A FAIRY'S TALE: THE FRACTURED ROAD TO FATHERHOOD

by

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INTRODUCTION: MASSAGING PURE GAY MALE MEMOIR INTO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

I envisioned this project with the grand and ultimately naïve desire of writing a gay man’s complete, coming-of-age memoir. I foresaw an all-encompassing, orientation-based memoir that would harness the literary traditions and witticism of great gay storytellers like Edmund White, Gore Vidal, and David Leavitt, imitate the social conscience of Paul Monette, incorporate the raunch of Andy Zeffer, and follow the structural approaches on memoir that Paul John Eakin, Thomas G. Couser, and Jill Ker Conway instruct. A pure memoir, based largely on my gay life thus far, appeared to be a reasonable initial subject choice.

This project started out as more of a panoramic study of a gay man’s childhood recollections, lessons learned towards manhood, and the anticipated maturity and seasoning that age and wisdom make possible. I soon discovered that the enormity of this project’s scope was not merely unmanageable, but it also lent itself to a kind of dithering unworthy of the detailed treatment a memoir requires. It also lacked a strong *raison d’être* that would rise to the originality and focal importance sorely needed to critically justify and sustain itself.

In time, and as a result of real-life circumstances transpiring, a whittled target for this project presented itself in my decision to become a father as a single, gay man by participating in both the *in-vitro* fertilization
and gestational surrogacy procedures. Once these were achieved successfully, their significance made the choice to tailor this project into a more limited artistic expression and offering of experiential insights—and their implications—rather self-evident.

Instead of a foray into the basic, linear dramas associated with a gay youngster coming to grips with his sexuality, a single, gay, man making his way towards parenthood proved itself a more juicy and tempting target, and provided a vehicle and context to craft the story of this unique yet shared human journey, gay or straight. This new focus created an opportunity to write about history, politics, egalitarianism, and justice, all still couched in a gay man’s memoir in broader terms, while not drifting astray from the more paramount story of a man’s manipulation of his own destiny towards fatherhood. Apertures for critiques on politics, religion, gender, and socio-economic issues often opened and presented themselves for analysis as well.

However, soon after the narrowed topic coalesced, choices were made that removed this project from the realm of pure memoir. I made an immediate aesthetic decision when beginning this project that some might consider controversial in treating many of the events pertaining to my memoir as fair game for fictionalization. While another stylistic decision was made to draw subjective lines in order to avoid cuteness and sensationalization while dramatizing these events, some vignettes and
crucial plot points throughout this project have been ‘tarted-up’ or just plain invented out of whole cloth for the purposes of a reader’s entertainment or what Janet Burroway identified as “the audience’s delight” in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (27).

As a writer in general, I tend to practice what Bronwyn T. Williams titularly identified in his influential essay *Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story: A Work for Three Voices.* As Truman Capote adopted and achieved in crafting his novel *In Cold Blood,* a new genre was identified and could thrive under Williams’ argumentative terms. Capote negotiated a tightrope that required him to observe integrity in recounting the grisly facts and essences of a real-life, multiple-homicide in rural Kansas while still toying with the sublime in tantalizing the reader’s artistic senses beyond the story’s ‘factual’ limitations and *ennui.* His commitment to literary conventions and style seemed aware of, but not necessarily obedient to, the limitations and restraint of reporting facts.

Fact and fiction can harmoniously coexist under Capote’s premise here, though his invented technique has its critics, especially in the case of *In Cold Blood,* when real-life atrocities were in essence fictionalized to varying degrees. A longtime Capote profiler Jack O’Connor, in a *New York Times* article entitled “How Capote Blurred Border Between Fact and Fiction” famously questioned whether or not Capote’s “blurred border between fact and fiction...lost[t] sight of the victims” in favor of an ornate
orgy with the English language that Capote routinely employed to amuse and edify his audiences. In responding to O'Connor, I argue that each real-life story being fictionalized should be evaluated on its unique content basis; the nature of its subject matter and explorable literary territory a writer's chief concern.

In that spirit, this project might best be referred to as autobiographical fiction and not memoir, and as such becomes a dramatized, often madcap account of syncing my formative sexual orientation predicaments with the unorthodox manner in which I later became a father. It's certainly not interested in trivializing murder victims' plights or other heavy-handed and vital matters of crime and punishment by any means. While this project's theme or intent is not throwaway or lightweight, it is arguably a sunny tale made sunnier through the literary liberties I've taken and the creative writing techniques I've learned and applied to it through my undergraduate and graduate literary training.

An enlightened, specially-trained audience might itself generate questions of narrative authenticity when reading and I found myself at odds with how to project a first person narrator that is certainly 'me' but not necessarily me. Amateur eyes or ears might not even question whether the 'I' within this project is the author proper, but a seasoned reader might, which is why I considered framing this project in the safer, third-person
narrative. However, I quickly realized that the deeply potent and personal content made anything but an ‘I’ proposition unfair to both its author and potential audience. Authorial ownership was essential to its authenticity and sincerity, even on fictional terms, I concluded.

The subject matter is unvarnished, unflattering, and often disturbingly coarse and gross. But I’ve learned through scholarly and artistic research that this territory is exactly what’s in need of a good airing out, outside the privacy and confines of the homosexual closet. Indeed, Paul Monette writes in Becoming a Man that “the closet equals no story—always” (23). While I might disagree and argue of the necessity in my choice to occasionally ‘hide’ (the reader determines at which points) behind a pretend narrator, I do not shy from Monette’s idea of dramatizing what’s hidden behind the closet, ugly or not. In the case of this project, ugly events abound, ugly in the context of eccentric occurrences, and are dramatized as such.

A total divorce from the unnamed ‘I’ narrator within this autobiographical fiction piece, by approaching it as third-person, would largely sever me from actual events that impacted the direction of my life. Jill Ker Conway instructs in When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography that I need not take the extreme disavowing measures of reporting from a totally fictional narrative perch. She notes that an autobiographical narrative, even fictionalized, in a postmodern literary age
grants writers latitude that is free from the kinds of inhibitions that previously shackled them from tackling touchy issues, even in this modified, first-person context (3). The chance to fictionalize the experiences I own as a single, gay male raising my biological daughter makes the task of first-hand demystification of this material to the reader an ‘I’ literary proposition.

Conway also introduces the idea of “agency” in autobiography, and, while she does not connect this literary technique to sexual orientation, its application in the gender terms she identifies in her essay is instructive. Women, Conway notes, and I was surprised to read, tend to use memoir as nurturing projectiles of female “agency” while men use it as a vehicle to express their abilities as male “agency” problem solvers and world-beaters (5). My marching orders from Conway were to pinpoint gay “agency” rhetorical opportunities in this story. Also, when measured against her gender “agency” hypothesis, this project supports Conway’s posits on a man’s writing motives. It is occasionally swashbuckling and often overtly self-aware of its own ‘maleness,’ gay notwithstanding. I wish I could report that I used my gender “agency” in advance and knowingly conformed to Conway’s argument in this project, but it was in fact realized in my frequent post-writing reads and dissemination of its many (hopefully) achieved themes.
To the issue of applying gay "agency" strategies textually, Conway does note, as does Monette, how a person’s sexual persuasion paints everything by shading a narrator’s choices and views of how he or she dramatizes scenes and handles characterization. Walking down the street? No—a gay man walking down the street. Drinking a cup of coffee? No—a gay man drinking a cup of coffee. Picking out clothes, painting houses, preparing a last will and testament, watching a football game—all their details and disclosures are shaped by sexual orientation. Conway’s "agency" is applied and demonstrated routinely in this project, as many scenes are ‘shaded’ to incorporate the narrator’s frequent preoccupation with and application of homosexuality to all things. This orientation obsession then typically pivots to various profound (and even mundane) events that are forever ‘tainted’ by this overt, strategic sex fixation.

The question of what realm autobiographical fiction belongs to (political, historical, literary, academic, arts and entertainment) needs to be answered critically. Should I be satisfied with an ersatz autobiography label as its sole paradigm and singular sphere of influence? Paul John Eakin in *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* suggests that categorizing (traditional) autobiography is problematic and must be considered when formulating its purpose. He suggests that autobiography and memoir will ultimately belong to the realm of “imaginative literature”
and the audience will in the end tap into its perceived pragmatic value on its own terms (23).

Eakin provides a doubly reassuring argument for this project. It proposes that an audience expects a little indulgence and creative mischief from the writer, and it gives him or her a little fast-and-loose leeway in relieving the drama from being rendered as it actually (and often boringly) happened. It also proposes that the realm or genre that this project belongs to is more free-floating, fickle, or voluntary than it appears. This piece arguably engages all of Eakin's listed realms, so perhaps it belongs to one, some, or all of them. This becomes the reader's decision.

How the reader uses the information within this project is also an important critical consideration. G. Thomas Couser, in *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* puts forward the idea of autobiography as a utility, and forces the author to answer the question of how it should be "applied" to the reader (4). Is it a product of limited personal experience or an attempt to convey genuine authority in the subject matter under the microscope to anyone reading it? Does the message necessarily need to be scientifically and absolutely true to preserve its teachable potential? Is there a distinction between truth and "autobiographical truth?" These questions were best answered by my writing a piece which teeter-totters between the empirical material it factually presents and a fun, wild story it fictionally portrays.
Couser references Michael Ryan and his observation that autobiographical truth is “produced by a rhetorical and metaphysical system which promotes a notion of privately possessed, ideal truth detached from history and language” (24). I concur that an autobiography is a singular interpretation of events and experiences, not gospel or prototype; this project is hardly allegorical. Couser also cites French philosopher Michael Foucault’s idea of autobiography as a “disciplinary technology” and echoes Foucault’s warning that it should not be solely an exercise in “self-mutilation” but rather a balancing act between dismantling taboos and exploiting the mutual pain gays and lesbians share through dramatic exploits that aid in the tension and conflict (25). This project adheres to this “balancing act” by having a narrator share his pain of negotiating his own homosexuality and the problems it causes, yet not exploiting it irresponsibly for dramatic purposes or at the expense of the greater gay cause.

Tone and word choice were serious concerns when writing this story. Since sexuality, masturbation, and the reproductive organs themselves were to be featured quite prominently by virtue of their very roles within this topic, a host of gay male authors were researched and enjoyed in my Independent Study, and I discovered much of their work’s content overlapped with my initial ideas of exploration. The creative result of this extensive profile was a hybrid narrative voice that synthesizes the
styles and techniques of Edmund White, Paul Monette, Gore Vidal, David Leavitt, David Sedaris, and Andy Zeffer. Each contributed to an achieved fusion of vocal flavor within the project’s pages that stands as a mega-modeling of the gay male memoir and short story fiction traditions that I’ve learned and applied from these authors.

Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* was an influential piece to this project. His experiences, told from an early 20th century vantage point, echo my own. From his aloof father, his loathsome mother, his preoccupation with masculinity and sports, his locker room crushes, his love-hate relationship with religion, his social isolation and imprisonment, White and I share so many common experiences associated with a young man coming of age on hostile grounds.

His admission that “[he] was a sissy” (9), his equating an unachieved serenity with a “lover who would take him away” (39), his sexual awakening story of fooling around with his friend Tommy in the washroom (116-120), nearly all of White’s musings jogged my memory, prompting and inspiring me to revisit the scars of a scared gay young man repositioning himself outside the heavy door of the closet that so safely cocoons gay men from the dangers that await them outside of it. This project reflects White’s rhetorical elegance and steel-trapped memory.

White turned to Buddhism for relief as family and friends were eventual dead-ends, and I admired the passage where he conned his father
into sending him to an all-boys school when he wasn’t “turning out as he should” (143) because of his constant association with his mother. He needed to be “around men,” he told his father, the amiable dupe, who fell for this disingenuous line of thinking immediately. White’s memoir was limited to his teenage years and it provided me with a great checklist of boyhood and adolescent moments that required dramatic treatment in my fictional piece. He reminded me of the luxury that a gay autobiographical viewpoint can often claim. It can be an almost unimpeachable window, since its primary feature is a wizened insight of being gay, a school boy, and a seasoned narrator now old enough to tell how it all went down, then.

Paul Monette in his memoir Becoming a Man proved quite instructive to this project as well, especially when pondering the greater applications involved. He suggests that perhaps the things that happened to ‘us’ (gay men) from birth on are visited upon all boys and young men, independent of their sexual orientation (45). It isn’t the experiences themselves, rather the engrained homosexual “painting” Conway referred to as the “gay agency” that transforms these gay-centric experiences into more familiar and accessible material to gay and non-gay readers alike. Monette’s piece certainly conforms to this idea, as his work includes almost required references to ‘straight boy’ childhoods, religious conflicts, schoolyard and classroom discoveries, masturbation references, anonymous sexual encounters, disposable relationships, and the booze,
drugs, and promiscuity the gay lifestyle often romanticizes. The term ‘required references’ surfaces due to their ubiquity within the pieces.

From Monette I discovered decadence, a devilish willingness to engage rather deviant sexual content in clever ways. White mastered flowery, inoffensive terminology in carefully crafted brushstrokes; Monette comes along and simply splatters the canvas. In a chapter entitled “Kite” where he details the shame of his first (gay) masturbation session, his genital acrobatics scorch the pages, alternating between the somber and scintillating seamlessly. Monette also beautifully captures the unsatisfactorily temporary trait of gay relationships; my story similarly taps into this. Finally, Monette riffs on his own church’s rejection of his gay awakening, and his writings model much of my project’s preoccupation with the practical inability of being gay and being a good-standing member of a ‘big religion.’

Gore Vidal proved instructive, as in one long chapter of this project I attempt a 2010’s homage to his tragic story of two young homosexual men in forbidden love during the 1940’s. In his *The City and the Pillar and Seven Early Stories*, Vidal trailblazers with his largely personal pieces that were intended to engage the “superstitions about sex in [his] native land” (19). Vidal didn’t flinch at the ‘scandalous’ perception the public conceivably expressed. He instead wrote about what
he lived and knew through “his own two eyes”—an autobiographical imperative.

David Leavitt, a University of Florida English professor and acclaimed gay author, likewise influenced this project heavily. Selections from his *Collected Stories* often inspired the commentary and self-analysis contained within my story. His short stories are poignant springboards whose essence I often harnessed within this project’s frequent vignettes. Their range is broad yet always accessible and heartening to my story’s cultural study and asides to the reader in bringing points “home.”

In “My Marriage to Vengeance,” Leavitt tells the story of a lesbian’s invitation to and attendance of her former lover’s wedding years later.

In “Gravity,” Leavitt takes readers to a gift shop and offers a short, heartbreaking moment between a son dying from AIDS and his overbearing Jewish mother.

In a longer and more reflective short story, “When You Grow to Adultery,” he explores two committed thirty-something lovers, one having an extra-relationship affair with his partner’s knowledge, the other permitting it, but growing to loathe it altogether. The action takes place on the couple’s trip to the cheating lover’s parent’s house for Thanksgiving. Leavitt’s ability to capture dialogue between gay men is so remarkable and impressive.
"Why are you mad at me?" the cheating lover asks his boyfriend inside the car as the boyfriend picks him up from having sex with the other guy.

"Because you always look so happy [when you come back from your lover's house]. Then you fall into your stupor, you fall asleep, or you want to go to the movies and sleep at his house all over again. Jack gets the best of you; I get you lying next to me snoring" (261).

A goal of this project was to imitate the dialogical truth-ringing David Leavitt captures when his characters speak.

Another David, David Sedaris, was also profiled and considered when identifying a literary tradition to mimic for this project. His essay-style memoir *Naked* provided impressive material to analyze. Sedaris, another established gay writer and performer wrote a short story called "A Plague of Tics" where he "is finally forced to face his naked self in the mirrored sunglasses of a lunatic" (45). At this crucial moment, he defers introspection and instead "picks potato chip crumbs from his pubic hair and wonders what it [life as a gay man] all means" (45). Sedaris's offbeat and quirky choices and insights licensed me to be likewise irreverent and sometimes crass in the things I chose to dramatize in this project, and the way they were characterized.

Finally, I studied the gay man's equivalent of a trashy, Jackie Collins romance novel in Andy Zeffer's *Going Down in La-La Land* in the
hopes of exposing myself to racier content for dramatic inspiration. His viewpoint, much more cosmopolitan as a good-looking, aspiring actor living in L.A., offered a rough and raunchy perspective I was keen on incorporating into this project. Zeffer, a self-proclaimed “circuit boy” describes a self-destructive young life of bars, clubs, and raves as being worthy of dramatic treatment, and does so within the lens of an older man’s head-shaking regret of a past life lived. Zeffer’s focus in each chapter taps into some familiar territory for urban gay men, but more foreign curiosity for the uninitiated gay and straight readers alike.

In “Beer and the Billionaire” he discusses the dilemma that nearly every good-looking, 20-something gay man faces—the opportunity to strike a domestic and financial bargain with a man “of a certain age” for free rent, unlimited wardrobe, and a hefty entertainment and restaurant budget in exchange for a sexual relationship (73). Zeffer also channels the social and moral conscience of Monette and White here, often contemplating the dangers of gay, male sexual intercourse in a larger city in the 1990s—one wrong anal move was a death sentence in those days that the straight world, on a comparative scale, rarely if ever considers.

This project is a product of negotiated autobiographical fiction that critically embraces a host of literary traditions, critical arguments, and established works of scholars and artists whose techniques and theories were the imitative objective this craftwork intended to project.
WORKS CITED


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CHAPTER ONE: BLOWING RASPBERRIES

A few years ago I found myself on a mid-afternoon grocery store pilgrimage. It was the kind of trek that involved getting up and out of the house just in order to say I was someplace other than the couch, staring at the TV screen playing who-cares-what starring who-remembers-whom.

Waiting in line to pay for my replacement duster feathers, shoe polish, and mint-flavored dental floss, I noticed a handsome young guy grasping his little boy’s swinging bare feet from the shopping cart with his hands and blowing raspberries on their soles to the child’s squinted, nose-in-the-air delight.

He couldn’t have been more than eight months old, I remembered—the kid not the dad. It was the kind of scene where I would’ve normally found no novelty in pointing out a few months earlier. But at the time, I was toying with the idea of becoming a father through the surrogacy and in-vitro fertilization (IVF) process. My eyes sparkled at the two of them, father and son, rejoicing in a stolen moment significant only to them, and to busybodies like me, the pining and jealous onlooker who so wanted for himself what they were experiencing together right then.

Standing in line and swinging my Guy Basket like a lazy pendulum, I was a single, 37-year-old, gay guy from Nowhere Particular, Wisconsin, taking his first unrealized baby steps towards a journey to
become a daddy. I rarely, even today, take the time to smell the roses and reflect on how rare and frankly oddball what I'd wanted to undertake really must’ve seemed to most average people when squaring their sensibilities with what I did.

The desire, as a functionally unmarried man, to take me and whatever dwindling tadpoles I had left in my balls and enter the assisted reproduction arena, along with a gestational surrogate and an anonymous egg donor, in a faraway city, with no guaranteed results, and make a baby, all while going broke whether it actually worked or not. Whew. Such a desire does tend to read at first blush not only long-winded but as being a little off my tastefully lacquered rocker, doesn’t it?

