

# SMALL COURAGE

A Queer Memoir of Finding Love  
and Conceiving Family

JANE BYERS

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# PREFACE

On one of our favourite cloudy-day family hikes, our daughter, Franny, tells a story. The hike is on a well-worn trail in Kokanee Creek Provincial Park. It winds through a mixed cedar forest culminating in a waterfall. The creek sometimes rages and sometimes achieves a more mellow descent, though never a serene trickle. It certainly never dries up, nor do any creeks originating from glaciers in our inland temperate rain forest of southern British Columbia. Before we became parents, this would have been our mellow recovery hike the day after a nine-hour rugged lung buster in the alpine.

Telling stories on a hike is not uncommon now that we have children; I have had nine years to grow accustomed to the endless chatter that I used to think of as an intrusion to my meditative and soul-cleansing walks in the woods. Our daughter insists on a story so she can distract herself from her own boredom with hiking, though often my wife and I are the ones tasked with telling the stories.

“Mama, will you tell me another story?”

“It’s your turn to tell us a story,” Amy, my wife, answers. It is quiet for a minute and I wonder if Franny is dreaming up a tale or has forgotten the question.

Franny slows down in front of a fallen cedar, its splintered trunk still upright, and says, “I am a baby animal, a puppy. I was born on that tree stump right there. My mother breastfed me. A few minutes later Theo was born. Then a cougar killed our mother and we were alone on the tree stump but only for two minutes. Then you came along and found us and we became a forever family.”

“How did it feel to be alone for two minutes?” I eventually choke out after picking my jaw up off the trail and quelling my instinct to frame the question negatively. *Were you scared?* is my first instinct.

“It was only two minutes so it was okay,” Franny says.

“Your birth mom died? Does it feel like she is dead in real life?” I ask.

“Sometimes it feels like she’s not really real,” Franny answers.

Franny’s twin brother, Theo, says, “Mom, look at that bird in the tree, way up there,” while continuing to whack dead branches that didn’t make it through the long winter.

“What kind of a bird is it, buddy?” I ask, my eyes too full of tears to see the dirty snow still clinging to the northwest aspect of rocks and cedars, the vibrant green of new growth on the fir saplings or the bird.

“I don’t know, maybe a chickadee?”

“Maybe,” I say, vaguely noncommittal, as I digest what Franny has just told us. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that she told an origin story after spending a week of family time together over spring break, during which the four of us were tuned in to one another in attachment-parenting bliss.

Franny is creating a story in which she is resilient. Apparently her ten-year-old self can manage resilience for two minutes. If this is true, I have given her something besides increasing her tolerance for hikes, which has been no small feat in itself. She often says she’d rather be at the mall, which is the place she used to stroll and walk as a toddler with her foster family.

My first poetry collection, *Steeling Effects*, was an attempt not only to answer the question of how any of us, and I in particular, ended up resilient, but also to leave a metaphorical road map for my children. Whatever difficult stories the twins will come to learn about their early beginnings and biological family history, they will also know they come from resilience. Let this be their inheritance.

Once, after seeing a colourful Anne Geddes print in Grandma’s front entrance—a well-constructed photo of babies, some bemused, some distracted, some focused, seemingly growing in terracotta flowerpots—Theo, who was seven at the time, said, “See, kids grow from flowers.” He said this with a glint in his eye, as if he was daring me to go along with that story and to refute the birth-mother/adoption story we had told him all along.

I pointed out the brown-skinned boy in the print and said, “Yes, that’s you.” His obvious delight told me he could live with this flowerpot origin story even if I always thought the print a little creepy for its juxtaposition of plants and children.

When I was a child, the closest I felt to my mother was in the rare times she would tell me about my birth. At first she didn’t tell me all the details of my near death, or of hers, or that they said I would likely be institutionalized

because I was without oxygen for too long. Perhaps she didn't tell me this until I was a teenager.

