

*My Story:
Decision-making About
Unmarried Motherhood*

Nothing my mother has ever said to me surprises me as much as what I hear her saying right now. “I’ve been thinking a lot about you recently and wondering whether you might want to consider having a child on your own.” Her voice is brisk and encouraging. Her words pierce the silence that has blanketed the kitchen since I settled into my seat at the table ten minutes ago.

It is a Saturday morning and I’m visiting my parents at their house on Cape Cod. My unusual quiet on this morning reflects the subdued mood I’ve been in during the past few weeks. Sullen and detached, I’ve not been much fun to be around. Even my usually quite tolerant family is having a hard time figuring out how to treat me. As I drifted around the house on Friday evening, I delivered hints of my anger and sadness but refused to talk with anyone. This morning, undaunted by my moodiness—or perhaps because of it—my mother is trying to penetrate my discontent. She is standing barely a dozen feet from me, rinsing some plates in the sink as she speaks to me.

Before I can respond to what she’s already said, my mother moves on, eager to complete her thoughts. Her tone is utterly matter-of-fact, not revealing a hint of awareness of the shock I feel at what she’s said. “You could consider using a sperm bank,” she says.

Fortunately, I am shielded from eye contact with her by the newspaper

I have unfolded in front of my face. Of course, this is not the first time I have thought about having a child on my own. But it is the first time anyone else, especially my mother, has voiced this option aloud—and the first time sperm banks have been mentioned.

My mother's aim this morning is perfect. Tossed like darts in a splendid arc, her words land in the innermost circle of my emotional core. This moment engraves itself in my memory. Our exchange alters forever the way I will think about my life.

There is nothing I want more right now than to become a mother, to create a family of my own. After thirty-seven years of seeing myself as my parents' oldest child, I ache for a new alignment: me as a parent, my mother and father as grandparents, my sisters as aunts, my brother as an uncle, my niece as a cousin. I want to add layers of caring and connection and responsibility to my life, a rich and satisfying life that seems suddenly to have sprung a gaping hole.

Until recently, my life seemed quite full. Though I'd experienced my share of sad moments and painful times, day-to-day I'd found pleasure and a sense of accomplishment in my job as a correspondent with *Time* magazine. And when I'm not at work, I am fortunate to bask in the close-knit company of caring friends and the enduring love of my family. I know how lucky I am to have all this, as well as good health. Now, however, I want more. I want to be a mother. What I want is to look across my breakfast table—as my parents have looked across theirs—and see my child's eyes staring back at me. I want that sense of deep connection with a son or daughter, a person who will trust in and depend on me just as during my childhood I depended on my mother and father. Even though I haven't articulated these desires to my mother, in things I've said and done it must be obvious. How else could she know so well what is weighing on my mind?

Now these thoughts, given voice by my mother, inhabit the space between us. To raise a child on my own? To have a child using sperm donated by a man neither I nor my child would ever know? As I think of creating my child in this way, my head spins at how unnatural it seems, how distancing and impersonal it feels. It has no sense of the closeness, warmth, or comfort I associate with creating a child with a husband. Now, as I hear my mother say, "You could consider using a sperm bank," I suddenly feel utterly detached from the image of motherhood I'd been holding on to, in which I am sharing the experience with a man. And the detachment also triggers my anger at how unfair this all seems: "Why," I ask myself, "can't this happen with someone I love? Why do I have to do this by myself?"

Self-pity is not my style. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I quickly switch gears to wonder how my child might one day think about my decision to be a parent by myself. What if she can never identify her biological father? Or what if this child of mine might never have a daddy in his life at all? Do I really have the energy, patience, and resources to raise a child on my own? Would I be able to supply the necessary discipline for a child who would have me as her only parent—and, at that, only during hours when I wasn't at my job, earning money to pay our bills? During my childhood my mother and father each played a big role; each stirred ingredients into the mix that created who I have become. Which, if any, of these ingredients would my child miss out on if I did this alone? On my own, would I be able to compensate for them?

“You don't think it's a good idea, do you?”

“We'd be there to help if you needed us,” my mother says. It's been several minutes since anything has been said. Now her voice is softer and more gentle.

