening in my throat. He’s not a minister, I reminded myself fiercely. He’s an accountant. He doesn’t care about our lives. All he’s going to do is figure out our tax return. That’s all. We had spent all the money we had, and then some, buying this house. We needed expert assistance, to get as much money back as possible.

Connie stood beside me with her hands folded, not looking at me. Around us the wood paneling emitted the smell of furniture polish. A furrow appeared in the accountant’s brow as he glanced at us, and I felt my stomach churn. We had decided to go to an accountant this time, see if we could file our return jointly. The house was in both our names; we had joint checking and savings accounts. All the bills were in both our names. We were creating a paper trail. If we couldn’t marry legally, we could do everything else together to show our commitment. Someday, when we got around to it, we were going to hyphenate our names. We had made our decision to file jointly with determination, but when the time came to go to the accountant for this appointment, I found myself quailing in fear. “I don’t have time for this meeting today,” I told Connie irritably as we drove to his office.

Connie looked over at me. “When you say that, I perceive you
think it’s my fault we had to do this today,” she said. Her voice had an edge in it like a tire iron. “And that pisses me off.”

I forced myself to mirror her, to respond to her reasonably, but inside I was in turmoil. My stomach churned. Everything—every interaction with other people, bank tellers, doctors, accountants—had become a coming out experience, and I was tired of it. Just once I wanted to be able to do something as simple as meet with an accountant and not have it require a monumental act of courage. Just once I wanted to be a normal person, without having to worry about a reaction to my very existence.

Henninger nodded at us, and we all sat down. I took a deep breath. “We want to see about doing a joint tax return,” I said. “And we want to get an idea of our refund.”

He nodded and glanced through our files. “Let me just go through this,” he said, reaching for his calculator. He tapped out the numbers, and I sat back feeling relieved. It looked like it might be all right. I glanced at Connie across the table. She smiled at me.

Henninger scanned the papers in his hands. “According to this,” he said, “you should have a refund of about eighteen hundred dollars.”

I refrained from kicking Connie under the table. Eighteen hundred dollars! Who cared about filing jointly? We could paint the house, finally recover our standing in the community. Connie and I looked at each other at the same moment. Or we could use it to buy sperm.

I was home from school one day when the phone rang. It was Karen Barber, the editor of Alyson Publications, a small gay and lesbian press in Boston. My first novel, Amnesty, had been accepted for publication. My heart pounded. “We can give you a three thousand dollar advance,” Karen said offhandedly.

My mouth went dry. Somebody was going to publish my book and give me money! My palms began to sweat; the receiver slipped in my hand. I forced myself to breathe evenly. Bargain, I told myself. Don’t just leap at the first offer. Besides, I knew my fellow graduates of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where I’d attained my master of fine arts, routinely received advances of $20,000 or more. Of course, I had always had trouble giving my stories away. Be strong, I told myself. You’re worth it. “Three
thousand dollars,” I said, fighting for a tone of nonchalance. “I don’t know . . .”

“To be honest,” Karen said, “that’s a pretty good advance.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll take it.”

We were ready to go. Between the tax return and the advance for the novel, we had enough money for nearly a year’s worth of insemination. It had all come together. It was going to happen, and now I felt as if I might throw up. Suddenly, insemination felt like a sentence, a looming reality as stark as a firing squad. I was going to be inseminated. There was no getting around it anymore. After years of discussion, months of active pursuit, we were going to begin the process.

“How’s the rewriting coming?” Connie asked me.

I had only to do the revisions the editor had asked for, and they’d mail us the check. “It’s not,” I said. The truth was, I couldn’t do it. Every time I sat down at my computer, my fingers froze. My brain emptied out. As soon as this is done, I’d tell myself, we can start the insemination. And then I’d stare at the keys. I couldn’t write a word.

Connie smiled at me. She laid her hand on mine. It felt soft and warm, the skin still smooth, untouched by age. I clutched at it, as if it might save me. “We don’t have to do this,” she said.

I looked at her. “I know,” I said. I felt as if I were slipping away. I squeezed her hand tighter. “But I want to.”

Connie eased her fingers from my grip, lifted my chin in her hand, and looked into my eyes. “Let’s take a trip,” she said. “When you’ve got the revisions done, let’s just take a drive, get out of town.”

“But what about painting the house?” I asked her.

“Screw the house.” We looked at each other for a moment. “Where do you want to go?”

I studied her, sitting there beside me, soft and warm in the light from our kitchen window. I thought of the past few months of letters to the editor, of summoning up all my courage every time I went into town. “San Francisco,” I said. “Somewhere where there’s lots of gay people.”

