

Swelling with Pride

Queer Conception
and Adoption Stories

Edited by Sara Graefe

Dagger Editions

Praise for *Swelling with Pride*

Swelling with Pride is an anthology filled with powerful truths and generous insight, as queer parent pioneers share the stories of the creation of their families. Including the most intimate details and the decisions that went into becoming parents, *Swelling with Pride* is also a useful guide for anyone considering parenting in a queer context. There is heartache in these pages, as children are yearned for, lost, mourned; as adoptions are disrupted and families separate—but there is also joy, as carefully planned and passionately desired dream children are welcomed home. Despite the odds against them, many writers approach their quest with refreshing humour. Readers will find themselves cheering these families on, astonished by their determination and inspired by the triumph of love over homophobia, technological barriers and infertility.

—Rachel Rose, author of
The Dog Lover Unit

Swelling with Pride gives voice to the new generation of lesbian, trans and gender non-conforming folks transforming parenthood. Whether they create their families through pregnancy, adoption or fostering, are single, partnered or creating ever new configurations of parenthood, this anthology's contributors offer their truths with courage, commitment and compassion. Infused with a uniquely queer perspective, *Swelling with Pride* will be reassuring to both prospective parents, those grappling with the nitty gritty of complications in donor choices, twin pregnancies, adoption or miscarriage, and even for those who've wished for parenthood, but found it heartbreakingly elusive. *Swelling with Pride* will be a valuable resource in the growing cannon of queer parenting literature, tangible comfort for readers during one of life's most difficult, yet joyous, journeys.

—Rachel Pepper, author of
The Ultimate Guide to Pregnancy for Lesbians

This collection is a valuable and illuminating addition to the literature about queer families, whose contributors are generous with their insight and experiences.

—Bruce Gillespie, editor of
A Family by Any Other Name

WHY I DIDN'T RUN AWAY WITH THE CIRCUS

Vici Johnstone

When I was twenty-three, I dropped out of university to run away with the circus. At least, that's what I like to tell people. It is not entirely true, but neither is it a complete fabrication. I did run away, but not quite to follow the circus.

I grew up in Vancouver. I had four siblings and we all attended Killarney Senior Secondary School, one of the roughest schools in the city. Being queer and out was just not an option in the seventies, and definitely not an option in the east end of Vancouver. After graduation, I floated around Vancouver for a while, eventually finding the queer community — the underground bars with black doors, barred windows, disco music and, yes, polyester flare pants — and I had a few affairs. By the time I was twenty-three, I had been out for six years. But in doing so, I also made the decision to disappear from my previous life. I abandoned my childhood friends and distanced myself from my family. I had accepted that being queer meant three things: one, that I would likely be single most of my life; two, that invisibility offered freedom and safety; and three, that marriage and children were now off the table.

When the opportunity presented itself for me to join the cast and crew of John MacLachlan Gray's *Rock and Roll* on a tour across Canada, I knew I had found the perfect job: one that allowed me to keep busy and keep moving. I became a gypsy of sorts, always on the move, always stimulated by work and surrounded by other people who rejected traditional societal roles. The theatre community became my new family.

But in the late eighties, things began to change. The Pride movement was gaining momentum, parades celebrating our queerness were happening all over the country (though in Calgary, where I was now based, we still needed a police escort), and I had landed a job at Theatre Calgary as a permanent employee. Life was still a party — we worked hard and played hard — but some sense of stability had returned to my life. I was content, but deep inside, I longed for the comfort and confidence that comes from family life — like the family I had grown up with.

In my second year at Theatre Calgary, I began to date a woman who was the theatre's house manager and also a student at the University of Calgary. We had only been together a few months when she invited me to join a field study she was organizing to the Balkan countries. In a span of ten weeks, we were to visit what was then Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece. The wandering minstrel in me jumped at the opportunity.

