You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

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You’re Not from Around Here, Are You? A Lesbian in Small-Town America.
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Give Me the Stamps
OK, coaches!” Our Lamaze instructor clapped her hands to get our attention. “I want you to get behind your partner and massage her shoulders. This will be very helpful throughout the early stages of labor.”

Connie stood behind me, her hands on my shoulders, her fingers touching me firmly, perfectly, just the way they always did. The expectant mothers sat in a row, like ducks, I thought grimly, while our instructor surveyed our ranks. I glanced up and down the line. Most of the other pregnant women, accompanied by their boyfriends, were young enough to be my daughters. Around us rose the musty smell of the instructor’s basement. Connie and I were the only pair of women, which of course didn’t surprise me. No one made any comment when we introduced ourselves as spouses, though as usual I could feel the tension in the air, tangible as glass between us and the rest of them.

“OK,” the instructor said. “Let’s talk about what’s going to happen just before the baby’s born.” She sat down on her folding chair, and we formed a circle on the floor around her feet. “Your breasts are going to grow even larger in the days before childbirth,” she said.

One of the teenage boyfriends nudged the boy beside him. “Oh, boy!” he whispered eagerly. “I can’t wait for that!”

Connie scowled at him. “Oh, right,” she said. “Believe me, they’re going to be so sensitive she’s not going to want you to touch them!” The boys stared at her, dismay evident in their faces.

The instructor cleared her throat. “At birth the baby is likely to be covered with a thin coating of vernix,” she said, “the grease that protected the baby in utero.”

“Yech!” said another one of the boyfriends, an auto mechanic in town. “I’m not touching it!” He glanced around for support. The other boys looked furtively at Connie and then at the floor, apparently afraid to meet his eyes.

“Let’s take a break,” the instructor said, looking at her watch. I glanced at it too. Another hour of this. Every week it was the same. We sat in a circle, and I felt huge and full of wrinkles, surrounded
by the tight young bodies of seventeen-year-olds. It occurred to me that I was twice their age.

One woman headed outside for a cigarette break. I stared at her in horror. “I smoked all through my first pregnancy,” she informed us proudly. “And it didn’t make any difference with the baby.”

The Lamaze instructor nodded in sympathy. “It is hard to quit,” she said.

I shook my head. Waves of heat rose through my body, persistent as a hot flash. It was really getting warm in this room. I pulled my sweatshirt off over my head. The instructor started. “What are you doing?!” she exclaimed sharply, then recovered herself. “Oh, you have a T-shirt on,” she said. Relief flooded her voice. I wondered if she’d been afraid I might be planning to flash my naked breasts to the room, do my Lamaze breathing topless. I could picture her saying to her friends: “You just never know what those lesbians are going to do!”

One of the teenaged girls looked at me. “You teach over at the university, right?” she said. “My dad was just talking about you down at the GTE plant.”

I looked at her nervously. “What was he saying?” I wondered whether I really wanted to know.

“Oh, he was telling the guys that you two are in my Lamaze class,” she said breathlessly. “He says you’ve really got balls!”

Well. “Thanks,” I said dubiously. At least I had a fan at the GTE plant. It was better than nothing.

“All right,” the instructor said, bringing the break to a close. “I want you all to lie down and do some deep breathing now.” I lay down on my back, pillows beneath my knees, my head in Connie’s lap. Above me I could see the exposed beams of the unfinished ceiling. “Now close your eyes and relax,” the instructor intoned, her voice deep and even. “Breathe in. Hold it. Now release.” I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath. “Picture some place completely relaxing,” the instructor said. I lay still, my eyes closed, Connie’s lap the softest pillow in the world. Her fingers massaged my temples. Recorded womb sounds from the tape player filled the room, rhythmic and monotonous. Some place relaxing. I wondered where that was.

Connie brought her fingers down my face, massaging my cheekbones. I could feel my body letting go. The sound of the mother’s heartbeat filled my head, causing my own heartbeat to slow in
response. I breathed in and out and imagined swimming down the center of a nearby lake, submerged in the water, surrounded by the mountains that had become so familiar to me in the last six years. I opened my eyes and looked at Connie. She smiled at me, her eyes full of warmth. We were doing this. We were actually doing this. In no time at all we would have a baby. I shut my eyes, let the music from the mother’s womb lull me with its rhythms, and listened to Connie count my breaths. Despite its shortcomings, Lamaze was a godsend. Finally, we had something concrete that we could do together to get ready.