When I finished the revisions, I took the manuscript down to the post office and mailed it off. It didn’t feel nearly as momentous as I once thought it would. It didn’t feel like the culmination of a life-
time of wanting to have a book published. Instead, it just felt like something I had done, like sanding down a piece of wood, staining it deep and rich and dark, then nailing it up somewhere. I got money back, an even trade. It felt like the most honest work that I had ever done. “So when do we leave?” I asked Connie.

We traded in the truck for a new Toyota, a regular car with four doors and a back seat, ready for an infant carrier. We got a joint personal loan from the credit union and paid off all our credit card debts. We put the tax return and the first third of the advance in our joint savings account. We stood in our front yard surrounded by our flowering trees and looked up at our house, its paint job fleeing off into the wind. It figured that Mrs. Dolliver had started with the damned front side. If the back of the house was peeling, nobody would know. A soft breeze ruffled our hair and sent the stripes of our freedom flag shimmering. “Let’s go,” Connie said.

We made it nearly to Chicago on the first day, crossing the rest of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and as much of Illinois as we could. We drove with alacrity. We spent the first night in a Day’s Inn on the highway, the second in Avoca, Iowa, where we made love in a tiny little hotel whose concierges were sure they had seen me before. The phone book was full of Blums. I wondered briefly whether I had some family here, if some relatives had stopped off here after getting off the boat from Germany. We walked hand in hand beneath the elm trees, down streets thick with azalea, past huge white houses with porches wrapping all the way around. The breeze touched our faces, smoothed back our hair. “What a beautiful little town!” I exclaimed to Connie. “We could live here!” I added, forgetting for a moment that we already lived in a beautiful small town and knew its limitations.

We drove through Nebraska as fast as we could, stopping the next night in Laramie, Wyoming. We could live here too, I thought as we drove into town; I was picturing a place where people rode down the streets on horseback, hitching up outside the drugstore. “Dykes!” a carload of teenagers, two boys and two girls, screamed at us through their open car windows as we carried our suitcases up the rickety stairs to our one-star AAA motel room. I felt a catch in my chest. Connie froze beside me. I measured the distance between us and the door to our room, between us and the street, and wondered if we could get inside in time. It’s just like Wellsboro, I thought. It’s just like fucking Wellsboro. Worse, because I had no turf established here, no property, no job, no claims of
ownership, nothing to protect me, to show that I was just like everybody else.

Connie looked at me. Her eyes were huge. “Can we just keep going?” she asked softly.

I shook my head. “Let’s just get inside,” I said. We locked the door behind us and drew the curtains. “Let’s just go to sleep,” I said, “and get up early.”

When we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco, I knew without a doubt that we could indeed live here. We spent our days walking the streets, our nights in the Mission District, sipping beer at lesbian bars and watching women play pool. We drank the best coffee we had ever had in our lives. We fantasized about living in San Francisco, in a community of gay and lesbian people, raising our children with like-minded neighbors in a city so open that it even listed the Castro District in its tourist information. “We’d be happy here,” I said, imagining our baby starting off to a school where she wouldn’t be stigmatized for having two lesbian parents.

“We’re happy in Wellsboro, aren’t we?” Connie asked me.

I thought about it. We had been. But were we still? I thought of the image I had had of Wellsboro as a friendly, open-armed town, waving us in off the highway, turning down our bedsheets for us, tucking us in. Now I pictured Wellsboro standing at the door, her arms across her chest and her lips pursed, shaking her head. “I don’t know,” I said. “Can we really raise a child there?”

“I don’t know,” Connie said. We walked along in silence for a while, sipping our coffee, thick and hot in our takeout containers.

“We could raise one here,” I said.

Connie nodded. “I know.”

We were barely out of San Francisco when we passed a succession of white wooden crosses staggering up a hillside. “Repent and Be Saved!” they proclaimed, the black lettering stark against the white. I shuddered in fear. They were the same crosses that we had on our hillsides at home. “What is this?” I asked Connie. “Isn’t there anywhere we can go and be free of this?”

Connie looked at me. “No,” she said. “There isn’t.”

Only the Castro District, I thought, thinking longingly of the good coffee that we’d just left behind. Only San Francisco. The rest of the country was a sweep of Christians, passing referenda forbidding us even to meet with each other in public meeting rooms. Repent and be saved. I could feel my heart beat, ragged in my chest. We had left our safe place. We were like mice now, loose on
the jungle floor, at the mercy of animals much more powerful than we were.