My story evolves too, as I gain perspective, as I raise children, as I benefit from time and softening with age, though I resist evolution for a rigid grip on what I call *facts*. You see, in my family I am a truth teller and for that I have never been forgiven. "Unhappy families are conspiracies of silence. The one who breaks the silence is never forgiven." So writes Jeanette Winterson in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* At some point I realized I must forgive myself, but this is the work of a life, forever in progress.

Back on the waterfall trail, I'm even more in awe of my daughter's story, her ability to tell it at ten years old, that she embraces the story and how it evolves. I have given her some notion of how important stories are in our lives and I do feel this is a major accomplishment. I'm not certain I have the same resilience. Not the concrete block kind, but the tensile strength of a spiderweb, many times stronger than concrete—that strength that absorbs new information and is intact, the kind that temporarily inhabits trauma along the journey but moves on to a full life.

We all want to be seen, to have someone who is curious about us. I yearned to be seen, still do, I'm slightly embarrassed to say. In many ways, not being well seen has motivated my parenting. The Irish novelist Anne Enright says that to see others as they really are, without trying to change them, is an act of empathy. I am determined to see my children—who they are, not who I wish them to be.

Perhaps, like Franny, we all tell ourselves stories we can live with. And what we can live with changes.

# HOME STUDY

Six days after our would-be children were born, we started our formal home-study process with British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development on November 1, 2007. Back in Toronto some years earlier, we had jumped into a Dykes and Tykes course at the 519 Community Centre. We did it spontaneously, without much prior discussion, long before we came to a consensus on starting a family. It was like so much at the beginning of our relationship: jump in, be delighted, don't sweat, except about how in love we were and the impossibility of return from such a love. Nevertheless, although we had dabbled in child-rearing conversations in the past, on the other side of the country, it was tender to start the actual process all these years later. The prospect of raising children together finally got me to realize I hadn't been in the right relationship with my ex. What if that happened to Amy this time?

Amy and I scoured our list of male friends who could be sperm donors but eliminated all of them for one reason or another; that route just felt complicated. At the time, an unknown donor felt daunting with the rules in place and the fact that we lived eight hours from a clinic. Depending upon Purolator to deliver live sperm in a timely way was not our chosen path to having children. More importantly, neither Amy nor I had a strong desire to be pregnant or give birth or pass on our genetic material, for that matter; hence adoption emerged as the best fit for our own values. This was around the time that borders were closing to international adoption for same-sex couples. There were thousands of Canadian kids that needed homes and here we were, a couple who wanted kids, so we opted for domestic adoption through the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

I managed to sound calm during my initial phone call with the adoption worker. "My partner and I would like to start the adoption process."

"Please give me your and your husband's name," responded the government worker.

“Um, well, I don’t have a husband. My partner is a woman,” I managed to state, while my wife paced in the background.

“I’m sorry. I mean partner. I want you to know that the Ministry of Children and Family Development does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation,” said the social worker.

Throughout the adoption process, we were told consistently that it would likely take longer to find a match for us because we were not the ideal family that many social workers or birth families imagine for adoptive children. This was always followed by an awkward explanation that the ministry was not homophobic but wanted what was best for the children in care and that it was easier to get buy-in from all parties involved with mom-and-dad adoptive parents. From our very first phone call, I was left feeling excluded and began to have concerns about the ministry’s biases. Policy is one thing but anecdotes of individual social worker biases abound, from flat-out “Homosexuality is a sin” to “The ideal family is a mom and a dad.”

To start the process one must engage in what is called a *home study* conducted by a registered social worker. Because the government social workers were understaffed, they contracted it out. With a shock of white in her long mane, our contract social worker started ushering us through the process full of competence and with the empathy that comes with being an adoptive mother herself.