Six weeks before my due date I awoke with contractions radiating down my stomach like lightning bolts. Braxton-Hicks, the pregnancy books called them. “Uncoordinated tightenings” that gave the uterus practice for “the real thing.” I focused on the dream catcher above the bed and practiced my Lamaze breathing. The contractions alternated with waves of nausea. My thighs and lower back ached. Connie was gone; she’d taken to going downstairs to the couch as soon as I started twitching. I fought down a rising panic. The real thing. What the hell was that going to be like, if this was just a tightening?

As I stepped off the scale at the next prenatal visit to Dr. Gordon, the nurse smiled at me and handed me a plastic cup to take to the bathroom. On the toilet I hesitated. My stomach was so big I could hardly wipe myself anymore. It was getting harder and harder to position that cup in the right place to catch the flow of urine. Most of the time I ended up pissing all over my hand. I gave my cup back to the nurse and waddled into the exam room for Dr. Gordon to pull up my shirt and measure the distance from my pubic bone to the top of my uterus, now somewhere in the vicinity of my collarbone. Let’s face it. There was just nothing dignified about this process.

He frowned at my chart again. “You’ve only gained another half a pound,” he said. “Are you eating anything at all?”

“No,” Connie answered. “She’s not eating anything.”

“I can’t,” I said. “Everything I eat makes me want to throw up.” Nobody told me the last trimester would be just like the first trimester. I guessed that the glowing period the pregnancy books talked about had passed me by entirely. It was unlikely it was going to happen now.

“What about milk shakes?” he asked. “Could you drink a milk shake a day?”
Connie and I exchanged a glance. “Yes, we can,” Connie said, as if we were both in this together, which, I supposed, we were.

A contraction woke me at 3:30 like a gunshot, followed by waves of cramps that kept me up for hours. I got up and went downstairs to where Connie was again sleeping on the couch. “Come back to bed,” I whispered. When I fell asleep cradled in Connie’s arms, I dreamed that we were both swimming in a pool along with an older woman. I drifted away from them, swimming long even strokes. When I looked back to find them, I saw a huge swell of wave coming toward me, rising far above my head. Panic rose, but then I saw Connie and the older woman standing on the side of the pool, cheering me on as the water bore down on me. I struggled to breathe, and opened my eyes, but there was nothing but the ticking of the clock and the darkness of the room, no sound but that of my heart, which was beating hard enough to wake the dead.

“Can you tell the court why you wish to change your name?” Judge Anderson asked me.

I sat in the witness chair and looked out over the courtroom, empty except for the court reporter, our lawyer, and Connie, who sat in the front row smiling at me as if I were the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She was wearing the same dress she’d worn at our commitment ceremony; her wedding ring shone on her hand. I looked into her eyes for a moment, her soft, green, shining eyes that I had loved for such a long, long time now. “To show my commitment to Connie,” I said. My voice shook. Tears stung my eyes. I closed them for a moment and took a deep breath. We were finally hyphenating our names, Sullivan-Blum, so that all three of us, Connie, Zoe, and I, would have the same last name.

“You may step down,” Anderson said, smiling at me. He was a tall and courtly man in his forties. I knew him from the days when I used to work out at the gym, and we would run side by side on the treadmills in silent camaraderie. “The court now calls Connie Sullivan,” he said.

I took my seat in the front row and watched Connie announce her commitment to me publicly, for the record, before the judge. This must be what it felt like to get married, I thought, to proclaim your love and get a document to prove it. Except that we weren’t married and that our document, if it were issued to us at all, had cost us about $400 and brought us no closer to any real legal connection.
“The court grants the petitioners the right to change their names,” the judge said, lowering his gavel. Connie threw her arms around me.

“I love you,” she whispered. I hugged her back. Her body felt firm and solid in my arms.

“I love you too,” I said. I closed my eyes. We had done it. We had changed our names. Deep inside my belly, I felt the beginning of another tightening, firm as a handshake, almost too strong to breathe through.

Outside the sun shone as if it had something on the rest of us, full of its own bravado. Connie and I sat on the front porch, reveling in our new names, while I thumbed through the copy of What to Expect in the First Year that my mother had sent me. “Oh, my gosh,” I said suddenly, as I happened upon a footnote under the section on “gender differences.”

“What is it?” Connie asked.