Outside Fresno we swerved around a blond suntanned boy skateboarding unafraid into traffic, stooping down to swoop past our car and over into the next lane. I watched him go with awe. His image stayed with me, his thin, strong body surfing through the traffic with absolute confidence, doing things I would be afraid to do. That was the kind of kid I wanted to raise, one that would be absolutely without fear. I wondered if I could do that in Wellsboro.

We kept driving east, crossing the Mojave Desert for hours. A billboard of Anita Bryant welcomed us into Missouri. “Still America’s Sweetheart,” it said. Her face, cracked with age, smiled at us. She gestured at us with her glass of orange juice, her hair swept back in its fifties swoop, high off her forehead. “Still!” I said, gunning the accelerator. “Do they mean since she crucified gay people in the seventies?” I suddenly remembered my mother standing with a group of women after a church service. “Anita Bryant’s a real hero,” she’d said.

“Drive faster,” Connie urged me, taking a sip of coffee out of her McDonald’s container and wincing. She eyed the speedometer. “Let’s get out of here.”

We had planned to stop in Indianapolis for the night, but every hotel room was filled. “What’s going on?” I asked a hotel clerk at the fifth place we stopped.

“It’s a revival,” she told me, her eyes shining. “There’s fifty thousand people in town!”

Connie was waiting for me out in the car. “What is it?” she asked.

I got in and slammed the door behind me. “A revival,” I told her. It just figures, I thought, starting the engine. We drive all the way across the country to find freedom and get bumped by an evangelist.

Connie just stared. “You’re kidding,” she said. She shook her head. “I can’t believe it.” We stopped at motel after motel. Every room was taken.

“How can there be so many Christians?” I asked Connie.

“The world is full of them,” she said. She turned on the radio. “The homosexuals are taking over,” the voice said, “with their secret agenda. Their sinful lifestyle is an abomination to the Lord.”

“What the fuck is this?” I asked. We both stared at the radio. “It’s him,” Connie said. “The evangelist.”
His voice cracked with feeling: “We must stop the homosexuals.” The car filled with noise. “Is that static?” I said.

“No,” Connie said. We both listened for a moment longer. “It’s applause.” We drove 900 miles that day. We drove until I could no longer tell the difference between the brake and the accelerator. We didn’t find a room until we hit Dayton, Ohio.

We collapsed on the bed, not even taking off our clothes. I lay with my eyes closed, my brain pulsing. Wellsboro is everywhere, slamming the door in our faces in every town across America, I thought. I pulled the pillow over my head, trying to shut off my mind. We’ll never get away from it. We’d have to live in a gay ghetto to ever get away from this. That wasn’t what I wanted. Was it?

It was mid-June when we got back home. The azalea and rhododendron were past their prime, their blossoms rotting into the soil around their roots. The sun was high in the sky. The peeling paint glistened beneath it. We carried our suitcases back into the house and unpacked our things. “We’re home,” I said. I looked around at our things, solid and familiar. We were home. We were back in the place we lived. The cats rubbed against our ankles, demanding their food. I opened a beer, handed it to Connie, and opened another for myself. I caressed its neck for a moment, feeling its chill. We were home. We were home, and we were going to have a baby.

I took a sip of beer and glanced around the house. Could we really have a baby here? I wondered. I thought back on our journey across the country, one conservative town after another, large and small. I took another sip. Could we have one anywhere?

Connie turned to me and took my hand in hers. “We’re home,” she echoed, looking so deep into my eyes I could feel my stomach lurch. A little thrill started up around the base of my spine. “Let’s go upstairs,” she said.

I drove past the university provost’s house the next day on my way to Mansfield. I glanced up at it. It was covered with peeling paint. I felt vindicated. Forget the paint job, I thought. We’re having a baby. I tightened my grip on the wheel. One way or the other we were having a baby. Money, I sensed, was the least of our problems.
“OK,” I said, turning from the class to the board and picking up a piece of chalk. GAY PEOPLE, I wrote on the board. I turned back to them. “Who do you know?” I asked.

The class looked startled. “Oh, I don’t mean personally,” I said, smiling at them. “You don’t have to out your roommates or anything.” A few people exhaled, apparently in relief. “I mean, historical figures,” I continued. “Or famous people now.”

It was the first night of “Gay and Lesbian Literature,” the first time such a course had ever been taught on this campus. I felt electric, like I could do anything. I’d just been inseminated for the third time, and I knew this time it would take.

