You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

Blum, Louise A.

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Blum, Louise A.
You're Not from Around Here, Are You? A Lesbian in Small-Town America.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/8763.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8763

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=190147
Why Don’t I Run Down to the Liquor Store?
With the new year came the takeover of the House and Senate by the Republicans. Anti-abortion fanatics killed two young women at family-planning clinics. "Justifiable homicide," someone called it in the papers. The Republicans' "Contract with America" advocated forcing women to establish paternity before being eligible for welfare or food stamps. Newt Gingrich, the new Speaker of the House, suggested that orphanages were a good way to raise children and recommended that Hillary Clinton watch the movie *Boys' Town* if she disagreed.

"Doesn't that star Mickey Rooney?" Connie asked, looking up from the paper and taking a sip of coffee.

"Orphanages!" I said. I shook my head. "What are they thinking?" My grandmother had been raised in an orphanage after her father had shot her mother to death and abandoned the children. I remembered her telling me that if they drank water from the river, the authorities locked them in the attic alone for three days to see if they developed typhus. It was the only story she had ever told me about her childhood. I put the paper down. I hadn't even made it past the first page.

I glanced around the kitchen. The morning light danced on the copper tiles around the stove. I was actually hungry this morning, actually thinking of shoveling in some food. I had awakened so hungry that I'd thought I would faint before I got down to the kitchen. I had dreamed about food all night. Now, as I helped myself to some cereal, picked up a banana, and began to slice it into my bowl, I could feel a mild nausea starting up in me again. "Whatever happened to family values?" I asked.

Connie snorted, setting down her cup of coffee, smoothing out the paper, and turning it over to the next page. "This is family values," she said. "Republican-style."

The new year also brought me the proofs of my novel from the publisher, with a directive to proofread it for errors. I tore it from the envelope eagerly, then nearly dropped it on the table. I was shocked by how thin it was, how small and vulnerable it looked. I feared for it suddenly, out on its own in the world. As I leafed through its pages, I was taken by the beauty of the writing. Simul-
taneously, I was afraid that it didn’t hang together as a novel. I worried that the critics would jump all over it, flatten it, stomp it into dust along the edges of the road.

I feared that no one would pay any attention to it at all.

A string of 60-degree days heralded the start of the new semester. I convinced Deborah to leave the president’s opening address an hour early so we could go for a walk on the bike path. As we left, the president was announcing that personnel costs were rising to 80 percent of the budget. “And I will not permit that,” he informed us sternly, as if it were somehow our fault. He didn’t elaborate on how he might prevent it. For a moment I imagined my tenure application as it sat on someone’s desk somewhere, an easy line cut for any budget. I could lose my job, I thought, as I squeezed as inconspicuously as possible past someone’s knees on my way out into the aisle. I could be denied tenure! A flush of exhilaration flooded me as we pushed open the back door and slipped out into the sudden spring. I could be fired! The warm air greeted me like an arm around my shoulders. For a moment I imagined a sparkling future of unemployment and long, long days in which all I had to do was write and be pregnant. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. I inhaled deeply as we walked down the path, away from the campus. The bare branches sparkled in the sun. The sudden warm weather reminded me how much I loved the seasons, how it took some cold weather to be able to feel like this. Otherwise, I might not be able to recognize the smell of promise in the air.

The morning of the first day of the semester was warm and soft. I pulled my best dress out of the closet and pulled it on, slipped on a pair of hose. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. I looked great—my hair lay perfectly, its cowlicks miraculously subdued. My skin glowed. Only the faintest roundness around my stomach gave me away. I felt wonderful. Hunting for a pair of earrings, I remembered the black crushed velvet dress that Connie had given me at Christmastime and how my spirits had dropped when I saw it. I thought I would never feel like dressing up again. Now I suddenly felt like the most beautiful woman in the world. It was like having a second lease on life.