As promised, our group of fifty students, led by a few rather renegade professors, travelled to some amazing destinations: Sofia, the Black Sea, Thessaloniki, Athens, Rhodes, Istanbul ... Ironically, at thirty, my partner and I were among the oldest in the group, and not the only queers. There were two young queer men in our group as well and we became quick friends, together seeking out the unique destinations and quaint pensions off the beaten track. Todd and Mark were not lovers. Todd had a partner at home whom he spoke about often. He even carried a picture and made promises that when we were back in Canada we would all meet, and that we too would fall in love with Fraser.

True to his word, when we returned home at the end of the summer, Todd arranged a dinner party to introduce us to Fraser. He was right; Fraser was, and still is, a unique and lovable man. It was nice to have a queer couple as friends. We had many dinners together and shared stories about our life goals and our families.

My partner and I had talked about children. We had been hearing that lesbian women in Canada were finding ways. While it was not illegal in Canada for queer women to be inseminated,

getting pregnant through a fertility clinic was not an option for anyone other than straight married couples. Ironically, it was not illegal to have sperm shipped across the border by Federal Express. We considered this option, but to me it felt too impersonal. I did understand why couples would want the anonymity, but I felt that I wanted a connection with the father. My partner was not so sure. But it all seemed a bit theoretical until Fraser told us that he would love to be a dad and, if we were interested, he was willing to help us get pregnant.

We initially thought my partner would be the birth mother (for the first baby), but then she developed some health conditions that the doctors felt might present complications. Suddenly, being a parent became a real and somewhat scary possibility. After many discussions, my partner and I decided that Fraser would be an amazing donor and I would be the birth mother. My partner was still uncomfortable about a father figure in our child's life. She was afraid that it would undermine her role as "the other mother." We found a solution when another queer friend also offered to "contribute to the cause." The solution of multiple donors, we decided, would offer the anonymity she needed, and at the same time the connection to the biological father(s) that I desired. The pieces were in place; now we just needed to sort out the logistics.

I don't really remember how we found Penny and Sue, and I have long forgotten their last names, but these two women were pioneers and advocates in the field of lesbian mothers' rights. Penny and Sue were single-handedly running the local chapter of the Lesbian Mothers Defense Fund (LMDF), an organization originally founded to help lesbians fight the law that challenged their custody rights when they divorced or separated from their previous male partners. Across the country, women who had been emboldened to come out of the closet by Pierre Trudeau's 1967 declaration "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation" were subsequently stripped of all rights to raise their naturally born children. The state, it seemed, was willing to stay out of the bedroom but also felt it had a moral right to protect children from

their hedonistic mothers. By the time we met Penny and Sue, the laws had changed and while lesbian women were still (and are to this day) fighting custody battles over their children, the need for a nationwide legal fund had somewhat subsided. Sue and Penny turned their commitment, and that of the local LMDF, to helping queer women get pregnant.

Penny and Sue had a young son themselves and were a wealth of information. They had developed a wide range of resources for queers who wanted to become mothers and hosted a monthly information-sharing circle. They also managed some more practical services, such as running sperm in a double-blind scenario, so that anonymity could be completely maintained. They wrote and distributed pamphlets about fertility and when and how to inseminate (FYI, turkey basters were not recommended!), and they were available twenty-four hours a day for women who just needed to talk. My partner and I volunteered with the LMDF with a number of other lesbian couples, and eventually we collectively changed the organization to the Lesbian Mothers Support Society. Our goal was to create a community of support, not just for ourselves as we tried to get pregnant, but also for our children as they grew up. We were not so naive to believe that society would welcome our children and our non-traditional families with open arms.

With Penny and Sue's help, we developed a plan that would see the boys alternating donation nights. We carefully tracked my cycle, so we would know when I was at optimum fertility. When the time came, our plan worked like clockwork: sometime in the late evening, one of the guys would show up with a little jar carefully wrapped up in a wool sock. We inseminated five times over five days, and two weeks later, I started having morning sickness. Unbelievably, I got pregnant on our first try.