I was actually teaching this course. I’d proposed it the previous spring, and the moment it appeared in the course schedule four students had signed a letter of protest to the editor of the student newspaper. “This course shouldn’t be taught just because of one person’s sexual preference,” the students wrote. “She should keep it in the bedroom.” Thanks to the ensuing controversy, the class filled up on the first day of registration. Now, as I faced the roomful of earnest students, I felt a twinge of excitement. I was doing it. I was teaching right from who I was, just the way I wanted to. Outside, campus police patrolled the halls. The department chair hadn’t wanted me to teach the class at night, though he never said why. Nor did I ask him. It was as if we had silently agreed that not voicing something would negate its existence. Several students had confessed to me that they’d been a little afraid to come to class, let alone carry the books around. But here they were, their notebooks open and their pens poised, ready to learn about gay and lesbian literature. It was the closest I’d come to feeling like a revolutionary since I’d left organizing.

One student, an English major, raised his hand tentatively. “Oscar Wilde,” he said.

“Audre Lorde,” said another.

The class began to loosen up. I could see their postures relax. A few took off their coats, as if they thought they just might stay a while. “Kurt Cobain was bi,” somebody said.

“The bassist for the Breeders,” somebody else said. “What’s her name?”

We went on and on, until the board was filled with names. I surveyed them with satisfaction. I was in good company. I put down my chalk and faced the class. “I’m a lesbian too,” I told them. My heart gave its familiar heightened skip, as if it might flee my chest
in another moment. I took a deep breath. “And I have to tell you that when I say that I feel afraid. I feel afraid every time I tell somebody I’m gay.”

The class surveyed me cautiously. I turned back to the board and drew a triangle in pink chalk. “OK,” I said. “Who can tell me what that means?”

Nobody could. I felt a tiny burst of pride. If anybody needed a class like this one, it was the students on this campus. I had full confidence in them. All they had to do was learn more about gays and lesbians—then they would accept us. It was all about education. I inhaled deeply. My body felt tense with excitement. I was doing it. Finally, I was teaching a course that had some relevance to me.

I was sitting at the desk in my office, shortly after the failure of the third insemination, struggling to make sense of the tenure application I was expected to complete this semester, when a colleague, a senior professor who’d been teaching here for many more years than I had, knocked at the door.

“I just want to take issue with the quote you have up on your door,” he said, pointing to Albert Einstein’s words: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” I lay my application paperwork aside and cursed my open door. Why hadn’t I closed it when I came in here? “The problem,” my colleague said, pausing for emphasis, “is that the kind of students we have here won’t understand what it means.” He gazed at me.

I could feel a surge of anger as he left. Outside, the rain fell in torrents. It was so cold I was already wearing a sweater, and it was only the middle of September. I went back to my tenure application. Surely, they didn’t mean that I had to include a syllabus and handouts for every single class I’d taught in the last six years. Our regular course load was four classes each semester, after all. I only had an hour or so before the gay and lesbian literature class—I needed to put this stuff away and start preparing. I still had a stack of papers to grade. I picked one up.

“I don’t see why gay people always have to talk about it,” was the first sentence I read. I put the paper back down, took off my glasses, and rubbed my eyes. I felt that familiar irritability, like the hair was rising all along the back of my neck. I’d spotted a little blood yesterday, but so far today there’d been nothing on my tampon. My stomach felt like it was full of glass. I glanced out the win-
dow. Rain was sliding down the glass, obscuring everything else. It was like living in a submarine. I put my glasses back on and picked up another paper just in time to hear a student knock at the door.

“Excuse me,” the student said. She was a lesbian; I knew that from the grapevine. I’d read her paper yesterday. She’d written that she didn’t understand what difference your sexuality made. I wondered what reality she lived in. She stood before my desk now, her hair in her face and her shoulders slumped. “You said we could ask you for help if we wanted to form a support group,” she said.

I did say that. I dimly remembered saying it last week, when I’d had more energy. Last week, when I could imagine the sperm still coursing through my body like suckerfish in earnest pursuit of my beckoning egg; last week, when I could still believe, despite the odds, that I might, just might, be pregnant. Last week I’d felt like Joan of Arc, floating about the campus eagerly dispensing of myself wherever needed. This week I couldn’t imagine caring less. “Oh,” I said masterfully, laying aside my student papers yet again. “Well.” I longed to tell her something important, something that would make her stand up straight and throw her hair back off her face, or, better yet, clipper it all off, but when I reached deep down inside myself, I couldn’t muster up anything of any worth. “Really, all you’d have to do would be put up signs all over campus,” I said, “with the time and date of the meeting.”

She surveyed me through her hair. “What?”

I fought the urge to shake her. “You know,” I said. “Just pick a time and day when you’d want to meet and then post signs all around.” I could see the confusion passing across her face like the shadow from the wing of some huge bird.

