You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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Your Silence Will Not Protect You
Frost covered the windows, etching delicate patterns onto the glass. The air was cold and brittle, as if it might crack in my lungs. It seemed like winter would never end. Just an hour south of us flowers were probably blooming by now. A mourning dove called from the roof, its voice deep with grief. I pulled a comb through my hair and studied my body in the mirror. I felt full of grief too. Zoe was right there, in full view of everyone. How could I ever protect her? She had no privacy and neither did I. Everybody who looked at me knew that I was carrying a baby. Everyone felt free to comment on her, to touch my belly, to ask her name. How could I ever keep her safe?

The phone rang as I was looking for my purse, and for a moment I considered not answering it. I glanced at the clock on the wall, then picked up the receiver. I was already late. What did a few more minutes matter? Deborah’s voice was slow and solemn. “I just wanted to warn you,” she said. “I didn’t want you to just see it in your box.”

“See what?” I asked. I felt a little impatient. I just wanted to get going, shake this sense of sadness. Was this from that church discussion group? I didn’t need those people. We had our own community, right here where we lived.

“Somebody made up a mock newspaper,” Deborah said, “and distributed it in people’s boxes.” She hesitated. “It’s called the Phaglight.”

I wondered for a moment if I’d heard her right. “What?” I said stupidly.

“They make some comments about me and my feminism,” Deborah said, “and they said some things about you.”

“About me?” I repeated. My brain seemed full of some kind of fog. I shook my head to clear it.

“Yours is much worse than mine,” Deborah said. She paused for a moment. “Much, much worse.”

I didn’t say anything. I just couldn’t seem to get it somehow. What was she talking about?

“I wondered when you’re coming in,” Deborah said carefully. “Because I want to be with you when you see this.”
When I got to campus, I pulled the car into a parking space as carefully as if I were maneuvering a plane onto the runway. The frost sparked in the sunlight as I made my way through the parking lot. I scanned the faces of the people I passed, as if they might be able to tell me what was happening, but no one seemed to notice me. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe nothing was going on, and this was just one of Deborah’s things she got upset about. I took a deep breath and pulled open the door of the English building.

Deborah and another colleague, the professor who had taken issue with the Einstein quote on my door a few months before, were waiting for me beside the mailboxes. I could see it in there, a flat sheet of paper, lying innocuously inside my box, still as a snake, just waiting for my touch.

“I just want to apologize to you,” my colleague said, his cup of coffee quivering in his hand, “for what you’re about to read in there.”

I looked at him dumbly. What was he talking about?

“My advice to you is to take it somewhere private before you read it,” he said.

“Let’s go upstairs to my office,” Deborah said. Her eyes were soft. She took my arm. I let her lead me up the stairs and close the door behind us. I looked at the piece of paper in my hands, tried to make out what it said. I still didn’t get it. I didn’t get it even when I read it. “Lesbian Loses Mutant Alien Baby,” the headline read. The sperm had been replaced with instant coffee crystals, the article said, causing the mutation. I was a bull dyke who had gone against the “natural order” and resisted men, and I’d gotten what I deserved. My partner had been unavailable for comment, the article concluded, because she was at a “Fattydyke Weightloss Clinic.”