Because I know pretty well my mother's perspective on such things, I interpret what she means by this offer to “help.” She does not mean daily assistance of the kind I might like to rely on if I were a single mother. After devoting a good many of her sixty-four years to raising me and my four siblings, my mother has made it abundantly clear to all of us that she has little interest in assuming day-to-day care of grandchildren. She deeply enjoys the different and special kind of love a grandparent has earned, but she is not willing to trade her long-awaited freedom—to pursue her own anthropological research and to write—to repeat the tough work of child-rearing. What my mother is saying to me is that in an emergency, as always, she and my father would be there to help.

In my mother's kind offer, the words that leap out at me are “we” and “us,” as in “your father and I.” Hearing them reminds me anew of what would be the solitary nature of my parenting experience. It also makes me wonder, for the first time since our conversation began, where my father is. I twist around in my chair to scan the living room. There he is, seated in a high-backed armchair, hidden behind yesterday's *Wall Street Journal*. A few minutes later, I hear the sound of his newspaper being folded and the squeak of his leather chair as he gets up and walks toward the kitchen.

Still rattled by my mother's suggestion, I am relieved when my father saunters by the table. I feel myself revving up inside to fend off my mother's scary yet intriguing idea, while another part of me wonders if maybe it isn't so scary after all. Maybe it's what I really want to do. I figure

my father's involvement in this will at least give me more time to compose my thoughts, so as he walks by I invite him to join our conversation. I know he's heard what my mother has said to me this morning. I am guessing, too, that she probably talked with him about it before she mentioned her idea to me.

"Did you hear what Mother said about me having a baby using a sperm bank?" I ask him. Without giving my father even a moment to respond, I toss out an answer. "I mean, you don't think it's a good idea, do you?"

My father doesn't reply. As he does in many of our family's forays into territory of any emotional consequence, he keeps a bit of distance. His custom is to stay along the sidelines until my mother signals him into action. He musters just a few words about how he doesn't know much about any of this. In my apparent eagerness to shove my mother's idea away, I assume this means he agrees with me that this isn't a good idea. Before I can engage him more in this conversation, he wanders off and leaves me and my mother and this idea together again.

"My friend told me I'd never be able to explain to a woman who wants to have a child why I don't want to."

While my mother's idea whirls around in my mind, it collides with the anger and melancholy that have been consuming me. I'm trying very hard but not very successfully to regain my equilibrium after a sad and prolonged ending to a three-year relationship with a man with whom I thought I wanted to have children. Tears still come quickly when I find myself remembering our time together.

This man and I shared so much so easily. Our love of the sea near where we both grew up wove our lives together. When we were with each other my mind occasionally drifted into an imagined future in which our children would play on the same beaches we did as children. Their childhood would be like ours—at least, I hoped a child of mine would be as lucky. I knew a child of ours would one day marvel at the ocean's beauty and sail upon her waves as her father and I so enjoyed doing.

But each time these visions came to me, I shook them away. I had to. My partner let me know he didn't share my dream. He didn't want to have a child. It wasn't that he didn't want to have a child with me, he told me; he wasn't ever going to have one with anyone. At first I refused to believe him, choosing to believe instead that, as our relationship grew, so would his comfort with this idea of our having a family. But over the years it became clearer that despite our feelings for each other we weren't going to

make it over this hurdle together. In trying to drag him over it—by trying to make him understand why he should want to have children with me—I hastened the end of our relationship.

During what turned out to be our last conversation about this topic, my partner leaned on the railing of his living room deck, a good distance from where I sat, and nervously smoked several cigarettes while he shared with me the advice a friend had given him. “He said I’d never be able to explain to a woman who wants to have a child why I don’t want to,” he said to me, and told me that he’d decided to heed this guidance. He was not going to try again to tell me why he felt the way he did. That afternoon I finally realized there was no ground left upon which we could compromise. I spent the next weekend packing while he went away to visit friends. His home, which for a long time I had shared, and where I’d hoped our family would live, no longer seemed able to contain these differing visions of where we were headed. I left the house key he’d given me years before on the kitchen counter, the first thing he’d see when he returned home on Sunday evening.

