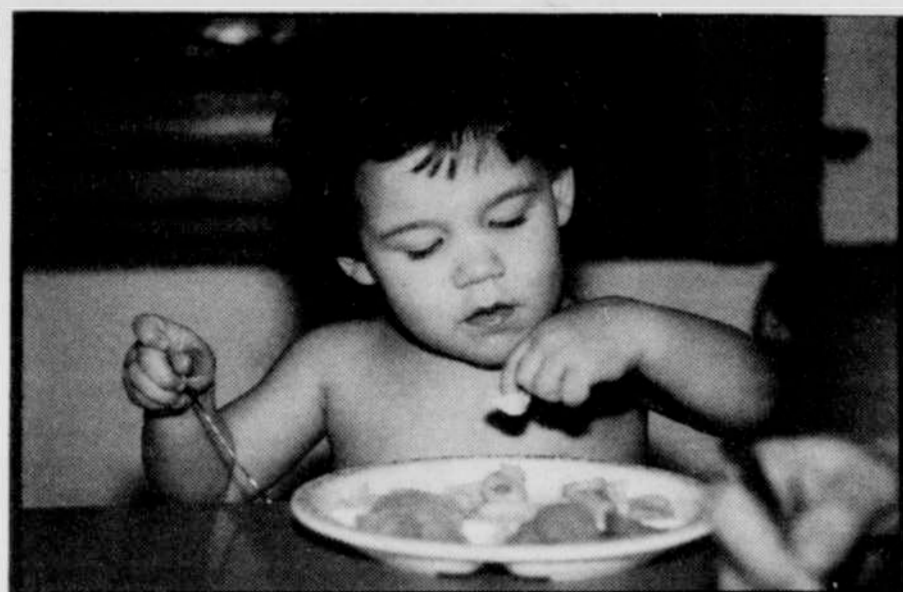




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"I think it will probably get louder."  
"Shhhh!" Sheila says. "Everyone be quiet, Gabby's sleeping." Gabby is pretending. We whisper goodnight. Sheila yells, "Wake up! Wake up!"



Gabby and the art of eating

Gabby needs a princess to kiss her awake."

This seems a good time to ask, "Do you care if they grow up to be gay, straight, bi, or whatever else?"

"No," Sheila answers. "On some level I think that being a heterosexual is probably easier, and so in that sense, yeah, and then I look at people I know who are gay and lesbian and I think, what am I talking about? Is that internalized homophobia? I think it makes no difference."

"I hope they have family and I hope they have love. I don't care how they get it," Mimi responds.

"A mommy is a mommy is a mommy is a mommy. There is nothing more universal than motherhood. So in that sense, there's no difference at all. None."

"Is there a difference in the way you feel about your boy and your girls?" I inquire.

"None. Sam is definitely the most affectionate and sensitive. I probably didn't expect that. I make a really concerted effort with him to not be different around stuff like when he gets hurt. I don't want to do the sexist thing of 'boys shouldn't cry.' I just let him have that part of himself.

"Risa has an amazing vocabulary. She's usually the first to do new things.

"Gabby is into testing the limits. She's a little tyrant. However, she shares very easily and is quite concerned about the well-being of others."

Mimi works 20 hours a week as executive director of a nonprofit health care advocacy association. Sheila works full-time for Aging Services in risk intervention.

Mimi was very much the motivating force behind this motherhood. "I always knew that I wanted babies. I tried on and off to get pregnant for many years." She says that it is a felony in Oregon for a woman to inseminate herself or to be inseminated by anyone other than an M.D.

"We went high-tech," Mimi says. "Selecting the sperm is like shopping through a Spiegel's catalogue boutique. The sperm bank sends you a list. It tells you the donor's height, weight, hair color, eye color, ethnic background, education.... There I am picking up the telephone and calling Southern California with my VISA card ordering sperm. They shipped it up to my fertility doctor. You never know what's on those UPS trucks!"

Both Mimi and the donor have twins in their families. Mimi thought it would be terrific to have twins. "Maybe," Sheila had said, "but don't ever say the other 'T' word."

Mimi was taking what was described as "a very low dose" of fertility drugs to ensure conception. "Lo and behold, did I get pregnant!" On the day of discovery, she says, "We went in for an ultrasound. I looked at Sheila and she was staring at the screen. I looked at the screen and I said, 'I think I see three.' I said, 'Honey, do you need to sit down?' and she said, 'No, no, I think I'm OK.' At that point the doctor walked in and I said, 'Doctor, there's three,' and he said, 'I think I've got to sit down,' and he did.

"I was scared to death. I was afraid Sheila was

going to leave me. I had had to convince her that it was OK for me to have a baby. I talked her into it. Now there were three. It was really scary emotionally, financially.... It got more exciting and more acceptable throughout the pregnancy."

The children were born by cesarean section. Sheila adopted the infants as soon as it was legally possible to do so. The adoption followed the same procedures as those used by a heterosexual step parent who adopts the spouse's children from a previous relationship. The judge requested an adoption ceremony in his chambers. "The ceremony was extremely validating as the nonbiological person in this relationship," Sheila commented.

Each woman is now a legal parent of each child.