At first the words had no impact on me. I stared at the paper for a moment. I didn’t want to look up. I could feel my cheeks growing hot with embarrassment. Instant coffee crystals. I thought of the insemination, that vial of yellow, egglike liquid. What if it hadn’t been sperm? What if it had been something else? I squeezed the paper between my fingers as if it were flesh, something tangible, something I could really touch. I felt exposed, vulnerable. They’d written about my insemination as if it were public property. They’d made a joke of it. How many people had seen this? I wanted to go downstairs to my office, hide myself away. I wanted to pretend this hadn’t happened, that this stupid piece of paper didn’t exist, didn’t even matter in my life. I looked at Deborah. “I’m OK,” I said.
She looked dubious. “Are you sure?”
I nodded. I looked back at the paper in my hands.
“Do you want me to throw it away?” she asked.
I held it for a moment. I was seized with the impulse to save it, to file it away the same way I had filed all those letters to the editor, to close it up in my file drawer. I shook my head. Why would I save this? It was nothing. Just trash. I wanted to forget it. I handed it to Deborah. “Yes,” I said. “Throw it away.” My voice sounded mechanical to me, like someone else was sounding out the words.
“Are you sure you’re OK?” Deborah asked.
I nodded. “I’m going down to my office,” I said. All I wanted to do was get away. I went back downstairs. Gina stopped in to check on me.
“I’m sorry about the hate sheet,” she said.
I shrugged. “It’s OK,” I said, but inside I could feel myself beginning to tremble. Hate sheet. Was that what this was? Could you call something that talked about instant coffee crystals a hate sheet?
I did paperwork in my office the rest of the day and drove back home beneath a steady gathering of clouds. I peered at the sky uneasily through the windshield. Where was the sun? It was as if the mountains had conspired against it, seizing it by the throat and sucking out its light like blood. I pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. Our yellow house stood there calmly, its fraying freedom flag barely visible in the darkness, just a collection of boards and nails, easily disassembled, eviscerated, and reduced to rubble. I pulled my keys from the ignition and hurried into the house, clutching my coat around me tightly. Inside, our house was full of light and color; spider plants and geraniums graced our windows, paintings glowed on the walls. Annie Lennox wailed joyously on the stereo. In the kitchen something simmered on the stove; I could hear it bubbling in the pot as if at any moment it might explode. I looked around me. This was our house. This was our life. Inside me Zoe was quiet and still. Before I knew it, I was shaking, and then I was crying, and I thought that I might never stop, that something inside me had been hurt so deeply that I might never heal, that this might have been the final time. I might not come back from this one.
I didn’t go in to work the next day. I couldn’t imagine it, walking back into that building. My sister’s words from long ago rang in my ears: “You did choose an alternate lifestyle that people were going to have problems with, after all.” Those words had stayed with me.
all this time, a tiny whisper in the back of my consciousness. I had asked for this, hadn’t I? What did I expect? What could I ever expect? Despair rose in me like a huge wave, pinning me down, threatening to stop my breath. I fought to breathe against it.

“But Deborah was also slandered,” Connie pointed out, “and what was her crime? She has a husband. She’s straight.”

But her words had no effect on me. I lay on the couch with a blanket around me. Inside me was only a cold, deep blackness that permeated every contour of my body. Deborah called to tell me that several colleagues had gone to the president and that he had dismissed it as an April’s Fool joke. “Nothing to get upset about,” he’d said. Someone told me that the walls of the student union had been plastered with the paper.

Snow fell throughout the day, hiding the grass, covering up the car’s tailpipe, whitewashing the street. I sat on my couch covered with my blanket and watched the snow. Nothing mattered anymore. There was a hole so deep in my soul I feared I might slip through it, just drift out to sea on my tears, leaving the shore far behind with nothing around me but the quiet rocking of the waves and the blackness of the water and the calming certainty of drowning. I could swim until I died. I could tread water and watch the shore recede and disappear until there was only the water joining hands above my head.

They had written about me as if I weren’t even a human being. Outside the snow fell like the stupid punch line to a joke that had gone on much too long. I was so alone. I would always be alone. It would always be just me and Connie, alone against the world. I watched the snow fall, thought about the lesbian potluck. Even other gay people couldn’t understand it, unless they were also out, unless they had felt it themselves, this wound, this emptiness, the nothingness that expanded and spread through me like an invincible gas, killing me in silence. There was no one I could talk to. I sat there till the sunlight began to ebb, teasing me, appearing and disappearing like a child playing hide-and-seek. It would not give me any place that I could count on. I sat on my couch and watched the darkness fall. There was no support for us, no one to soothe our suffering. I was so off balance, so open to attack, so pregnant. Steps and sidewalks were treacherous. I dropped things when I picked them up. I couldn’t pass cars on the highway anymore; the oncoming traffic was too frightening. It was too much to protect myself. I couldn’t do it.
I tried to go in to work the next day, but the closer the signs for Mansfield became, the harder I cried, until I could barely see the road for my tears. I kept reaching in the back for tissues, until I began to find them on the passenger seat beside me, as if someone were laying them out for me. I turned around and went back home. I tried to tell myself that it was probably only a handful of people, at most, but it didn’t matter. The obscene phone calls, the letters to the editor, the town meeting, the church fiasco, my relationship with my family. Nothing had touched me the way this had. There was nothing I could do that would let me out from under this sorrow that crushed me like the snow. Nothing would set me free. I could not go in to work. I couldn’t imagine ever going back again. I could not stop crying, as if my heart had been cleaved in two and left to rot inside my body. I was supposed to give a reading from my novel on campus at the end of the week. I couldn’t imagine doing it. I couldn’t imagine ever going back, teaching another class, going to another meeting, talking to another student.