Now, a few weeks later, I know that in suggesting that I have a baby using a sperm bank my mother is trying to snap me out of my funk by getting me to think about my future. But her words are spinning me around, catapulting me even further back into my past, to memories I thought I’d successfully packed away.

**“What I really wanted to do was have a child
with someone I love, a person who wants to
have a child with me.”**

In my mind’s eye, I am thirty-two years old again, newly divorced and wondering then, as I am wondering now, if I will ever have a family of my own. I remember how I gave some thought then to whether I might try to become a single parent. But, in those days, I’d never reached the point of confronting the questions my mother is thrusting at me today. When I was in my early thirties, the idea of intentionally becoming an unwed mother seemed daunting, even selfish. My marriage wasn’t working out, and one reason I left it when I did was the hope that I could make a fresh beginning. I saw the years ahead churning with possibility, and with the probability that I’d find a new marriage partner and start a family.

“You know, I thought of having a child on my own after I was divorced,” I tell my mother, revealing something I’d never discussed with her before. “But it wasn’t something I wanted to do. What I really wanted was to have

a child with someone I love, a person who wants to have a child with me. I don't want to have one with some anonymous donor at a sperm bank."

There it is. A response to her idea spills out, almost involuntarily. I am surprised, as I hear myself speaking, at how definite and negative I sound. Not all of me, or even the bigger part of me, really wants to dismiss my mother's idea so quickly. Only the part of me that is frightened by the magnitude of this solitary action wants to toss it aside.

"I simply know how much you want to have a child," my mother replies, directly, quietly. "This might be a way for you to do it. We will be there for you. It is just an idea for you to think about."

**"I am certain he sensed my 'baby panic' and backed
away; how could he not?"**

That afternoon I go sailing. It is a perfect escape. On the boat I am able to laugh and enjoy the exhilaration of being in an old wooden schooner at sea, among good friends. During the rest of this weekend, not another word is exchanged about the baby-making idea.

No one needs to say more about it. The idea is firmly planted in my mind. I know, and my mother senses, that she's tapped a part of me I have been afraid to touch. I'm grateful my mother did this for me. By saying what she did, she has pulled off a bandage and revealed a wound. It hurts to have my wound opened to the air but, as with most cuts, it will speed the healing.

During the next few weeks, whether I'm at home or in the office or out with friends, my mother's idea—which has by now transformed itself into my own—won't leave me alone. It keeps rattling around inside me. Battle lines form. Her words pop into view, and then a garrison of logic springs up to fight against them. But an equally well-equipped and competing emotional force stubbornly adheres to the possibility, holding its ground, as well.

In time I come to accept that the notion of having a baby on my own has a compelling power stronger than my ability to simply cast it away. Only by fully exploring the idea will I be able to let go of it. Or embrace it. For now I can rule out neither option. Daily there begins anew a spirited encounter between what I know about myself so far and what I'm in the process of finding out. Whether I decide to move ahead and try to have a baby on my own will depend in large measure on how confident I am of my ability to handle motherhood without a partner and how fair I believe my decision will be to my child.

As the weeks go by, I am more and more aware of how different this

exploration feels to me than it did five years before. The years which then seemed to stretch so far out ahead of me now feel compressed, like an accordion after its final note. Soon I will be thirty-eight years old. Suppose I meet a man tomorrow, one who wants to have a child, and we fall in love, and we give ourselves time to make certain our relationship is solid before we decide to get married. Even if I get pregnant right away—which is hardly likely, given my age—I am likely to be in my early forties by the time my child is born. I might even be in my mid-forties if these steps take longer than my most optimistic calculations. I begin to wonder whether I'm willing to wait for these possibilities to occur to lead me to what I want most of all—a child.

Each of the steps—meeting this man, falling in love, making certain our relationship is a solid one, deciding to get married, becoming pregnant—carries with it unlikely odds. Just meeting someone who would be compatible as a life partner and who'd want to settle down with me and start a family is not likely to be easy. To begin with, it's hard for me to imagine how I'd go about it. I am uncomfortable circulating at parties, dreadfully awkward at the kind of introductory small talk that leaves lasting first impressions. I am an abysmal failure when it comes to flirting. I simply don't know how to do it, nor have I felt comfortable with it the few times I've tried. Every so often I find myself scanning the personal ads, but I've never placed or responded to one. As far back as I can remember, I met the men with whom I've had long-lasting relationships by going about the day-to-day business of living my life. They happened to walk into it. But will this strategy work again? From listening to my single friends and reading about the lonesome plight of unmarried women who are in their late thirties, I at least have to recognize that the odds of meeting the "right man" and getting married do not seem promising.