When I got to school, a senior male colleague stepped into my office. “Oh, my,” he said, seemingly startled when he saw me. “You look very nice.” A touch of worry creased his brow. “May I say that?” he asked, licking his upper lip. “Am I still—ah—permitted to say that?”
Why, I wanted to retort, are you suddenly afraid of being a sexist asshole? But I felt too good to be angry. I smiled magnanimously. “Sure,” I said. “You can say it.” I felt full of queenly dignity, fully able to drop dispensation wherever I went. I had no need of petty likes and dislikes. I was a new woman now, preparing to leave my first trimester and enter with dignity into my second. It was nice to have months to mark off like this, each day taking me to a more meaningful level in my existence. It was like that first year with Connie, when we celebrated the tenth of each month in honor of our blossoming commitment, both silently ticking off the years until we’d each outlasted our longest previous relationship.

I glanced at my watch. It was time for my first class. I rose to my feet, adjusted my dress, and ran a hand through my hair. It was the closest I ever got to combing it during the day. I took a deep breath and picked up my books. I was ready to meet my new army, ready to break in a set of new recruits.

The students perked up when I walked into the room. “Wow,” said one woman, whom I’d had in class the previous semester. “You look awesome!” I introduced myself and took a few minutes to describe the class. I felt flushed with enthusiasm, charged with new energy. This was my favorite creative writing class. I’d designed it the year before to teach students the freedom of freewriting, to give them a chance to learn to write without worrying about the consequences of grammar. I faced the class, smiling warmly. I felt a little like Gandhi, taking writing to the masses, giving them the tools with which to liberate themselves.

“So,” I said, clasping my hands. “Let’s go around the room and introduce yourselves and tell us why you’re taking the class.” I turned to the student nearest to me in the circle. “Let’s start with you.”

The student looked at me and then rubbed his head, as if I’d already asked him to do too much for the first day of class. “My name is Ed,” he said, looking around the room. “I’m just taking this course to fulfill a writing requirement.” To his credit he did sound mildly apologetic.

I was not to be floored. “That’s OK,” I said. “How do you feel about writing?”

Ed looked at me. His face bore a look of slight confusion. “Well, I don’t like it much,” he said.

“Next,” I said quickly. Maybe I could move this along, get to the students who were waiting for this class the way somebody else
might be waiting for religion. Or the way Ed might be waiting for me to bring the class to a close.

“I’m a criminal justice major,” the next student confessed, as if he might have been admitting to ax murder. “I’ve never really had to write anything.”

“I don’t mind writing,” the next student said brightly, as if I’d asked her how she felt about cleaning the house. “It’s OK.”

I sighed. Surely, Gandhi hadn’t had to deal with people shrugging their shoulders and saying, Well, I don’t really care if we ever get our freedom. The same thing happened every semester. I started the first class feeling like Jesus and ended it feeling like Mary Magdalene—still, when all was said and done, a whore.

I smiled as compassionately as possible at them and moved on to the next part of the class the way I always did, even though I felt like screaming. I wondered what would happen if, instead of writing the rules of freewriting up on the board, I threw my chalk on the floor and yelled, “If you don’t like writing, then get out of this class!” It probably wouldn’t do much for my tenure application. I should probably feel grateful to the criminal justice majors. Their quest for an easy writing class was paying my salary. I wondered what it would be like to teach creative writing to students who actually wanted to write creatively. I shook my head to clear it. I doubted I would ever know.

By the second week of school the parade of students in and out of my office was as constant as the rain that had replaced our respite of warm sun. It felt more like November out there than January. Between students, I sat at my desk and looked out the window and remembered my childhood in the snowbelt of northeastern Ohio, how winter regularly deposited three to four feet of snow throughout the county. For a moment it seemed positively blissful, cross-country skiing through the fields of my youth, a rough wind reddening my cheeks, my father at home tending the fire, and my mother in the kitchen canning apples. I shook my head. Whose childhood was that? Sometimes it was like Ted Turner had occupied my brain, colorizing my memories. They surely didn’t have anything to do with real life.