For every supporter of my baby-making plan I've encountered along the way I’ve met two or three confused and bewildered detractors, but in the end all that mattered was what I thought about it, and if I had the money and mentality to see it through, it was nobody’s business but mine. Oh, yeah, and some custody judge. I chose to believe that wanting to become a dad was good and proper, gay be damned, often out of sheer necessity to ensure my own daily sanity to sustain the vision and the potential it might bring.

And perhaps, if I needed another reason, it might have been to actually bear witness to that cringing saw of miracles happening to guys of even varying deservedness like me, and that, when my head and my heart
and my hard-on were all in the right place at the right time in an enchanting Minneapolis masturbatorium—the kind of anti-wholesome image that Norman Rockwell might take a gun to his head and throw his paint brushes into a chipper-shredder in protest over—a great thing in the world came about in the form of my daughter, Rosie.

Put mildly, making a baby in a manner where no one is on the receiving end of a fully loaded man-gun ain’t easy. Vaginaless procreation is hardly an instant pudding transaction, and would make the idea of wanting to become a dad this way unthinkable, its logistics preposterous.

But, damn my torpedo, I went along and tried it anyway. It was the biggest risk of my riskless existence to that point, and yet the abdication of its attempt would’ve branded me a failure at life, so I told myself. The only failure that comes in life is the failure to try. I’d so hoped for the winds to be at my back, for medicine and mysticism to converge and shine upon me, but one never knows with these things. So many people never taste the sweetness of assisted reproduction’s temperamental fruits, and I’d hoped to get lucky on the only crack I had at this.

Baby Rosie was crafted back in a batch of blurry days of delicious mystery where things didn’t necessary turn out as planned no matter how much I wanted them. Ask anybody and they’ll tell you that the science of
IVF is cold and thoughtless, indiscriminate in its discrimination. What happens, happens, desires and noble intentions of any fertility challenged couples or singles be damned—it simply doesn’t give a shit and spoils some, stiff’s others for no apparent reason, and in my case I had one bite at the apple and hoped to catch it on a good day.

No one can will an IVF baby into existence, no matter how skilled a reproductive endocrinologist’s hands or how self-deserving or worthy people fancy themselves of having children—including me. It’s all a goddamn crapshoot, an accidental occurrence; no matter how successful the medicine is the moodiness of the procedure always reigns. It’s a lucky strike that plays favorites, breaks hearts and shatters lives along its way. That’s the truth about IVF and don’t let anybody tell you otherwise—they’re just full of clam dip.
CHAPTER TWO: WELCOME TO THE NUTHOUSE

I'd decided that the time was right to go out and make a baby without having sexual intercourse with a woman, without a partner to lean on and help raise it, and without a clue of how to get any of it done, so the problems were complex and plentiful. Making a kid without having hoo-hah sex is hardly blasé. The orgasm that was needed took place in a padded room.

The confusion and complications in procuring a no-sex-involved kid were numerous enough pre-birth, but they would endure and continue to needle me even after my child was born. For example, in what should have been after-birth after-glow, legal drama and custodial uncertainty managed to piss on everyone’s parade. It took more than twelve weeks after Rosie arrived for me to get in front of a judge, only to have him proclaim that my case was so weird that in his county, one that he boasted had proudly stood for over 150 years, it had never decided the legality of a single, gay man donating his sperm to an unknown egg donor to create an embryo that was transferred into a gestational surrogate that carried the baby to term but was not its biological mother. When I write it all out like this, who can blame him for being spooked?

But it made me realize, standing about two-inches tall in that courtroom, eking out requests through my attorney, that this Dorothy wasn’t in Kansas anymore, no matter what year it was. In the sterile halls
of justice even the supposed end-prize, the cherry-on-top sanctioning moment of Rosie becoming my legal-schmeagal daughter, wasn’t as blissful as I’d imagined. It was instead awkward, with a head-scratching magistrate who didn’t know whether to eat his gavel or shit the bench. Hardly the gauzy, Hollywood money shots we both deserved.

I knew I wanted to chronicle my baby adventures from their beginning. The voyage to single, gay parenthood might have been grisly and grueling, but a raconteur’s play-by-play of events might someday bemuse and edify someone, I thought. I took to scribbling down facts and feelings that bubbled up and kept them in a spiral notebook, never thinking I’d revisit them again, nostalgically. Why wax upon what didn’t end up working out, right? The journal was a Rorschach of rhetoric that I could flip through like a series of animated stick drawings, crumbling in effigy as bad news surely awaited me; it was only a matter of time, of course.

But before things couldn’t work, they first had to transpire. That sounds strange. The whole doings I remember as occasionally sticky, smelly, joyless, nerve-racking, thankless, expensive, risky, subversive, and maddeningly stressful. My notebook told of my plunging syringes into the doughy buttocks of my gestational carrier while we were on the road, staying at hotels, or a daily rubbing of the Buda-like fertility refrigerator magnet we all swore by, or handwringing over the every-other-day blood
beta numbers from the doctor’s office, or the intensity of the red lines in pee-pee pregnancy tests in our early, amateur days of inquiry.

Our obsessions to shoehorn this baby into our lives were epic, their syntheses beyond rational, from the thousand-dollar pharmaceuticals to the voodoo trinkets to the pre-embryo transfer pineapple juice cocktails, to taking the smoother back roads home after the insemination instead of the bumpier highways, the bizarre held no end. Rain dance rituals and old fashioned prayer were typical, a clinging to whatever ceremonial edge they might provide us. While our hearts were in the right place, we excused our minds for a few months and plodded on superstitiously, the impartial renderings of fact had no place here; this was blind, wacky faith.

In many ways, the surrogacy trip felt like a constant two-year, low-grade heart attack, a tense drive filled with dramatic phone calls, positive and negative test results, pacing, time frozen, waiting for the always ‘next step’ which could result in a start-from-scratch failure. To catalogue the pure daily stress I lived through was to hop on a roller coaster my blood pressure probably wouldn’t let me sign on for another ride again. Each successful hurdle tasted so temporarily sweet, one domino of tension falling after another, strung-out, building. It was maddeningly glacial, a pleasurable and unexpectedly masochistic temptress, her irresistible crescendos of good news here and there kept us alive and hoping.

When Rosie first emerged from life’s most crucial, yet to me
unfamiliar canal, I backslapped myself a little too hard as she slid out the other side. In the moment I’d forgotten I’d had help along the way, bringing her to bear, yet those around me sure didn’t forget, and boy did I hear about it. I got cocky, and I didn’t consider that the magical idols and faith-soaked investments those surrounding me held dearly and solely explanatory for my baby being born—like God, for instance—mattered. Here I was, all this time privately placing my chips on hard science and this crazy thing called medicine and people around me were effusing praise on the mystical, on theology’s favor as a substitute for the grinding phone calls, road trips, and disappointing agony turn after turn before things eventually turned my way.

I got pissy, irked. In every way possible a human being can engineer another I made that child, directed and produced her for Chrissakes. I was stamping my feet on the inside, God’s brigade somehow trumping my moment of glory, my sweat equity. But it didn’t take long, maybe an hour or so after Rosie was born and I held her, shirtless, skin-to-skin, her head resting on my bare chest for the first time, that I gave my heart a try and sent rationality packing. It felt good not having all the answers as to how exactly she’d gotten here as we rocked back and forth, her sweet breath and squinting eyes upon me, the improbable path of nirvana and possibility she and she alone had managed to pave in front of my very eyes. I don’t doubt God anymore. I just continue to have my
doubts about people and how they use God in such ungodly ways—
pimping him out in order to fuel their own pet prejudices.

It was just plain luck that I’d never encountered any
ultraconservative stick-up-their-asses. The kinds that, to them, being gay
was a sort of parental disqualification, though if anyone ever got in my
face, I’d promptly say to them that I don’t think they were qualified to be
parents if they were going to raise their kids to be closed-minded idiots
like them. Why the fuck would the world need any more of their lot? But it
never came down to that, thankfully. I could’ve cared less what people
said in private about me and my baby and I couldn’t have controlled
what’s said behind closed doors between bigots anyways, but shoulder-to-
shoulder, I was always supported and praised by the people I told. I’m
spoiled that way.

I guess I owe part my good fortune for not acquainting with
people possessing the open-mindedness of a pair of bedroom slippers in
the first place, really. People I barely knew at work or in the
neighborhood would learn of my impending fatherhood and autonomically
ask how my wife was coming along. Depending on how well I knew them
or how much energy I had at the moment, I often would sigh and choose
easy the easy route. Wife and baby were doing just fine.

I liked the strange duality of playing it straight, too. The idea that
people believed that ordinary coitus crafted Rosie weirdly pleased me,
though it probably shouldn’t have. It was as if I wanted the world hear me roar ‘look at me, I sexed a woman and made a kid’—a most unsettling utterance to be sure. But the concept satisfied me. Part of me wanted to project to the world that this murky engineering I’d dangled in front of strangers was in fact not the perverted parade people thought it was, rather a wholesome, heterosexual inevitability.

I wanted to be the normal, straight guy who fucked his way to a kid of his own, an everyday humper blowing his load inside of a woman to create new life like so many people do. But it was a lie that I could only achieve by beating stacked, straights-only reproductive ground rules. Besides, from my view, the benefits of heterosexuality realized are making children, not love. Don’t get me started on love. It’s a feel-good, one-word redaction that two people reduce their relationship to. It’s a slippery concept that inoculates people from the guilt of lust and pleasure. A child is the hard reality of the procreative act, not love. I’d slowly started down the path of beating that system, cracked the code and bypassed the order of offspring operations.

I wanted a kid of my own, yet, with the homosexuality and whatnot, really didn’t want to partake in the smooth, vagina goodness of a woman. Call me irresponsible. I was a cranky child who wanted that box of Lucky Charms stacked with all marshmallow bits but no cereal, a peanut butter sandwich, no crusts, Cracker Jack with no nuts. In my mind
I knew it naughty yet still satisfying at the same time. My friends think I’m bisexual, but I assure them they’re wrong.

In my mind, I kind of wanted everyone to think that Rosie came into the world through good old fashioned, regular American, penis-in-pussy sex—it’s as plain and perplexing as that. Oh, I knew that someday I’d have to tell my daughter that she came into being within in a sea of petri dishes and incubators, and not as a result of daddy entering mommy in a wild tussle of passion and romance, but for now, the heterosexual lie served its purpose for her daddy.

I obviously liked girls, and that’s important to other like-minded dads, especially the cute ones. There was a baby in that stroller and I was right behind it, hands on the keel, so of course I fucked a chick. Hot straight dads would fall for my act all the time, letting me get close enough to them, as we sat together on park benches at playgrounds, close enough for me to smell their aftershave and their ball sweat through their gym shorts as our children played. I could see the waistbands of their underpants and their nipples through their t-shirts. Secret leering over other dads was a great perk of being a dad, I quickly learned. Could the nut house be far behind?
CHAPTER THREE: LIFE AS A COUCH

I became a father on the couch.

And not the fun way most dads become dads on couches, either.

For the rich guys becoming dads includes a romantic roll in the hay after a bistro dinner of sauces and fine wines on a feather-down comforter or canopy. For the poor guys, a pants-at-their-ankles quickie, probably after Burger King, complete with beaded brows and swirls of cigarette smoke in the trailer park after the clawing and scratching is over. I started the process of becoming a dad in the unenviable supine position, alone. It was a cream-colored mid-century couch. The weather was breezy, a windows-open afternoon in early May, and as a flickering laptop rested upon my stomach, I feverishly surfed for the perfect website to make my dream of becoming a father come true, as if it could hold such power.

I’d known my share of couches over the years. The principal’s wicker office couch from my Catholic grade school comes to mind. The child psychologist’s cloth-style sofa back when I was about ten rings a bell. My mother’s solution to my dilly-dallying approach to cleaning my room as a child was sending me to a therapist, one of her many disproportionate reactions I dealt with growing up. The therapist ended up bitching (loudly, as I remember listening in two doors down) at my mom for having no sense, and that I wasn’t even close to being crazy or a problem child; treating me was stupid.
In fact, mom was the only one that got treated that day. The shrink, I think her name was Dr. See, gave her a valium and a scolding. All that managed to become of that forgettable episode was my eventual transformation into a neat-freak, because of my mother, I suspect, under the predicate of a particularly terrorizing event that went like this.

A few weeks before our trip to the shrinky, I left a damp towel on the bathroom floor. I’m sure no other absent-minded ten-year old had ever dared such an infraction. My mother’s reaction to this was to teach me a lesson in the consequences of disorder, the price of chaos and uncleanliness, as she proceeded to tear my pre-teen shrine of a bedroom to shreds, as she ripped my prized Garfield posters from the wall, yanked the well-anchored shelves with my models, stuffed animals, and paltry trophies right from the walls in a swirl of plaster-clouded dust, and brandished a hammer to my fish tank, swinging and draining the water and glass into shards onto the carpet I was told to mop up before dad got home.

Later on in life, I’d eventually lose boyfriends to my obsession to order, and the worst part was, in an ongoing slap, my mother still denies these events ever happened. But Dad knows they did, and in any case, I leave the impact of that day’s events to others and let them decide how I got so cleaning crazy. Let them evaluate as I quietly take to folding
towels in the corner, smoothing them to perfection, while they decide who
is telling the truth and who isn't.

But back to couches—I was no stranger to couch sex either. Years
ago, strutting about in my peacock phase, feathers and legs spread
brightly, I defiled with a repugnant relish my fair share of couches. It's
kind of an underground thing, and I hasten to mention it out of sheer
embarrassment, but for gay men, it's a secret practice and a mark of pride
to discretely cum on every couch we possibly can, preferably in the most
sexually acrobatic means possible, the trajectory product of a risqué romp.
It's like a lion king lifting his leg and pissing on a bush or a palm tree,
unashamed and instinctual—the more public and widely used the couch,
the better.

I like to advise my nearest and dearest to always think twice before
sitting on that unverifiable couch or chair in a hotel or library, or even that
cushioned church pew or padded bench in the department store dressing
room—we have no shame. Unless a black light is standard carrying gear
for them that they can flash side-to-side in the darkness to confirm the
state of things, always remember, the gay guys could've been on that
couch first.

Now, as to that couch I'd mentioned laying on in May, it was Baby
Rose's true starting point in life. If she's ever to look back and reflect on
where she got her start, hers was on this couch. It was parked in a small
sitting room on the second floor of the two-story Dutch colonial house I lived in. This house was an uneasy cross between French country and *Pottery Barn*, as if I didn’t make quite enough money or possess enough designer know-how to make every room look like the fancy store display I wanted them to be, but I came poor man’s close.

This couch’s claim to fame would be how it served as a resting and thinking place to unlocking the secret of how to make a baby without actually having intercourse with a female. I laid there not getting laid for hours thinking about things, days passing, before and after work, struggling to develop a plan with no knowledge, experience, or ideas to guide me. There we were, the two of us (the bond between man and couch is neither casual nor to be trifled with) wondering how I could become a daddy and make a baby.

Considering the one-horse hamlet I lived in, travel was certainly going to be required. I’d researched enough to know that the most successful, *Nutty Professor* kind of medical equipment was housed in the likes of Chicago, Minneapolis, St Louis, but nowhere near my back yard. Me, the couch, and *Google* spent the better part of three weeks together unlocking the secrets of how to make a baby under my reproductive provisions, as the *Pop Tart* wrappers began piling up, along with the empty soda cans and layers of dust. Time seemed to alternately creep and whizz, paradoxically and without reason, and likewise no measurable
progress came of these couch efforts, either. I did manage to build a wall of empty Girl Scout cookie boxes, though. It looked like a beer can pyramid sitting on the window sill.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINGER IN THE DIKES

The weeks of couching began after I'd just come back from a meeting with a pair of lesbian friends who were interested in finding a sperm donor, and I managed to work my way onto their daddy radar. They thought maybe it was their time to start a family and they were in search of ripe candidates. They were two happy-go-lucky dikes going tree-to-tree, sniffing and tugging for the juiciest, low-hung fruit on the market, and since they were former pupils from a creative writing course I taught at the Y a few years back, we agreed to a teatime chat.

We met for coffee downtown in a café so gay-friendly, it went by the name *Gay Friendly Café*. The lesbians were good but not great friends of mine who slid into their hetero-quivalent roles with remarkable ease. One was of the typical lipstick persuasion, a cocktail-dress-and-heels kind of girl with long, blonde flowing hair, always sipping her ceramic latte cup daintily, lady-like. Crystal was her name. Crystal's lover was the classic grease-monkey, overalls and pigtails, belching and farting her way through our meeting like a hog-wrestling farmhand. She snarled over her hot chocolate in its paper to-go cup and spoke in spurs and cuts. Her name was Bertha, but shortened it to Bert.

They were an interplanetary mismatch but most definitely in love, the anti-couple shoehorned into life's overlap of trust and lust, and in my singleness I was kind of jealous of them, but not the mechanics of their
sex, which suggested a silk-meets-sandpaper proposition. For the record, lesbians frustrate me. Here they were, women—free and right and proper to fuck and love all the men they wanted to society’s approval and delight—and they chose to fuck each other? I’ve tried and tried to get a handle on it and I just don’t get lesbians. They don’t know how good they could have it. Sometimes I wished I were a lesbian.

Gay men and lesbians are in reality two unsuspectingly curious, warring factions; subcultural rivals who passive-aggressively put up with but secretly can’t stand each other’s guts. I blame it on Freud and such. Neither camp can stand the other occupying its mannerisms and sexual space turned-about. Ask lesbians what they think about fags and they’ll tell the same thing—they can’t stand them. Gay men-lesbian catfights can be pretty ugly and hissy to watch.

This meeting was not a success as it turned out, though we parted ways the same acquaintance at which we arrived. The terms and conditions of this particular gay baby-making maneuver found none of us on the same page, and though I’d mentally toyed with getting the daddy ball rolling, maybe even with them, I’d never quite gone to the length and level of plotting these kinds of logistics, never started to think how to mechanically craft the goods, and in doing so realized this lesbian connection wasn’t the proper fit for this wannabe daddy.
The lesbians weren’t interested in a parental third wheel in any way being part of the family picture, anyway. They were instead looking for a few batches of baby batter, hot from the balls, dumped into a medical syringe and hand delivered to either one of them for a private insemination by the other behind a closed door. I suggested two closed doors for backup just in case one door failed and they laughed and understandably agreed. For all the soap-and-water gloss-overs, a baby is made when semen comes out of the balls and goes through the penis and into the vagina. I needed a bird’s eye view of what jerry-rigged destination those lesbians had planned for my man-goo about as much as my wang needed warts.