I thought of the letters to the editor that had followed our story in the newspaper, the anger I’d felt in response. I wanted that anger back. I wanted it to fill my body, give me power, fuel my rage. I didn’t want to be this powerless, quivering, fearful being, unable to stand up for myself. I tried to call that anger up, and all I could find inside myself was a quivering mass of jelly, limp and flaccid, falling from my hands like flesh from a bone.

I made myself another cup of tea and carried it back to my desk, safe in the comfort of my home. I wanted to write in my journal. I wanted to do something. I wanted to go in to work; the women students were having an open mike poetry reading, and Gina was reading. I needed to be there. I needed to go see the president, talk to him about the importance of making a statement. Above my desk hung my Audre Lorde quote, slightly yellowed with age: “Your silence will not protect you.” I stirred my tea. I couldn’t go in. I was afraid that if I did, people might see me cry. I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let anyone know how deeply this had hurt me. I wanted to be strong. How could I have allowed something so stupid to have such an effect? I took a sip of tea. It warmed me like whiskey. Your silence will not protect you. I remembered reading those words at our wedding, remembered crying as I read my vows, crying as we entered into our life together, unable to see where the path might lead. I wondered if I could afford to wait until I was not afraid to go in to work. Wasn’t that like waiting to live my life until
the fear had gone away? I had done that long enough, lived whole years of my life in silence, waiting to find the courage that would let me speak. I thought of Gina, of all the gay and lesbian students. Was it fair to only allow my strength to be visible, to have this calculated vulnerability in what I chose to allow my students to hear and read? How could I not be a whole person, as full of fear as I was of anger, as susceptible to gay bashing as anyone else?

I took another sip of tea and held the cup in my hand, feeling its warmth against my palm. Inside me, Zoe slept, still as the day, waiting to see where it might take us. I was a whole person, I thought. I was strong. I could act despite my fear. I took a long, deep breath, felt it fill my lungs. Zoe stirred, a movement as vague as a brush stroke.

I got my coat.

The miles ticked by like markers on a race. The sun shone dubiously, casting a hesitant light on the frost that tinged the road. Every mile that took me farther than I’d been able to drive the day before felt like a victory. But at the same time the grief welled up regularly, threatening to crush my lungs. Each time I struggled for breath, fought for it as if for life. I am a whole person. I am powerful. I repeated it over and over again, till I could feel the air enter my lungs, feel the grief recede like a tide. Pulling into the parking lot was like reaching land. I did it, I thought. I sat for a moment, breathing deeply. I had gotten here. It felt like all I needed to do.

So many people were at the women’s open mike that all the seats were taken. Posters for an upcoming forum, “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Homosexuality,” hung in every hallway, my name dark and deliberate, listed as the moderator. My stomach dropped, like taking a dip on a roller coaster.

When I saw Deborah, I made my way over to her. Her jaw was tense. “I spent all morning arranging security for this and for your reading,” she said between gritted teeth. “I talked with everybody about it at the Women’s Commission, and I’m sick of talking about this issue!” Her eyes flashed. “I can’t spend any more time on it,” she said. “When I came to school and saw the posters for the forum on homosexuality I thought: I cannot spend another minute on this issue!” She exhaled so sharply I could almost see the air leaving her lungs like smoke. “So I hope you don’t mind that I don’t come to the forum.”

I backed away from her and looked for a seat. When I sat down, I felt a fury rising up in me, more than anger, more than anything
that I had ever felt before. How dare Deborah call my life, my world, what I lived with every single day, an “issue,” as if my life were a cause she could just pick up and then discard when it no longer fit her schedule? Rage filled me like a bull, its hooves striking at my chest, cutting through the flesh. I took a long deep breath and then another. I knew Deborah was stressed, but I didn’t care. This was a stress that I was forced to live with every day. I made myself pay attention to the women who took the microphone and read their poetry to the world, to anyone who would listen.

The president leaned back behind his desk, surveying me as if I were some kind of animal with which he was not entirely familiar.

“I just wanted to talk with you about the hate sheet,” I said. I made my voice as strong as possible. I kept that anger with me, nourished it like a flame. Thank god I had the anger. I made myself say the words. It was a hate sheet. Anything that could make me feel like this was about hatred and nothing less. “I want you to make a statement of support for the gays and lesbians on this campus,” I said, “in the next issue of the newspaper.”