Sheila invented a personal support system for the family that she calls "soul watchers." "Each child has at least four soul watchers—a male, a female, a blood-family member, and a friend," Sheila explains. Each soul watcher has made a life commitment to their child. The group includes people of different ages, races and sexual orientations. "The energy is amazing. The love, the diversity—the group includes an artist, a doctor, an ex-Catholic priest, HIV-positive people, devout Christians..."

Mimi comments, "I don't believe in a child having to rely on only one or even two adults to get their needs met. It does not create as healthy children as when kids have lots of adults whom they're close to, whom they trust, love, know from the day they're born, and can go to for their whole life."

The mothers experienced enormous early support from the lesbian and gay community, family and friends. A straight mother of triplets told me that she received plenty of societal support during her first year with her babies, but after that the support evaporated and she was basically alone with the overwhelming task of caring for triplets. She said her experience is typical of the phenomenon of multiple births. I wonder if the soul watchers have been participating as planned.

"Most of the soul watchers have been very supportive," Sheila says. "Some live out of town. Just one person has dropped out. Our families are real good about quantity and quality of time. I think there are a lot of different ways to participate. It'll change a lot over the years. We added our friend Niko, but she's an s-o-l-e watcher. She buys Sam shoes all the time. It's a different kind of support, but I think we actually have more support.

Mimi adds, "It's a more focused support. Fewer people do more than in the early days. But we're running out of clothes. People we didn't know used to show up with boxes of clothes, and we're running out. It's a very scary prospect to think about buying clothes for three children at the same time. There are no hand-me-downs."

At the urging of their pediatrician, the couple took a class through Kaiser Permanente on communication for same-sex couples.

"That class made a huge difference for us," Mimi reflects. "It was very basic communication skills—taking responsibility for my own feelings and for letting Sheila know what they are: 'When this happens, I feel...' They said two things keep most relationships together. First is planned pleasant activities, where you sit down and you actually plan events to do together on a weekly basis. We can't do it weekly, so we do it when we can. The other important element is having a family business meeting where you take care of routine stuff and problems, like the proverbial toothpaste cap or how come the dog poop isn't getting picked up in the

back—talking about it away from the incident when there's no heated emotions. We try really hard to do that.

"We had heard that during the first year, 70 percent of marriages dissolve with multiple births. Between sleep deprivation and uncertainty and stress and financial strain, I see how that happens. If anything could kill our relationship, it was this.

"That stage of trauma is over for us. Sheila has taught me everything I know about the word 'commitment.'"

Mimi adds, "Sometimes I think this is easier than having a kid every two years. When they go to bed at 7:00 I know I'm free till 7:30 tomorrow morning, and if I had another baby or if I were pregnant again now, that would not be the case."

"Is that at all a possibility?" I ask.

"No. I say it just to tease Sheila: 'Honey, could we have another baby?'"

I ask Sheila, "Are parenting issues harder for you because you are lesbians than it would be if you were a straight couple?"

"Yes. Some of the issues are the same: How do you make your child a responsible, loving, mature, functional, ethically moral person. Then there are other issues, like they will not get social or peer

issues I worry about for months work out so simply and easily that I feel like a fool. So we'll see if this one works out that way, too.

"Then there's school. I love the concept of public schools. There's no certainty of good education in public schools in this city right now. I will soon start working to make sure that the Portland public schools are a good place for my kids.

"Sheila and I were talking about what Christmas will be like in 20 years when the kids are grown and we're retired. I wonder if it will be like my siblings where everybody has to arrange their schedule so nobody's there at the same time, or will it be more like other families I know where the kids all love coming home together."

Concerns about Christmas—the Winter Solstice spinoff holiday—are common. The original holiday celebrates the shortest day of the year and the return of the sun. It eases our fear of darkness, the future, the unknown and our anxiety about when and if the sun will return to warm us. It celebrates the miracle that in fact, each year, out of the darkness, the light is reborn and grows stronger with each passing day, nourishing a new year of new life.

The original pagan Santa Claus hasn't changed much. He is a positive male role model, a provider

of loving generosity to everyone. All children are his priority. He is encouragement to be good for goodness' sake. He is the embodiment of lighthearted happiness.

When last we left the triplets, they seemed to be living the good life. They had more diversity in childrearing support than most parents would dream of. They appeared to have almost everything children could want except a good grandpa or two.

It is now a year later, and although life is quite



Gabby and Sheila

support as easily as children of heterosexual families because we are lesbians. They'll get teased. One of my concerns, not being a biological parent, is: Will they turn on me? I expect some degree of them not wanting to have lesbian parents because of too much hassle at school. Hopefully they'll have enough love and support and information that that won't happen."

For Mimi, the tough issues are "the future issues. I have tremendous anxiety, often about some developmental change that I know is coming. Now it's about what am I going to do when they are not confined to cribs, when they wake up in the middle of the night and they can get out of a bed. So far the

complex, and far from perfect, and the future is unknown, today it seems that these are three very happy, very healthy, well-loved little people. The kids have so embraced the spirit of Santa Claus as a living entity that the presence of this grandfatherly figure permeates the house. They adore his jovial personality. They know that HoHo gave them most of their new toys, as surely as they know that certain toys came from one grandma or the other. It would not be a stretch to say that for now, they have found the ultimate grandpa in the spirit of Santa Claus. Not bad for a new form of family and future.

HoHo is at home in this house. I bet when the triplets are grown up they will love to come home.



Risa: "HoHo!"