I paused as another Braxton-Hicks contraction tore through me, concentrating on breathing as deeply as possible. If this was practice, I was getting a lot of it. “Listen to this,” I said. I’d finally found the only mention of homosexuality in the entire book. “It says that boys who play with dolls will become homosexuals if their fathers chastise them and tell them to ‘be a man.’ ”

“You’re kidding,” Connie said.

I re-read the footnote. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising, like hackles on a dog. I closed the book and dropped it on the floor of the porch. Another contraction rippled through my uterus like grass fire. I was sick of these books, sick of the constant references to husbands and fathers and to babies that would all follow the same developmental patterns for their gender. I was tired of trying to sift out the relevant information while trying to overlook the fact that my existence was either wholly ignored or portrayed as something negative. I watched a robin peck for worms in the yard, while a crow hunted around the base of the forsythia as if scavenging a corpse. I was sick of being invisible. I wanted to be seen and recognized and listened to. I wanted the whole world to know that I existed, to acknowledge me as a whole human being, to pay attention to me. It didn’t seem like too much to ask. I closed my eyes and breathed my way through another contraction. I was tired of politely knocking on the door—I was ready to break it down.

When I opened my eyes, Connie was studying my face. “You’re
awfully pale,” she said. She looked at her watch. “Maybe we should be timing these contractions.”

The sun was setting before we began to wonder whether we should call the doctor. It was always so hard to know what to do. Was this really a contraction, or just a practice contraction, and how could I know the difference at this point? Connie sat beside me on the couch in the back room, her watch in one hand, her open notebook in the other, writing down the times, from the start of one to the start of the next. I wondered whether I was making the whole thing up. Maybe I should just relax about it. We heard a rustle from the bushes outside. Connie looked at me. “What was that?” she asked. We both looked through the screen door into the bank of bushes that separated us from the Knights of Columbus hall next door, where the flashing lights behind the stained glass windows told us that the knights were having a party for the high school kids.

“This is where the lesbians live!” a boy’s voice called from the bushes.

“Hey, shitheads!” another voice called from another place. Laughter rippled the leaves. My heartbeat quickened, even as another contraction doubled me over. Connie stood up and in one quick movement threw open the screen door.

“Who’s out there?” she asked.

“Shithead!” another voice called. Somebody giggled. The darkness was spreading. We could barely see the bushes, let alone anyone behind them.

Connie stepped out onto the porch and slammed the door behind her. “Don’t call me a shithead, you fucker!” she yelled. Her voice trembled. “Get the hell off my property!”

“Fucker,” a voice echoed.

Connie turned around and looked at me through the screen. “I’m going in there after them,” she said. Her voice was low and steady, her fists clenched at her sides. “Do we have a stick or something?” I stared at her. Who did she think she was all of a sudden, Rambo?

“Are you crazy?” I asked. “Don’t go in the bushes!”

She stared at me. “Then what should we do?” she asked.

We looked at each other for a minute. “Call nine-one-one?” I asked.

By the time the police came, the woods were empty. I stood on the front lawn with Connie, the police car’s red lights flashing,
while the officer on duty took down our information in his notebook. I watched him write. He was young and tall and blond. For some reason he didn’t feel threatening. I liked the feel of him next to me, big and full of muscle, sheltering me with his brute male strength. After he left, Connie paced the front porch. “Those little fuckers,” she said. “I hope they come back!”

I glanced at the watch. Contraction after contraction tore through my stomach. “I think it might be time to call,” I said.

The nurse with whom I spoke told me to lie down “and call back if they start coming every ten minutes.”

I lay back on the couch for an hour, practicing my Lamaze breathing while Connie timed my contractions. In and out, following the surge of pain, like surfing a huge wave. They weren’t coming every ten minutes. I felt a swell of relief, took a deep breath, and exhaled. Then I saw that Connie was crying. “What’s the matter?” I asked her.

She looked at me, her face streaked with tears. “They’re coming every six to eight minutes,” she said. Her voice shook.

“Go right to the OB unit at the hospital,” the nurse told me. “They’ll hook you up to a monitor.”

By the time we got to the hospital, the contractions were coming every five minutes. “I’ll call your doctor,” the nurse said. The room was full of the sound of Zoe’s heartbeat, rhythmic and even. I tried to take a breath, but all those Lamaze instructions seemed to have vanished from my mind. What was it I was supposed to be doing? Connie took my hand and I focused on her eyes, deep and dark in the light of the hospital room.