I shook my head and leaned back at my desk. I felt so tired. It wasn’t the fatigue that would balloon in my head like a mushroom cloud throughout the first trimester. It was a plain regular tiredness, one that weighed down my eyelids and put pressure on my neck and shoulders. All I wanted to do was put my head down and
close my eyes. I was only days from the second trimester. Surely, it would be all downhill from there. I massaged the back of my neck, trying to work out the kinks. How much lousier could I feel? If this was what it was like, why would any woman ever get pregnant more than once? Who in their right mind would go through this again?

A student coughed politely from the doorway of my office. “Do you have a few minutes?”

I rubbed my eyes and tried to look awake. If only I could still drink coffee. No, I debated saying. Or, rather, yes, but they’re mine. Instead I made myself smile. “Sure,” I said. “Come in and have a seat.”

The student sat down, nervously folding and refolding his hands. I waited, folding my own hands across my belly, checking its dimensions as I did routinely these days. “The counseling service sent me to see you,” he said, clearing his throat with vigor. “I don’t know if they called you.” He looked up at me. His eyes were beseeching, like those of the deer that not too long ago the hunters had chased through the hillsides in their own private genocide, eager to stock their freezers with bodies that they’d killed themselves. “I’m gay,” the student said, and I nodded, waiting for the rest, waiting to hear his story, the same way I heard all the stories, of all the students that the counseling service forwarded to me, as if by virtue of being gay I could also double as a therapist.

“So what year are you?” I asked him, gently, settling myself back into my chair.

“I’m a freshman,” he said, his lower lip trembling. “My dad thinks I’m going to meet a girl up here.”

I just sat there and let him talk, thinking about this place where we lived, the people sequestered in those hills just beyond my window, grateful not for the first time to the deer who took our bullets for us, who distracted the townspeople from what could have been their real target, thinking about the father who hoped this place would make a man of his son, who might never understand how thoroughly it really could.

“I need to have sex.” Connie’s voice shook, trembling like the branches of our forsythia in the wind. I could see it out there in the yard, feeble and alone, looking for all the world like it had already died, succumbed to the winter that had only just begun to rage
around us. The rain outside had turned to a light snow, drifting down through the light of the streetlamp and dusting the street like soap powder. I reluctantly tore my eyes away from it. For not the first time, I thought it looked warmer and more inviting outside on the street than it did in our own living room. Connie stood between me and the front door, almost as if to keep me in. “All I want is for you to make love to me,” she said. Her eyes flashed with anger.

I sighed and glanced at the clock above the kitchen sink. Eleven o’clock. I’d wanted to be in bed by nine. I shifted my weight and leaned against the door frame. All I really wanted was to go to sleep. It was all I’d really wanted to do since breakfast. Connie and I had been fighting about sex continuously for weeks, always late at night and always, it seemed, with me standing in a doorway, as if trapped in some limbo between worlds. This was just one in a long succession of fights in which I felt that everything terrible that I’d ever done got dredged up and flung in my face. The problem with having a long-term commitment, I thought wearily, trying to prepare myself to mirror her, was that you could never escape your past. You could never grow up enough to leave behind who you used to be. It was like getting together with parents and siblings, who remembered only the worst aspects of your past and dragged them out at every family gathering.

“I need you to make love to me,” Connie said. Her face was tight with fury, like the sky just before a storm. Oh, god, I thought, closing my eyes and leaning against the door frame, can’t you just make love with someone else? I could barely get up the energy to brush my teeth, let alone bring someone to orgasm. I imagined Connie making love with someone else. It seemed like that would work, didn’t it? I was sure it would bother me in principle, but at the moment it seemed like the best solution possible. “I need you to initiate sex,” Connie said.

I looked at her helplessly. Nausea and fatigue dogged my every step. The second trimester had arrived with no relief. My fetus was developing either uterus and ovaries or ducts to convey sperm. It occurred to me that my baby at this point had more of a sex life than I did. At least it had potential. My own sex organs felt about as developed as a block of wood. “I don’t know what to say,” I said. “I just can’t do it.”