“You lost me,” she said. “What am I supposed to do?”

I put down my pen. Exhaustion spread through me like a growing wind. Organize your own fucking support group, I wanted to scream. Just leave me alone! I closed my eyes for a moment. Guilt flooded me, filling my brain. What was the matter with me? I did want to be a role model, didn’t I? My tenure application lay accusingly on my desk next to my stack of student papers, waiting for me to provide appropriate documentation for every committee I’d been on in the last twelve semesters. There were so many things I hadn’t done. I’d wanted to organize a caucus of the lesbian faculty from all the campuses of the state university system, but I’d lost the energy to do it. A women’s conference was coming up, but I had to get this tenure stuff in and be inseminated again at the same time.
There just wasn’t enough time in my life to get it all done. I opened my eyes and looked back at my student. She was gnawing on one of her fingernails. “Look,” I said. “Can we talk about this after class?”

That night I showed the class a movie by Harvey Fierstein, *Torch Song Trilogy*. I’d shown it before in other classes; I knew how to lead discussion of it. I could hear myself talking in patient measured tones, as if someone else was speaking. All along I worried that at any minute some demon would rise from my throat and choke somebody. A student raised her hand. “It’s so great when straight actors play gay characters,” she said. “Especially men—it must be so hard on them!”

Why? I wanted to shout. Why would it be any harder than it would be to play a straight character? I knew that I should say it aloud, that I should lead an intelligent discussion of this issue and all its implications, but inside I felt too personally insulted to be able to. I couldn’t imagine myself saying anything more enlightened than “You moron.” Instead, I dismissed the class and walked out to my car alone, the rain cold and persistent around my neck. So many of the papers I’d just read had hurt my feelings. Maintaining my persona as the professor of a literature class was harder than I had expected because, as a lesbian, I took the homophobic comments so personally. It might be all about education, but did I have to be the one who did the educating? I pulled open the door of my car. The rain beat down against the hood as I started the engine. I’m not the person I thought I was, I thought dully, maneuvering the car out onto the road. I’m not the person I wanted to be. The rain pelted the car. The sound of it lulled me. All I had to do right now was drive back home. I could feel the panic in my chest, as if everything were breaking up inside me. I was tired of people’s need. All I wanted was to be left alone. All I wanted was to find a space inside myself and crawl inside and just die in there, just rest.

“So the letters to the editor have really slacked off, haven’t they?” a male colleague asked me one afternoon when he ran into me on the stairs a week or so after the fourth insemination.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, unimpressed. It was true. Now they appeared only occasionally, usually after a particularly heavy rain. My colleague glanced at me.
“You know,” he said slowly, stroking his beard, “I think everybody’s really OK with it.” He nodded at me cheerfully. “The vet came out to see our dog the other night, and he brought his boyfriend, and we didn’t say anything about it and neither did he.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, looking for an exit. I was tired of this, of every moment offering a reason to make a stand.

“I really think everything would be OK if we all just practiced live and let live,” he said. “Why make such a fuss about it?” I felt behind me for the door to the stairwell. It must be here somewhere. “You know,” he said. “I don’t go around saying I’m heterosexual all the time.”

I could feel something snap inside me. How dare he presume any connection between us? How dare he say everybody was OK about gay people. “Oh, really?” I said carefully. I looked pointedly at his hand. “Do you wear a wedding ring?” I asked him. He looked startled and took an almost imperceptible step backward. I barreled on, unable to stop myself. “Do you ever mention your wife in a public setting?” I said. “Do you ever hold her hand while crossing the street?” I took a step closer to him. “Well?” I said. “Is she covered under your insurance policy?”

“Well, gee,” my colleague said, feeling behind him for the door. “I guess I never thought of it like that.”

“No,” I said grimly. “I guess not.” I felt as if a cobra were coiled up inside me, and at any moment she might strike out with her fangs bared, and I’d have no control over her. Dumbly, I watched him leave. My body ached. My legs felt drained of energy.

And then it hit me. Just like that. A body blow, right to the stomach. I had PMS. There was no way around it. I was going to get my period, for the fourth time since we’d begun insemination. How long was I going to bang my head against the wall before I gave it up?

