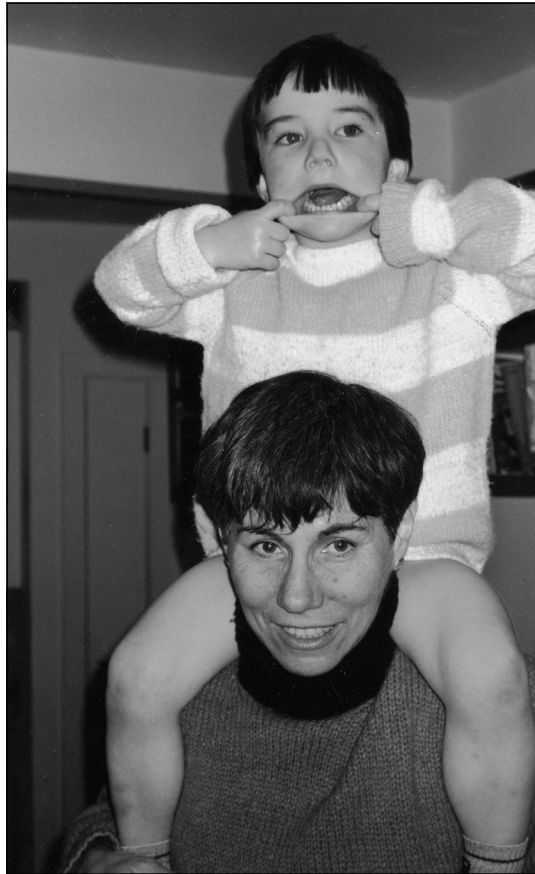


The Death of Fred Astaire



When I was a child I accepted without question that I would one day be a mother. In my twenties I told all my boyfriends that I would someday want children. At thirty I told Robin, my first woman lover, that even though I loved her, had never felt more in love, never been happier in my life, I knew we wouldn't last more than a few months because I wanted to get married and have children. Two years later when Robin and I broke up, I began searching in earnest for a man to start a family with. That's when I found Sandy—a sturdy, vital, grown-up woman with a full-throated laugh, a tenured job at a local university, computer know-how, inspiring political commitments, and great cheekbones. A woman who wasn't an artist but who loved good literature and theater, opera and running, and, quite possibly, me.

I gave myself over to the pleasures of new romance. Not until almost a year later, the summer I was thirty-three, did I realize that my desire for children had changed from being a rather abstract assumption about some future I could not seem to catch up with to a yearning I could taste. This panicked me. Sandy had bought a house in Cambridge that I had helped pick out, and we were planning to live together in the fall. This arrangement was not likely to lead to anyone's pregnancy.

I had heard of lesbians raising children together, children conceived when their mothers were with men. I had heard of lesbians adopting children and even of conceiving them through artificial insemination. I felt sure these options were for other people: committed lesbians, women who not only loved women but thought it better to love women, women who had great anger or bitterness about aspects of their own childhoods and thought raising children with another woman would result in better children, a better world. I was none of these women.

Though none of my relationships with men had lasted more than a couple of years, I considered them as happy and healthy as

most I had seen. I had loved some of these men and was still attracted to men. I loved dancing with them—fast, slow, old style, new. I liked watching them play basketball, fiddle with car engines, dress wounds, argue in court. I had enjoyed wearing my boyfriends' shirts—they made me feel thin and sexy—and nothing turned me on more than the sight of a man holding an infant in the crook of his arm or throwing a baby into the air.

Certainly, I considered myself a feminist. I recognized ways in which I had compromised myself in my relationships with men. I had discovered that when I was with women I felt more fully myself and more deeply loved. Still, I had never been entirely comfortable with phrases like “overthrowing the patriarchy,” probably because in many ways that patriarchy had treated me well. I remembered my childhood as happy, had only minor complaints about the way my parents raised me, and perhaps most significant of all, I was a daddy's girl—a fact apparently so obvious that even though I never had much of a voice, in a camp musical revue I was chosen to sing “My Heart Belongs to Daddy.”