Connie looked at me, her lips as tight as if they had been stitched together. “Fine,” she said.
We went to bed barely speaking to each other. I wanted to make up but didn't know how. My mother had raised me never to go to sleep on my anger. I liked that idea, but resolving the argument seemed to be more than I could handle at the moment. Leg cramps kept me from sleeping. Every time I shifted position, Connie sighed through her teeth. She hated having her sleep disturbed. How would she deal with the baby? I wondered. How would she deal with any of this? Everything was going to change—our sex life had already changed and not for the better, obviously. We were having trouble now—what would happen after the baby was born? My forehead itched. I tried to ignore it, tried to stay as still as I could on my side of the bed. I wondered if Connie would leave me, unable to deal with my escalating hormones. The bedroom took on a sudden chill. I remembered a coworker from years before whose husband had left her in her eighth month of pregnancy and moved in with his girlfriend. My coworker had cried all day at work; her eyes were always red-rimmed and watery. She was befriended by another woman at work, who had come home one day after nineteen years of marriage to find the house empty, a note on the bed from her husband. I wondered what had happened to the pregnant one. I'd helped her write a résumé; I liked to think she did OK. Now I wondered whether she had. I pulled the comforter up to my chin. Something in me expected Connie to act the same way as those deserting husbands. Why wouldn't she? I wasn’t much fun to be around. I was tired all the time. My head ached. I was continuously nauseous. Another cramp gripped my calf. I rested my toes against the foot of the bed and pushed my heel down, trying to straighten it out. Connie had sworn she wouldn't leave me. I brought my knees back up to my chest and curled into as small a ball as possible. Maybe she should leave me. Maybe we were finished. I tried to breathe evenly. We would have to be careful, I thought, that we didn’t fall into the trap of staying together just for the sake of the children.

Connie nuzzled me from behind. “Hey,” she said softly.

My heart opened up like a flower. I could feel it in there, warm and pulsing with my blood. “Hey,” I said.

She wrapped her arms around me. “I love you, you know,” she said.

I closed my eyes and pressed myself into her breasts. “I know,” I said and waited for the sleep to settle in.

The start of February brought a sparse gray snow, just enough to
require shoveling so it could sit along the sides of the road and collect exhaust. I felt as if I would be pregnant forever, this baby sucking all the life out of me, just like the passing trucks robbed the snow of its true color. In the kitchen I could hear Connie setting the table, getting ready for our friends, Cheryl and Sam, to come over for dinner. Beset with a sudden desire to create, I'd spent the day cooking up a pot of bean soup. Smelling it now, I could hardly imagine eating it. I walked into the kitchen, dragging my body along like a set of chains, and dropped into my chair at the table. Once I'd had a vision of myself sprinting through my pregnancy. I saw it again, wavering briefly before me like an apparition, before I closed my eyes and let it go. Fuck it. “What time are Cheryl and Sam coming?” I asked Connie.

She took the saltshaker over to the counter to fill it. “About ten minutes or so, I think,” she said. She took down the box of salt. I could see her weighing it in her hand, wondering if we had enough. “We don’t have any wine,” she said, glancing at me. “Do you think that’s a problem?”

I shrugged. “Not for me,” I said. “I’d prefer it if there wasn’t any—do you think that’s OK?”

“I guess,” Connie said, filling the shaker and holding it up to the light in an attempt to see its contents. She looked at me. “I talked to the Weight Watchers leader about your diet,” she said. “She said you should really try to eat green vegetables.”

“Really?” I said. “You told the Weight Watchers woman about me?” I could feel a lift in my chest. Connie had been going to Weight Watchers for several years now, and to my knowledge she’d never mentioned me. Now she had talked about me in a meeting full of all the old girls from the area. I felt a flush of pride. I’d been claimed.