The president brought the tips of his fingers together and frowned at them. He was a former football coach who regularly walked the campus and greeted students by name. He had made his reputation by being moderate; an all-around nice man, everyone agreed. “Well, I don’t know if I should mention homosexuals specifically,” he said, giving me a sincere scowl. “I could just say ‘minorities.’ ”

I took a deep breath. “I think you have to mention us,” I told him. “Because every other group, every other minority, is included by default, except for us.” The president looked confused. I could feel a part of me throwing up its hands, throwing in the towel. “We’re not included in civil rights legislation,” I said pointedly.

He looked at me. His eyes narrowed. “Do you mean I could fire you for being a lesbian?” he asked.

My heart skipped a beat. I thought fleetingly about my application for tenure and promotion that was slowly but surely making its way toward the president’s desk. I pictured his hand moving in slow motion toward my cover page, about to stamp DENIED in permanent ink. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry. “Yes,” I said. “There are no laws protecting me.” I fought to take a breath before my lungs collapsed. I made myself look him in the eye. “But
I’d sue you,” I added, almost mumbling, one hand covering my mouth. My voice sounded thin, a tiny birdsong lost in the wind of a huge and storm-ridden forest.

The president sat back in his chair. “I’ll certainly think about it,” he said, nodding his head reflectively. “I’ll give it some thought.” He opened the door for me, thanked me for coming in. We shook hands politely. “You take care of that baby now,” he said and closed the door behind me.

The morning of my reading, I felt as if the morning sickness had returned. I couldn’t eat. A nervous diarrhea drained my body. “I don’t want to go in,” I told Connie, throwing my clothes on the bed. “I’m sick of performing for Mansfield.” I wrapped my bathrobe more tightly around me. I thought about Deborah, tired of the issue of my life. “I don’t give a shit about that place,” I said.

“It’s not for them,” Connie said. “It’s for you. It’s to celebrate your publication.”

I pulled on my clothes. My publication. My heart felt cold as ice. Who the hell cared about my publication? I couldn’t give the reading. I couldn’t imagine being able to do it. Mansfield felt like a prison cell, just waiting at the other end of the highway for me to serve my sentence. All I wanted was to get it over with, get all of it over with, get on with my life.

Campus police lined the stairs that led to the room where my reading was scheduled. Their arms were folded across their chests, their faces impassive. I moved through them as circumspectly as possible. I knew that Deborah had arranged for their presence, but somewhere deep down I still feared they might really be there for me, that at any moment they would close their ranks around me, snap their cuffs around my wrists, and lead me away. My rib cage felt as if it were closing in on my heart. My legs shook. I shrunk behind Connie. When I reached the door, I couldn’t go in. People flooded the room, filled the chairs, and spilled out along the back, where they leaned against the wall. “I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” I told Connie. “I’ll be right back.”

When I emerged from the stall, I clung to the sink and stared at myself in the mirror. You can do it, I told myself. I took a deep breath. I am whole, I repeated, silently. I am a whole person. I closed my eyes. All I wanted was to get out of there, disappear into
the world, leave no traces behind. I opened my eyes. I was still there, standing in this bathroom. I had to go back in.

Upstairs, people poured into the room. The police stood on either side of the door, motionless. My heart pounded. How could I do this? Who knew who might be in that audience? The student who wrote the letter, the obscene phone callers, whoever was behind that hate sheet. I scanned the faces of the people in the room. How would I ever know which expressions concealed hatred, whose coat might hide a gun?

Connie slipped her hand into mine. “You can do this,” she whispered. “See? There’s Gina.” I followed her eyes and made out the faces in the room. I recognized students from the Gay Support Group, several women from the potluck, the elderly gay man who lived in the center of a nearby town with his partner of nearly forty years. The room was filled with friends, with gay and lesbian people. I didn’t see an unfamiliar face in the crowd.

I took the podium and glanced out across the sea of faces. I can do it, I thought. I can give this reading. I opened my copy of the galleys, looked at my audience, and began to read. As I read, my voice soared. The nervousness fell away, and there was nothing but the beauty of my words. This was my novel, and all that mattered was the story that I had already told, that needed only my voice to give it life. I was reading to people who understood what I felt, who understood what this all meant. I avoided Deborah’s eyes. I read to my community, to the lesbians and gay men who peopled my world. When I finished, the applause was deafening. I grasped the podium, suddenly weak. People squeezed my arm, hugged me, patted my back. I felt like Jesus, everyone clamoring to get a piece of my hem. I was dizzy with it. I reached for Connie to steady myself. The room shimmered around me. A mild cramping seized my belly. I took a deep breath to still it. I had done it. I had given my reading. I was a whole person, and I was filled with power. I left the room on Connie’s arm, heading for the nearest bathroom, to deal with the last of my nervousness.