The pregnancy went as pregnancies go: I swelled up like a balloon and developed cravings for curry and apricots, both of which I had previously hated. My partner and I joined a Lamaze class, which definitely made some of the other participants uncomfortable, but the nurses were amazingly supportive.

In September of 1990, I gave birth to a beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed baby boy, who is now almost thirty. We named him Dannen. Shortly after his birth, my partner and I were interviewed on what was then CBC Radio's *This Morning*. Our interview was part of a special program on alternative families. The day after the interview ran, my neighbour knocked on my door to tell me her mom, in Newfoundland, had heard our story and that it had changed how she viewed not only queerness, but also queer parenting. She said it had never occurred to her that we also desired family.

Fraser and his new partner, Doug, have been a constant and positive influence in Dannen's life. We have lost touch with the other donor, who made it clear from the beginning that he had no need to serve a role and felt confident the child was in good hands. My partner who was there with me in my biggest moment is no longer in my life. We split up and I gained sole custody of our son. It was a bitter legal battle, one that left me torn between upholding the rights of the queer community and my commitment to my son's well-being. I have not heard from her for many years, though she does occasionally contact Dannen.

In all honesty, I have to admit our son did have some struggles. He faced discrimination and confusion at times because he has both a mother and father who are queer. But he held his ground and as he grew, so did Canada's understanding of queer culture. Our son, and the children of the women we worked with in the eighties and nineties, live in a different world than when they were born. Queer parenting in Canada is widely accepted because of women like Penny and Sue who paved the way for queer parents like me and thousands of others. Our world has indeed changed. Our children are no longer so unusual, and being queer in Canada is no longer a definitive "well of loneliness."

Many years have passed since my theatre life. I have settled down a bit. I bought a house and a business, and my son has graduated from university. I still have this intense drive to keep moving — to see new things, meet new people. Fortunately, my work

feeds this part of me. Fraser and Doug are also big travellers, so between his mother and father, our son has been lucky to see many amazing places in the world. As a graduation present, he asked for contributions to his travel fund, so it seems he has inherited the wanderlust from both sides of the family. It has taken me many years to realize that leaving something familiar does not have to mean you are running away. Sometimes leaving simply means you are reaching out for a bigger community.

LIKE A BOY, BUT NOT A BOY

ONE EXPERIENCE OF NON-BINARY PREGNANCY

andrea bennett

As my left leg bumps the edge of the coffee table, a small wave of coffee curls up the side of the mug. Always clumsy, I seem to have lost all sense of the boundaries of my body over the course of the last few months. The apartment I share with my partner, Will, is a small 3 1/2 located in Little Italy in Montreal. Will is an avid gardener and lately, the *Dracaena marginata* (which we call Margie VII), perched precariously on top of a Go board in the living room, is my greatest nemesis: I've knocked it off its centre and caught it as it's fallen an average of once a week.

It is odd to have lost grip of where I end and the world begins. It's odd and bruising in a different way that the world has lost sense of my conceptual boundaries, too. Last week I was on St-Viateur in Mile End taking photos for a guidebook I'm writing, and I walked past a man and woman heading in the opposite direction. The woman said in French, speaking to the man but looking directly at me, "You think they are boys and then they are not boys."

I've been thinking a lot about when Kim Kardashian was pregnant with North and the entire tabloid press was obsessed with her weight gain. My jeans got tight at six weeks along; when I went to a maternity store to find new pants, I lied and said I'd reached nine. Size was not the only way in which I felt like an imposter: it seemed as though all the clothing on offer wished to emphasize every bit of body I generally try to downplay. Boob shelves, bows, florals; form-fitting and empire-waist dresses. In the back, on the discount rack, I found two dark-coloured pairs of stretchy skinny

jeans. They'd do; I'd find shirts in the men's section at the various thrift stores in our neighbourhood.