We also ended up arguing about the last name of the child, what my visitation rights would be, what they were they looking for in a DINO (dad in name only). Maybe someone to occupy the role of the wacky dad-type who dunked his tie in the gravy and played idiot at Thanksgiving dinner, I just didn’t know. As we talked, I realized that it wasn’t going to work out. Beyond that, the legal shit they hinted at started to sink in. The lesbians knew as much about running a kid-making factory as I did, but they did state that in Wisconsin, non-married-people had no obvious custody rights, no statutes that standardized things. Parental rights were awarded on an ad hoc basis, judge’s whims, gavel to gavel. It sounded increasingly dicey.
Months later, I’d find out they had some of their shit straight and some stuff they were just way off on. We talked contracts, payment and secrecy, and it soon became too scheming and calculating for my tastes; I got itchy in the booth. I thanked them and left the coffee shop in a dejected shuffle. This was not my avenue to becoming a father; I’d discovered strike one.
CHAPTER FIVE: PRELUDE TO ‘THE STORY’

So I returned home from the lesbian tit-a-tit and plopped myself on the couch upstairs, again grabbing my laptop and draping it on my gut, thinking of ways to become a daddy, and much like Pooh Bear thumping his brain with his paw and chanting ‘think-think, think-think’ I swung at air, nothing popped into mind. In the finger twiddling helplessness of the moment, it got me to thinking about how I’d decided that making a baby was the solution to my life’s problems of loneliness and wilderness. It didn’t reveal itself pleasantly or painlessly.

Up to that point, I’d had boyfriend upon boyfriend waltz into my life then sashay out, me usually on the assist, shushing them along, leaving me blinking away half-tears in a chilly reminder that I remained incompatible with romantic relationships, as if that secret sauce of happiness with another human remained elusive to me, or perhaps more alarmingly I just didn’t like the taste of it in the first place, or never would.

I’d always pointed finger after blame-soaked finger outward, and when the latest boyfriend dropped out of the picture a few weeks prior, I’d sworn off men, playing the I’ll just watch porn card, relishing the chance to gorge on high-fat, super premium ice creams and morph into that unencumbered, feckless biddy I knew resided within me, needing only a nudge. But I chose the nobler and certainly more waistband-friendly road
of finally becoming a daddy instead, and I’m quite glad I did. Buying new pants can get expensive.

The last boyfriend was the turning point for me, a doozy of a wake-up call. I think it best I tell The Story of him, to paint the picture, since everything that comes after, including Baby Rosie’s multi-stepped genesis, stems from this relationship imploding and my life turning into desolate shit, a cratered shell of existence. It took place, or better yet ended a couple months before the unsuccessful lesbian powwow. For clarity’s sake, let’s call me ‘Bruce’ and him ‘Brian’ as the co-protagonists of The Story. It’s just easier this way.
CHAPTER SIX: ‘THE STORY’

Bruce dated a guy named Brian for about a year—well, I guess I should say six months on the cheat, six months half-assed legit. Brian was the entire time, to be clear, married to a bulbous, blustery woman. Her name was Janice and I never met her—she seemed nice enough and in a shocking ‘settler’s move’ once bartered with Brian that he could have me and still live at home with his family—however fucked-up that would’ve been. He was unswervingly gay, a lisping dandy at first meeting—how no one ever suspected he was a foo-foo butler pirate by that time struck me incredulous—and lived in the deepest sectors of the closet. He also had three naughty boys, legendarily troublesome. Actually, I only thought the five-year old twins were a handful, the 11-year old boy was comparatively bearable.

Bruce was single, always between Mr. Nexts, and not the kind of single that results from never having tried to be anything to the contrary. He was involuntarily childless, as he had not crossed a lady’s reproductive underpass since he was a drunken teenager at an all-legs-spread kegger years ago. It’s true, I did have sex with women, and functioned normally—I just visualized pair after pair of titty litties sliding down men’s legs and falling onto their bare feet on the floor—for some reason using that technique transported me to a place where satisfactory completion could occur.
Bruce’s singleness was a product of trial and error, and error, and error in relationship after relationship that never quite blossomed into anything but anxiety and dead-ends, and then along came Brian to take him on an unintended tour of why. *That’s sometimes how it goes, isn’t it? I had to be on the delivery and receiving end of an epic screw job to figure out the problem and start a family all by myself—I owe Brian an incalculable debt.*

Sometimes someone comes along and awakens a man from a slumber, instructs him that his whole goddamn life is slipping away, seasons passing, until the only thing left is a pair of slippers, a pie-stained bathrobe, catheters, sitzbaths, and that loathsome Pat Sajak spinning his wheel every night on TV after supper. Bruce started down this exact pathway while still on the friendly side of 40. *But I wasn’t going travel all the way there—not a chance.*

Brian and Bruce eventually split up. They simply had to for Bruce to make a baby. While it was hard to immediately calculate dividends in anything in the breakup’s aftermath for Bruce, nearly two years to the day after parting ways with Brian, his daughter was to be born. But before the sweet nougat center of *The Story* can be reached, bitter truths needed to reveal themselves to Bruce. He bore witness to his own required, tectonic debacle before the bliss.
Weeks later, the smoke cleared and in the debacle's wake came a
biological man-clock, wound tight, ticking newly hot inside him. But the
clock had actually started long before that. Only in the new silence could
this clock be heard and its commands obeyed, as new life was forged and
found its way to Bruce. The Story is Bruce's story and Bruce's story alone;
Brian just happens to be in it. If I hadn't met Brian, Little Rosie would've
remained only an idea, a line item on a broken dreams list. The day of her
first ultrasound, when Rosie was the size of a blueberry, I texted Brian and
told him how much he was responsible for her arrival. He never
responded. He now writes a daily food blog with his partner and their six
combined sons.

Bruce and Brian were a contradictory concoction that found a
groove in a bizarre state of normal they both could live with.
Relationships were few for Bruce yet sex was at times plentiful, and he
never mistook the meaning of one for the other. He was a handsome man
of dark brown hair and pearly blue eyes with a lean, sculpted physique
with just enough muscle to protect him from being called scrawny.

Boyfriends fizzled out quickly for Bruce, like light bulbs on the
fritz. Each guy's eventual withdrawal was under the same blame-game
ruse guise as the other. Bruce invested heavily in the art of the one-
nighter, usually with straight single guys and married men—one-and-done
fling seekers like Bruce held strong currency with the online swingers and
shakers waiting on the other end of salty emails directing him towards secret locales. Bruce would snag them then throw them back, and he was rather unashamed about the whole thing, as he was dealing with the kinds of guys with wives and children, with only tonights, never tomorrows.

Bruce was relationship-stupid yet otherwise pretty smart, a college professor with a picket-fenced, Midwestern fortress. Subway suppers by candlelight got old as the decades stacked and the house kept itself empty, emptier year by year, but that didn’t change anything.

Brian, though, was different, or perhaps Bruce chose to believe that in order to fill the empty dinner chair across from him from time to time. Well, I knew the guy was married, had three kids, and was really, really kinky in bed, and I left it at that. And Bruce really did love him, as they shared a flair for French food, fine wine, and pretentious but altogether harmless snoot in everything they saw from fashion to farmer’s markets to music to the legitimate theater. Oh, and we both had really, really kinky sex together.

When the two of them met, Brian was working at a cell-phone call center and miserably providing for his family. He worked hard, paycheck to-paycheck by day, only to play even harder at night, trolling gay chat rooms with his pants down and bathroom door locked, hand on his cock, jutting over like-minded, secret gay marrieds and singles. He sandwiched his flings, sometimes cyber, sometimes back-alley, between the tub baths
and pumpkin patch trips with his little kids and his wife. The first picture he ever sent me in an email was with him and his three boys at a pumpkin patch. Sex with her was perfunctory, ragged, smelly, and unwelcomed. It was also rare; he told me they hadn’t fucked in over a year.

Then along came Bruce, stumbling his way through a Kinky Sex Chat Room, capturing Brian’s interest and crotch in one fetish-tinged strike. They met weeks later at Bruce’s house, after a series of mutual chicken-outs, and after an unlikely discussion of politics, sports, and family values over a bottle fine French wine in even finer French stemware, the two had glorious, kinky bareback sex. A rare, almost prohibitive risk that I never took—but Brian felt safe to me. Still, I freaked out for weeks thinking he gave me HIV after our first fuck, but of course he didn’t. In the 90s, I would emerge from HIV clinics with a sigh of relief at the news I was still negative. I could still become a dad. Yet here I almost threw it away with Brian. But the sex was unknowingly safe and sound that evening, so it was no worries eventually.

They then fell in love, as genuinely as possible after a single session of lovemaking. Their sex was smooth, lavish, and loganberry fragrant, so unlike sex with his wife, Brian complained. Ironcally, Brian had bad, bad breath, but he always bathed in lilac soap, so I focused on one smell and not the other and it seemed to do the trick.
They instantly loved each other and would one day move in together and just negotiate around those ‘pesky details’ of Brian’s home, with his wife and kids, and all the severings yet to come if they were to live happily ever after. Gay men often proclaim ‘I love you’ with all the sincerity of a cashier’s ‘have a nice day’ to the random customer. To a gay, one night of clawing and scratching somehow ethically vaccinates him and permits the forgoing of a common sense courtship, a respect of a relationship’s ripening through time passing. That second-guessing wisdom quickly vanishes, replaced with the zing of accelerated lust. *Brian and I were no exceptions to any part of this.*

Brian’s kids became an immediate issue. Though slowly introduced and absorbed, like ricin or some other insidious poison, they were monuments to malfunction, a trinity of micro-maintenance machines that in the end Bruce just couldn’t stomach. *I found them to be horrible creatures that never allowed us an uninterrupted moment when we were all together.* Brian had twin five-year old boys and an 11 year-old pre-teen. The twins provided Bruce and Brian with a never ending stream of epoxy-level clingingness and demands, so much so that Bruce thought even the most honey-sweet nanny imaginable, a doting Mary Poppins high on goofballs, would eventually have reached for a sharp knife and filleted those squawking urchins to ribbons.
The boys were the sole source of friction and eventual fracture
between Bruce and Brian, a rank combination of naughty and needy. To
Bruce, they were unimaginable brats, by-products of imbecilic parental
methods, or worse, perhaps no methods at all. Bruce applied the sweet
reason acid test to their demands—it’s not as if nosebleeds or ass wipings
that typical five-year old needs went unattended. Instead, their brand of
villainy was a surgically invasive, irrepressive need for total, perpetual
adult presence in their orbit. No more than five unsupervised or
unscripted minutes of entertainment provided could elapse before the
twins screeched and stomped their way to wherever Brian or Bruce might
be. It could’ve been the toilet, the shower, the bedroom where kinky sex
might be taking place in the anticipated dead of an overnight. The boys
 barged in and demanded attention, attention, attention.

Bruce grew incapable of even establishing the pretense of being
able to stand the little shits. Yes, that’s absolutely true—I dreaded the
weekends with them—yet, in time, I would yield to the reality that I didn’t
hate these kids, I hated myself for going my entire life and not having any
kids myself—and here this asshole has three of them, horribly reared, and
all bloodline extending boys on top of it. But he never shared his feeling
about them to Brian. He instead fashioned and failed at ways to make nice.
Bruce produced his DVD ace, sliding Willy Wonka and the Chocolate
Factory into the machine, only to witness the twins transform, in seconds,
into a brigade of ungrateful miscreants slithering up the stairs wailing
“we’re bored, bored, bored!” Except for these little dorks, I have yet to
encounter a child who isn’t entranced with Willy Wonka and his magical
allure—it’s entertainment paralysis, normally; candied cinematic catnip
to any other child I’ve met and screened it for.

Still, even with the weekend invasions from Brian’s boys, their
relationship temporarily endured. Brian exited his family home and
moved in with Bruce in a New Year’s Eve exodus for the ages. While
every other jolly couple in the world was clinking crystal flutes of cheap
champagne at midnight and fucking until 12:07 AM, Brian told his wife
he was gay, a kinky-sex-gay on top of it, and was secretly dating a man
named Bruce for the past six months behind her back. She booted him
onto a snow bank with only a Hefty bag of boxers and socks to sustain
him. He called Bruce to pick him up, and then moved-in, a carload at a
time, with Bruce reshuffling furniture and sleeping spaces to
accommodate both him and his weekend-crashing kiddos.

Meanwhile, Bruce eventually had no choice but to tell his family
that he was living with some married guy and his kids that come over on
occasional weekends, and naturally the brows of disapproval were
collectively raised. To this day, I have never brought another man ‘home
to the family’ because of the embarrassment and ‘told you so’
repercussions of the whole Brian-and-his-kids affair. The dysfunctional
glue was thus applied to Bruce and Brian and laid rest to dry; a slow
hardening of an unsustainable bond each of them should have known
better than to press down so firmly together in the first place. Gay men
think with their little heads far more often than their big ones, to the
delight of their loins, yet at their good sense’s expense.

Things didn’t last, and a rather nuclear event—*I’ve known so
many*—ended it all. One weekend, the kids’ stay managed to encroach
upon one Bruce’s special dinners he had planned for Brian. Seemed his
wife was arriving home late, and the kids were stranded and forced to stay
through the dinnertime hours before going back home. Sometime early
that afternoon, the kids managed to strike so precise a destructive note,
playing ‘weatherman’ and applying magic marker to make a ‘map’ out of
*Ikea* window treatments, that Bruce finally lost it.

He screamed into a pillow, a throat-scorching decibel even he
didn’t know he had in him. He was an otherwise level-headed, reasonable
guy. But somehow, in an afternoon’s suffocation where coloring books,
toys, and all the dangling carrots of childhood amusement failed once
more to deliver, his face split, radish-red, and his voice cracked, levies
broke, floodgates flung open. Three months of tongue-biting and teeth-

{} gnashing up in smoke in a single afternoon’s detonation, unleashed, into
the pillow as he shouted and shouted into oblivion.
In the heat of frustration, Bruce then bolted from his own house, leaving Brian aproned and confused, holding a cookie sheet of frozen fish sticks for lunch, the kids pulling his strings and hopping around in a whiny, intolerable chorus. Bruce hopped into his car, tore out the driveway and just drove and drove and drove, realizing an hour or so later where he was, about a hundred miles from home. He attempted to cool off at highway speeds, windows rolled down in February’s assuring chill, before turning around and heading back home. Bruce got near Madison and turned back around heading north, returning to the scene of his crime.

Bruce called Brian and unloaded, complaint after complaint, volcanic, semi-automatic, relentless. It just so happened all the while that Bruce was dissing and bitching about the boys over the phone, Brian, on the other end, was meticulously picking up every scrap of their belongings from the house, stashing it in his car, winking and nodding sympathetically to Bruce over the phone and offering game plans and strategies, soothing his litany of concerns in a honey-tongue, casing the joint of their affects in a sneaky, heartbreaking double-cross.

“Let’s fix this, sweetheart. Just come home and it will all work out.” It was the last thing Brian said to Bruce before he hung up. Bruce would never hear his voice again.

By the time Bruce arrived back home an hour later, they would all be gone. Not a trace or residue of them ever living there remained—not
even an abandoned tube sock or a knick in the woodwork left behind. 

Brian and his boys were gone forever. Bruce breathed in the scarcity and renewed quiet of an all-too-familiar, tin-canned house. A booming silence had returned and lingered uneasily, a fart cloud clinging noxious and motionless, in the hallways and alcoves.

Bruce walked over to the sink and did the only thing he could. He puked, uncontrollably, between the tears on his cheeks and the chunks in his hair. *That's exactly how it happened, exactly what I did.* Then he collapsed onto the kitchen floor, his face rubbing against the winter-cold tile, and he cried and cried, not unlike the little boys he had just talked himself out a few hours before. He stared at that the empty dinner chairs, shook his head, and cupped it in his trembling hands for hours before walking the hallways in circles all night, never sleeping.
CHAPTER SEVEN: SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT

In the weeks that followed The Story, I got into a pretty serious flopping and writhing jag on my couch while at the same time getting reacquainted with my faithful old roommate loneliness; it moved back in. I'd eventually get my shit together and move on to creating new life a few months down the road, but, in the weeks following The Story, and with my head firmly planted up my ass in an orgy of self-pity, conclusions on destiny and legacy called me out, and I took pleasure in drowning in the cowardice of not answering the bell to face either of them.

A mortality meme emerged. It sucked to feel needed and wanted by no one, yet it felt worse to actually give into an upsetting of my physical and emotional routines, a Catch-22 recipe for solitude I didn't want any more but didn't know how to live otherwise. Even ruts become comfy blankets to committed loners if swaddled and cuddled within them for long enough.

I liked my couch more than I liked most people. I likewise felt that way about the carpeting, stemware, and decorative accents I owned. I didn't like things touched or walked on, smudged or crumbed. Things made me happy, and likewise made me completely miserable, a paradox of materialism that crept in after Brian left and started giving me the hives, kept me up nights. It wasn't about the kids, either. In fact, they would
reveal themselves to be what was missing, though subconsciously I will claim that I knew that all along, whether true or not.

Weeks after The Story concluded, and a few days after I met the lesbians for our failed coffeehouse clambake, things began to crystallize, a haze clearing after years of meandering and dithering, but mainly after those two watershed events. I began to smile again when I thought back what had brought me there in the first place. When I realized that Brian, of all people, this skinny, nerdy, death-breathed little prick had life by the balls and that despite the messy divorce, the economic wipeout, and the heartache and struggles for him yet to come, he still had it made—my jealousy cup raneth over, a bitter bottle of pills were swallowed, one by one.

He played through the marriage thing to have children, and got what he wanted and needed. So yeah, he got a little shit-stained and scarred through the years by physically living a straight life he didn’t belong near, but big deal. He somehow managed to come out of this with his prince to find and his children to raise. I seemed relegated to the eternal sidelines, a childless spectator. He had both time and opportunity and used it while I had lived a nomad’s past and present, only to gaze ahead to my spinster’s future.

That’s what I learned from my Brian. I suspect I owe him everything—so does Rosie. A child was the missing ingredient in my life
and I had to go out and make one, not get one. I wasn’t into the adoption thing, and I can only imagine opening that can of worms given my station. A child of my own, to invest the love and nurturing within me, to instill within it right and wrong, good and evil, cruelty and mercy, to teach it all: know to be factually and spiritually true, that’s what was missing all along. I’d needed it and craved it all my life, I’d wanted it back then, then back then turned into right now, as I closely watched Brian with his three sons.

It took my brief and doomed relationship with him to finally admit that I hated him for having children, or better yet hated myself more for not having them in the first place. Not the noblest of reasons for starting a family, but facts are facts. That he had had the raw materials to get the job done for years, with the wife and the sex acts and such was of no solace to me. I failed at my daddy plan. I was a pillar of inequality standing next to him and I needed to fix that.

He’d accomplished self-regeneration and generational certainty. He’d created vestiges, footprints, human markers that would someday alert the citizens of the world, for however long they and their children’s-children’s-children lived, that even after he was long dead, he was once there. They would be organic monuments that proved his existence that he made a difference somehow, and that people loved him and were left behind to continue what he just couldn’t finish in the years he was given.
What were my markers? Abandoned housecats and five-cent goldfish were my time capsule's only occupants. Brian had it all, that lucky cocksucker. He had children to care for and love, and I hated him for it long before my respect regrew for him as a parent and a man. Becoming a dad made me wise to how much I'd really admired him.

I so wanted a child, on a complex yet entirely above-board basis, to be clear. I unknowingly suppressed my parental yearnings with childless media celebrants like the Barefoot Contessa cookbooks and World Market bone china, with household trinkets and sponge painting, wicker furniture and obsessive-compulsive car care. In the end, all this crap plateaued into a whole-lotta nothing after Brian came along—because crap ultimately culminates with and in no one. It took meeting him for an awakening to occur, to slap my parental wants into warp speed; pinball planning reflexes took over. The time was now or never; I was no spring chicken, after all. In gay years I'd already been dead a full decade, so I needed to get cracking.