I was Daddy's little helper, trotting behind him with the rake, the caulking gun, the monkey wrench. He taught me to ride a two-wheeler, to keep my head throughout a geometry proof. His loves were my loves—rousing music, veal parmigiana, the first forsythia. His values were my values—naturalness, honesty, persistence, daring, and, especially, family. In my early twenties I began to discover all I admired in my mother: her graciousness, generosity, intuitive feminism, intelligence, love of art and literature—in short, her depth of feeling and understanding. Up until then it was my father I held on high and aimed to please. So the thought that my little girl (for, of course, I would have a little me) might not have a father at all, and certainly not in the same way I had mine—this was nothing I was ready to imagine.

As a child of the sixties, I did not want to replicate my parents' lives, but my idea of doing things differently went no further than marrying a man with long hair, maybe an earring, most likely a non-Jew with a meager income; of doing it not in a temple or country club but on some mountaintop, *sans* ice sculptures, *avec* wildflowers. It was preferring chamber music to symphonies, sending my children to Quaker camps, never consulting an interior decorator. It did not include, as the title of a book I eventually read on the subject put it, *Having a Baby Without a Man*.

Perhaps if my mother had once been a nightclub singer (in sequins!), or my sister had eloped, or my father taken bribes—if anyone in my immediate family had just the tiniest secret or blemish. Or if I was used to being left out or taunted. But we were Jews who lived among Jews, and my experience with feeling different went no further than having been briefly forced to wear shoes with protruding metal plates designed to correct my pigeon toes. Accustomed as I was to approval, when I was in my first lesbian relationship, I boldly told nearly everyone I knew. But I also had dreams about being corralled and branded, I lived in dread of so much as a raised eyebrow, I daily chose to look as straight—no, straighter!—than I always had. When I knew, really knew, I wanted a baby, I thought: this having-a-baby-without-a-man idea might be fine for lots of people but not for me.

This was 1984, just two years after the Sperm Bank of California became the first to provide services for lesbians, a year before Rock Hudson announced he had AIDS, five years before the appearance of *Heather Has Two Mommies*—the first children's book to depict a lesbian couple parenting. I knew of only one lesbian who'd had a child "without a man." Lois had grown up across the street from me. I hadn't seen her in years.

So why didn't I just tell Sandy I couldn't move in with her?

Love didn't come easily to me. When it had come with others—a few men, and then Robin—I eventually ran scared. Of course I was older now, and Sandy older still. She had stature in the world, something I associated with men. She had integrity. She also had a groundedness that calmed me, but a lightness of spirit too. She loved my writing and gave me plenty of space. We spent long hours side by side in her sunny attic doing our separate things. I was touched by her tender heart, by the hurting places inside her. I felt sure I could heal them. The qualities in me that drove my exes crazy just made her laugh affectionately. Who knows, I thought. Maybe, because I had climbed mountains, run a 10K, ventured into dark lesbian bars, I might someday be courageous enough for a life that, at present, felt beyond me. Worth mentioning, too: When I first met Sandy and casually asked if she wanted children, she didn't hesitate before saying, "Yes."

Me? I wanted a baby soon, but not quite yet, so when a friend pointed out, "Just because you move in with someone doesn't mean you can't move out!"—even though this seemed like just the sort of thinking that traded pain in the near future for agony later on, I found myself repeating the line like a mantra, even quoting it to friends:

Just because . . . doesn't mean . . .

No doubt the line was not far from my mind that late August morning while I was scouring my summer sublet before heading back to Cambridge. *My Fair Lady* was playing on the radio, and although I had long ago decided show music was too lowbrow for sophisticated me, I was enjoying singing along: "I Could Have Daaanced All Night," "Would-n't It Be Lov-er-ly." I was belting it out until somewhere in the middle of "The Rain in Spain," when I dropped the sponge and burst into tears. A minute or so later, dry-eyed again, I wondered: What was *that* all about?

The song was a happy one, not about anything that particularly hit home, but back to my scrubbing, it came to me: how we sang at the tops of our lungs, my Daddy and I—mimicking Rex’s haughty Britishness, howling along with Julie’s triumphant *Spaains* and *plaaains*. My throat tightening again, I thought, not without some amusement: well, maybe I’m sad because it looks like I’m *not* going to marry my father, after all. Nor even a man like him. Nor any man at all.

A year or so later, after Sandy and I moved in together, a friend asked, “If she were a man would you marry her?”

I barely hesitated before saying, “Yes!”