We received the adoption packages from the Ministry of Children and Family Development with an “adoption questionnaire” that included a laundry list of characteristics and diseases that prospective families must opt in or out of accepting. We referred to it as *the dreaded checklist*. Were we prepared to adopt a child with a shortened lifespan due to degenerative disease? How about physical disability, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)? A child born out of incest? Rape? A child with spina bifida? Neonatal abstinence syndrome? The list overwhelmed us. Unless we were open to some less-than-ideal circumstances, we were unlikely to be matched for a very long time or at all through the ministry’s process. The profound joy we felt at making the decision to start a family by adoption was attenuated by the reality.

That every adopted child has special needs was burned into our psyche by the social workers. We were used to reading those words but it washed over us. We were left bewildered by this wide definition, unsure of how it would manifest. Were we taking reactive attachment disorder, developmental delay, oppositional defiant disorder? We wondered if they were just covering

their asses, having heard of a high-profile case of an adoptive family relinquishing their children because they couldn't handle special needs. Was it really that common? We would soon come to understand first-hand what *special needs* can mean for kids with interrupted attachment. But at the time it was an opaque sea into which we could not penetrate until we dived into actual, real parenting.

We sat with the form for a long while. Unless we had company, it stayed out on the table so we could slowly metabolize the possibilities. We agreed each of us had veto power over any ticked boxes. I was more comfortable with physical disability, having worked in rehabilitation; Amy was more comfortable with behaviour issues. We had been told there was a trade-off between age and attachment, between diagnoses that might emerge and age. The older the child, the more is revealed in terms of medical conditions and psychosocial issues, but also the more likely there is interrupted attachment. Did we want kids who had no bonding issues or did we want kids who were old enough to be cleared of FASD? We were unlikely to get both. It was such a profound mix of emotions in the process; we were excited about moving forward in the adoption process and bewildered and saddened by the reality of adopting from the pool of BC's waiting children, of which, we were told, there were 1,300 at the time.

In the course of the home study, the social worker visited us approximately six times in our home to examine our lives. We prepared each time by dressing in casual clothing that managed to also convey success. The low-key success of wearing a nice fitted blouse or a merino wool shirt that manages to convey expensive without bragging is elevated to an art form in Nelson, with its abundance of outdoor adventure stores. Before every visit we practised answering the questions we thought would be asked. It felt as if we were selling our house, given how we cleaned it each time and served snacks. We met on our deck in fair weather. "Tell me about growing up. How is your relationship with your siblings?" asked P'nina, the social worker.

"I am very close with my brother Justin," I said. "He was born when I was eight. I was like his second mom. I carried him around, met all his needs. Although he lives in Thailand, we remain very close."

"What about your other brother?" asked P'nina.

"Well, where to start? James and I aren't close, never were. I was an only child for five years. I remember him always being a difficult kid. And it got worse from there."

During the next visit we walked through our house counting fire extinguishers and smoke detectors. The whole process ran the gamut from mundane to intrusive.

In decriminalizing homosexuality, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau stated, “There’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation.” It was to go against the grain, then, to invite “the state” into our bedroom. I felt guarded knowing the history of discrimination against our people. Were we intimate? If so, how often and was our sex life healthy? Had either one of us had an affair? So unaccustomed were we to answering sex questions, so hyperaware of societal discomfort, that it was an uncomfortable leap to now be talking openly about our sex life with a heterosexual social worker. And the slightly less but still uncomfortable “How do we deal with stress and conflict?” It was a revelation to see our milestones recorded in this way.

Social workers with children to place comb the home studies for matches for their kids. Ours said, “Loving home, active, outdoorsy, social drinkers, like to travel, spiritual but not religious. Have means to look after children. Both professionals. Have both dealt with difficult life experiences, and have healed things well including going to counselling.” I was moved by the observation that we had a lot of strengths as a family. I was learning to see my challenges not in terms of them happening but in terms of my handling them well—a new awareness of my resilience perhaps.

In some ways I think it is easier for LGBT folk to go through this process because they don’t assume that they can have a child without some sort of intrusive procedure. It was an advantage. An advantage for us was that we weren’t grieving infertility. We wanted children, there were thousands who needed parents and we felt strongly that bringing more children into the world was not an ethical choice for us. Adoption was our chosen path from all the options, not the option we were left with. There would be enough loss later on.