From that moment forward I was convinced that I was going to be a father; there was no doubt about it. No matter how it had to be done, no matter what it cost, I was going to make a baby, though I did realize such a task, while it required luck and pluck, it needed no fuck. Saying and envisioning fatherhood was rather effortless. The last time I checked, saying stuff doesn't make stuff happen, so I knew then that I had a lot of
work to do and very little know-how of where to get started. Still, even blind and clawing, I was well on my way.

I had nothing left, after all, no boyfriend, a bunch of sisters quaintly coupled and cocooned with their husbands and children of their own, so the stakes were relatively low, nothing to lose but the small prices of money and disappointment. I’d even surrendered my cats to the humane shelter a few years before, as the puked-up hairballs and urine-soaked room corners became just too ugly to manage—I had nothing. I’d grown to have absolutely nothing to come home to. The drama of this unborn dream, or this dream of the unborn, was the only thing left to sustain me at the time, and when something as sacred as creating a child lights afire within a lost and lonely guy like me, the call simply had to be answered—no screening allowed.
CHAPTER EIGHT: FAMILY CIRCUS

I grew up stewed in a vat of complex family values. There was church on most Sundays, and a still-married mom and dad who professed to be unspoiled virgins on their wedding night, in the 1960s, for God’s sake. My parents stuck together even though they didn’t really like each other. I’m from football, boobies, racism, gay jokes—the whole convoluted conservative package neatly wrapped in the homespun Midwest. And I liked growing up most of the time, even though I struggled for friends, clawing my way onto the radar of the playground movers and shakers for a pick-up game of tag or an invite to a McDonald’s restaurant birthday party, which was quite the invitational coup for a kid back in those days. I ended up getting one.

I had all-sisters and I was steeped in the importance of having children and siblings. They made life complete or at least made sense to have around. As the oldest, I grew to wish that one of my younger sisters had popped out a boy, to relieve me of the burden of passing on the family name, and maybe give my dad the chance to have a not-gay-son to teach the art of pussy hunting with. By the time I knew exactly what I was, I hated having only sisters.

It was unfortunate because by the time the first whisker hit my chin, I knew that I could never meet my dad’s carnal expectations of his son. I was a dick man, a knob-gobbler to the core, and I was silently of no
use to him when the big boobs and curvy backsides of those beer
commercial honeys would flicker on the TV and Dad’s tongue would wag
and he’d elbow my ribs as if the keys to the Kingdom of God themselves
were to be found only in a bikinied set of perky jugs. But a brother for me
was not to be, as all of my siblings were happy, healthy little girls, or
better yet my Barbie buddies, as I called them behind my dad’s back.

It would have been so much better if even one of them were a boy,
though. In the end, maybe that estrogen-drenched household itself half
explains my big gayness. I love my sisters and, some days, even my
room-trashing mother, but I didn’t always like them. Now my dad I
always like, even though he lived to embarrass us. He drove around
exclusively in shabby minivans, yet feared nicks and scratches from
people parking next to him in car lots, so he lugged around two large,
blaze orange traffic cones in the hatchback and stationed them to the right
and left of the vehicle, leaving no one able to park next to him. The police
mercifully confiscated them and we never saw them again. Dad was too
cheap to invest in replacements.

When I was a kid, Dad was always at work and was never around
to mediate the constant donnybrooks my mom and I would get into day
after day, especially during the summertime. Funny how a needed,
neutralizing voice like his was never around when an easily snuffed-out
dispute between moms and me would blossom. I think being around
nothing but women at home led me to dislike women in general outside it, maybe sexually, even. Though I don’t know if that’s the explanation as to why I like guys, in fairness. The cute little Mormon dude next door had twelve sisters and got arrested when he was 15 for banging a neighborhood girl on the schoolyard teeter-totter, so who can say?

I can say with a certainty that my unveiled, decades-long dislike of my mother must’ve projected pretty deep into the cracks of my psychosexual mojo, and it’s within the realm of possibility that my genitals simply won’t go where my mind’s angels fear to tread. That is to say, anywhere, absolutely anywhere that anatomically resembles my mother. It was a reverse Oedipus complex—as a kid I wanted to kill my mother and marry my father.
CHAPTER NINE: DUDE LIKES JESUS, DUDE LIKES DUDES

Family was one thing, religion quite another. Trying to sculpt it into my particular life was a tricky maneuver, what with the gay thing and all. The awakening reality of my own sexual orientation was at first the chest-clutching realization that I wasn’t going to someday get married to a girl and mate and have little kids. There would be none of them playing at my feet while I helped dress a little girl’s Barbie doll or lay down a train track or two for a little boy counting upon me to set up his train set on Christmas morning.

The let-down wasn’t self-contained. My parents and sisters expressed disappointment at the news I was gay at first. It’s not like I exactly relished the idea of my own childless future, either. Back then my old pal religion was ever-present in my life, making me feel horrible about who I was with each gay rite of passage I overcame. Whether it was mustering the courage to walk into my first gay bar, buying my first pair of leather pants, kissing a guy on the mouth for the first time, holding my boyfriend’s hand in the back of the movie theater, religion was there, making me realize that a one-way ticket to hell for me was only an arrested heartbeat away.

I was a dude that liked Jesus, but I was also a dude that liked dudes.
I wasn’t entirely sure Christ would’ve approved of that, and, like
clockwork, the screaming voices of television and radio wackos showed
up with their clarion calls of the rapture’s coming to smote both me and
the rest of Fudgepack Nation. Instilling shame and self-hatred in gay
people is the only quill these one-trick ponies have and it pissed me off. I:
was tough enough to grapple with this new and strange part of myself that
I’d just discovered and had been told my whole life before to be rightfully
terrified about and to categorically reject. Guilt-peddling assholes only
made a scary situation even worse as I tried to make sense of it all.

The two concepts—a guy likes Jesus and likes guys—became a
friction-prone and eventually incompatible pitch. It was of little comfort
early on to realize those religious experts were usually light in any medical
or legal training and pocketed very little in the way of facts. Their ideas
were typically cherry-picked biblical passages that fit their ‘don’t be gay’
template. There was no flexibility on religion’s position when it came to
divine edicts on the whole gay issue from their perch. I wanted no part of
their fractured takes on good fuck/bad fuck.

It’s sad because I think Christ and I would’ve gotten along pretty
swell. I’d have liked hanging with him, though he’d probably have a few
bones to pick with me, especially since I fancy scripture and its ilk a
steaming pile of speculation, and merely average literary fiction. But
what I can say about the bible is that it captures what casual onlookers are
meant to believe. Through words and deeds, the bible articulates what Christ believed in and stood for. That is to say, what people are led to believe he believed—even the premise of it all seems thin, flimsy.

Like all good Catholics, I’ve never really read the bible much, but I’ve read of it. I’ve done the Leviticus thing with the no-men-lying-with-other men deal, but beyond that, it’s just Catholic gist-mongering—a cliff-note take on scripture that the rank and file are only able to recite clumsily, and I’m not too certain that the church’s leadership doesn’t exploit and pounce on their ignorant abridgement to its many advantages.

But I knew of some stuff Christ yakked about. Love people, be kind, be accountable, be honest, treat people like I’d like to be treated, don’t be judgmental. On paper anyway, Christ didn’t busy himself with what gays did behind closed doors, or where they shoved their junk, I’d come to know that much. I sometimes wonder what Jesus these anti-gay, fundamentalist types are referring to when they open their mouths and venom leaks—the one that suggested loving everyone or that Jesus guy they think is fixated on the evil, galactic gay takeover? The older I got, the more I realized I didn’t need religious books, ceremonies, or even people to validate or vaccinate me of my gayness, though I still felt guilty for wanting to hump all those hot deacons.

Besides, religion to a gay guy is a pretty incongruent fit, a practical mismatch that attempts a vulgar cradling between the Butt Fucking
Saturdays and Rosary Sundays, shoehorning them both into a fragile, creepy séance. Religion’s hold over me waned through the years, but to its credit, it did not let me go down unbruised or without one hell of a fight.

Once I came out, I adopted a saucy, flamingly brash disposition in bed and out, while at the same time still trying to be a mild-mannered, Clark Kent Catholic on weekends and religious holidays. Over time, though, religion slowly lost its grip, slipping a bit, its talons retracting from my skin in a bloody reveal of regret that scabbed over and transformed into crusty wounds of acceptance of lifestyle and a recovery. The fact was I liked being Catholic, but I liked being gay more, the opposite predicament of most priests out there, and as time passed I realized it wasn’t intellectually consistent to continue being both.

I liked the priest’s dresses (so did they, apparently) and the smoke and the perfumed incense and the hierarchy of the church’s officers like bishops and the Pope and all that shit. I didn’t mind the customs, either, like Communion, going to mass every morning, or the high-profile holidays like Ash Wednesdays and Adveints. These traditions are good, clean standalone soul-searchers, and if I could be gay, act gay, and live gay, I’d take the whole gay ball of wax. But Catholicism didn’t give me that choice—to be in a good standing, the gay must go away.
I had to hand it to religion’s style, though, its perfection at peddling a fool’s gold of falsehoods that grifted the masses into salvation’s bidding. Believing in the unbelievable was a discipline I’d envied within others and tried to instill in myself. But in the mirror, where I always stared and saw a guy who liked fucking with guys, I just couldn’t reconcile what I liked to do with my genitals and square it with how the church viewed garden variety fags like me.

The church committee-types, the ones at the pancake and porky breakfasts, their fangs dripping with superiority and noses sniffing for the faintest scent of unholliness in everyone they encountered, also cheesed me. I was always confused as to why they even gave a shit about who-fucked-who-in-the-what. Maybe it was because I fornicated outside marriage; I dabbled in that reasoning for a while and it kept me in tithe a few more seasons. But eventually that didn’t wash either. These assholes didn’t support two guys tying the knot together and pounding each other’s perfectly formed, matrimony-bound asses in the first place. It was a lose-lose limbo with these fuckers—attending church and reconciling what the rules were gave me a headache and so I eventually just stopped going altogether, much to my family’s horror and damnation.

My psychosexual relationship with religion was unsettling to say the least. When I was a teenager, after my trench coat video store trips began, I remember going through a weird masturbation ritual where, while
fantasizing and pleasuring myself, I would simultaneously chant religious
utterances stroke after stroke to purify the jerk sessions.

"I cum in the name of the son I will eventually make, even though
I'm fantasizing to men, this semen that is exiting my penis will one day
make a child and please God." I needed help. It sounded almost
Eucharistic, and if my mother had been listening at the door, she'd
probably been sick enough to approve of my approach.

The church's hold on me was so strong that it even held court over
my monkey spankings. It was the first of many last straws. Religion
managed to insinuate itself at every corner of my life, demanding to know
my intentions, ordering that whack-offs were now target practice for my
future marital and reproductive ends and destiny. By the time the Internet
entered into the picture with its guilt-free porn goodness, I quickly
abandoned the Gregorian jerk-offs and settled into the passive decadence
that meat beating was all about.

Religion began to matter to me again only after I'd hit the baby-
making ground running, as if to remind me of mystical things I was
planning on tampering with in creating a new life form must not
commence under Satan's extramarital sponsors. If religion didn't
consistently make me feel bad about myself so much, I'd probably come
to like it again.
CHAPTER TEN: A TALE OF TWO TALES ON TAIL

I went to a Catholic grade school and I was the precocious clown, a hallway scamp, the kind of kid my teachers said to my parents on conference night was “gifted, spirited, lots of energy” but trust me, as a teacher myself I know that’s my code for “your kid’s a fucking pain in the ass.” Nonetheless, I came to sexual awareness, that is to say I was shown what heterosexual intercourse and the God-intended product was, through a dusty reel-to-reel video of a European couple ‘making love.’ Though billed as a ‘discreet and educational on-screen necessity’ by the hand-wringing nuns—nothing made more sense than getting sex-trained by a gaggle of sexless old maids—we actually saw the penis going into the vagina at a sixth-grade sex education social, a strange summit at a chapel-turned-classroom. To me, it was a most revealing piece of porn.

This retreat was a thing of beauty. A circle of boys in heated horseplay, squatting Indian-style, learning everything about the birds and the bees they already knew from the nuns and priests. Of course, everyone except me knew about this intercourse thing. Even at that time I had no idea or curiosity of how babies were made or what moms and dads did after kids went to bed. They drained a few Highballs and rattled a few bedframes, but I never contemplated it much.

It’s safe to say I was rather repressed sexually, disturbingly delayed in urgency and awareness when compared to my horny adolescent
colleagues. Months earlier, long before our little film in the chapel spilled its secrets, I came home one night, nose in the air, proudly professing at the dinner table to my family that the playground hotshot, Gary Engel, had told me that babies were made when dad sticks his ‘blank’ in mom’s ‘blank’ earlier that day at recess. I actually used the word ‘blank.’ My parents offered bewildered stares at both me and each other.

My mother, of course, ever to be counted upon as a barrier and countermand to common sense, was so horrified at what I had just said that she denied the accuracy of his account over and over at dinner that evening, from the salad and dinner rolls all the way to the orange sherbet for dessert. He was all wrong, she said, and what was I hanging around this naughty little boy at schoolyard functions, anyway? It should have been a moment for optimum parental clarity and guidance on human reproduction, not a platform for my mom and her sputtering, puritanical denials of the straight story on sex. But that’s what I got; it’s no wonder I’m screwed up.

When I saw the baby coming out of the birth canal as the Eurofilm climaxed, I was in a state of genuine awe—the magic of regeneration, the ability for humans to make more of themselves when the time was right, it was a pivotal yet conflicted moment for me. But then I recalled the sausage making at the beginning of the film, what with mom and dad in all their naked, coiled, and uncircumcised glory, and I later walked onto the
playground that afternoon during a bathroom break confused, my tummy churning a little at what I’d seen.

The other boys were peacock strong, strutting about in fits of spitting and crotch grabbing, talking of boners they’d sported during the fucking scene and such. I didn’t understand a thing that they were saying or feeling. They began associating the film with the girls they wanted to make out with. I was thinking about the impressive length of movie daddy’s shaft, the size of his balls, his muscular thighs and his volleyball buttocks.

The film was the beginning of my gay awakening, I guess, and it would later be confirmed in a year or so when my friends Chad and Paul invited me to the Y to play basketball with the rest of the gang. I’d never had a gang before, so the experience was exhilarating and such a rare boost of confidence for me and my awkwardness. After my pathetic dribbling and fumbling of the ball for a few hours, we all hit the showers for a wash.

Even in the seventh grade, as the boys stripped out of their t-shirts and underpants, I was quite fascinated with the tufts of armpit hair sprouting from their lean, smooth arms, the shape of their blossoming genitals, and the near perfectly shorn patches of public hair hugging their junk warmly and snugly. Chad was the obvious choice. Light years ahead of the rest of us in cock size and facial hair, a smooth-skinned, Filipino
bronze, and a beautiful, refined torso and abdomen, he was the grand prize, red meat for the pre-adolescent voyeur like me. I had to be a careful peep, and boy was I ever.

This was the educational film that caught my attention, a locker-room style exploration of my likes and dislikes, not those Euro-whores. This was what I liked to see, over and over again. This was the boner they were talking about on the playground.

Yup, I would say I was pretty much a goner from that moment forward, focusing my gay gaze where it rightly belonged, rarely if ever at the girls or women that I would encounter throughout my life. Though I was unable to process the meaning of my locker room curiosity at the time, I liked what I saw, and doggone it if it wasn’t Filipino Chad’s private parts, all dangling and swinging and calling me to touch them or taste them—nothing else competed. I’m not sure it was sexual, just an implacable urge I neither knew what it meant nor what to do with it.

It couldn’t have been sexual, really. I wouldn’t even have my first orgasm until five years later, around 18. To my knowledge only cadavers are later bloomers than me in this department. Long before the ease and slick of Internet pornography made stroking a keystroke away, I had to earn it, partaking in high-stakes VHS showdowns at local video stores, wearing a trench coat and a suit, pretending to be my dad so the two-buck-an-hour clerk would think I was a clandestine business man, a noontime
wanker who worked at a bank and needed to get off without his wife getting wise. I was so nervous, but to my surprise the chicanery worked the first time I tried it and every time after—the clerk never even asked to see my ID.

I came home, ran to my bedroom, and popped the videotape in, carefully stripping off my dad’s suit and draping it over the chair so as not to wrinkle it before I returned it to his closet. It was straight porn, men and women fucking, and at the time it wouldn’t have even occurred to me that any other variation of porn, the gay or lesbian variety, existed anyway. Naked, confused, and yet certain that this was something I had to do because that’s what dudes in heat did, I just stared at the images and grabbed myself in order to see what would happen. The escalation was immediate, and, rest assured, nature took its course.

I didn’t even know what I was doing was called masturbation; the nomenclature never involved me. I just knew that my balls were calling, like the salmon or swallows returning home to spawn, the left and the right one both telling me they were full of something that needed to be emptied out. The act, no, more the ceremony held such great initial mystery and a tantalizing apprehension that it would grow to become my best friend for years and years and years and years and years and years and years and years and years and years to come. My prostate is often on life support, my dick in need of a breather or a day’s break from my incessant handshakes.
CHAPTER 11: VULVA TO THE RESCUE

After a few weeks of poking around the Internet, I discovered companies out there existed that handled all the wheeling and dealing of the surrogacy procedure. I stumbled across an East Coast outfit that was slick in packaging, hypnotic in imaging, and positioned just below the Wikipedia slot at the top of the Google search—I should’ve known better. This place even had a video and everything. I watched on the edge of my couch cushion, drinking in the daddy elixir, never having viewed an e-seminar on how in-vitro fertilization and surrogacy worked.

There was a classy, stewardess-like spokeschick with big tits and white teeth—an upscale kind of stewardess, nothing like the hags of my hometown Hooters by any stretch. She promised excellent results for couples, unmarries, and singles to get knocked up with their superior New York City clinic protocols. She even gave a nod to lesbians and gay men out there like me that pined for parenthood, hold the penis and pussy. I decided to give them a call and take a chance.

New York State is interesting, I’d learn. Surrogacy contracts themselves are illegal there, but actually performing IVF procedures is totally kosher. Surrogacy laws in the United States in general are quite a cluster fuck, actually. No consistency, no interstate reciprocity, with aspiring gay and lesbian parents at the mercy of the political and cultural
winds of the often ignorant majority residing within that elects judges and makes laws to barricade off parenthood to them.

In fact, when the time came about a couple years later, Baby Rose and I were at the feet of a Wisconsin judge and the guardian *ad item* assigned to her to seal the deal and make legal what genetics and biology cannot guarantee what I thought they would. The fact that Rosie was the flesh of my flesh had not a damn thing to do with what the state needed to consecrate and make legal through a judge’s written decree. Just because I was her *biological* father didn’t assure I’d be deemed her *legal* father. In Wisconsin, a child’s mother is the woman it slides out of and the child’s father is the woman’s husband—cut and dried. Variances granted to this fact are hashed out afterwards in court, meaning that I was pure bystander, a stranger in the delivery room in the state’s eyes. Surrogacy laws are fucked up. I had to adopt my own daughter.