Not that things were perfect. I was beginning to realize that Sandy’s wounds went deeper than I thought—and my talents as healer were flimsier. Still, we were fierce advocates for each other. Together we’d created a beautiful home (with, come to think of it, much help from “our architect,” the yuppie’s interior decorator). More often than not, that home was filled with laughter and sweetness. One friend who’d spent a weekend with us commented on the balance, the grace she saw in our lives. I was touched; I felt it, too. And Corky, her dog whom I had come to love . . . Since I’d appeared on the scene, he was healthier, happier, better behaved, and—most important—wild about both of us.

And so, when I saw a notice about a discussion at the women’s center on lesbian parenting, off I went—alone, for although Sandy was interested in raising children with me, she feared that coming out, or being found out, would jeopardize her job prospects. She’d moved up in the academic ladder and had her eye on being a college president someday. Furthermore, unlike me with my appetite for hashing things out in groups, she preferred to make her decisions in private.

I had expected the discussion to be geared to lesbians considering parenting, and I had assumed that, like many feminist events, it would be an upbeat, cheerleading sort of thing. What it turned out to be was a support group for women already *doing it*, women who clearly needed support. The children being discussed—well, one teenage daughter was so intent on proving her heterosexuality that, according to her mother, she had become a “slut.” Another daughter’s best friend’s parents had prohibited their daughter from visiting. A son avoided the problem by never inviting his friends home. One woman’s ex-husband was suing for custody. All the women looked exhausted. They all had money problems.

Still, I focused on how much I liked these women, how impressed I was by their strength, integrity, and resiliency. In all cases, their children, born while one of the women was *with* a man, had expectations of normality and a relatively recent relationship to the co-parent. And none of them appeared to have the class privilege I had. This was something I knew I was supposed to feel guilty about; still, I couldn’t help thinking: Perhaps I, with my sense of entitlement, not to mention my actual entitlement, will be spared some of these women’s difficulties.

That same winter I attended a local health clinic’s introductory meeting on “artificial insemination,” as it was called then, before they changed it to “alternative insemination” because “really, there’s nothing artificial about it.” I can’t remember how I first heard about this meeting, but I was told to call the clinic and, without mentioning my purpose, ask for a certain person. Only then was I told the time and place. I was shocked by all the secrecy. It had never occurred to me that what I was contemplating was risky in any realm other than the social or emotional. I still don’t know what law I was breaking or what the clinic feared—loss of funding, bad press, chastisement from

the archdiocese?—but as I entered the specified building and located the basement stairs, I felt like a novice member of some underground cadre meeting to plan their next bombing. And I guess, in a way, I was.

It was a small gathering including a straight, single woman in her late thirties, three lesbian couples, and the two presenters, a nurse and a lawyer. The nurse spoke first:

The sperm was flown in from California. Someone met it at the airport with dry ice. It was crucial the client get to the clinic within a few hours. Of course all of this had to be carefully coordinated with one's cycle. Each insemination cost fifty dollars, usually one did two or three a cycle, and, on the average, pregnancy was achieved after about six months, but sometimes it took years. One's chances of a healthy pregnancy and baby were no better or worse with "A.I." The bank screened its donors carefully, but there were no guarantees—though their donors were not paid, which meant they were more likely to answer the questionnaire honestly. One received some basic information, including donor's height and weight, race and religion, hair and eye coloring, occupation, special talents. There were two possible arrangements—one in which the father would stay forever unknown, though you could get certain medical info, another in which the father could become known when the child reached eighteen.

Then both nurse and lawyer fielded our questions:

Yes, it was possible your child could be the half-sibling of someone else's child and never know it, and, if the two fell in (heterosexual) love and reproduced, their offspring would be a greater risk for abnormalities. Yes, although they were very cautious in their labeling, names were never used and a mix-up wasn't impossible—you could end up with a baby who was not the one you ordered. Yes, it was possible in the case of donors who never intended to identify themselves that the child could have a medical condition that necessitated genetic information beyond the basics on record, and that info would now

be difficult if not impossible to obtain. And no, she didn't know if there were Xeroxes of the records or what would happen if there was a fire in the building that housed them.