The falling-in-love part seems easier, if and when "he" walks through my life. But I worry a lot about whether my yearning for motherhood might push me into the wrong marriage. I've already made one mistake, choosing a wholly inappropriate marital partner for reasons I now understand. He proposed marriage at a time of great vulnerability for me, and I said yes right away. Though I kept my word to him, as I walked down the aisle on my father's arm I knew the marriage was not going to work. Yet I was afraid to admit that to anyone, most of all to myself, and stubbornly refused to back away despite plenty of advice from family and friends to do so. Would my resolve be strong enough now to prevent me from making a mistake like that again? The more I think about this, the more I realize that what I fear most isn't that I won't get married but that I might marry the wrong man out of desperation to beat my biological clock.

Awareness of this invites me to question for the first time if perhaps this

sense of desperation was a silent player in my recent relationship. Did my partner's awareness of my "baby panic" contribute to our losing the physical intimacy we once shared? As I think about what happened, I am certain he sensed this "baby panic" and backed away; how could he not? It is now becoming clear to me how connected these things were in our relationship. When he talked of getting married, the idea of having a child was never part of his equation. My response was always no. I could not make a commitment to a life together unless I knew we would be parents. Now, with hindsight, I am better able to appreciate what he was probably hearing in my words: "I don't want to be with you as much as I want your sperm." To hear that from someone he loved must have hurt.

"A writer calls these men 'sperm banks on legs.' "

As I contemplate the difficulties of finding a partner, I find some comfort in knowing how common my situation is. Like other women of my generation, born in the early 1950s, I had been greeted during my teenage years by reverberations of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*. A boisterous, important revival of the women's movement was taking place. After graduating from Wellesley College in 1973, I'd set out with great confidence—some might say cockiness—into territory where before my time mostly men had journeyed. Art history was my college major, but my first full-time job was as a researcher with *Sports Illustrated*. I was assigned to the baseball beat, so I began to spend a lot of time at stadiums interviewing ballplayers. By 1978 I was the plaintiff in a highly publicized lawsuit in which a federal court judge ruled that women reporters should be given equal access to interview athletes, even if it meant entering their locker rooms. By the 1980s my attention switched to news reporting for *Time* magazine. There I pursued what has become a passionate interest of mine, reporting on the lives of children and families.

Like many of my peers I reaped extraordinary rewards—not of wealth but of personal contentment—from my professional accomplishments. Also, like many of my contemporaries, I didn't think a lot during my twenties about finding a permanent partner with whom to share this exhilarating journey. There'd be plenty of time for that once our careers were under way. Now, in our late thirties, many of my unmarried women friends share stories with each other about how difficult it now seems to meet "eligible" men who want marriage, fatherhood, and will accept the egalitarian relationship that we've come to believe is possible and that we expect for our family lives.

As my friends and I compare notes on our failures to construct such partnerships, we discover that single men our age and older fall roughly into three categories. Some are natural-born bachelors who intend to keep things that way; my former boyfriend seemed to be one of these. I didn't need to fall in love with another man like him. Others are divorced and have children; they are, perhaps, more eager to find a partner but unwilling to have more children. Or they're homosexual. Several of my friends observed that the few eligible men who seemed relatively open to the idea of marriage and fatherhood tended to fix their sights on younger women who might not have such sharp expectations about the need for a truly egalitarian marriage.

After surveying my not-so-promising prospects for gluing this marriage-and-family package together, I start to think more seriously about my options for becoming a single parent. As soon as I open myself up to learning more, I am surprised to discover from several articles that many women like me are pursuing this route. This reminds me that when you open your eyes to something, you often start to see it. Or is it, perhaps, that just as I'm contemplating this, the media are also discovering that many among my generation of financially secure women appear willing to travel along this new route to motherhood?