That afternoon, around the kitchen table, a notebook and pencil at hand, heavily salted snack treats at the nervous ready, I decide to call the toll-free number of this New York clinic and talk—day or night the spokesboobs said—with a telephone specialist who could answer all of my questions about gestational surrogacy. I didn’t even know what half the terms in her bouncy-bounce sales pitch meant, but her breasts swayed so hypnotically back and forth, calling to me like a pair of pied pipers that I fished out my cell phone and dialed them up.
“I’m calling about information for becoming a father, maybe.” I used my big-boy voice, too. All-balls, a hint of John Wayne to let them know I meant business.

“Well, what exactly are you looking for, sir?” The voice seemed grandmotherly yet scolding, a tad too matter-of-fact, I thought. Where was Big Tits from the web ad? Her velvety voice and ample rack was more what I needed, strange as that sounded.

“Um, see, uh—can I be honest with you?”

“Of course you can, sir. Please do.”

I oddly enjoyed the tartness of her rejoinder—nasally, with just a sprinkling of Brooklyn. Her name was Olga, she told me, her parents were survivors of Bergen-Belsen, and caught in the updraft of her heavy drawl, it sounded like she said her name was vulva.

“I’m, uh, calling from, uh, Wisconsin,” I said. “I’m, uh, kind of a single man, gay man, wondering about having my own child?”

I’d never I was gay, single, and wanted a child all at the same time to anyone before.

What followed from Vulva was an intense play-by-play of the gay surrogacy baby-making process. She laid out every puzzle piece and snag that could result from mistakes or nature just not cooperating. Surrogacy might’ve been medical dream fulfillment or better a sort of fertility catnip for the hopelessly childless, but it was also a business, a big one, with
payouts left and right to every player cut in on the action, carving into piece after profitable piece of the financial pie—‘opportunity costs’ she innocently called them.

As my hand shook and my ear buzzed, she rattled off one insurmountable step after another. A chill came over me while hearing how her company’s hash was slung specifically, how they could crank out a kid sans sex. It seemed too good to be true, a magical cheat, and the more I heard from her, the less I believed. My mind began to doze off, drifting back to more arrogant days when I had ‘becoming a parent’ so clocked, so figured out.

Years back I wore slimmer slacks and hipper shoes, and projected a simple sass, waving my cigarette bar-side in a casual arrogance at the fags and flies that hung on my every daddy boast. Oh, I’d be a dad someday, I’d tell them; nothing was going to stop me. I’d just find a woman to pork one drunken night and, voila, nine months later I’d get what I want and raise my kiddo. As I snapped back to hear Vulva spell out what it actually would take to get to that point, conceiving a child without the woman, it overwhelmed me. I began to sweat and grit my teeth while the words slid from her lips and into my mind. Later, and even more depressingly, her words slid and clawed their way into my wallet.

I suppose I owe a debt of sorts to her, because she laid out for me in frank terms the relatively impossible scavenger hunt I needed to go on,
as if I could simply go down to the local hardware store and fulfill an exotic shopping list that included finding a cryogenic freezing clinic, a gestational carrier, a directed donor vetting mechanism, a female gamete provider, a toasty-woasty womb, a couple embryos (blastocyst variety, or at least of cavitating morula-quality, of course) and a reproductive endocrinologist who'd merely suction and transfer, with a microscopic catheter, something so miniscule, something one-eighth the size of a grain of salt, from an ultrasound-guided tube into a swollen, peanut-butter sticky uterine endometrium. All I needed was a credit card and a shopping cart and I was good to go, right?

Everyday stuff found on everyday mom-and-pop store shelves this wasn't. While I was at it, I'd be sure to pick up a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. But have no fear, Vulva reminded me, the folks at her New York City clinic could provide all of this for me for the low, low price of a measly hundred grand, a price that knocked my dick in, but she further reminded me that I couldn't really put a price on a child of my own, considering my situation and all, could I? My dick remained knocked in, afraid to come out and face the world of financial reality.

She spoke in a half-assed antiseptic voice, not exactly staccato or technocrat, but with enough edge to convey how daunting making a baby the not-old-fashioned way was, which I took as a surprising dish of fair dealing, since it seemed to contradict the easy-peasy website prattle I'd
been lulled into assurance of beforehand. Each of her words struck me, rat-a-tat, like an old dot matrix printer carriage screeching and scraping itself across my mind’s printer paper. She enumerated the steps in a sequentially smart fashion, and they went something like this:

Oh, but before that she told me that a baby is created, if a guy is either incapable or uninterested in partaking in good old fashioned vagina sex, in a laboratory under extremely delicate and controlled conditions. The slightest environmental imperfection usually derails the train at great cost, the ultimate collateral damage of all—the unsustainability of dawning human life. Down this road, the punch card to parenthood is fraught with uncertainty, despair, devastation, elation, miracles, tragedy. It’s so idiopathic and temperamental that no specialist can guarantee a single step along the way, or which way the path will wind, or even if the ground itself might collapse underneath me at any stage from start to finish. Who would do this?

It’s a tantrum sequence, like an ornery formula, made up primarily of a squirting here and a freezing there, a culturing there and a suction here. The process is an almost unbearable subroutine, a computer program of chaos, expense, and split-second coordination that I thought I’d never be able to hack. I cracked open *Twinkie* after *Twinkie* while listening to her, popping them in my mouth whole, nervously gumming them and
scribbling wildly as she rattled off the order of things to get a baby
cooking, the wrappers collecting like leaf piles on the floor.

Here’s the stuff that’s needed for an IFV pregnancy to go down:

*I needed a gestational carrier.*

The term ‘surrogate mom’ is out of fashion in these times of a
more precise assisted reproduction glossary. This was the woman who
would carry the baby for me—a rent-a-womb at variable pricing
schedules. Since I didn’t have a wife or girlfriend that would receive my
little toy soldier, Saggy Tits suggested I pursue a good female friend or a
sister. Sometimes, she said, rich and very young gay men (of which I was
neither) who were eager enough used their mothers or sisters, still in their
gestational prime, who would serve as the fetus’s carrier for free.

*I needed an egg donor.*

Just because my dick didn’t go near a girl’s golden arches didn’t
mean I was unaware that reproduction required a female component. Egg
cells were required to hook up with my sperm, which I would provide—
more on that in a moment—and the two would disco away in incubated
culture plates drowned in solution. Procuring an egg donor presented
options—some clinics provided them in-house, others did not. If it did
not, it was up to me to find one and have her ready to go when the time
came. I had no idea where to find an egg donor so I’d figured on
eventually going with a fertility clinic that screened and supplied one for me.

*I needed me, myself, and I.*

To be the biological or genetic father of a child, I needed to provide 50 percent of the genetic material that would be specially prepared and used when the IVF procedure was eminent. Clinics varied in terms of their policies, but I learned that a quarantine period of six months was usually required for the genetic material produced by me, because no sexual or intimate relationship existed between the gestational carrier and me. I would shoot a couple times into sterile cups, then the samples would be tested, and if they passed muster would be cryogenically frozen then thawed fresh as daisies down the road when needed. Everybody’s still rightly afraid of HIV transmission to the carrier and unborn child, and they screen relentlessly for it. I would be given a complete physical the day I provided my samples, tested for every STD under the sun, then if found clean, like a liberated leper, the sample would be processed and frozen for six months. I would then be STD tested again at six months, and then if found still clean, *ipso* fucking *facto*, the samples are 100 percent HIV-free and ready for baby-making.

*I needed a butt-load of money.*

Every bulldog had its mitts in the cookie jar—from the attorneys (mine, my carrier’s, Rosie’s guardian *ad litem*), the psych counselors, the
social workers, the reproductive clinic, the cryogenic freezing outfit, the
STD testing clinic, the long-term storage laboratory, the carrier’s doctor
and hospital, the hospital where Rose was delivered, the restaurants,
hotels, gas stations, the carrier’s health insurance company, the carrier’s
husbands place of employment, the carrier’s chiropractor, the court costs,
the DNA tests, my insurance company. No one or nothing came cheap or
free. They bled me dry for over two years. As if the emotional ransom
wasn’t enough, every scrap and chip of financial resource I’d held dear
was placed in the middle of the pot. I had nothing left, I was all-in, not a
single accumulated dollar left, and I yet I didn’t care. Had I not tried, the
cost would’ve been my soul.

Vulva went on to say more about it, but that’s pretty much the gist
of it. At that point, I imagined the unlikely synchronicity that this whole
thing would require, and the enormity of bringing things together. What a
gigantic gamble this would be, like chasing a fart in the wind with a glass
jar to contain and preserve it after catching it and slamming a lid on top.
CHAPTER 12: PONDERING PATERNITY

As I hung up the phone with Vulva, I felt an acid sloshing at high tide in my stomach. Things seemed less obtainable now than when I didn’t know a damn thing about them in the first place. It was as if the in-vitro procedure, with all its variables and moving parts, players and stakeholders, didn’t serve to inspire any faith in a positive outcome within me anymore. In fact, it served to depress me. I recall feeling so bereft that I even toyed with resorting to old fashioned vagina sex to solve the problem—for, like, maybe a second. Some of life’s best ideas are left on the cutting room floor, and this one sure as hell would be added to the pile.

There was so much I didn’t know about myself that now required forensic exploration and a vital prodding I realized I might not be up for. This wasn’t going to be clean and easy. It was going to be a pins-and-needles affair, brimming with uncertainty. For a guy who preferred sure things, getting the ball rolling on making a baby had heartbreak’s fingerprints all over it. Visions of failure loomed everywhere my mind took me, as if success itself was dangling, a waving beefsteak in front of a starving lion, over a cliff, me leaning over the precipice to grab it only to wobble and lose my balance, plunging downward.

I needed something visual at that point so I sketched out a schematic on piece of waxed paper. It looked like one of those restaurant placemats, the treasure map on a children’s menu. For each part I needed
to locate and pocket as I would travel down the trail, hot prospects on any of them did not immediately jump out at me. The whole host womb or gestational carrier cog stood particularly elusive as did the farm-fresh girly eggs that needed harvesting. These ingredients, obviously not in my hip pocket, were impossible hurdles I couldn’t fathom vaulting. Then there was the medical facility itself. I couldn’t shell out a hundred grand to the New York clinic, so I had to locate generic alternatives and off-brands to make this thing work.

Finally, there was me, my junk, my dick and balls. Did they have the right stuff? I didn’t even know if I was fertile. What if I was sterile? What if I had HIV and didn’t know it? Being gay had become more a theory than a practice after Brian, and even then I hadn’t been tested in years. Questions mounted and festered, making what should have been a once-in-a-lifetime quest instead turned into a freak-out. When it came to using my reproductive organs for any other purpose than jerking off, I had no clue where I stood. I mean, how often does a gay man ponder his own potency? A butthole is impregnable after all, so naturally my own virility had never, ever crossed my mind. But my tune on that changed mighty quickly.
CHAPTER 13: XX—WHY?

For weeks after I’d learned the IVF facts-of-life from Vulva, I lay on the couch, burning up websites for scenarios and probabilities, frantically searching for hand-me-down hopes to suggest success somehow loomed in the distance. But a new anxiety, no, more an old nemesis, came home to roost. Since high school, my biggest fear since learning about the male reproductive system in biology class could be summed up in three evil little letters: XXY.

This particular self-dread had lay dormant, a nearly 20-year slumber of not thinking or caring about its possible presence within me since I was never in reproductive mode, until now. Old demons about my own physiology, insecurities beyond the gay thing, had regrouped within me, sending me into a couch-sprawling coma that lasted for weeks. After years of avoidance, I asked myself the obscure but crucial question—did I have XXY? I once measured my dick with a tape measure to divine the answer to that question. Black and Decker’s results were inclusive.

When I was in high school we learned in biology class of Klinefelter’s Syndrome, not quite a disease, where guys have small penises, small testicles, sparse facial and body hair, pair-shaped bodies, long legs and arms but short, stubby torsos, man-boobs, high-pitched voices. It’s a congenital, chromosomal nondisjunction, a genetic disorder referred to as XXY. And, of course, to the surprise of no one, I, in the
thick of an uneven pubescence, exhibited damn near all of the characteristics. I conveniently didn’t bother to consider that these traits could easily present themselves for a million different reasons on a million different guys in a million different scenarios. Nope, I had Klinefelter’s Syndrome—it was case closed.

Klinefelter’s came complete with cognitive disabilities for learning, delayed speech, motor skill difficulties, a free tote bag, and the big prize, absolute sterility—no children, no way, no how. This hereditary irregularity, I’d learn, is just an unlucky happenstance of nature at the time an egg is fertilized. A male embryo results, and it cannot produce any sperm.

His eventually undersized testicles would become pathetic dry docks of squibs and blanks. Dr. Me diagnosed me back then as a lost XXY cause. I was depressed for a time about it, was teased by a couple of the school yard bullies and called XXY here and there, a highbrow application of a new terminology those assholes managed to learn and retain for insult purposes only, but I eventually forgot about it and moved on. It just wasn’t important enough.

My fear of being an XXY was eventually replaced with the coming out process by the time I was 20, accepting myself as gay man and testifying to anyone who’d listen that I was gay, gay, gay, gay, gay. The Klinefelter’s thing was folded neatly away, relegated to a disturbing cedar
chest of other irrational thoughts and obsessions, replaced by far more pressing matters. Besides, when I was 20 I made the decision to lose 100 pounds, and damned if once I dropped the weight all the XXY symptoms, save the genital size, gulp, all but disappeared.

I was pretty good looking in my 20s, that pear-shaped blob from my teenage XXY years had melted away through the religions of lean diet and murderous exercise. I didn't mind the newfound attention from straight girls who took a visual shine to me, either. And it usually was the straight girls, too. I was just straight enough in mannerism that no one ever suspected, as if gayness meant malfeasance that I was, as my mother said "one of them-there-homosexuals."

And to say that no one suspected I was gay was to say that other gay guys rarely pegged me as the ass-up, your-place-or-mine slut any young gay guy becomes—I was no exception. I was taught and firm, rounding out t-shirts and jeans in physically flawless fashion. I could burn mountains of calories by just looking at them and hot, frequent sex was its reward.

So, while the XXY neurosis went dormant for a couple decades, after talking with Vulva from the New York City Clinic a few weeks back, she reminded me that now my reproductive potential was in play, on the table for the first time, and my XXY fears, on autopilot, roared back with
a vengeance, sending me reeling. Back to the couch I ran to brood and roil around in another wave of self-destructive behavior.

July in Wisconsin is a time to be out-and-about, showering myself in warmth and sun that only hits about two months a year up here if lucky. I’d figure I’d snap out of my fertility fugue quickly and rejoin the living in a day or two, but this Klinefelter’s thing shut me down cold, completely. I spent days and nights cloistered in the house, darkened and humid, windows closed, air-tight and stuffy, not functioning, worried that I was a useless and sterile.

I was a low-rent Howard Hughes, missing only the ten-inch fingernails and shoebox moccasins, shuffling around in a robe and drinking diet sodas, pacing the tack of the hardwood floors. My laptop served up page after page of fertility scenarios and possibilities on my chances of sterility. I made myself sick, writhing around, crying, and questioning my very male existence. There was something disturbingly chauvinistic about my desire to be a parent I was beginning to discover, and being shut-in helped my mental absorption of it.

This motivation slowly revealed itself and tapped into a primitive and unattractive impulse for wanting a baby, a humbling revelation that served as a wrinkle but certainly not a barrier for going forward with this process. Fathering a child tapped into striated vanity and inadequacy buried deep within my slew of shortcomings. I’d just rarely acknowledged
or indulged in them. But as I began to question the nature of my motives for wanting a child, it tapped into some uglasses, some soiled linens that needed a good airing out. Now was the time.

Was I doing this was to prove I was a man, I was uncertain. It wasn’t a sexual or gay matter, I didn’t think. I wasn’t revisiting lifestyle ethics or wanting the straight life after all or some bullshit like that. I liked fucking and being fucked by men, established years ago, an over-and-done-with, coming-to-Jesus thing. But procreation, making a bloodline clone? That was a different matter; a new vanity within me began to emerge and take hold.

I was still a man. I needed to do this for me, for my dad, for humanity, whatever. Something inside of me steadily gnawed and egged at me to get the job done, pointing at all those normal guys out there I would see at the Y, at Wal-Mart, at the kiddy park, instructing me to be like them, to be their equal, to do what they did and succeed at what they probably clumsily or inelegantly obtained through an incidental screwing of their wives, mistresses, random girls.

Their dicks could’ve accidentally landed in a pussy, errant pistols firing, nine months later a kid shows up. I just had to be as manly and functional as a common barfly or any straight asshole, right? This was below-the-belt personal for me now. I was out to prove my virility, to exonerate my untested manhood. Is it possible to find the goodness in a
thing that has in its roots in a simple narcissism fortified with the idea that I didn’t want to grow old alone? While flawed, this rationale for having a child began to make sense to me and I ran with it.

So I slowly started living life again. Being blue got boring and was obviously getting me nowhere. Meanwhile, precious time was lost in coordinating all the in-vitro stuff that I needed to gather, so I got my ass off the couch, took a shower and a shave, and decided to spring into action and make a few moves. When last I’d left off, I was melting down over my virility status.

First I called my doctor, who knew all about my tendency to overblow my own aches and pains, and after answering my call and congratulating me on my momentous decision, he scheduled me for a semen analysis, the suitable choice and a sure-fire way to see if I had any useable swimmers in either one of my nuts. If I didn’t, it would be game over, he confessed. But he agreed with me that I had to know either way and move on with my life. In-vitro fertilization was far too expensive a procedure to take chances with uncertain potency in either half the team, he said. I certainly wasn’t going to start cold calling fertility clinics if I was shooting blanks.

The days leading up to my cum test were difficult ones on many levels. I had to give up my daily sauna routine for a month, the only relief for an aching back after slipping a lumbar disc a few years earlier. A
sauna’s steady, 200-degree roasting is sweet on back muscles, murder on sperm cells. A month’s refrain would be time to reload, and give any viable sperm at least a fighting chance, as opposed to being cooked alive. Another thing I had to prepare for was life without masturbation. I’m sure it’s the same way for straight guys, but tell a gay guy he can’t whack off on a daily basis and a royal rage typically results. A gay man, his dick, and his hand form an unholy alliance, a perverse triad, a horny trio that frowns upon being disbanded.

Semen prep days found me bitchy and irrepressively randy. They were nail biters, even the slightest breeze or brush against my underpants resulted in an unwelcomed arousal. Uninvited boners in grocery stores and libraries are a nightmare, especially when wearing sweat pants or running shorts. I resorted to an all-denim regimen until my sample exited to play it safe.

In my masturbation vacuum, the world was so sexually amplified, shaded in a schizophrenic horniness only ejaculation could silence. I remember working out at the Y in a stupor, horse-blinded with a necessary tunnel vision, not noticing the biceps, buttocks, or even the sexy-stubbled square-jaws of the locker room Adonises that dumbly lumbered about in the weight rooms and shower stalls in all their toweled or better yet naked glory.
When I would glance around it was agony. A chiseled Asian in a muscle shirt and backwards baseball cap pursed his lips and pouted at me, begging me with his eyes to go down on him in the locker room. Grocery stores became tough sledding, my fixation on junk pouches and candied asses. Eventually, it got so bad that a nice clean pair of sideburns on a guy became a turn-on, and started turning me into an overly eroticized voyeur, no sweatpants buns or uncovered pectoral nipple was immune from my drooling lechery. It began to get scary.