These were answers to questions I would never have thought to ask. What I thought to ask but didn't was, what do I tell my child when she asks who her father is? What do I say when she is older and wants to know who I thought I was that I could deprive her of a father? And will we—the child and I—spend the rest of our lives (or a mere eighteen years) walking down the street, into the supermarket, onto the airplane, searching the eyes of every man for some telltale sign that they belonged to her father?

Such questions told me that neither the eighteen-year wait nor the life of eternal ignorance were the right routes for me. And artificial insemination, the actual process of racing to the clinic and climbing upon a cold metal table—well, there was nothing inherently horrible about it, unless a person once had rather different images of conception. Which is all to say that although I dutifully took notes (for I could no longer assume what was out of the question now would remain that way), when I got home I began the list in the back of my little black journal. It included former lovers, men I had dated once or twice, old friends, husbands of friends, friends of friends, someone I once shared an office with, my handsome car mechanic . . . I remember trying to maintain a brainstorming mentality, but I see now I must have censored from the start. Absent, for example, is the name of my one gay male friend (the HIV test wasn't out yet) and a straight man I came close to marrying, not because I felt this would be too sticky but because of his sister's colitis, his brother's asthma, his father's blood pressure. I remember thinking that if I had married him, none of this would have prevented me from wanting his child. I also remember realizing that if Sandy and I could procreate and I was applying the same strict standards to her family history, she would

not have passed the test. Still, I told myself it was entirely appropriate I should apply different standards to a donor than a husband or mate, and when the word “eugenics” grazed my mind, I swallowed the bad taste it left.

Shortly after I entered the first round of names, I received a formal-looking envelope from someone on the list, an old college friend who had, for one night, been my lover. Though I had been sure this man wasn't for me (too intense, too wounded, too many drugs), when I saw the wedding invitation, I couldn't not, at least for a moment, think that *I* could have, *should* have been the one to marry him. More lingering was the realization that his marriage would make it less likely—no, just about impossible—that he would want to father a child with me. It seemed to mock the whole plan, exposing its full ridiculousness, its inevitable failure. I declined the invitation, never even sent a present. The longer I looked at my list, the clearer it became that really, there were hardly any genuine possibilities. Certainly, not the husbands of friends, especially not the one whose wife had just had a hysterectomy—and to think I had once viewed that as an auspicious sign! Not the ones I barely knew, or the one who had horrible teeth, or the one who would insist on the kid going to his alma mater. Not the one who might interpret a missing button or dirty face as a sign of bad mothering. Or the one who, once he had his “own” children, would forget our kid's birthday. Or the one who was probably still in love with me. Or the one who worked in a lab with blood. Or the ones who might not be absolutely, unequivocally okay on the lesbian issue.

That didn't leave many options, but in the spring of '85, after endless difficult discussions with Sandy, who was at least as scared as I about embarking on such an uncharted route, I wrote Neal (one of the old friends—straight, single, childless, first on the list) and asked if he'd consider fathering my child. He promptly replied with an antique postcard, a photo of an elegantly dressed man and woman in

a rowboat, its title something like “Lifelong Friendship.” Neal’s own words were brief. *Very flattered, very nervous, very interested.*

How perfect! I thought. The photo, its title, his message. For a few minutes at least, this no longer seemed like such a crazy idea.

That summer, I was further spurred on when I visited Lois and her family—that is, her lesbian partner, her partner’s teenaged son from when she was married, and the now four-year-old daughter whom Lois had conceived and was raising with her partner. I’m not sure what I expected, but I remember feeling relieved that the child looked normal, even pretty, and was adored by her older “brother,” who struck me as an unusually thoughtful and articulate sixteen-year-old. What I most remember was how at bedtime the daughter climbed into Lois’s partner’s lap and clung happily to her, in no way displaying surprise, confusion, or distress over the womanly breasts and smooth cheeks.

Neal and I started talking on the phone a lot. He told me he wanted to be a father, and it was looking less and less likely he’d become one in conventional circumstances. For a long time he’d had no serious girlfriends. Women claimed they preferred un-macho men, he explained, but when it came right down to it, that wasn’t true. Now, finally, he was in a serious relationship, but the woman already had two nearly grown children. I told him I wanted the child (“our” child?) to know its father and see him regularly; nevertheless, Sandy would be the other primary parent, and if anything should happen to me, she would become the legal guardian. I told him to think about it. In a subsequent call, he said he’d been thinking—and talking to friends. Most were supportive. The one who wasn’t hadn’t swayed him. He was still interested.