It was week thirty-four. “We have to stop the contractions,” Dr. Gordon told me over the phone, “or we’ll have to ship you up to Elmira for a premature delivery.” I held the phone numbly, unable to say anything in response. “In the meantime,” he continued, “we’ll do a blood count and a urine catheter, to test for infection.” I watched the nurse readying a syringe. “And we’ll give you a sedative to try to calm your uterus.”

The nurse rolled me over and swabbed my behind. “Now breathe in,” she commanded and drove the needle home. I gasped with the pain, clutching Connie’s hand. This was almost worse than the contractions. “Nubaine may burn,” she added, as an afterthought. She scowled at the monitor. “You see this mountain?” she asked me, pointing at the swell of a uterine contraction on the printout. “I don’t want to see any more mountains.” Her dark hair clung to her
face. She was Korean, her English heavily accented. I found that reassuring somehow. Like us, she was different, even though a silver cross swung from her neck. She gathered up her paraphernalia. “That baby’s got to cook a little longer,” she said. She looked at us both, her eyes dark and steady. “You pray now.”

We spent the night in the hospital, Connie in a recliner by my side. While Connie slept, I watched the monitor registering my contractions in the form of hills and valleys. Dr. Gordon had told me he wouldn’t discharge me until he’d seen a flat line for forty minutes. I watched the needle on the paper, ticking out mountain after mountain, doing my best to pray, to a god or goddess I wasn’t even completely sure was really out there, much less with nothing better to do than listen to my feeble pleas.

“Irritable uterus,” Dr. Gordon commented cheerfully, writing the discharge orders in my chart the following morning.

“Excuse me?” I said. It had sounded like he’d said I had an irritable uterus. I shook my head. This sedative was taking a while to wear off.

“You’ve got a condition called ‘irritable uterus,’ ” he said. “Some women have it. Nobody knows why. It can cause early contractions, because your uterus doesn’t want to have that baby in there.” He smiled at me, his glasses glinting in the fluorescent light of the room. “If it persists, we’ll have to put you on tocolytic agents to relax the uterus so you can carry to term.”

I exchanged a glance with Connie. Oh great. An irritable uterus. Was there something wrong with me, that I couldn’t seem to handle any aspect of this pregnancy with any grace and dignity? I pictured my uterus in there, grumpy from the task of playing hostess to some unwanted guest who’d clearly overstayed whatever welcome she’d come in with. Here I was, trying to finish out my pregnancy like a good girl, while my uterus was whining about what a bad day she was having. What did she think was going on with me—some kind of picnic?

I spent the day feeling anxious and hung over. As I tried to fall asleep the next night, I had another contraction. Fear swept through me. What if they didn’t stop? What if I had to go back to the hospital and do it all over again? I pushed back the sheets and started to get up.

“Where are you going?” Connie asked groggily.

“I’m scared,” I said. I could feel the tears filling my eyes. Connie sat up and put her hand on my arm.
“Come back to bed,” she said. “I’ll hold you.”

We lay together all night, Connie putting her arms around me every time I awoke. “It’ll be all right,” she whispered. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

Connie brought me breakfast in bed the next morning, plumped up the pillows behind my shoulders, and opened the blinds to let in the sun. The morning was cool and crisp, almost like autumn, like a gift from the goddess, just to make my pregnancy more comfortable. Connie sat down beside me and opened her notebook.

“We have so much to do,” she said, “with this name-changing stuff. There’s our social security cards, our insurance, the hospital admittance papers, the doctor’s records, the car registrations, the titles, the mortgage, the deed to the house.” She lay down her notebook. “We’ll never get it all done!”

I took a bite of toast and chewed it tentatively. Nothing had much taste anymore. My stomach was in a constant state of agitation and excitement, a combination of Christmas Eve and preparation for a funeral. I glanced around the bedroom. That dropped ceiling was as annoying as ever. I eyed it as I took another bite of toast. I wanted it down. I really wanted it down, before the baby was born.

At my next prenatal inspection, Dr. Gordon told me, “Her head is engaged in the pelvis now,” Dr. Gordon said, doing the internal at my next prenatal visit. “Her head is really right there.” His voice rang with enthusiasm. “Look,” he told Connie. “I can rock her head and Louise’s hips will rock from side to side right along with it.”

Well, don’t talk to me about it, I thought. I’m just a pod for her. Go ahead and jerk me all around the table. Privately, Connie and I referred to him as Dr. Dad. “I heard you got a friend of mine pregnant,” Deborah had told him, at the receptionist’s desk shortly after my successful insemination, much to the consternation of the office staff.