We went out with Ginger and Lee and several others to a local bar, where we took up an entire table, and I sipped a club soda and lime and tried not to inhale too much cigarette smoke. The cramping continued, slight but constant, the way it used to at the beginning of my period. I massaged my belly covertly beneath the table. This was my night. I wanted to celebrate it. Ginger had recently
had heart surgery after nearly dying, and Lee was telling the story. “Oh, go on,” Ginger said, when she was through. “It wasn’t exactly like that.”

Lee patted her arm and shot a knowing glance at the rest of us. “Ever since she got that new heart she’s been so ornery!” she said.

I sat back and breathed deeply. I was at home. I was with the people I belonged to. I hadn’t invited Deborah to come. Why would she want to? My stomach clenched and I closed my eyes. “I need to go,” I told Connie regretfully, and we rose to make our good-byes.

Lee enveloped me in a hug that smelled of whiskey. She smelled like my father. I felt a sudden homesickness overtake me. I’d hardly spoken to my family throughout this pregnancy. I didn’t know if my father even knew. I wondered what he would think when he saw my novel, which was largely about him. A pain shot through my stomach, though whether it was a cramp or a bolt of fear I wasn’t sure. “You take care, kid,” Lee said.

The next night, at the planning meeting for the forum on homosexuality, I sat in a soft chair trying to breathe through the cramps. I wondered whether something was wrong. I must need more sleep; it had been a long and difficult week. We went to bed that night at 9, but by 3 A.M. the cramps were fierce enough to wake me. “Let’s go down and have some tea,” Connie said. By 5 A.M. I could hardly breathe for the pain.

“I think I need to call the doctor,” I said. Connie nodded. Her eyes were dark with worry.

We met Dr. Gordon at the emergency room. “You’re probably dehydrated,” he said, frowning with concentration as he connected me to a fetal monitor and checked my cervix. “The lowered fluid level probably stimulated the oxytocin [hormone] level,” he said, “which stimulated the contractions of the uterus.” He looked at Connie. “Has anything been going on?”

When we got home, Connie tucked me into bed. “I’m going into my room to pray,” she said. Her voice shook. The contractions continued into the early evening, getting steadily worse. I knelt on the bed, folding both hands across my belly, forcing myself to breathe. I’d refused Dr. Gordon’s intravenous line, promising to drink a lot of fluids instead, but now I wondered whether I would have been better off letting someone else rehydrate me. Pain tore at my uterus in regular waves. I choked down glass after glass of Gatorade. It was evening before the contractions began to recede. I lay back in the bed, struggling to breathe. I wasn’t even sure I could
sit up. Dr. Gordon had instructed me to stay in bed that day, but what about the next night, when we had scheduled the forum?

Connie shook her head. “You can’t do it,” she said. “It’s too much.” She scowled at me. “I’m not letting you.”

I closed my eyes. Relief rolled through me like a calming wave. If I let it, it could take me right out to sea, where I could float forever, sustained by my belly, instead of the other way around. Thank god, I thought. I didn’t want to moderate that forum. I never wanted to get out of bed again. “We can get somebody else to moderate,” Connie said. She glared at me. “It’s not such a bad thing to have something happening about gay issues on campus that doesn’t center around you.”

I nodded. I knew she was right; I didn’t want to do it, but deep down I had a nagging feeling of regret. Our big forum on homosexuality, and I wouldn’t be there to oversee it. I thought about the students in the Gay Support Group. Was I letting them down? Who would give them their pep talk? Who could do it, if it wasn’t me? Could anyone else moderate as well as I could? I thought about the students who had put together the hate sheet. I wondered if they would think that they had won, when they saw I wasn’t there.

More than a hundred people attended the forum, including the president. According to Gina, it went well. People had asked questions; discussion was active. I wondered what it meant, if it meant that this was over now, that we had won. The president had been there; that had to be a good sign. When the next issue of the student newspaper came out, I rifled through its pages tentatively, looking for the president’s statement condemning the hate sheet and supporting his gay and lesbian faculty, students, and staff.

It wasn’t there.

I put the paper down and looked out through my window. Everything was quiet, still. Even the wind was absent. It was as if we were all waiting for something, hanging on the edge of spring, waiting for something to happen.