The flashing lights behind me sent my heart into overdrive. I didn’t have to watch for cops quite so vigilantly now that I was an adult in my thirties and was working diligently to get all those past speeding violations off my record. But the sight of a cop still filled me with terror every time. It was beyond traffic tickets. Ever since my days in the neighborhoods, organizing sit-ins and demonstrations, the sight of those flashing lights was enough to make me want to run. I’d been arrested more than once, and I knew it had little to
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do with breaking any law. I pulled over to the side of the road and waited for the officer to make it to my window. I could see him in my rearview mirror. He got out slowly, hitching up his belt as he glared around and shifted his gum from one side of his mouth to the other. I didn’t think I had been speeding. I lunged for the glove box automatically, dug out for my papers, rooted around in my wallet for my driver’s license. My hands felt clammy. My fingers shook a little. I swallowed hard.

“License and registration, ma’am,” he said, peering into my car. I could see myself reflected in his sunglasses.

“Was I going too fast?” I asked, handing him my documentation. I remembered that my straight female students told me they often got off by looking sweet. My reflection glared at me, my hair clippered so short I looked like a convict. There was no point in my even trying to look sweet.

The cop inspected my registration and held my license up to the light as if checking for its authenticity. “No,” he said, “not really.” My stomach clenched. He pulled his ticket pad out of his back pocket and scrawled something on the top sheet and tore it off. “I’m giving you a warning,” he said. “You weren’t going fast enough for a ticket.” He stuffed the paper in my hand and nodded at me. “You have a good day now,” he said. “We’ll be seeing you.”

I watched in the rearview mirror as he strode off, his long-legged swagger eating up the road between our cars. “We’ll be seeing you.” I put the car in gear and pulled out carefully, conscious of his car still parked there, as if waiting to catch me again the next time. Anger flushed my skin. Son of a bitch. In the months after the article came out, I’d been pulled over three times. “Thought your inspection sticker was overdue,” one commented, “but I see now it’s not.” Another took his time circling the truck, checking every inch of it, until I was noticeably late for class. “Thought your vehicle might match a description of a hit-and-run,” he said, working his way around to my window. He squinted up at the sun, then back at me. “Course, that automobile had New York plates,” he drawled, taking an easy look around the interior of my car. “And it was a different color.” He tipped his hat to me, a gesture these guys must have picked up from an old Clint Eastwood movie. “You have a nice day, now.”

Oh, sure, I thought grimly, now back on Route 6. The fear was gone. In its place was a hot quick anger. “Lose the Grateful Dead sticker,” one of my students had told me. “And that ‘Thelma and
Louise Live’ sticker,” another told me, shaking his head. “That’s got to go.” I glanced at the speedometer and slowed down a little. “Have a nice day.” My heart pounded. I tried to draw a breath, but I couldn’t get the air into my lungs. What was I doing? What the hell did I think I was doing?

The next morning I poured myself a cup of coffee and opened up the Star-Gazette. The same reporter who had done the feature story on us earlier had written an article about the forthcoming publication of my novel. I leafed through the local section looking for it. Maybe that would make me feel better. Some aspect of my life was still functioning, after all. There I was in Section B, smiling earnestly at the camera, looking like I didn’t have a care in the world. Nobody would ever know how many rolls of film Connie and I had gone through to get that shot. I read through the article eagerly. Information about the publisher, information about me. I took another swallow of coffee. There I was—a real writer—discussing her first novel. Then came an interview with the owner of the nearest bookstore, in Corning, New York. He said his store wouldn’t be carrying my novel, as there was no interest in “that” in this area. I put the newspaper down and stared into my coffee. All my life I had dreamed of walking into a bookstore and seeing my book on the shelves. Now it wasn’t going to happen. At least not in the place where I lived. I read through the article again. Grief tore at my chest. What did he mean, I wondered, by “that”? Did he mean the things I was writing about—loss and grief and hope and pain? I put the paper down again. I knew what he meant. I knew exactly what he meant. And deep down I feared that there wouldn’t be any interest in it in any area, not just this one.

I poured out the rest of my coffee. Fog clung to the streetlamps. The cold gripped my bones. I made myself a pot of tea and climbed back into bed and buried myself in the quilts. My period came with a vengeance, rolling out of me in waves, as if to say, “See? You thought you could plant a baby in here. Well—I’m tougher than that!” I wrote in my journal for hours. I never did make it in to work that day. It was as if I were already distancing myself from my job, making room for new priorities. I watered the plants, made a batch of muffins, read a novel, went to the gym. Slowly, I could feel myself growing stronger. I walked back from the gym and let the rain wash over me. I could do this. I could live my life. I could teach my classes and write my books and love Connie and apply for tenure and keep on living my life. I inhaled deeply. The scent of the rain wound its
way through my nostrils, full of dirt and earth and growing things. Inside, my body sloughed off old tissue, prepared itself for new beginnings. I picked up my pace. I could do this. I could keep on doing this.