Though normally a sucker for rarefied cafes that served arugula and chèvre, when, about a year later, my parents were visiting from New

York, I suggested a large, noisy deli I hoped would make them feel at home (despite the small portions and inferior rye bread). They'd already endured three blows: I was involved with a woman, after her a second one, then that one and I moved in together. Even so, telling them my latest plan wasn't going to be easy. It would slam the door on any lingering hope that this was all just a phase. More important, it would slam that same door on me. Preparing for this moment in therapy, I often cried. I certainly didn't want to cry now—nor did I want to sound overly casual about the potential problems. In my previous comings out to my parents I struggled with similar conflicts, and, while proud to have shielded them from the depth of my pain and uncertainty, I also longed for them to know the real me.

In any case, they took the news calmly. The Bloody Marys I suggested probably helped. Also, my mother wasn't entirely surprised—she knew I'd visited Lois, and that had started her wondering. Quickly getting into the spirit of the thing, they surprised me by arguing in favor of an unknown donor. I figured they, of all people, would share my desire for a live and involved father, that link to heterosexuality who could provide at least a whiff of normality. But they were more concerned about the possibility of "complications." And they were not alone. Sandy had mixed feelings on the issue. My sister, her husband, and several friends with firsthand knowledge of disastrous situations involving a known father felt as my parents did. Nevertheless, I proceeded with my plans, albeit rather slowly, in part because I had my own anxieties but also because I had gotten a new teaching position and didn't think it wise to have a baby—with or without a man—my first year on the job.

About a year after our lunch at the deli and shortly after a weekend family party celebrating my father's sixty-fifth, I phoned my parents to discuss the latest baby news. I mention the celebration because we'd all gotten along well over the weekend, and my

parents had been particularly warm to Sandy who, for the first time, felt fully accepted into our family. Also, the poem I'd written for my father had been a big success. After my recitation, as my father walked toward me with open arms, oblivious to everyone else in the room including his beloved brother Karl who had traveled so far to be there, I could see that even after I had betrayed him (for that's how I thought of it—he'd given me his all so that I might become the perfect wife for a man a lot like himself), even now when it was becoming less and less likely that I'd ever come around—I was still his best girl, the apple of his eye.

I approached the phone call with optimism—I would view my parents as allies. After some chitchat, I asked for their opinions on some weighty legal and medical matters. Things seemed to be going well until my mother got off the phone to take another call and my father said, "Look, we've been dealing with this and will continue to, but I want you to know what a great disappointment it is."

"Disappointment": a relatively mild word, said in a mild tone, yet, I couldn't bear it. I grunted a good-bye and hung up.

A few minutes later the phone rang—my mother wanting to make sure I was all right. As we continued to talk, she recalled that Mother's Day when I was six or seven and we went out for lunch at Tavern on the Green. Did I remember? Yes, I remembered—unless I was just remembering because she'd mentioned this not too long ago, shortly after I'd sent her a book that included a section on lesbian daughters coming out to their mothers, a section she said she found very moving. I remembered the lushness of Central Park, the horse-drawn carriages, the tables with linen cloths and pastel flowers, the ladies in their spring dresses, men in their dark suits, the roving violinists. And yes, I remembered, more or less, what my mother most remembered: how I sat in my party dress, elbows on knees, absolutely transfixed by the couples dancing. As my mother now spoke of this

again, she choked up and I wondered exactly what was getting to her so. Surely not my unladylike position hinting at future lesbianism—I'd always been on the girlish side. More likely it was that she could not find the thread connecting that child to the woman I'd become—or even if she could, it pained her that I was never going to be a part of those handsome couples that had so entranced me.

Later that night I watched *Eyes on the Prize* on TV. There were the proud parents of Andrew Goodman, the white college student murdered by the Klan for his activism. There was Medgar Evers's wife just after her husband was killed by a white supremacist. And Fannie Lou Hamer, a poor uneducated woman speaking out so passionately. All that hope, dignity, and courage—it moved me so, tonight especially because it was my disappointed father who had taught me about Rosa Parks and *Brown v. the Board of Ed.*, and had told me, again and again, how important it is to stand up for what you believe.