Dr. Gordon extended his arm and pulled me to a sitting position, supporting me as I swung my legs over the side of the table. I took a deep breath. I felt so much less pregnant now that the baby had dropped. I had so much more space to breathe and eat in.

“After one more week, she’ll be OK,” Dr. Gordon said, “and if you start to go into labor, we won’t try to stop it anymore.”

I ran my hand across my belly. My baby was in there, about to come out. A wave of excitement washed through me, swiftly followed by a surge of dread. Zoe moved a little. She had so little
room now that her little foot came right through my stomach, pushing out the skin. Connie and I both stared at it. What a bizarre thing this was, carrying a live human being around inside of me. One day soon that little foot would be out in the open, that whole little body would be out in the open, free of the constraints of my grumpy uterus, out on its own, living its life. I couldn’t imagine it. I just couldn’t imagine it.

Once Zoe could be born safely, she showed no signs of wanting to be born anymore. The contractions dissipated into light, shimmering waves that came and went like a rainfall, while through it all Zoe slept securely, locked into place in my pelvis like a docked boat. The temperatures rose as my belly swelled to unimaginable proportions. I felt hot and huge and cranky, a woolly mammoth trudging up and down the streets of Wellsboro, just looking for a fight.

My manuscript for my second book lay in its padded envelope on the postal scale, ready to be sent to yet another agent who would probably turn out to suffer from a multiple personality disorder. “Four dollars,” the postal clerk barked, hauling the envelope off the scale.

“OK,” I said. “I need four dollars worth of stamps for the outside envelope and the same amount for the SASE inside.”

The clerk studied me. He was an old white-haired white guy who ruled the post office from his corner window. I’d heard him say to another post office guy, laughing one of those croupy laughs that sound like he might cough up a lung in another second, “You sound like a Japanese Jew!” It was hard, so hard, to get a grip on the mentality around here. His dark eyes narrowed. “You got another envelope inside here?” he asked, as if I might be confessing to smuggling drugs.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I need the same amount of postage for it.” It wasn’t like I didn’t do this all the time. I’d sent out hundreds of manila envelopes from this post office, all with self-addressed envelopes inside for which I needed to procure extra postage, and every single time it was a problem.

“I need to take it out,” the clerk said, pulling open the outside envelope, “and weigh it separately.”

I looked at his hands, at his fat, meaty, pasty fingers trying to touch my manuscript. A wave of heat went through me. Mr. Post Office Man. Just let him try to get his hands inside my envelope.
“No, you don’t,” I said. “It’s going to weigh the same. All I need is four dollars worth of stamps for it.”

“I need to weigh it,” the clerk persisted, trying to open his end of the envelope. I grabbed the other end and held on tight.

“No, you don’t,” I said menacingly. We stared at each other for a moment, each of us holding one end of the envelope. A silence fell over the post office. A few people in line behind me shifted their weight from one foot to another. “Just give me the stamps,” I hissed, my teeth clenched, my fingers tight on my envelope.

“Just let me take this out,” the clerk said, pulling on his end. Sweat rolled off his brow.

“GIVE ME THE STAMPS,” I snarled. I pulled on my end of the envelope so hard I nearly hauled him over the counter. He let go.

“That’ll be eight dollars,” he said, letting go of the manuscript and opening the stamp drawer.

“And a receipt,” I said, pushing the money at him. Everyone waited in silence while I took out the inside envelope, pasted on the stamps, and pushed it back in. I sealed the outside envelope and put the remaining stamps on it. “Stamp it first class,” I said. My voice was level, my stomach huge. I was bigger than he. I was bigger than anyone else in that post office. I could take him; just let him try to mess with me.

He stamped the envelope. “Next,” he said, avoiding my eyes. His voice shook slightly. A ripple of triumph went through me. I’d won. I’d intimidated Mr. Post Office Man. I turned and swept past the townspeople gathered there, moving like an elephant, slow and full of grace, my trunk swaying from side to side, the townspeople huddling in the corner, as if they were clearing space, praying only that they might be spared, that they alone might live.

I walked home slowly, the trees shaking with the weight of my step, traffic stopping as I crossed the street. When I got to the house, I kicked open the front door and eyed the stairs. It was time for that dropped ceiling in the bedroom to come down, and I was just the woman to do it.