“Look at this,” one of my gay students told me, slapping a flier down on my desk. I shoved my tenure application aside and picked it up. It was an advertisement for a romantic getaway weekend sponsored by the Christian radio station and the Comfort Inn—for traditional married couples only. I felt a flush of anger and then, just as quickly, a sense of exhaustion. I was too tired to fight these battles anymore. I put the paper down and looked at him.

“Well?” he said. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked at him harder. “You could try entering,” I said, “and see what happened.”

He stared at me. “Oh, no,” he said. “Not me.”

I looked back at the paper and sighed. Of course, not him. I was the one who should do something, but inside I could feel myself sagging. I just didn’t have it in me anymore. I glanced at my watch. Only a half hour until my next class. I still had to prepare. I was just going to have to pick and choose my battles, that was all. And this just wasn’t going to be one of them.

“Let’s try a different guy this time,” Connie said. “The last one had two chances. It’s time for a change.” We got out the sperm catalogue and pored through the information again, even though we nearly had it memorized by now. “What about the Jewish doctor?”

I shook my head. “He doesn’t have proven fertility,” I said. A shame, I thought. I looked at the sheets more closely. No. 9164 kept catching my attention, but I kept pushing it away. He was Jewish, but he was also German, and I was determined not to curse my child with any more German heritage than was absolutely necessary. My own was enough, I thought. Enough anal attention to detail. Enough sense of dread and persecution. More than enough. My mother had called me after I’d sent her a copy of the article about us. “Your father doesn’t think it’s a good idea for you to have a baby,” she said. I’d flushed with anger. My father, who’d never taken an interest in anything I’d done. How dare he? I scanned
back through the sheets again. No more German blood. I had to
dilute my father’s heritage. But 9164 stood out so starkly it might
have been printed in different colored ink.

“It’s the numbers of my birth year,” Connie said. “1964.”

I pushed the papers toward Connie. She re-read his donor
information.

“He’s a med student,” she said. She looked at me. “I say we go
with him.”

I nodded. The German Jewish med student it was. It felt a little
like playing Russian roulette, this choosing of sperm. Who knew
what chamber might come up?

My hormone surge finally showed up on the fourteenth day of
my cycle. We’d already ordered the sperm, already set up the
doctor’s appointment. The weekend had been approaching, and
we’d either had to take the chance that I would ovulate eventually
or risk missing another cycle. Sometimes I felt like the whole
world was conspiring against my getting pregnant—faulty ovula-
tion kits, inaccessible doctors, hostile receptionists, inadequate
money supply, sperm banks that didn’t ship on Saturday, an LH
surge that always seemed to show up over the weekend or on hol-
days (except when it didn’t show at all). I sat and sipped my decaf
coffee and smoothed open my newspaper and thought that this
month I didn’t want a baby at all. Why would I want kids? My God,
I had no time and energy now—why would I want to throw kids
into the equation?

I put down my newspaper and glanced out the window. The day
was gray and rainy, the way that all the days this fall had been,
somehow beautiful, a dark, aching day full of clouds and fog that
gave way to blue in the points of higher elevation along the road I
took to work. The air was full of a cold dampness. Connie sat down
at the table with me and picked up a piece of the paper. Anxiety
tore at my gut. What would a child do to the order of our lives? I
glanced at the clock. At two o’clock we would be inseminated. I
wondered if I was especially afraid because this was the fifth time.
The odds of conception were getting better every month. Maybe
this time it would actually work.

I glanced around our clean kitchen, our thriving ivies in the win-
dows, our coffee brewing on the counter.

A part of me hoped it wouldn’t.
Connie glanced up at me and smiled. She touched my hand for a moment. Her fingers were warm and gentle, soft as rain. She went back to her paper.

I wondered whether I was crazy. This wasn’t exactly an accident. We were going about this with cold calculation, counting days and testing urine, using speculums and angiocaths, swabbing off mucous to give the sperm a clearer path, aspirating excess semen in an effort to cram in every last expensive drop of the stuff, lying in wait for half an hour with my hips elevated to ensure the sperm had the proper start. No one could say we hadn’t asked for this. No one was holding a gun to our heads. Connie tightened her hand around mine.

“Are we crazy?” I asked her. “What are we doing this for?” I took another sip of decaf. “I don’t think I can stand much more of this stress.”

Connie nodded and took another sip of her coffee. “I know,” she said. “No wonder it usually happens through sex. That’s the only way people can get over the anxiety.”

Of course, I thought. “If everybody had to do it the way we’re doing it, how many people would?” I looked at Connie. “We’d be a world populated by lesbians.”