On Instagram, I follow two different kinds of accounts that allow me to see parts of myself reflected back at me. I follow accounts that celebrate curvy bodies; these overwhelmingly feature feminine women. Stripped of clothes, the outline of my body resembles aspects of the variety of shapes and sizes that pass through my feed. Yet I also follow accounts that display transmasculine and tomboy style. In clothes, this is what I want my body to look like. If I only followed these latter accounts, I might find my naked outline wanting. I might pine for a smooth swimmer's triangle of a body. I might feel even more enmity vis-à-vis my breasts than I currently do. (The day I found out I was pregnant, I was excited for two reasons: in addition to the pregnancy itself, I'd also made the decision to delay relieving myself permanently of breasts until I had and nursed a kid — pregnancy lit the gas lamp at the end of that particular tunnel.) I know that many masculine-of-centre people have bodies like mine; nonetheless, I sometimes can't help but feel that the shape of my body betrays me to onlookers.

Our culture is currently into bodies like Kim Kardashian's — into them until they cross a line; into them until the same tendencies that allow for curves lead to monstrous pregnancies. My own body has felt monstrous since it began to fit nowhere, exactly. The monstrousness of pregnancy came as no great shock or surprise; I knew to pay more attention to pregnancies that reflected genders more like my own back at me. I understood not to take personally the aesthetic directions of the clothing at the maternity store. The two little lines on the stick showed up nearly two decades after I'd set thinness, femininity and girlhood aside and decided to accept myself for who I was.

I grew up in a suburb outside Hamilton and I've been a gender non-conformist since I was a kid. This so deeply disappointed one of my parents that it was part of the reason I had to learn to live without her love.

I always felt a bit like a boy, but not really like a boy. I always had crushes on boys, even as I found most of them wanting. I started Googling “straight butch?” as soon as I hit university and met queer friends. Later, thanks to Tumblr, I came across the term *non-binary*, and it clicked into place like an overall buckle over its button. By the time Will and I met, I’d learned to negotiate relationship-related gender issues one by one. I knew to seek out softer men who wanted what I wanted: to strike a balance where we were both close to the middle of the gender teeter-totter. But I was scared, even with Will, when I decided to tell him that I wouldn’t always have breasts. “Fw-wssht,” I said, curling my hand up and away.

“How do you see me?” I had asked him once. He said he saw me like I’d once described the way I saw myself: a person, first and foremost. I knew this was a privilege the rest of the world wouldn’t afford me, just as it does not afford others, but I was relieved and full of gratitude to have it in my own home, in my own relationship.

When Will and I got married, we wrote gender-neutral vows and both wore suits. We explained to our families that I wouldn’t be going by bride or wife — we’d be sticking with “partner.” We had a small casual wedding three months after deciding to get married. It all, language-wise, went fine enough.

When I got pregnant two and a half years later, I was reminded of my family’s initial reaction when I told them Will and I were getting married: they’d never expected me to. Though no one had ever really verbalized that they’d seen my gender non-conformity, not *exactly*, it was clear that they had seen it by their reaction. They’d seen it and read it as a rejection of everything they associated with heteronormative gender roles. Getting married was a blip on one’s life timeline, but pregnancy and parenthood was a much larger commitment — a much larger commitment that my family, like perhaps a lot of families, see as the next step in a row of conventionally heteronormative choices.

I’d been thinking of raising a kid in the context of my partnership with Will, where the two of us would share parenting and

working, as we share everything else. To the world outside my relationship, though, a gestational parent coupled with a cis male partner immediately reinscribed woman — and motherhood — it immediately reinscribed a gender, and its role, that no one who knew me well would ever have prescribed to me.

Is this a problem of body, or language? I wondered.

I first broached the “I’m not Mom” conversation with my brother and dad while visiting them right after Will and I told them I was pregnant. We were sitting in a restaurant booth in a town at the tip of the Bruce Peninsula. I was irritably hungry, and I’d just ordered nachos.

My brother, close in age and relationship but far away in life experience, wore a now-familiar look of mild confusion.

“But you call me Dad, and that’s gendered,” my dad said.