The next morning, crossing the river in the car my father handed down to me, I heard Yehudi Menuhin playing Brahms's Violin Concerto, one of my father's favorites. Turning onto Storrow Drive, I shifted into fourth, and hearing the rising curlicue of strings my eyes stung at the memory of that music filling the house of my childhood—the order, the sunlight, the faith in the future.

Neal and I met in a Mexican restaurant. After a round of margaritas, I asked him: If you do marry and have other children, will you still visit "my," "our" child? If the child isn't normal, will you love it anyway? If, for any reason, I decide I want an abortion, will you protest?

He gave all the correct answers. He even offered financial help, but I told him I'd heard that might lead the courts to grant him more rights than I wanted to grant. I emphasized that Sandy would be the other primary parent.

He asked me: “What are you worried about—too much involvement or not enough?”

My answer: “Both.”

Over the next few months, Neal and I, and Sandy and I, had countless separate conversations. At one point, the three of us had dinner. I would have preferred more three-way meetings, but Sandy, though craving a child, was apprehensive about this arrangement and preferred to do her negotiating with me.

The contract Neal and I eventually signed gave him visitation rights and the right to be apprised of the child’s development—nothing else. It specified that if I should die the child would go to Sandy. It also stated that “certain clauses stated herein may not be enforceable in a court of law,” nevertheless, “the parties choose to enter into this Agreement and clarify their intent . . .”

That summer Fred Astaire died. I heard the news on the radio and was surprised by the depth of my grief. Sure, I enjoyed the guy’s skill and grace and sprightliness—but he was of my parents’ generation, certainly no heartthrob of mine. (Too skinny! Too pale!) So why this lumpy throat, these tears on their way.

“The end of an era!” The announcer declared. “Of style! Of dancing cheek to cheek!”

Ah, so that was it! Not the soloist hoofing with his cane, but Fred *together* with Ginger, gliding through their ballroom numbers—he in his top hat and tails, she in that swirly chiffon; he knowing his steps, she knowing hers. I was really going to do this thing: *Have a baby without a man*, and, apparently, I wasn’t done mourning yet.

Farewell Fred, I cried—not really, but that was the feeling. *Good-bye Steve, Jim, John, the Other Steve, Alben, Gary, Seth . . .* Surely the end of an era warranted a good cry, and I allowed myself a few

hearty sobs. *Good-bye to all the world smiling at what a fine figure we cut.*

And hello . . . ? Hello to what? Making it up as we go along?

In October of '87, I went to the Gay Rights March on Washington with Robin. When Robin and I were lovers, I would not have been up for such an event. Now that I was with Sandy, she wasn't game. I knew that if I *did* have a child, it would be easier to pass as straight. At the same time it would become even more important that I—and Sandy, too—be out and proud of who we were. Walking through a city overtaken by gay people, doing my habitual accounting of ways I was and was not like other gay people, I couldn't help noticing what seemed like a particularly high proportion of people of both genders in red glasses. *I* wore red glasses and I loved my red glasses, had always felt they were "me." So maybe that's what clinched it—all those red glasses. I was glad to be there, I identified, I belonged. I felt that way even at the mass gay "wedding," a lengthy, hodgepodge ceremony full of Christian and pantheistic rhetoric, liberation politics, flowers, and kitsch, where all the weirdest had gathered—the fattest, skinniest, hairiest, smoothest, queens, bulldykes, down and outest—even there I felt at home, felt as if this was the right, the logical place for me to be, given everything I was—an outspoken New York Jew, a graduate of progressive Oberlin, my card-carrying ACLU father's daughter, my mother's daughter, too. I wished Sandy were there with me so we could marry, but since she wasn't, I married Robin—for old time's sake and ongoing friendship. We didn't have a ring but we kissed; we threw rice.

A journal entry from late August '88: "Last night I checked my mucous—stretchy. Neal called to say we're on for Saturday. Last ses-

sion with shrink helped me decide on A.I. as opposed to intercourse. It's more important for Sandy to be there and feel part of this from the beginning. I picture us making love beforehand, and then me crying, for a change. But I can also imagine feeling happy, close, excited. And Labor Day weekend—how auspicious!”