I never realized the depths of my lustfulness until forced into a month-long estrangement with my Little Buddy. But I ended up making it through intact, not a single slip-up. I wanted a baby after all, and the medical accountants needed accurate sperm numbers if I was to spend big bucks on trying to make one. Besides, it was showdown time for me and XXY. The time had come for our little cold war to end after many unresolved years and worry on my part, and this semen analysis would do just that. Semen ahoy!
CHAPTER 14: SPERM. COUNTS.

On the day of the test I went to the hospital lab and managed to jack off into a sterile plastic vial about as wide as a toilet paper roll, just like I was told. Even after doing this probably all day, every day for years, the technician who handed me the sealed, sterile alcohol wipe for the tip of my dick treated this transaction with a light chuckle. She handed over the sample collector with a playful knowledge that spanky-spanky was about to go on behind the closed door of the masturbatorium (the fuckers actually labeled it) when she left. I probably would've laughed too. It is kind of funny to imagine the tortured male behind the sealed walls.

So I spanked my monkey and limped home, knowing everything was literally all out of the bag now, and I recall the nurse telling me that the results of the analysis would go to my doctor in a week or so, then he'd call me or mail me so I knew what's up. My doctor was not a 'call me' kind of guy, so I figured the mail would reveal all in a week or so. It did.

The week’s wait was spent in episodes of acid reflux fits, never a true point of psychological peace reached, and a low-boiled mental strain ruled each day as I’d cross off each one from the calendar with a big black 'X'. But the week passed, as they’re known to do, and I did indeed get the results of my test by snail mail, within one week, on the button.

I’d imagined how I’d feel if the bottom-line number had revealed that I had zip in the way of sperm, absolutely none to be found clattering
away in my testicles. I marched to the mailbox in a foggy curiosity, more
dread, really, and I tiptoed to the mailbox in case the letter had heard me
coming. At the bottom sat a thick envelope, lab results-sized, fat and
glaring up at me like a lost kitten in need of a petting. I looked both ways,
saw no one coming, and then snatched the envelope, placing it under my
armpit, running into the house.

The light transition from bright summer sun to the unlit living
room created a luminary shock, a flickering blue buzz before my eyes. I
felt drunk. I'd never clenched a piece of postal paper so tightly. I slit
open the envelope with my fingers, held my breath, and looked down at
the results to see if my life was to have even a small chance at changing
someone else's.

To my happy surprise I discovered that I did produce sperm. That
is to say, I made some. The numbers, after pounding a few websites,
eventually made sense. The totals were only so-so. Within the matrix of
my shot wad, I'd produced about 18 million sperm. At first blush that
number appeared rock-star solid. I mean, 18 million sperm, that's quite a
haul for a tiny teaspoon. Besides, one sperm was all that was needed to
 crank an egg down the road, right?

Well, yes and no. I came down from my shooter's high rather
quickly. I looked at the internal criteria and results and red flags slowly
started to slide up my flagpole. The total sperm count was 18 million
alright, but they were found within a full 2-milliliters (mL) of semen; so really, I was shooting 9 million per mL load, nowhere near the vicinity of a powerball player. A normal sperm count is 20-40 million rascals per 2 mL wad. That bitch of a brother-in-law once had about 150 million squigglers in a 1 mL serving, so my measly lot was no match for his.

Add to that the motility of my sperm, or how fast they moved forward and actually swam around, was somewhere near flailing, like a one or two on a scale of five. My sperm it seemed were sluggish and lazy, swimming in circles and banging into each other—it figured. And to top it off, my doctor chimed in with some scribbled handwritten notes that caught my eye and popped a few blood vessels at the bottom of the last page. It read like this:

*You are probably fertile.*

*You are probably fertile?* Either I was or I wasn’t. The best I could get was *you are probably fertile?* I tore up the report and threw it away. I realized that this process was to be one leap after another, constantly swimming in one state of uncertainty to the next, so it was then and there that I decided take the first leap of all and figure that it would be alright, that my sperm was good enough, just like my doctor said. It felt unusual to not worry, but for a moment, I did.

Besides, even if I’d sported just a single sperm, I wasn’t going to go through life having never even tried to become a dad. Just as I decided
to trust my doctor that I was a probably fertile human being, something rang a bell in the back of my mind. It was something sweet Vulva had mentioned a few weeks back about a new medical thing that virtually eliminated male factor infertility. It was called ICSI, I remembered, which stood for intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection. I'd remembered the name, and that it dealt with overcoming guys with low sperm counts.

In my Klinefelter's crackup, I'd managed to cordon off what she'd told me. I even remember her mentioning the fact that not all men are 'championship breeders' and sometimes needed a little dose of science's helping hand. There was now a protocol that made light shooters like me into fathers with a cool machine that took an individually retrieved sperm, sucked it into a microscopic needle called a pipette, then injected it into a magnetized and stationary female egg cell, with fertilization probably guaranteed.

As for me, the mystery of whether or not I'm an XXY still remains today, an unrequited reckoning that I no longer let interfere with my daily functioning and self-esteem, well, sort-of. Rosie came along, and is probably genetically fine and dandy, and in the end I'm too chicken to find out anymore whether I am exactly an XXY or not. I'll just leave it as one of life's delightful uncertainties whose secret will someday just discretely and merrily go down with the ship.
CHAPTER 15: JANE, HIS WIFE

Baby Rosie is a product of many chefs, a smorgasbord of different surgeons each wielding their own special scalpels, and Jane Brown, a coworker of mine from a convenience store/gas station combo I'd met about fifteen years prior to my baby-making days was one of them. We shared the 5am-2pm early bird shift. Afterwards I'd head off to classes in the afternoons and evenings. It was a Citgo station attached to a submarine sandwich shop near the town's shopping mall. We'd spend our shifts mostly smoking and gossiping about the world with each other on the sidelines, between customers, away from the gas pumps where no one could see us. We were below average workers to say the least.

It was like-at-first-sight, a significant like, hefty in secret sharing and intimate tidbits about each other, a too-quick-to-trust maybe, but it felt right, special. Our attraction was such a pleasing jolt, a guilt-free zing to look forward to at an otherwise dead-end job. I grew to like getting up and driving to that dump for no other reason than her.

I so enjoyed Jane, right from the start. She sparkled with an insecure energy that tickled me at every turn. She fancied herself a gruff and grizzled, tattooed rebel with her flowing black hair, her thin, sensual curves, and her jeans-and-boots grit that never matched her hidden warmth and an old-fashioned provinciality I discovered pretty easily. She spoke
with faux gravel that cracked all too often, giving way to sweetness, an unexpected vocal demure.

Jane was in fact a recovering wild child, a naughty girl her parents had long written off. When I first met her she’d just sworn off the booze and casual sex, disavowing the carnival of her life’s manifest. She’d settled down a tad, found a steady named Adam, and she talked of marriage, kids, college, eating right, and exercising, all while working at a gas station to save money to one day plan a jailbreak from her parents’ basement. I too lived in my parents’ basement that summer so we were a couple of peas in a pod, bonding deeply, almost too instantly for us to realize. It only took a few weeks after we met before she asked me if I was gay, mincing nothing. I told her that indeed I was, and then asked her what gave me away, like the ending of a *Scooby Doo* cartoon.

“Because you’re cute and you don’t talk about girls, like, ever, you dumbass,” she said.

“Plenty of guys don’t talk about girls and they aren’t gay,” I reminded her.

“Ugly guys that don’t talk about girls aren’t gay—they just can’t get laid. Trust me, if a guy’s hot and doesn’t talk about girls, you can pretty much bet he’s gay.”
She had me pegged immediately; I had to hand it to her. I loved her even more for expressing her instincts and for her unflinching need to know. She cared about me.

Months passed and the gas station life ground on. One afternoon in August, while eating a basket of onion rings in the sweltering sun, Jane asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. She knew I wanted to be an English professor, I reminded her, but she shook her head and told me she was asking me a different kind of question here.

“No, no,” she said. “I know you want to be a teacher. I mean how do you want to end up years from now? Do you want to get married and have a wife, or man wife, or husband or something?”

“Never thought about it,” I said. At the moment, I was busy and more interested in dunking my onion rings in the remaining ketchup she’d left me—she was a ketchup hog.

“What about kids? Do you want a kid someday? It’s possible you know. Gay guys are doing that now with surrogate mothers and donors, you know. I read it in People magazine.”

She was probably probing for something deeper, more meaningful. She was able to peel the superficiality right from me, scraping all pretense down raw like few people that I’ve ever encountered could, really. She felt my loneliness, how empty and unfulfilled a person I’d become in my 20s. The baby thing that she’d brought up was bolt from nowhere, but she
demonstrated yet again a knowhow of how my wheels spun, and of what I really needed.

I’d heard of surrogate moms and in-vitro fertilization here and there, like she had on the news and in magazines (the Internet at this time was in its infancy and a non-source of real information) and, though I didn’t tell Jane, when it came right down to it, I’d always known being gay would never prevent me from being a dad, though I had nothing to back me up on that.

Within the naïve cloud of youth lives an unearned superiority and many delusions, as the details of surrogacy and in-vitro would later inform upon me, but not back then. In those days it was pie-in-the-sky whimsy, a feast of fooling myself into how simple and easy procuring a baby would someday be with or without a woman’s help, an automatic eventuality.

My dad and I would go for long runs in the summertime and he’d ask me unexpectedly frank and pointed questions like, even though I was gay, did I ever want to have kids?

“I will have kids, Dad,” I would tell him. “As sure as we’re both standing here, I will pass on your name and make you a grandfather.” It was puffery, a bluff, putting him and everyone listening on-notice that, gay or not, I’d find a way to be a father someday and make him a little grandson. A granddaughter was unthinkable. I wanted a boy.
One morning in the parking lot over cinnamon rolls and cigarettes, just before the first customer arrived at 5:30 AM, Jane lobbed me a humdinger that would change everything.

“How about after we are done having our four kids I carry one for you?”

A piece of dough got caught in my throat and I began to cough, taken aback. She was so precise in her child mathematics. Jane whacked me on the back and continued.

“I’ve always wanted to be a surrogate for someone, and you want to be a dad, someday, right?” Her eyes were glistening, a bug-eyed Disney character, innocent and beautiful.

I cleared my throat and began to think. I was so off-taken I rolled my tongue in my mouth, searching for words to say. Not wanting to hurt her feelings and knowing such an arrangement would never come to pass, I simply lit my smoke and thrust my hand out for her to shake, like a banker closing a sale.

“It’s a deal,” I said. We shook hands and finished our smoke in the morning sun. And that was that.

The months passed and I’d go on to quit the gas station, Jane staying behind to build her nest egg for her basement breakout. I’d graduate from school and be swept into the whirlwind of building a career, buying a car and a house, that sort of shit. Meanwhile, Jane and Adam did
get married, got better jobs, had their four kids, bought a house ten blocks
away from me, and raised their brood to their working class-best in a
modest ranch home about a half-mile away from me.

Though I stood up in their wedding, we began to drift apart, slowly
at first, hanging out more often than not. We were all dining together at
Outback when I got the call my grandma passed away. The get-togethers
then transitioned to the more infrequent, impromptu Friday night drinks
now and again. Then suddenly a year passed between outings and phone
calls, followed by a complete fizzle after that. I began to miss them and
wish we had more in common. Jane was then pregnant after years of
trying and failing, so I saw less and less of her after this news.

When their twins were born I visited Jane in the hospital, but after
that so much time began to pass that I stopped counting and started
forgetting about them. We all accepted the divergence and didn’t take it
personally, of course. They had a new family of their own to raise and I
didn’t, going the route of gay-guy-with-two-cats, all the while secretly
resenting the little bastards for pooping on my floors and puking on my
wing-back chairs. We still all loved each other, but at a distance, at
different stages in our lives that showed no signs of ever intersecting
again. Two years turned to five turned to ten, I hardly thought of them
both, even as kid after kid kept coming. I should’ve visited them,
should’ve kept in touch more. God knows I had the time, yet somehow never had the energy. Maybe I was just jealous of them for having kids.

And all along, I’d never forgotten about our surrogacy deal, though I had no illusions that she’d remembered any part of our special little handshake. I began to think she’d only propositioned me to make me feel better, to put a smile on me in the face of another crappy, lonely day. She probably never even meant a word of it, instead pumping me full of pipe dreams or blowing insincere sunshine up my ass—empty words and bullshit promises.
CHAPTER 16: A MEETING AT 'DENNY'S'

Fifteen years later, and once I had medical confirmation that I wasn’t sterile, I got to see Jane again. I started networking, and since I realized that in going it alone I was pretty much tits on a bull, a three-peckered Billy goat—pick an uncoordinated animal metaphor and insert it here. I needed some serious girl talk and who better than with a four-time mom who clearly knew her away around making a baby in spades.

I was herding surrogacy cats, chasing my own tail in a single, swirling jaunt. I did know the steel-cut basics by now, that three elements needed to somehow converge in the same place, at the same time—my sperm cell, a female’s egg cell, and a host uterus for a nine-month embryo lodging. But my dummy’s take on what was involved with the entire in-vitro fertilization process, and how unlikely it was to work, wasn’t getting me very far. That clock within me was ticking, and my batteries were running low.

The IVF procedure was brimming with insider terms that I’d never heard of or had any clue as to how much they all cost. My mission was partly to discover how cheaply I could obtain everything that was needed at more rock-bottom prices. The more confusing the step sounded the more it cost, I did find that out rather quickly. But I wasn’t advancing my cause. Flapping the gummy parts of my brain in a stream of what-ifs grew
unsatisfactory. Some action was needed, and who better to help me along the way than good old Jane. I gave her a call and she accepted a meeting.

We landed at a Denny's restaurant for a crash course on the ins-and-outs of what I was getting myself into. We hadn't seen each other in five years or so, but we'd reconnected on Facebook and had resumed speed casually a few months before, picking up right where we left off. Within minutes of ordering our soft drinks the wisecracks were unleashed. She commented on how my jeans accentuated my shelf-ass. I took to making fun of her hopelessly outdated hairstyle and cheap shoes.

She was delighted that I wanted to become a daddy, and she showed up at the restaurant with a binder stuffed with pamphlets and handouts to get me started. As smooth as an Avon or Amway lady, she cracked out her stash, a website for every question, a low-cost solution for every high-priced proposal that Vulva had dangled over me. I was shocked at how steeped and prepared she was with this surrogacy shit. She was a guns-a-blazing, loaded weapon of information and tips; she was more than an armchair rookie. This was something beyond her intuitions.

I began to wonder how she had obtained such encyclopedic knowledge about in-vitro fertilization and gestational surrogacy. She effused a volcanic, razor-sharp acumen with each step. Something was up. Turns out I was lucky to have caught her between her routine flights to Canadian fertility clinics. She herself had become surrogate, just like
she said she would, but was twice unsuccessful, a piker trying to shake the goose eggs she was racking up with her failed attempts at providing an infertile couple from north Austria with a child of their own.

There was gold in the surrogacy hills and Jane, while always too classy to dish, was probably cashing in. Her intended parents, she told me, were all-Euro socialites, loafers and croissants types, endless pockets matched with endless patience. The wife had had cancer and froze her eggs while she still could. I remember grinding my tongue at the prospects of her Austrian quest, tearing my napkin slowly under the table while feeling pissed for dragging my fucking feet and not getting to her first. I hated those Austrians and didn't even know them.

In the midst of my pissy-fit, I managed to string together and tuck into my pants pocket pamphlets, brochures, and post-it notes that Jane had prepared for me. They detailed how a baby is made IVF-style, and Jane said they should house enough information to get me started:

**Ovulatory hyperstimulation** is where the egg donor takes pricey drugs to make lots and lots of eggs in her ovaries, sometimes twenty or thirty, instead of the usual one-per-month. This is a risky procedure, a toll on the egg donor's body, and is not taken lightly.

*Lupron* and *Estrace* are more pricey drugs that the gestational surrogate (the woman receiving the embryos) takes to make her womb
like two pieces of bread with a super-sticky layer of peanut butter spread between them to hopefully snag a traveling embryo.

**Egg retrieval** is the day when the eggs are sucked out of the ovarian sacks of the donor, a mind surgical procedure. The sperm’s curtain call is right about then—fertilization ‘show time’ for the little swimmers comes along pretty quickly thereafter and they have to be ready.

**ICSI** (the thing that Vulva told me about) is the current, why-take-a-chance enhanced fertilization technique that most embryologists use and most coupies and singles opt for if they’re going to do this. The other option is to let the eggs bathe in sperm and maybe, maybe one sperm will crack the outer shell of the egg. But if chance is to be bypassed, **ICSI** is the ticket. It’s an unbelievable medical procedure where someone literally grabs a single, microscopic sperm cell and, after gently slicing its tail off and sucking it into a tiny glass tube pipette, injects it into the cytoplasm of the egg cell with the hope of fertilization activation and an embryo forming within the next 24 hours.

A **blastocyst** is eagerly awaited. If the next day following **ICSI** a two-celled embryo results, it’s left to culture in a lab, in a dish, for three-to-five days until it begins its cellular division (slowly at first, four cells by day two, eight by day three, a hundred or so by day five) and it’s everyone’s great hope that the embryo will thrive, grow, and reach the
elusive blastocyst status. So many embryos, fragile as filament, tender as a spider’s web, arrest and don’t make it to three days, much less the five that’s required to give a wannabe fetus a fighting chance.

By the time she put down her pointer and folded her brochures, Jane and I settled into a nice little meal of burgers and rings, the Diet Cokes kept coming, and we laughed again like old times. I sensed an unspoken sadness between us, though, that amidst the laughs was an emptiness and dissatisfaction that we were going our own ways, separate forks down a surrogacy road we’d romanced a decade ago, but now travelled in opposite circles and directions. I should’ve called her years ago, shouldn’t have waited for her to be snatched up by those Austrian snoots, but it was too late. She was committed to these assholes and contracted with a surrogacy agency, and, in knowing her loyalty—end of story.

Jane had given me a great website to find gestational carriers, one she swore by that would eventually locate a perfect fit for me. My first mistake was leaving that restaurant giddy with empowerment, believing that a sane, shapely woman was out there somewhere and would gladly carry a child for me for free or nearly free. I had so much to learn, and was about to be taken on a self-guided tour of torment. But for that evening, early on in the game, it felt good that Jane was doing her thing and I was doing mine, and that we both knew about it. I’d only wished we
were doing things together. We split a brownie sundae and finished it a comfortable silence.
CHAPTER 17: SUSIE, THE ORIGINAL UTERUS

Hanging with Jane reminded me that at one time I actually had a surrogate in my sights that might’ve made this first crisis of finding a uterus all but unnecessary. Long before I’d met Jane, long before I’d ended the drinking and fucking sprees that would’ve made parenthood impossible in the first place, I had a friend who was so special, I almost found the balls to ask her be my baby’s mommy, but just not in time.