And so it was, at thirty-two, that I began to experience the raft of questions, comments and concerns one receives when one comes out. (Like, for example, “Not everyone will understand as well as me,” and “You know that this is going to make things harder for you?” etc.)

As I floated ideas about what I might prefer as an alternative to Mom or Dad — Zaza, Omma, Momo — well-meaning family members shot down each and every one.

Every time I feel I’ve made headway, we backslide. I try to remember to feel lucky to have family that loves us, family who wants to try to understand, but the power of the pregnancy-female-mother connection is strong enough as to efface all efforts.

At my lowest points — hormonal and physically exhausted — I feel myself wilt like an unwatered, thirsty plant. I give up trying to find an alternative. The truth is, I’m not an early adopter; if I could, I’d give in, melt myself down and reform as mother. But I can’t do that, either. So, I’ll be, simply, a *parent*. Instead of telling the kid to call me Mom, I’ll ask them to call me by my first name. I’ll ask the kid and I’ll ask my family — I’ll ask and hope they’ll listen.

By nineteen weeks, I have felt the fetus flutter a couple times: once when leaning a little too hard against the kitchen counter doing dishes; another time lifting a heavy box of bike parts up onto a shelf at a bike co-op where I've started volunteering. But mostly I feel nothing, and it worries me. When I was first pregnant, I Googled rates of miscarriage by age and the statistics were not extraordinarily comforting. I wrote in a poem that the world had been lying — there *was* such a thing as “a little bit pregnant.” I began to talk about being pregnant before conventional wisdom says you're supposed to, and Will and I made a tour of the area's thrift stores, buying and washing onesies and sweaters with creature themes. The anxiety passed momentarily after the first ultrasound, but it came back shortly after: it was statistically unlikely but still possible that something could go wrong. I could have this belly and then I could have a child, or I could have this belly and then it could deflate before any of the strangers I pass in the street even realize I'm plump *with child*.

I do not feel dysphoric in my pregnant body. I feel different anxieties — anxieties about loss and death, primarily — but I do not feel dysphoric in my body. I feel dysphoric in the *language used* to talk about my body, my pregnant body.

By twenty-two weeks, I need but refuse to buy a larger bra, hoping, like goldfish, they will only grow to the size of the bowl they're given.

By thirty weeks, I have both insomnia and some new tactics for approaching well-meaning loved ones who keep referring to me as Mom and Momma. My dad has taken to talking about my pregnancy by underscoring that he's looking forward to being a grand-*parent*, not a grand-*father*; baffled and annoyed, I tell him what I'd appreciate more is if he could expend some of that energy telling his friends *my* wishes when it comes to names and terms and roles. “He's trying,” Will says.

I decide that when we send thank-you cards — our families and friends have been so kind and supportive in so many ways,

sending notes and gifts as the due date approaches — we can introduce the baby's name and reinforce the parent terms we'll use all at once.

Outside of the heavily gendered French-language healthcare system (where it takes enough mental effort to understand directives speaking in my second language), I will begin gently employing a script I have prepared to correct a friend, family member or stranger's use of "Mom." I will start buying picture books that display a variety of different family structures so that, hopefully, my own home will continue to be a place where I can easily and without friction be myself. Up until now, I've been doing a simultaneous rewrite, in my head, of all the pregnancy literature so that it includes me. If I need to, I'll write and draw the books myself.

Though I've never knocked over Margie VII, Will's prize *Dracaena marginata*, our cat has felled her on two separate occasions. Margie's pot bears a series of cracks and fissures; part of it has been reinforced with folded tinfoil. Every time the cat knocks over one of Will's plants — he deeply loves the cat; he deeply loves the plants — he feels mad at the cat. Then he superglues the pot back together; lovingly replants Margie, or Phil, or whomever else has been affected; sweeps up the debris; and forgives the cat. This whole exercise is a useful metaphor. I could wish for a simple wholeness that betrays no cracks or fissures, but I will be better served by learning to pick myself up and heal as many times as necessary.