“Yeah,” she said, pushing back her chair to retrieve the coffeepot. “Only two women could do it.”

I wondered how many women were dissuaded by this and gave it up before they ever got pregnant. For every lesbian who actually conceived a child, there must have been a hundred who wanted to.

Connie poured the rest of her coffee into a travel cup. “We’d better get going,” she said, glancing over at me. She smiled. “It’ll be OK.”

I drained my cup. I wished I could be that sure. I really wished I could.

The first insemination of the month went smoothly. For the first time I felt cramps as the semen entered my body. Dr. Gordon informed us that that was a good sign. The uterus was contracting because of the prostaglandin to pull the semen upward. I didn’t understand it—I mean, I’d never had cramps during sex, but I was willing to accept anything that could be construed as a good sign. As I prepared for the second insemination the following morning, I felt a kind of peace settle over me, like anything was possible, like I would write another novel, grow a child in my belly, make soup and bread and spend long hours reading, make fires in the fire-
place and feel myself begin to nest, settle into myself, like a bird.
The morning was quiet; I could hear the water moving through
the radiators. The house was settling all around me, a kaleido­
scope of small soft sounds. Cars moved down the street, their tires
spinning on the rain.

Connie and I drove to the office in silence, holding hands across
the front seat. I was filled with a new and quiet calm. When the
time for the insemination came, I lay down on the table and parted
my thighs and let the doctor do his work while outside the rain fell
and Connie held my hand.

As I drove to work, I felt full of peace. All I had to do was go to a
lecture by a guest speaker and teach my class that night. The
insemination was over. The hardest part of the day was over.

The North Dining Room, which doubled as a lecture hall, was full
of criminal justice majors, all with crewcuts and baseball caps, chewing
gum in the corners of their mouths like tobacco. I watched
them covertly and wondered for a moment why they were there, at
this lecture by a visiting professor who was talking about lesbians
and violence in film. They must be fulfilling some class require­
ment. The students snickered over clips from Basic Instinct, nudged
one another all through the scenes from Thelma and Louise, while
the speaker talked about lesbian subtext. When she was finished,
Joe Dyer, one of the criminal justice professors, stood up. “I just
want to say that Louise was grieved at seeing her boyfriend leave.”
He paused to clear his throat, then glanced around the room. “I
think this shows she was a normal,” he hesitated, as if catching him­
self, then added delicately, “if I may still use that term, woman.”

I could feel something click inside me, like a gun cocking. My
heart began to beat faster and faster, as if it were gathering
momentum and might take off at any moment. I didn’t hear the
speaker’s answer. I knew the lecture was over only when the crimi­
nal justice majors around me picked up their notebooks and
began to leave. Dyer stood between me and the door, expounding
on his theory to a group of faculty.

“By ‘normal,’ ” Deborah was asking carefully as I approached
them, “do you mean heterosexual women?”

Dyer glanced at her, his brow furrowed in annoyance. “Yes,” he
said.

I heard myself talking before I could even think about it. “I object
to the use of the term *normal* to apply to heterosexuals," I said thinly. My heart shook in my chest like a leaf. What was I doing?

“Oh, you're just arguing semantics here,” Dyer said. He turned his back to me, waving his hand in dismissal. His back blocked my view. He was taller than I was. His voice was louder than mine. I could feel something growing taut inside me. He wasn’t just Joe Dyer anymore, an innocuous criminal justice professor; he was my brooding German father, turning his back on me just one too many times.

“Hey!” I said. I went to put my hand on his arm, but before I knew what I was doing, I had a fistful of his coat in my hand. I swung him around to face me. “I am a lesbian,” I said. His face grew pale in alarm. A roaring filled my head. I wasn’t even in my body anymore. I had become a fine white light, surrounded by a group of disembodied faces, all staring at me in awe. I tightened my grip on his coat and looked him right in the eye. “And I am a normal woman.”

He stared at me. Everyone was absolutely silent. We all stared at my hand, as if wondering what it might do next. I unclenched my fingers and pulled them away. For a moment I thought his coat might come away too, like the skin of a burn victim.

“Just a minute,” Dyer said, but I had already turned away. His voice followed me to the door, but I had ceased to hear him. Inside me all that anger that had flared up so suddenly was gone, just like blowing out a match. I walked back to my office with my hands in my pockets, feeling the rain against my face. There was still an hour before my gay and lesbian literature class. If I hurried, I could get some work done on that tenure application, dig up some proof of my service to the community, mine my past six years for evidence of why the campus needed me.