A few women whom I read about describe canvassing male friends to see if they'd be willing to donate sperm—either with a doctor's assistance or in person—to help them create a baby. The women promise friends who are willing to help that their sperm donation will entail no financial obligation once a child is born. Some of these women and men sign agreements prior to the child's birth, setting out their views on custody, visitation, and support. The writer of one story called such donors "sperm banks on legs." It is, I think, an apt description, and about as far away as words can take me from the image of shared parenting that I find myself still holding on to.

At a meeting where women whose lives have reached a point similar to mine gather to talk about how we might have babies on our own, a lawyer explains that such agreements reached before a baby is born don't mean much if a father decides he wants to be involved in his child's life. In imagining all sorts of potential complications, including an inharmonious relationship with a donor—a relationship like the one I'd experienced during my marriage—I decide right then to put this approach to baby-making aside.

Other women explain how they plan to get pregnant by letting an "accident" happen. They never mention marriage as part of the plan. This has the feel of an old-fashioned strategy with a modern twist: bed a man

for his sperm and then send him on his way once the baby is conceived. For me, this approach is also out of the question. What if the man does not want to father a child? Is it right to trick him? What if my child wants to know her father, but he pushes her away? Even during the difficult waning months of my recent relationship, I never considered tricking my partner into fatherhood. I didn't feel I had the right to do that to a man who told me he didn't want to be a father. Nor would I want my child to face the circumstance of having a father who didn't want her.

“Why have I been wrestling so hard with this if everyone agrees it's right for me?”

A few months have now passed since my mother's words took root. Her idea of using an anonymous donor is starting to make a lot more sense to me. One night I dream that it has happened: I have a baby on my own. I am a parent. I am scared and overwhelmed but also extraordinarily happy. After I awaken the next morning, I discover for the first time that I can say out loud, “I want to have a baby and I will do it by myself.”

“I have decided to have a baby!” I announce to my tennis partner that morning. She is an older woman, long ago separated and the mother of two children whom she raised all but on her own. She responds quickly and crisply: “I think it's a good idea.” This reply gives me a big boost of confidence. “You've got a lot of friends and family who will give you support. If you have to travel, I could help out,” she tells me, walking close to me as she picks up a ball.

Her reaction turns out to be typical of what friends say to me as I start to share my plan with them. I'm a bit surprised when they aren't more shocked by my news. Why have I been wrestling so hard with this, if everyone thinks it's so right for me to do?

A man I worked with a few years ago invites me to lunch that week. I tell him about what I intend to do. “If there is anyone who can do this, it's you,” he tells me. I gratefully acknowledge what I assume is a compliment, even if I'm not certain why he's giving me such a vote of confidence for a job I have never done. He is worried, he says, not about my competence as a parent but because I may be lonely—and at times maybe resentful—as I assume the full weight of parental responsibility with no backup in sight. I share his concerns, particularly when I think about how I'll pay for the help I'll need. But I am trying to be upbeat.

“I already have many moments when I feel very much alone,” I say to him, responding to his concern about loneliness. Having a child, I know, will at least make these feelings of aloneness go away.

Later that day I try this idea out on my cousin, who is nearly forty; she is stepmother to two grown boys and the mother of a three-year-old daughter. “Wow. What? I mean, are you sure? Great.” My cousin’s words tumble out faster than she can coordinate her thoughts. She and I have been as close as sisters since childhood, when we spent summers together at my grandparents’ Cape Cod house. Now we live near each other in Cambridge. Laughter comes easily to us when we spend time together, but we are also good at listening to each other’s problems.

That afternoon we talk about mothering and our own mothers and then about how I might manage on my own. She makes me laugh by recalling moments when married friends of ours who are mothers complain about how much easier it might be to raise children by themselves. Being with a man can be like having another child to take care of—or at least, that’s often what these women say. Sharing such stories offers my cousin a chance to grow accustomed to this idea I’ve sprung on her. It also gives me a chance, for the first time in a long while, to simply sit with her and giggle as we used to in girlhood. There is no doubt that my melancholy is finally lifting.