“I told her I had a friend who was pregnant,” Connie said, replacing the saltshaker on the table. “How’s the soup doing?”

A fuzz filled my brain. “A friend?” I said slowly. “You said I was a friend?” I shook my head. “You’re kidding.”

Connie looked at me. Her brow furrowed. “What’s the big deal?” she said. “You know I’m not out at Weight Watchers.”

I stared at her. Who was this woman standing in our kitchen, the woman who had held my hand through every insemination, this woman who was going to raise this child with me, be its mother just as I was? “You said I was a friend?” I repeated. Tears rose to my eyes, stinging the lids till I had to close them. “I’m not just a friend,” I
said softly. My throat closed on the words. I wasn’t even sure she had heard them. All I knew was that I couldn’t speak, couldn’t think of anything else to say. We both heard the knock at the front door at the same time.

“I’ll get it,” Connie said, leaving the kitchen like casting off an old shirt. I stared after her stupidly. What had just happened, and was I the only one to feel it?

Cheryl and Sam swept into the room, bringing with them the vague scent of incense and candles and long exotic dinners. “We don’t have any wine,” Connie said apologetically.

Cheryl stopped halfway through taking off her coat. “Really?” she said, glancing at Sam, who had collapsed into a chair beside me. She looked at her watch. “Why don’t I run down to the liquor store and pick up a couple bottles?” she said.

“I’ll go with you,” Connie said, grabbing her coat.

The door slammed behind them, signaling their departure. Sam looked at me idly, one finger playing with the napkin at his place. “I really feel like drinking tonight,” he said.

I stared at him under cover of an interested, listening look. We both just sat there, waiting for the wine to arrive.

The bean soup was a success, with the liberal addition of horseradish and cayenne. I played with my spoon, unable to eat. I could barely contribute to the conversation. My throat felt as if it had closed up on itself, leaving a raw and gaping wound. Connie refilled her glass from the second bottle of wine. “It doesn’t even matter that it’s Louise that’s pregnant,” she said, her voice energetic with alcohol. “I feel completely bonded to this baby.” Cheryl and Sam nodded, sipping from their glasses.

“That’s wonderful,” Cheryl said, her voice suffused with warmth. Their cheeks glowed with a sense of shared community. I sat with my bean soup, now cold in my dish, my glass of water untouched. Oh, really, I thought. I could feel myself begin to shake. You feel bonded to this baby? I stole a glance at Connie, her voice full of excitement in the middle of some story about her life. If you feel so bonded to this baby, why did you pretend in public that it didn’t belong to you? I stirred the soup in my bowl so vigorously my spoon clanked against the edge. Nobody noticed. A heat spread through me. Connie felt bonded to the baby. I glanced down at my stomach, a soft round lump in my lap. What baby? I just felt like I was getting fat. What did she find to bond with? It was just something that got in the way of our sex life, that caused fight after fight. So far it had
done nothing but drive us apart. What the hell was she bonding with?

I picked up my glass of water and drained it, carried my dish to the sink, and deposited it there with a crash that stopped all conversation. “I’m tired,” I informed them pointedly. “I think I need to go to bed.”

“Of course,” Sam said, draining the last of his glass of wine. Cheryl wrapped me in a warm hug. “You take care,” she said. I bit my lip not to cry. What had I done? What had I gotten myself into?

I dreamed that night that I gave birth, and it was just a pan of tissue and blood. Sam brought it in, pointed to a lump of flesh, and said, “I think this one might develop into a baby.” I took it home, but then I realized that something was wrong, that Margie and Julie had brought home an actual baby. It occurred to me that I must have miscarried, and I went to the doctors, but they weren’t there. My colleague Roger met me at the door and pushed me back on the table and pulled out a huge pair of shears, and when I felt their blades inside me I realized suddenly that I was nine months pregnant, and I began to scream “No!” When I woke up, my heart was beating and my mouth was dry. Connie was fast asleep on her side of the bed, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get back to sleep, could find no comfort anywhere, no safe place to be.