What actually happened: It poured on our way to Vermont, but just as we drove up to Neal's funky farmhouse, the sun peeked out. On the oak kitchen table sat a vase of pink and violet wild flowers. Neal appeared with a bottle of champagne and three crystal glasses. We toasted to I don't remember what. Soon after, Neal disappeared into his room and Sandy and I sat out back with Corky. In ten minutes, maybe fifteen (it was beginning to seem like Neal might be running into difficulties), he walked out the back door and stuck up his thumb. We cheered. Sandy and I (and Corky) headed into his cool, damp bedroom with its brass bed, white comforter, tree-graced window. Neal had left his offering in a glass on the night table. I had my syringes. Never dexterous, I fumbled through the procedure. And then, we waited the requisite twenty minutes, urging the miracle to occur.

It didn't.

Not that time. Nor the next couple. But one Thursday afternoon in November (Veterans Day!) I drove up by myself feeling something in the air. Neal wasn't home yet when I arrived, and I'd had such a heady trip I took out my notebook and began writing:

I will call you A. And tell you how it was—the ride up to Vermont for your conception. Late fall, still filled with ambivalence, I imagined turning around—but midway my mood changed. The mountains? The music on the radio? The way men in passing cars looked at me with approval and I couldn't help feeling pleased? I imagined I was going to see my lover to make a baby, you. Then remembering it wasn't like that, I imagined how, years from now, I would describe the night you were conceived. I never asked my parents about my conception, but if you

want to know whether you were born of love, you were. That's what I'm trying to say. Tonight I loved my life—the darkening sky, the journey, the freedom. I stopped for gas. Self-service was crowded so I splurged. I stopped to buy wine for later, coffee for now. It started to drizzle. I felt a fleeting pain near my right hip—a little egg dropping from my ovary? I touched my breast—not swollen yet. I threw my quarters into the basket and one fell. I wanted to tell you all these little things, stories with no point except that I was here, caressing it all—the ordinary, the strange, the way it was and wasn't what I'd always wanted. Your mother—she almost missed her exit, got teary-eyed with Dvorak. And then the news: "One quarter of the N.Y. prisoners have AIDS. Texas will be the site for the \$4.4 billion atom-smasher. Bush, elected two days ago, is working to smooth out his transition to the White House." No, the world isn't going the way I'd like. Even my life—not the way I imagined. Harder. But I headed north off the highway. It got dark and began to rain. At Route 107, I made a sharp right, and Anabel's Colonial Inn was all lit up, and somehow that was enough—sublime. And you . . .

I realize now I've been thinking of you as a boy.

Two dogs are curled up beside me now in front of the woodstove. I just got off the phone with Sandy. She felt close by. You are on your way.

This is not, of course, the end of the story. That boy—we named him Sam (a regular, everyday name to offset all the rest)—is growing fast, and there's much that could be said about how it has been and how our family puts us both on the margins of conventional society and, at the same time, smack in the middle of it. In a recent fantasy I imagined a Mother's Day a few years from now. We go to Tavern on the Green and Sam, in his Sunday best, sits, enchanted, watching his two Moms dance.

But who am I kidding? I'm not that brave. And even if it became perfectly acceptable for two women to slow-dance at Tavern on the Green—it's not just the dance that holds such sway. It's the

tension between the dress and the suit, the smooth and the rough, the swinger and the one swung.

Or so I thought. Now I'm not sure.

A few weeks ago I went to a performance of ballroom dancers. To my surprise, I found all that cheek-to-cheek stuff rather dull and bloodless. At first I decided this was probably because the men were all gay. Then I read in the program that most of the couples were married—to each other! So I thought, well, maybe *that's* why it's so desexualized. Then the tangos began: first women tangoing with women, then men tangoing with men, eventually, the usual. But when the curtain fell, even the straight woman I was with agreed that the same-sex couples were the most fun to watch. The odd thing was, nothing seemed odd about them. There was no cross-dressing; the women all wore black sheaths and high heels, the men tight, black suits; no partner seemed to lead the other; and yet—how they sizzled!

So who knows?

Here in our cabin in the country, we have time and air and mountains. Sometimes we put on Sam's red plastic Sony cassette player and dance in the kitchen—Sandy, Sam, and I, all together or in some combination or Sam alone—and then I catch Sandy's eye and we smile and I think: I'm not missing anything, this is the whole thing.