But even as my cousin and I chuckle about these married mothers’ stories, I know these women didn’t—and most wouldn’t—choose to be parents on their own. I wouldn’t choose this path either if it didn’t seem the only way I could now become a mother. But what I also hear my cousin saying, as the two of us continue to talk, is that I should not let my opportunity for motherhood slip by only because there isn’t a man in my life who wants to father a child with me. “I don’t think it’s impossible at all,” my cousin says. “You could do it.”

In a phone conversation with a close friend in California, I hear a similar message. “I couldn’t do it,” my friend tells me, “because I don’t have my life pulled together yet. But I think you could do it.” Another friend, a woman who relishes her life as a grandmother to her stepdaughter’s child, tells me, “That’s exactly what I would do if I were your age. You have my full support.”

That’s what I hear from everyone: “You can do it.” But how is it that they know this about me, and I don’t? What do they see in me that gives them confidence I could make this work? How do they know I would be happy raising a child alone? Why do they seem so confident, when I’m not, that my child would turn out okay?

A few days later I am sitting again with my cousin in her living room. She’s been at home all day with her three-year-old, who refused to take her afternoon nap. Now it’s early evening. Her daughter’s crankiness is straining her patience, so she summons her husband, who is exercising upstairs. “I’d go crazy if he wasn’t here right now to take care of her,” she

says once her daughter is out of the room. Her thoughts turn to me and what it would be like not to have someone else to help. "At the end of the day the two of us talk about things with each other," she says. "These are the kind of things you wouldn't have."

How well aware I am becoming of the trade-offs involved in this decision. On the one hand there is the intense emptiness I feel in my present life, an emptiness I think is there because I don't have a child. On the other hand, in parenting by myself I may feel a different kind of loneliness when I don't have my child's father to share in the joys and responsibilities that come with being a parent. But if it comes down to not having a child, or to having one on my own—as it seems to do—then I am comfortable with choosing the latter. After all, having a child by myself at this age doesn't mean we'll always be alone. Plenty of single parents find new partners when their marriages have failed. And even though my baby-making years will soon be over, I suspect that my desire for a loving relationship with a man won't vanish when I am a mother.

At times I even imagine my prospects for finding a partner might be brighter then. Instead of the incredible awkwardness involved in discovering how a man feels about "having" a child, being a mother would establish my position about this right from the start and I could judge how any relationship with a man would fit in with my life and my child's. In fact, friends tell me that men seem more comfortable fitting themselves into a ready-made family, rather than feeling pressured to start one of their own. This clearly shouldn't be the reason to have a child on my own, but at the same time it's reassuring to know this decision might not diminish the probability of my finding a relationship as well.

"You might as well get accustomed to the criticism right now and build yourself up to ignore it."

It is time for me to seek medical advice: I need to learn whether what I want to do can be done. It is Christmas season, almost the New Year, and it seems propitious that the only appointment my gynecologist has available is late on the afternoon of December 31. "Perfect," I tell myself. "I'll take it." There could not be a better way for me to welcome in the New Year than with an actual plan in place for having a baby. I'm excited to have turned this corner and to finally be doing something instead of just thinking about it. I jot down the time in my appointment book: it's the final entry of that year.

Perhaps because my friends are so supportive, I expect to hear similar

encouragement from my doctor. I am wrong. Grudgingly, and with a shame-on-you tone in his voice, he offers me a few names of physicians who do donor inseminations. But he wonders aloud if they will agree to take me. I am, after all, unmarried. He says that no single woman has ever asked him this before. "You know there's a sperm bank out in California with all those Nobel Prize winners' sperm," he says. "I'm not sure they'd do it out there either." His implication isn't lost on me: outlandish ideas like this one belong on the Other Coast. Only his New Englander's reserve prevents him from coming right out and stating his personal disapproval, though his tone conveys plenty.

This is the first time anyone has been so negative about my plan. During my hour-and-a-half drive to my parents' house, where I'm to spend New Year's Eve celebrating the launch of my baby-making plans, I'm reduced to feeling only anger at how my life has turned out. When I arrive at the house, my sister greets me. She is a year younger than I, married, the mother of an eight-year-old daughter, and a practicing attorney. She's able to quiet my distress. "All sorts of people are going to have opinions and make judgments about your decision to have a child on your own," she tells me. "Many of them are going to disapprove, so you might as well get accustomed to the criticism right now. You'd better build yourself up to ignore it. You're the only one who must be certain. When you are, it will be the right thing for you to do."