My 20s were a series of misadventures, a decade without accountability, a drinking and whoring timespan of youthful recklessness that never realized its power and damage, or fleeting. When I was ten, I wanted to be 20, when I was 20 I wanted to be 30. But then, perhaps not shockingly, the allure of being an age climber whittled itself to a nub, its pinnacle reached, then regressed in a tail-tucked retreat. When I was 30, I then wanted to be 20. It’s the gay, anti-aging vortex that pulled me into reverse. The Duchess of Windsor, Wallis Simpson, once said that a woman can never be thin enough or rich enough. As a gay man, I’ll both testify to that and add young enough to her majesty’s mix to one-up her.

Luckily my 20s contained a conscience, or at least a brake pedal I could tap now and again. I had a dear friend, Susie, who I’d thought of asking once to carry my child, somehow, someday. She had mall-fried hair, a bargain bin fashion sense, irrepressibly gaudy press-on nails, and a heart of solid gold bullion that would have done anything for me. She
died before we ever had the chance to discuss having a baby for me in any serious way, unfortunately.

I worked at a hardware store in my 20s while going to college and we became the peas-and-carrots in each other’s lives, spending holidays eating chilidogs and smoking pack after pack of Marlboros. Her death to me was a paralytic, a life-stopper that took years to shake off, like my puppy and my bicycle being crushed by a squealing pickup truck over and over again. I account for my good fortune later on in life because my bad breaks early on kept coming, Susie’s death right near the top of the shitpiled heap. She had contracted a rare blood disease called TTP.

She died on a Monday morning in December, before I could even make it to the hospital; her brother’s shaking voice on the other end of the phone urging me to “get down here” as fast as I could. But I failed to get there fast enough, left only to hold the stiff, chilly hand of her freshly-passed body moments before they wheeled her over to the morgue and the funeral folks. In the seconds I had alone with her, I quickly stroked her hand and whispered into her ear, begging her to tell me what’s waiting for us on the other side, what it’s like, what I’ll see and hear someday as I crossover like she did. She didn’t tell me. Then they took her away.

She was my best buddy, my smoking and drinking gal, the silliness and the laughs we shared made the retail grind tolerable, two misfits with the bizarre fortune to experience each other’s loneliness together,
company and misery. In a life up to that point of confusion and aimlessness, she made the disappointment of it all seem manageable, and then she was gone, without warning. I was unready for what it truly meant to face death. I quit smoking cigarettes the day she died and never picked them up again—they killed her, quickly it would seem at 40, pack after red-striped pack. We drowned in blue swirls most days, we could’ve hung and cured meat at her house the tobacco clouds were so consistent and so thick, but for her it was too late.

I had a friend once named Susie, who might’ve carried my baby someday, but she up and passed away from a rare blood disease, so that option was out. We worked together at a hardware store and she spent her day at the cash register painting her nails and eating peanut butter cups and drinking Pepsi. She was a gem, my kind of lady, generous and damaged from a hard-lived, tough-loved life cut short. She’d have been a great mom, too. Not much more to say about her. She’s been gone for so long sometimes I can’t even remember the sound of her voice, which scares me because I used to be able to hear her in my mind, but it gets harder and harder. If I were to get lucky enough and have a baby girl, I wanted to name her Susie, but it reeked of smarmy retreat, and besides, Sue, like me, hated her own name. She wouldn’t have approved.
CHAPTER 18: THOSE WACKY WOMBs

Jane provided me an online avenue to find a woman to carry my child, the first part of the puzzle. Not exactly a penny candy transaction, so I was grateful for the lead. Oddly, I'd never considered the decidedly 21st century approach of consulting—yo-ho-ho—the Internet to find a carrier in the first place, so I felt a tad stupid for not realizing an obvious resource had remained ignored by me for all this time. Turns out the Internet was a mixed bag, and not quite my friend.

As it happened a host of websites were out there that became a Craigslist for people who were seeking gestational surrogates and also the surrogates themselves who were offering their services to the desperately childless. I found the introduction to this world at first unbelievable, blinking and headshaking in the realization this wacky womb universe actually existed—women were out there who wanted to carry children for couples and singles who wanted them, people just like me. What I wasn’t prepared for was just exactly how cuckoo bird almost every one of these surrogates ended up being, a breeding ground for the lonely, unstable, or mentally ill.

Obtaining a uterus was essential to this transaction, so I became resigned to the view that Internet strangers would have to do—they were the only and therefore best candidates to carry my child. I had no friends or family I felt comfortable asking to do this, and as Jane had advised me
earlier, if I wasn’t going to pay big bucks for a surrogacy agency to coordinate and provide it all for me on a silk pillow with a foil-wrapped mint on top, I had to self-advocate and discover what the baby-making market would bear, bit-by-bit. In going after the assembly piecemeal, it wasn’t even worth a fertility clinic’s time to approach it without having a surrogate at the ready, so I returned to the couch and laptop afresh, with a priority surmomomy mission in mind.

And what would the world of cyberspace surrogate mothers reveal to me? Consider the barroom scene from Star Wars, crossed with a trip to the local zoo, then sprinkle in a day pass to the local psych ward, and finally garnish with a dash of absolute, round-the-bend, fucking crazy. I had no idea the level of weird I’d stepped into. Part of me realized, reflexively, that any woman who would carry a child for someone for free naturally had at least a slight screw loose, but in my naiveté and desperate attempt to save cash, I’d forgotten. The bizarre human buffet I encountered with online surrogates, coast-to-coast, from the Dakotas to the Carolinas was beyond reason, a jolt of skunky champagne, rude and totally tasteless. What a crop of crazies.

And these ladies were all obese, which, surprisingly they themselves didn’t even know but I would later learn would medically disqualify them from being viable surrogate candidates in the first place. Fertility doctors never had a good answer for me as to why seriously fat
women couldn’t be surrogates beyond the metabolically confusing things I think they were inventing that pregnancy does to them. It always pissed me off because it became axiomatic when searching for carriers online that the heftier they were, the heftier their hearts. In the end, the only heart that was broken continued to be mine. Still, they were all nuts.

As to their crazy, the candidates I contacted ensuingly took the cake from each other. I had a woman from Texarkana, Texas who, even after I told her I was gay, insisted we have the baby underwater, with no medical supervision, both of us nude and her grabbing my genitals while she delivered. Another chick from Dearborn, Michigan wondered if I had a problem with her many, many antipsychotic medications—and would I mind chipping in and paying for a script every now and again throughout the pregnancy should she need a pick-me-up? Women from Seattle and Albuquerque wanted in on all aspects of the child’s post-delivery life, an access window that didn’t make sense and I couldn’t provide to total strangers.

This went on and on. Thousand-pounders begging me to find a clinic that would accept them in spite of the fact they’d need to be airlifted from their bedrooms, an Alaskan prostitute who wanted to turn a new leaf through motherhood, a nymphomaniac from Pawtucket that absolutely, positively couldn’t have another abortion and needed to ‘cork it’ for nine months, and a lady in South Dakota on welfare who wanted me to marry
her in order to get on my insurance so she could untie her own tubes then have my love child.

Each correspondence became an increasingly sick fishing expedition, a freak-show of freaks and psychos waiting to pounce on the other end of my instant messages. Nail chewing emails back-and-forth, not a suitable candidate in the lot ever replied. The kinks and quirks of these women caused cringes up my shoulder blades that I'd never thought would apply to this search. I draped an afghan around myself in mid-August to quell the shivers.

They stripped the wholesome out of it, clawing away my optimism and thoughts of purity and sanctity. It was rarely a matter of money with these women, either. Aside from the side-action bonuses of free airfare, room services and my springing for a Xanax refill, their motivations were usually altruistic. Fucked-up, to be sure, but nearly all of them carried within them a seemingly authentic yet implausible desire to help the childless, like me, have a child—no matter what the storyline or lifestyle happened to be. I couldn't judge them, but I sure as hell could think that most of their cheese had decidedly slid off their crackers, understandably. These women were off their onions, and it was nearly a month of striking out, candidate after candidate, before someone sane hit the radar and I found myself above water.
CHAPTER 19: OKLAHOMA REDEMPTION

One day, after weeks of dead-ends and disappointments with each woman I'd contacted to carry my baby, a woman named Karen from Seminole, Oklahoma replied to my email. In her ad she stated she only wanted her medical expenses paid for, her husband was cool with her being a surrogate, as so many women I'd find out were posting surrogacy ads on the sneak, their husbands completely in the dark. She also didn't care if the child's intended parent was single or married, gay or straight.

Most importantly, she sounded normal, so, with the bar set firmly low, the first thing I did was double-check to see if she really was from Oklahoma. From what I knew, what stereotypes had carefully taught me, things down there were a little backwards, the Civil War was still chic, and it certainly wasn't a gay man's vacation spot by any stretch.

Turns out she was an educated, half-white, half-Native American registered nurse married to an Indian named Khan (yup, like from Star Trek). She had three kids and worked in a hospital emergency room, coordinating airlifting care for trauma victims needing helicopter transportation to the big hospitals in Oklahoma City. She had to have something on the ball, I thought. I'd taken a chance and shot her an email a few days earlier, but heard nothing back.

Just as I was about to wade back into the screwy suromommy waters, her reply popped up in my in-box. It wasn't a quick hello; it was
her surrogacy manifesto, a ten-page long email that was fascinating to read, but unnerving in its detail for a first contact. I read that she had three children, an orange cat named Viv, and loved being pregnant. She wanted to carry a child for a worthy person, since her husband snipped himself years earlier, and her love of gestation became a percolating call to the surrogacy wild. Maybe, just maybe, I was that worthy person.

Her messages were jolly, harmlessly pushy at times, but her undertones were couched in a perfectly balanced, sunny eagerness that made them seem rational, almost ecstatic to help out. She sent me a picture of her family and they were beautiful, flawless—a motley troop of mocha-skinned younglings, a smooth innocence, with pony tails and braces, soccer pads and fake tattoos. Karen herself was a knockout with big chestnut eyes, pretty brown hair with a touch of corn-roll frizz, and big shapely curves I’m sure her husband had a grand time latching onto. That first day messaging we must’ve ping-ponged back and forth ten times, increasingly breathless and anxious with each read and reply. The pipeline was instantly addictive and pleasurable.

Days continued, as did our communications. The syntax of Karen’s emails dripped with a Southern honeysuckle, a cornpone-and-grits edge that combined her 'sweeties' and 'darlings' with 'goddamn right' and 'kick ass' in a charming yet complex yarn of bruising sincerity. She was a
tiger, a bucking bull. I liked her feisty style and the fit we forged right from the get-go.

She fudged around the money issue, tiptoeing and insisting that it was 'un Southern' to discuss such matters, especially at the beginning point, and what with the sacredness of carrying my baby and all, but I insisted we go there. Eventually, she said that she'd just want her medical and travel expenses paid for, and she threw out a five-thousand dollar lob as a trial balloon fee for services rendered. After listening to Vulva and her hundred-thousand dollar talk, Karen's quotes were heavenly and perfectly dreamy set of figures.

Her husband and children were fine with her wanting to be a surrogate, supporting her dreams to be pregnant but not with her own, and the distance between Wisconsin and Oklahoma was not an issue—l'd be picking up the cheek for all the airfare, anyway. The only prickly pear left dangling in the room was the whole single, gay dad thing—easily disposed-of, I thought.

She had a checklist of questions for me at-the-ready when she called the first time, and she fired them off, her voice less mousy than I'd imagined, rather strong and hoarse. Chiefly, she was confused that such a "straight acting and sounding guy from my emails" was sniffing around surrogacy websites for a kid of his own when all that he needed to scratch his itch was some penis-in-the-hooch action. I couldn't understand why
she couldn’t accept my self-identifying sexuality as fact—if no-means-no, why can’t gay-mean-gay and speak for itself these days?

I assured her over and over of my pristine gayness, unsure what I could've said or done to prove it to her and her needlessly reasonable doubt. And when all her questions were answered, and after a thorough examination of pictures of me, my family, my home, and my underwear drawer (she had a thing for it) we had a deal, in as much as things could be consecrated verbally at that point. We were a team. We were going to get the job done and make a baby together.

Our emails and text messages soon became a bit more playful, risqué, even naughty at times. I'd text her a selfie of me at the beach in my board shorts and flip-flops or a nude pic of a hot guy or two I'd dated years back, and each of her giggling responses told me of her repression and innocence, the Oklahoma façade that shattered the faulty cultural chasm separating the two of us. She was a scoundrel, as decadent as me, yet geography didn’t afford her such dalliance, nor did her husband, an orthodox Sikh elder with a soft spot for her wildness to be pregnant.

I found our secret, dirty rapporte charmingly educational for both of us. In time, she'd ask surprisingly curious and pointed questions about the mechanics of gay sex and to describe the difficulties I’d had in coming out to my family and friends years back. She confessed of a healthy, school girl’s crush and shine that she'd taken to me, and went a step
further in saying she possessed not an ounce of shame in admitting it. We
bathed in trust, a promising bond that just felt right. In my whistle and step
down the street, I began to think this arrangement might work.

Karen lived in rural Oklahoma—down-home Americana, maybe,
but it did not exactly house or sport the smartest of all cookies the Fruited
Plain has to offer. She and her husband's grammar were shaky, their
worldliness a frontier, modular-home nonexistence, and as I looked into
state ideologies, I realized that if my baby were to be born, it needed at
least a drop of progressivism that Wisconsin offered—the baby needed to
be born here, not in the Bible Belt.

In Oklahoma, they still teach the stork to school children as an
explanation for how babies arrive for God's sake, its conservatism
legendary, and, from my view as one big seven-layer subculture salad,
quite dangerous to my parental interests. I'd be damned if I'd put the
question of my baby's custody into the hands of a chain-smoking, chaw-
spitting judicial good ol' boy from Oklahoma. The only thing I knew
about her state was the musical. No, I'd fly her up here and put her up in a
hotel, room service, pedicure, bonbons—the whole smear. My baby would
be born in my back yard, my home field advantage, on my turf. She had
no problem.

To be fair, my premature branding of Karen as a rube in no way
meant she didn't know her way around medical terminology and
procedures, especially when it came to *in-vitro* fertilization and gestational surrogacy. She was an RN and talked the talk, rich in the inner-workings and complexities of the kinds of assisted reproductive techniques that morons like me can't even feign a familiarity with. And just like Jane, Karen could rattle off her shit with a silver-tongued ease while I just nodded and sucked my thumb over the phone, rocking in the fetal position as I listened to her talk, fluent as a crystal stream.

She'd asked me what fertility clinic I'd chosen, and embarrassed, I told her I hadn't even gotten that far or even made a phone call. She talked up some of her Dallas and Houston favorites, but to me they seemed too far away and way too humid for my comfort. She tipped me on vetting the clinics that provided the egg donors in-house--one less step for me--so I could skip that hunt altogether. Bully for that, I told her. She had no fucking clue what that meant.

I thought I had my surrogate mom all locked down, karma's wheels finally beginning to grind my way. Now it was on to find a fertility clinic to prepare the royal ingredients. Just when I began to think the dots were connecting, I only managed to crack open another can of crazy.
CHAPTER 20: CLINIC(AL) DEPRESSION

Once Karen was on board, I began to thinking more clearly and plotting more confidently. While not yet a Grand Master, I began shifting the chess pieces with more bravado and confidence, knowing the next move resided with selecting a clinic somewhere in the United States to conduct the in-vitro procedure from start-to-finish for us. I would soon learn it was less a matter of me choosing a clinic than the clinic assessing my qualifications and deciding upon me and whether I brought successful mojo to the table or not and passed their muster. Nothing about this experience ever failed to provide a display of how wrong I was on the way it worked, recalibrating the way things really were at every phase’s stumbling block—and there were many.

Cold-calling fertility facilities took guts, and it often required a chest-pumping or two before picking up the phone, as a constant, uneasy burn flowed through me with each finger-shaking, hand-ratting dial. I didn’t know where to start, but used the Internet as best I could to research the best success rates as an initial filtering and weeding out of the lousy ones. These calls were time consuming, often sneaking them in-between classes on campus. These places weren’t open after 4:00 PM and rarely called me back. At the carwash or in line at McDonald’s, anywhere I could make a call and be even half-assed focused in the daytime would have to do. This took weeks and weeks of attempts.
Turns out, the CDC requires fertility clinics to report their success and failure rates, to open their books, bare-naked, and disclose how good or bad they are. In this instance, it seems the government is actually concerned with its citizens throwing good money away at incompetent institutions. No matter, I scoured the report cards to see which clinics had the best outcomes for patients that needed egg donors—a guy like me would need both an egg donor and would have to use a surrogate carrier. These factors lowered the success rates a lot.

The answers I received to these calls unearthed an uncharted discomfort. They quickly became a squeamish exercise that harkened back to the days of calling my restaurant bosses in high school and asking for raises or the HIV clinics to get the results of my tests back in the 90s. That swinging-dick swagger evaporated with each unsuccessful call after call.

A hot prospect in Houston that Karen had mentioned didn’t even speak to single people, they quickly yet politely confessed, ditto for a top-shelf outfit in Arkansas I’d had my sights on. In neighboring Michigan, I think even the word surrogacy is still illegal, as the state, thirty years later, is still trying to scrub off the stench from that whole Baby M thing—the poster child for how surrogacy’s best intentions can go horribly wrong and is far from legally certain or air-tight. Reputable fertility joints throughout America wouldn’t even take a glance at me or even listen.
One of the best fertility clinics in the country, located just outside of Chicago in Gurney, Illinois, actually hung up on me when I told the receptionist I was a single man from Wisconsin interested in using their services to become a parent. St. Louis, Des Moines, even Colorado and Wyoming, all of them were not interested in talking to me because of my ‘nontraditional’ status and ‘morally questionable’ objectives. When I asked some of them why they only worked with married couples, they were most times frank yet provincial, each of their self-righteous rejections a paraphrased version of the following:

“This is an elective, not compulsory medical procedure, sir.”

“We reserve the right to refuse medical treatment to whomever we so choose, sir.”

“We reserve the right to refuse medical treatment for whatever reason we choose, sir.”

“You have no legal right to be served by this clinic, sir.”

I added the sirs.

Each conversation made me feel smaller and smaller, a reject’s reject just trying to get his groove on and play games with the rest of the reindeer. And I’d done my homework enough to know that my local-yokel clinics in nearby Green Bay or La Crosse, or sadly my state metropolises of Madison and Milwaukee had comparatively terrible in-vitro success rates when compared to the larger cities. I wasn’t going to
flush my baby-making money down subpar fertility toilets, home court or not, but I also couldn’t dial up the best-of-the-best outfits on the East and West coasts because it simply cost way more than I had. I was stuck. After a few weeks of striking out, something hit me. Why was I ignoring my neighbor to the immediate West? What about my fertility friends in Minnesota? Had I ignored an entire state because of a petty and pretty stupid prejudice predicated on my American football hatred of their Vikings?

It was glaring error, a nearly colossal mistake to overlook the Minnesotans. But that’s nearly what happened. And I began to clunk my head when I remembered from previous retail therapy sessions I’d embarked upon that Minneapolis had always been my San Francisco of the Midwest, a homo’s mecca of shopping malls, boutiques, drive-thru Botox, gay bars, bathhouses, and, of course, a cultural infrastructure that just gave a gay brother a break as he walked on down the street, a city that smiled and winked at the queen bee in all of us, nodding its head instead of wagging its finger. How could I have slighted this over-the-rainbow natural? I should’ve been forced to turn in my gay card and my ruby slippers at the same time.