My partner got flagged in the home-study questions around substance use, specifically her drinking habits during college. She was realizing she was gay in the midst of a small college-town scene rife with frat parties and overt homophobia. Alcohol cushioned that discomfort and masked the trauma of coming out to parents who were afraid of what she had become and the bad “choice” she was making to be gay. It was the only flagged concern of our application. I could have easily been categorized the same way but for some reason this wasn’t noted by the social worker. I would guess many LGBT



people who are coming out drink too much in the early days or did so when acceptance was more of a gamble, when the threat of job loss was real. Not that I'm advocating alcohol as a good coping mechanism. Still. Obviously we made the cut; there were no major stumbling blocks from the home study. It said, "Jane and Amy have come to a place in their hearts and relationship where they are ready to parent a child together. They thoroughly enjoy the time that they spend with their nieces and nephews and with children of their friends; however, they also find there is a deeper yearning to share their love, the security of their relationship and home and their hearts with a child on an everyday basis." This description, while flattering, sounded more rational than we ever were. I don't know how else a social worker could have expressed it in a way that would make us strong candidates. I think she did an excellent job.

At the same time, we were doing a weekly course with other prospective adoptive parents. This had to be done by teleconference because of the geographical challenges of our remote and dispersed region, with prospective Kootenay parents within a four-hour radius. The course dealt with an array of issues, including the dreaded checklist. In the course we discussed how to deal with curious onlookers as newly adoptive families and how to respond when someone asked, "Who is the real mom?" It was our first glimpse that we had already built up some good resources from coming out and taking our place in the world, that within our earlier despair or struggle were sown the seeds of our resilience.

During this waiting period—besides watching the seasons pass and trying to enjoy our numbered days of relative freedom to hike and get outdoors—we attended a workshop for prospective adoptive parents in Nelson. I remember listening with alarm to an adoptive parent who was a featured speaker. "I will always remember the first time my daughter referred to me as her mother. She painted her wall with 'My mother is a fucking bitch.'" I turned toward Amy, who was beside me. A look passed between us that said *Can we do this?* Amy squeezed my forearm. We resumed listening to that courageous woman. "I am grateful that my daughter finally called me her mother. This was progress for a kid who was so hurt." This story was both sobering and also an opportunity to check in about rising to the challenges of adopting children. I convinced myself that our path would not be so rocky. I was never under any illusion that family life was all sunshine and roses, so in the end I was moved but undaunted.

Now, as a parent, I understand how much that mother must have distilled her heartache to be able to recount that story with a smile in front of our group.

Our home study was finally finished and put into the Ministry of Children and Family Development system in July 2008. We got a call from a social worker, Janice, in late August asking us to meet with her to review the information. She spent an inordinate amount of time asking us about our willingness to adopt twins, noting that we hadn't ticked that box on the form. I turned to my partner, the original impetus behind not checking the box, because she was freaked out by the twin girls in *The Shining*. Not having seen the classic flick, I was wilfully naive and had no problem with twins but I was overruled when we originally filled out the paperwork. When we realized this wasn't just a theoretical question, Janice, with a glimmer in her eye, confessed, "There are boy-girl twins that a social worker from elsewhere was considering you as a prospective match for."

"Are you serious?" we both asked.

"So, are you interested in hearing more?" she said. We looked at each other and nodded our heads enthusiastically.

"They are biracial, Indian Caucasian. They are gorgeous and ten months old." We hung on every word. "There is something else. They are placed with an evangelical Christian foster family." She paused.

"What does this mean for us?" This freaked us out.

"I'm not sure. I will put your names forward with the adoption social worker."

We walked out agog, I suppose like a pregnant couple staggering out of an ultrasound that confirmed twins, but, it being the first trimester, understandably cautious. And the evangelical curveball had us wondering how much influence foster parents had over choosing a suitable adoptive family. It was so much information all at once.