Her reassuring words comfort me that evening.

"Just as my parents raised me and my siblings together, I want that kind of parenting for my child."

More months pass, and my mind zigzags like a billiard ball. I seem driven by alternating forces: one is a pulsating desire for a child; the other, my still inescapable fears and uncertainty about parenting alone. One night I write a letter to my former boyfriend, asking him if we can try to start again. I tell him my decision about a baby can wait until our relationship grows stronger. But it takes only a few days of being together again for us to realize my promise isn't possible for me to keep. I cannot put the baby issue aside so easily. Neither can he. Again I am tossed into sadness and confusion. Tearfully, we say good-bye.

I decide to seek professional counseling to help me cope with this rejuvenated sadness and with the pull I still feel to be a mother. During our weekly sessions the therapist and I focus on what appear to be major stumbling blocks preventing me from moving ahead. After all the time I've

been thinking about this, it seems strange to me that I haven't resolved the very questions I posed to myself on that morning when my mother spoke of my having a child on my own: Am I really comfortable having a child who will never know her father? Can I be the kind of parent I want to be, if I do this on my own? Will my child be angry at me?

Conceiving a child by using an anonymous donor still cuts deeply against my long-held expectation of what becoming a mother would be like. I can't seem to let go of wanting a man to be a parent with me. It seems too lonely not to have someone with whom I'll be able to share my child's moments of discovery, someone who will help me to raise this child, someone whom my child will know as her daddy. How do I discard these images of motherhood, which I've carried with me for a lifetime? My parents raised me and my siblings *together*; I always wanted that kind of family life for my child.

During these therapy sessions I realize how much of me remains captive to these images. The 1950s were the era when the new creature called television beamed portrayals of motherhood into millions of America's homes, mine included. I grew up seeing these television moms—Donna Reed, Harriet Nelson, June Cleaver—and also watching my own mother's life, which did not look so different from theirs. Despite the many changes in women's lives, those images of motherhood seem hard to erase. I tell myself that what I need to remember now, as I think about being a mother, is that those TV moms and my own lived in vastly different times than I do. Their lives cannot be models for my own. Yet inside me a tug-of-war rages. Part of me longs for the simplicity of these TV moms' lives, even though I know from my mother's experience that for many women the veneer of contentedness was just that. Another part of me knows that whatever family arrangement I one day have—whether I marry and then have a child, or vice versa—my daily life will be very different from these mothers'. But is what I'm considering—intentionally becoming a mother on my own—*too* different? And where do I look to find workable models for my version of motherhood?

One of the most difficult things for me to figure out is how my decision to have a baby on my own will work out for my child. How can I know? Yet I need to try as hard as I can to envision this and understand how my child might one day feel. I need to think about how I'll respond to questions my child will inevitably ask: "Who is my daddy?" "Where is my daddy?" "Why didn't you give me a daddy?" I can't know exactly what my child will want to know about her father, but I know with certainty that she will be curious. If I use an anonymous donor, I will need to tell my child the truth about her conception when she is able to understand. Will

I find words to soothe whatever anger she might have because of this empty spot I've handed her? Are there any words that can adequately explain this?

In thinking about this, I examine with my therapist how it is that children and adolescents explore their identity, especially when they don't know one half of their parentage. She suggests that I look back in my own life to examine where I found a sense of who I am and how I developed my self-esteem. My parents spring immediately to mind. The older I become the more I recognize how much of what I am each of them gave to me. From my mother, I absorbed a daredevilish, world-be-damned attitude. She is there to give me a reach-for-the-stars affirmation for even my wackiest ideas. Though she and I often view the world through very different lenses, I know she will be there for me whenever I stumble or falter. To my father, who is a fanciful storyteller and my sporting companion, I trace an unflappable steadiness that underpins my approach to life. "Don't act in haste!" I hear him advise me, before I've even asked. He conveys an inner calm quite unlike my mother's up-and-down emotions and constant swirl of energy.