It would turn out that the Minnesota clinics would be my last hope. The coastal progressives I called were totally tolerant of my needs and situation yet pocketbook prohibitive. I couldn’t even afford the airfare and
have anything left to spare for breath mints or a condom. I felt a depressing finality while scanning the websites for the best clinics the state had to offer.

After compiling my own sort of Consumer Reports performance composite, I realized that only two clinics even passed a standard sniff test, none of the others were worth my time or exploring. One was the Rochester-famous Mayo Clinic. I could only imagine the stratospheric fees, so I decided to call the other clinic first. It wasn’t located in the coziness of Rochester, rather in the rundown ruins of Old Downtown, a good hospital in a lousy neighborhood. The restaurant next door was aptly named Hell’s Kitchen. I gave them a call anyway.

A receptionist answered, and after a month of dismissive cattiness, I spoke, at auctioneer-speeds, before she even had a chance to either say anything or hang up on me.

“Hi, I’m a single gay man calling from Wisconsin wants to become a father, have my own biological baby, and I need the services of an egg donor and one of your reproductive endocrinologists to make my dreams of parenthood come true. I’ve been hung up on by nearly every clinic I’ve talked to, coast-to-coast, so before you even connect me to somebody who’s just going to dismiss me, I’ve got all my cards on the table, here, no secrets, that’s the way it is. Now, can you help me?”
I never took a breath. I’d also never just spit it all out and told it like it was just like that. Palpitating, my heart pounded in my ear and head as my hand shook, trying to keep the receiver glued as I winced and waited to hear the receptionist’s reply. Never had I felt so coiled and helpless as when waiting to hear her voice, whether or not my journey would continue towards the elusive baby I’d come so far to make, at the mercy of so many. She paused before she spoke, heightening my agony. I got all my terminology right, too. That should count for something, I thought. Say something, damn it. Say something. Tell me what I want to hear.

“Sir, we’d be happy to help you,” she said. Her tone was friendly, playful, as if surprised that I didn’t call them first and had experienced a month of hell.

“This clinic actually has many gay singles and couples, men and women, as our patients and clients. Let me connect you to the right person to explain everything you need to know and answer every question you may have. Let’s make that dream come true. I’m so glad you called this morning.”

Baby Rosie was a step closer to becoming. If I’d had a smoke, I’d have lit it.
CHAPTER 21: A CASE OF COLD FEET

The next month flew by at an amazingly smooth clip, stress-free and loaded with hope. By the time September arrived, I had as satisfying a grip on nearly all the moving parts I needed to collect as I could've expected, and as August wrapped up, I was ready to take a road trip to the clinic in Minneapolis to make contact and get the balls rolling. This meeting was not to be me giving their outfit the ultimate thumbs-up, though. It turned out the opposite, a well-intended grilling session where the endocrinologist would give me his thumbs-up as fatherhood material.

The consultation at the fertility clinic became a sort of police smoker, a good cop-bad cop form of interrogation that was a tad unsettling, to be honest. The doctors and nurses probed the soft underbelly of my motivations for parenthood, asking me questions about my finances and if I had a lateral support system. I understood their angle, and that their questions were in the spirit of wielding medical ethics and all that, but still, their need to question my motives cut straight to shape of my heart and it shook me up a bit. All this happened quickly, too, in a whirlwind eight hours, in an inner-city Minneapolis clinic smacked between the dizzying decay of skyscrapers that had seen better days, and a Sheraton Hotel. But first, I had to get there.

Now, a couple weeks before I was to pack up my 4Runner and my foot would take to the gas pedal and speed away to that Sheraton, I'd
actually developed a case of cold feet. Oklahoma Karen and I had kept in
daily contact in the time leading up to my first trip, swapping sweet-
nothing emails that hit just the right keep-the-faith note on my end. She
beamed with certainty that the procedure would work, she the perfect self-
promoting gestational surrogacy candidate on the planet, didn’t I know.
She dangled her crystal balls in front me, ordering me to gaze into them
and imagine a year into the future and see that smooth, bouncing baby
rocking back and forth in my lap, cooing like all get-out.

The clinic remained rock-solid on the communication front too,
never permitting response time gaps or confusion to set in. They mailed
me an itinerary that plotted out, in 15-minute increments, how my eight-
hour appointment would shake down. From receptionist to janitor, I’d
imagined, these guys were on the ball. I’d checked them out, of course,
and their success rates were even better than they Mayo Clinic—the best
in Minnesota. But all these great things that were happening soon
succumbed to my doubts and insecurities, and a slight meltdown had
commenced. I cancelled the first appointment I’d made for late August.

The clinic was not content to let me roll around on the couch this
time, though. They called daily, sometimes twice, insisting that I make
contact with them and reschedule our initial consultation. As the
voicemails began piling up, I began wondering if they were calling out of
panic that my tens of thousands of potential dollars were going down the
drain, or if they actually cared about my psychological well-being, what with me just disappearing in a terse cancellation message and all. Actually, this meltdown was a tad steeped with a case of crocodile tears, as after the entire year had unfolded so imperfectly imperfect as it had, there was no way I was going to stop now. I just need a little more fortitude, and it came at a Dairy Queen.

After ignoring another blinking light from Minneapolis on my answering machine (yes, I still had one), I headed to the low-rent creamery to drown my sorrows. As I ordered my super-giant, extra-thick chocolate malt traditional I’d used previously for an emotional crisis such as this, I saw an absolutely gorgeous pair of guys sliding a little girl, preciously-clad in a yellow sundress and bright white sandals, into a highchair. Squealing with anticipation at what frozen culinary treat was about to come, I watched every move as the two men each kissed her on the forehead and began spooning the bright-white soft-serve, smooth as her tiny white sandals, into her waiting and puckered mouth, giggling gratefully at them with spoonful after loving spoonful.

They wore gold wedding bands on their fingers, even in a state they couldn’t get married in, and their hands brushed against each other as they fumbled for napkins and babies rattle. They wore tight tank-tops and flip-flops and had chiseled calves with just the right amount of hair on them. They were in love and were sexy and had a child to raise and love
and dote upon, and right then and there, with torpedo swiftness, I threw
my blimp-sized shake cup into the garbage and headed home to call the
clinic, hoping that I had the good fortune to catch them in time before they
went home for the day. Enough of this shit was enough.

But first, halfway out the door and in the parking lot, I had the
good sense to turn around, march back into the Dairy Queen, and fish my
shake out of the trash can, as mortified and confused onlookers gawked,
their jaws at half-mast. No sense wasting a perfectly good malted.

After consuming on the ride home all 64-ounces of it, I called the
clinic, in a strange, frozen fog of carbohydrate overload. Sure enough, the
receptionist answered, wondering what the heck had happened to me,
confessing that they were concerned and disappointed that I’d decided to
back out before anything even began. I bullshit and told them the first
thing that came to mind, that I’d had a stomachache and was out of
commission for a bit, and then asked when their next appointment was to
reset the dial and get back on track with making babies.

The next eight-hour, initial consultation appointment they had was
a week later, the dad after Labor Day. I took it immediately and told them
that this time, there would be no mistakes, and that I’d be there no-matter-
what—just try and stop me.
CHAPTER 22: SHOWER POWER

Things went great at the clinic at our first meeting. My swimmers were frozen and performed admirably when called upon six months later. Karen, my Oklahoma firecracker, turned out the perfect surrogate and fell pregnant days after the procedure just like she was supposed to. Jane crapped out with her Austrians and bit her lip, jealous on the sidelines but still rooting for me and the baby. About the only two things left were to endure nine months of stress (I found it a reassuring sort of anxiety-driven dysentery) and to have a baby shower for Rosie.

A few weeks before she was born, I found myself awash in a sea of people gathered at a safe-to-say unconventional baby shower that my sisters threw me. About seventy or so, some as busybodies, some for the free food, most to just wish me luck and shake my hand, lathered on the support of my pending parenthood and big accomplishment.

In any case, we all rallied at a ramshackle municipal hall a couple townships over. It smelled a tad of nursing home musk and was quintessential Midwest with its checkered plastic tablecloths and foldable aluminum chairs. I uneasily realized that everyone in room knew the score, probably because I didn’t hide the reality of Rosie’s conception and incubation to anyone. Their eyes seared upon me, suspicious but polite, as I stood up and gave my thank-you speech.

And they were all there, the whole lot of them, the Tea Party
Catholics breaking bread with my friends (ranging from pink prisses to booted butch boys—say it ten times fast) to celebrate my daughter-to-be. Even my unlikely family contingent, like my wicked aunts, long estranged from my mother on both sides, surprisingly accepted their invitations and showed up to wish me well. If there was a naysayer in the entire bunch, they sat on their nits that day.

I recognized how spoiled I’d been, all things considered, an unmarried, gay single man having a baby in the most misconstrued of measures, practically flaunting its strangeness, at a baby shower’s expense. Few people in my life have ever undermined my pristine commitment to my own gayness, my candid disclosures about the surrogacy experience. I’m undeterred in defending my sexual orientation and its byproducts to anyone. I’m the luckiest guy alive on that one alone. I used to think it was because I didn’t look or sound gay, but gay happens behind closed doors, naked, in bed, with body parts plunged in the appropriate holes. When framed in real terms, I’m quite decidedly the gayest gay that ever gayed and everyone I know knows it.

Since Rosie in the end broke my bank to the tune of $60,000 all-told, my life savings gone poof, the baby shower guests were bribed with cheap hot dogs, self-blown balloons, and baked beans laced with Kessler. Standing up in my pink tie, silver vest, and tight-assed jeans (I’d lost 20 pounds for the affair) to soak up the spotlight and thank them for their
support, I experienced a belonging that I hadn’t felt before, as if I’d achieved something that I had to have, yet didn’t know why I had to have it. Fatherhood was something they had and now I did too. I was part of the club, their club, the virility club, the ‘my reproductive junk works’ the ‘I’m not a childless freak like the rest of those other homos’ club. I was just like everyone else, except, not.

In fact, I was like no one else in the room—that room or so many that would follow. I’m a guy who often will look in everyday’s reflective glass at a restaurant or the gym and shrug and stare at my ordinariness, my utter commonness. But after Rosie, I had to face the fact that I was most uncommon, unique in my endeavor and its result, endowed with a bounty denied almost all gay guys. It felt weird and conflicted to enjoy the overlap of the moment, delivering my remarks to family and friends, knowing that I defied both nature’s reproductive limits and my orientation in a flash of defiance, like some glittering jewel of unlikely achievement. Any uncertainty as to why I was doing it was part of its hook, its high-stakes charm, and I could’ve cared less how the critics vamped when I wasn’t listening. It was a fleeting, hard-earned gloat.

Besides, I knew they were all there to celebrate the promise that a new, unspoiled life coming into the world at the hands of radical science and medical technology invites, and I likewise could sense an understated yet disapproving snicker from some gathered towards the absence of
intercourse in my baby-making equation. The baby itself wasn’t even there. Karen had yet to venture on up to Wisconsin, though she had researched and chosen a fancy hotel. We put a pregnant picture of her next to the pretzel bowl. It was a fuckless, babyless baby shower. It was screwed up, I admit it, and I couldn’t exactly blame some of the guests for being confused and on their best game of Midwestern Polite. It was a weird way to become a dad.

The party went off without a hitch, and then just as quickly I was home again to the empty rattling of a tiny house. It so needed an infusion of life and innocence that I surely couldn’t provide it. At the time it housed only me and my favorite friends, found in mostly dead actors populating my DVD collections like Columbo and Murder, She Wrote in my elegant but sterile mahogany curios. I dusted and vacuumed often to keep clean, mark time, and stay busy.

I was a purposeless person, wrapped in the barren fig leaf of vocation as an English professor at a local community college. I owned a gay-chic house, empty in every way that counted, and my parents, who rarely visited, instead heaped favor and attention on the children of my siblings; they had little time for anything else. Getting on their radar meant manufacturing babies, I deduced. It was a sad conclusion that grandchildren were the key to relevance in my family’s eyes, and though it was fairly low on my motivation trough, getting positive attention, a piece
of my family’s affection, was no doubt on the list to why I decided to make a baby.

As for that baby shower, I can’t wait to tell Rosie about it sometime. It was the equivalent of her daddy’s wedding day, celebrating a super bond we would both grow to share, one only death could truly break. I beamed that day—I was the star of something, anything, for the first time in people’s eyes, including my own. Of course, I was the opening act dwarfed by the absent headliner still in utero, but I could’ve cared less about the billing or star credit. I knew they were there for her, but I breathed in the idea it was all about me, the myth of the one-man show.

It was perhaps the most selfish moment of my life, a gift-grubbing haul of trinkets, diapers, and burp cloths alluringly bartered for through plastic forks, paper plates, and a dime store bakery cake that was way too dry; the frosting tasted like day-old oatmeal. The stuff was all for Rosie, so I embraced the shakedown and rattled my tin up away at my relatives. I can’t wait to show Rosie the pictures someday. I looked so skinny and handsome.
CHAPTER 23: SLIDING HOME

On a winter’s night in February, nine months after a pee stick test told me I needed to get ready to be a dad, and just after I pulled back the sheets to climb into bed around 11:30, I received a text from Karen. I put down my saucer of yogurt, my nightly traditional.

“Get ready to be a dad,” it said. It was ten days too early. I nearly fell out of bed, suddenly wide-eyed and wired.

She’d been holed-up in the town’s fanciest hotel for a week or so, enjoying the soft, terrycloth robes and the pedicures and the pints of Ben & Jerry’s I’d deliver nightly to pamper her and check on the baby still in her belly, rubbing it greedily, like a lamp with a genie in it.

As I tripped my way to the hall closet to stuff a duffle bag with some socks and underwear, and maybe a clean t-shirt or two and a pair of pants, my mind let loose the dervish within me of the last two years. It was all I could do from throwing up.

Karen and I, like I said, lucked out and she got knocked up on the first IVF try with one fetus, even though we transferred two embryos; multiples were a possibility with this pregnancy.

I found out the baby was a healthy little girl.

I’d lost 25 pounds for the birth occasion knowing that I’d be sitting on my fat ass, stationary and sucking down carbohydrates like a sugar
vampire during the late-night, newborn patrols everybody had promised me were coming.

My family, friends, and coworkers were on board as much they could be expected to and I managed to get maternity level time off at work—a whopping six months total.

Karen caught two colds, freaked-out twice about the whole thing (one required a flight to Seminole to ease her shakes and talk her down from various emotional ledges), and she spotted blood in her underpants once but it was no biggie and things progressed as medically uneventful.

I stockpiled up baby clothes and all the assorted sundries, room-by-room my empty Dutch Colonial became filled wall-to-wall with cribs, bouncers, swings, bassinettes, changing pads, stuffed animals, burp clothes, bottles, ass wipes, blankets, and, oh Christ, diapers, diapers.

Karen had already arrived at the hospital when I got there, calling an overnight and premium cab outfit, not the most frugal of decisions, but I didn’t give a shit at that point—to start placing a price on the two passengers in the final inning of the game was to throw pennies at the wind—I was dead broke and just glad I had kickass health insurance to cover everything. She was swept away, up to her room, and connected to a bunch of machines that beeped and booped to let everybody know that she and my baby girl were still alive, well, and ready to rumble.
We'd met with the hospital honchos weeks earlier, the two of us, to explain the unique features that required accommodations within our little deal, how I would be in the delivery room and that I was baby's father but not her husband, and that she was an out-of-stater and a gestational surrogate whose husband was back home. They were courteous yet visibly confused and politely wary, and at eight months down, one to go towards the finish line, I could've given two shits about whether or not their fucking feathers were ruffled. I shook everyone's hand and stared squarely and firmly at all of them, getting my balls on and looking each of them, the firing squad, right in their eyes. I dropped a saucy yet serious gauntlet.

"If anyone has any issues or hang-ups about this, get them out of your system now, in this room, in front of our faces, or not at all, are we all cool with that?"

They were, the assured me. Now came time to see if they were telling the truth about it.

I was never a believer in that bullshit cliché about things being 'always darkest before the light' but the agonizing time between Karen's arrival and hook up to the monitors and the birth of my baby was the most frightening period I'd ever spent, breath by breath, in my entire life. Seeing the baby's heartbeat, up and down, clinging to her host and sheathed only a layer of fluid away from me and the life awaiting her in
the world outside drove me crazy. I was sure something would go wrong and prevent her from breaking free and sliding into my waiting, trembling arms. But, like so often, I was destined to be wrong again.

And then it happened. Between the loudness of the contractions rattling the glass and me getting kicked out of the room for a few hours, I received word to wash my hands, take a pee (though not in that order) and get my ass down to Karen’s room—it was show time. Karen was a pillar of modesty to that point, allowing me to sit in on the ultrasounds in Oklahoma while she remained discreetly draped by gowns to hide in total all of her private parts. Imagine my surprise when entering the delivery room, with a drugged, sweaty and swearing woman, straddled in stirrups and lying spread-eagled in all her vagina glory, ready to bring my baby into the world.

I was too excited and too nervous to even be grossed-out.

After a serious of grunts and pushes, and with me standing in the wings marking time and pretending, like I now knew every father-to-be must’ve done, to feign function or usefulness at these proceedings, the crown of the baby’s head first appeared. It looked like a wrinkled chestnut stuck between two fuzzy coconut halves slowly cleaving in two. The head would stay stuck for a few minutes while more gripping and even louder yelps of pushing and shoving cascaded the room.
The bloody and cheesy aspect to baby delivery was interesting to me, as I knew there’d be residue, but even before baby appeared, it looked like a pizzeria had just exploded on the stainless steel table between Karen’s legs. After one last, loud push, the head came through and the baby slid out, parting the hairy highway, blue and slippery, into my arms, as the doctor made way and let it happen. I can’t even remember catching and cradling her I was so numb and stunned.

I’d held her for a second, a frozen second where everything that had happened and would happen in that room would be forever remembered as spun gold. I felt literally a centrifuge, me twirling around as her cord was cut, her bottom slapped, and her deep aqua skin turning to purple then to newborn crimson. They cleaned her mouth and her eyes and gave her a bath and wrapped her in a sweet-smelling swaddle and a pink stocking cap. I snapped pictures from my phone, mummified; none of this really happening, a miracle’s eve come to pass.

But come to pass it did, and as I stared at Karen and my parents and most of all the perfect baby girl God slid into my arms moments earlier, it was clear to me that I had manufactured for myself a newfound and untouchable purpose on earth again—or maybe for the first time. Fatherhood to me was a ticket to many wonderful things like acceptance, assimilation, and ascendance to parenthood’s Promised Land. But at that
moment I was just breathing in her, breathing in me. Her eyes were darting and fearless, her fingers clawed and clasping mine.

It's rare that guys like me ever get a chance to cup in their hands their own child. Most gay men either can't or won't become parents. For me, rocking a creature of pure innocence and helplessness, needing every care in the world imaginable tended to merely to live another day, left its mark as it should have. My tears spoke for themselves that day.

I named her Rose. It seemed the perfect fairy tale name for her and for her father. We were both complicated flowers, beautiful and prickly at the same time. It worked for both of us as we began life all over again.