It is difficult for me to imagine how different my life would be if my parents were not there, in the tag-team alignment that is their enduring marriage. Perhaps I would have done fine, as many children do, seeking out these missing ingredients from other people in my life. But in thinking about my child, I can't stop myself from wanting her to experience the daily consistency of my parents' yin-and-yang parenting style. Can I supply this on my own? It's hard for me to imagine how I can.

My therapist urges me to think of people outside my family who also contributed to making me who I am. I can remember special teachers and close friends and friends' parents and coaches and other adults who came in and out of my life. Each has contributed to shaping my life. In focusing on these forces, I gradually become more comfortable with the idea that I could serve as a kind of hub for my child. I'd be like an air traffic controller, constantly communicating with other people and routing an abundance of loving support into my child's life. My child would also have a built-in network of aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins. The friends who are so enthusiastic about my having a child would also be an important and enriching part of her or his life. And I would become involved with a whole new set of friends I'd meet at my child's day care, at school, and through weekend activities.

The more I dwell on all this, the clearer it is becoming to me that no one can be certain how being a parent will work out. So many impossible-to-predict circumstances will be swept into the mix. In this respect, it

doesn't matter whether I am married or not. I cannot possibly know now whether my best efforts to compensate for the absence of my child's other parent will be enough. All I can do is what I am trying to do: ask what I hope are the right questions and allow myself the chance to thoroughly think about those aspects of the situation that I can, to a degree, predict.

These months of contemplation are accomplishing something very important, shifting my thinking away from myself and onto my child. This feels like progress. And though I haven't found all the answers I am looking for, I find that by addressing these issues I am moving closer to deciding to go ahead.

“I think there is a high probability these mothers may be better parents than many married couples who have children.”

One afternoon I have news I want to share with my mother. I dial my parents' number and wait for her to answer. She does. But before I can start to tell her my news, she says my father wants to talk to me. This seems odd. Usually I talk with him only at the end of a conversation with my mother, and then only long enough to hear a brief description of his most recent golf game.

“Melissa,” he says as he gets on the line.

“Yeah,” I respond. “It's me.”

“Well, this morning I went over to town to have my car serviced and there I was, sitting in the waiting room while the car was being fixed. Just a tune-up, but it was taking a while. And on the television set in the waiting room there were women talking about why they'd had children by themselves.”

Now I am beginning to understand why my mother insisted that my father talk with me. As it turns out, one of the morning talk-show hosts was interviewing unmarried women about my age who had become parents on their own. But my father's story has less to do with that than with what happened in this waiting room. An older, heavyset man who was sitting near my father started talking to the television set, ridiculing these women as they spoke about how and why they'd done this. According to my father, this man believed the women were engaged in sinful activity: at one point he said that if any more proof was needed of the decline of moral standards in our country, these women offered it. His rantings became impossible for my father to ignore.

“I don't think this has anything to do with sin,” my dad said to this man

as the other customers listened in. "It's got more to do with the right of free choice. I can't speak about *these* women, but I think there is a high probability these mothers may be better parents than many married couples who have children."

By now I am listening to my father's story with rapt attention. Even if I wanted to interrupt, I know from my years of being his daughter that until he has finished, my words won't be heard. He goes on to explain how he'd told this man that he was impressed by the women's commitment and sincerity. Upon hearing this, the stranger walked out, flashing my father a dismissive grin. Everyone else in the small waiting room focused on my father. No one uttered a word. Everyone sat silently as the interviews went on, listening as the studio audience aired its own divided feelings.

"I didn't personalize it," my father assures me. "I didn't say, 'My daughter is doing this.'"

What he's just said astonishes me: "My daughter is doing this." How could he know I am no longer only thinking about trying to become a mother on my own? In fact, that is the news I have called to share with my mother and, in turn, to share with him. To hear my father telling me this story makes this seem like a serendipitous moment. As he hands the telephone over to my mother, I feel a surge of strength rising inside me. It is a warm feeling, as though my parents' arms are wrapped lovingly around my shoulders. It is comforting to know that my entire family understands.