

# HOMODRAMATICA: Family *of* Five

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A photograph of a family of five walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a wooded area. The path is dappled with sunlight and shadows. In the foreground, a child in a red and yellow striped jacket and a grey hat with a red pom-pom walks. Behind them, another child in a colorful patterned jacket. Further back, an adult in a dark blue jacket and hat, and another adult in a dark jacket and hat carrying a child on their back. The background shows a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

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Disclaimer: This is a work of memoir. The author has tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from her memories of them, but does not claim that events in the book happened exactly as they have been written. Some details have been altered slightly where it would not detract from the book's overall veracity, and some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals mentioned within.

## Dedication

To Kris and the girls, the absolute loves of my life.  
And to all of the queer kids out there who don't believe they  
deserve a happy ever after: *You do*. I promise.

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## Introduction

For those who may not know me, I'm a writer of lesbian fiction, a gay-married resident of the Pacific Northwest, the mother of three awesome daughters (including fraternal twins), and a ginormous soccer fan. In fact, I intended to publish this book before the 2018 Men's World Cup started, but alas, I missed my self-imposed deadline. So here we are a bit late. If the US men had made the World Cup, this book would probably be even later. But that's a whole other story.

*Homodramatica: Family of Five* is a collection of essays that started out as random posts on my blog *Homodramatica* and eventually coalesced into a quasi-coherent story of our family's beginning. Each chapter presents a text-based snapshot of daily life for my wife, three young daughters, and myself at a particular moment in time. Woven through this writerly scrapbook, as I've come to think of the collection, is the theme of gay marriage in the United States. What are the flashpoints in the cultural conversation about same-sex marriage? How does the debate impact parenting in general? And how does the political climate impact the life of our gay-married, same-sex parented family in particular?

As the saying goes, the personal is political. For our queer family, caught up in the culture wars of the early 21st century, the two have often been inextricable.

*Homodramatica* the blog wasn't actually my idea. In 2009, after nearly three decades of dreaming of becoming a "real" writer, I signed a contract with Bella Books to publish my first novel. *Solstice* came out in early 2010, followed by *Leaving LA* and *Beautiful Game* in 2011. Somewhere during that pre-parenting gold rush of novels, my editor suggested I start a blog, one of the easiest marketing tools for a writer to manage. At the time, my wife Kris was eight months pregnant with our first child. Not only would a blog help me connect with readers and other writers, I decided, but

it would also be a place where I could jot down my thoughts about “lesbian fiction and life,” as the tagline says on *Homodramatica*, with a spotlight—or dare I say *focus*—on the family.

Seven years later, my kids are now old enough to understand that Mimi is a writer of grown-up novels that they won’t be allowed to read until, you know, *never*, if I have my way. They also know that I occasionally write about our family, and they seem intrigued by the idea of appearing as central characters in one of my books. For my part, I’m glad I recorded so much about their early years because after 88 consecutive months of disordered sleep, my memories of past events are a bit blurry, to be honest. My wife, Kris, agrees.

For the purposes of the story this book attempts to tell, I have fleshed out the original pieces from the blog and added several previously unpublished and/or significantly altered essays, marked in the table of contents by an asterisk. It turns out that while I have rarely lacked for blogging topics, I have often lacked the follow-through to post that content online. Like many would-be chroniclers of daily life, my intentions were good when I started the blog. However, I’ve grown less efficient at posting in recent years as my family, day job, and fiction writing have been higher on the priority list. As a result, my goal of a thousand words a day—the minimum daily word count Ray Bradbury recommends in *Zen in the Art of Writing*—has tended to be reserved for fiction.

Still, I’m glad I started the blog, even if the guilt at not posting has sometimes taken up more room in my psyche than it probably should. But thanks to the demands of self-promotion, my kids now have a book they can hold in their hands and say, “This is the story of our family. This is how we came to be.”

So read on, and I hope you enjoy this prose scrapbook of the early years of our family of five.

## Dear Girls\*

This first essay is not an essay at all, but rather a letter to Alex, Ellie, and Sydney, my daughters. Right now two of the three of you are still too young to read, but you won't remain so for long. You are (un)lucky enough to have a writer as a parent, and, what's more, one who dabbles in memoir, also known as the reckless revelation of family secrets. Alas, alack. At least you'll get a detailed account of your childhood, right?

You three are even more “fortunate” because I inherited a love of taking photographs from my father, or Goofy Grandpa as you call him. Not only are your every move and word analyzed in prose, but they're also captured in high definition digital video and photography! Good thing you're growing up in a world where the term *selfie* existed before you achieved self-awareness.

These are not the only ways in which your lives diverge from childhood norms. There is one part of your parents' identities that has impacted you in myriad ways since even before you were born, a fact that firmly sets you apart from nearly all of your classmates. It's so obvious that it hardly bears repeating, but here it is: Your moms are... NFC North rivals. There, I said it. Mama roots for the Vikings and I, Mimi, cheer for the Bears. I can almost guarantee that no other child you meet here in the wilds of Western Washington will have such a cross to *bear*. (See what I did there?)

Oh, and we're queer, too. But while there are those who would claim that the five of us are not a real family, you've never known anything else. To the three of you, having two moms is as normal as living in a cream-colored rambler, or having a dog with a brown eye patch, or riding around in a minivan.

At dinner a few weeks ago, Alex, you asked why Mama and I were making plans to go see a movie, just the two of us.

“Because that's what married people do,” I replied. “They go out on dates without their

children.”

“Even straight people?” you asked, brow furrowed.

Your mother and I looked at each other, trying not to laugh, before responding that yes, even straight people go out on dates without their kids.

Being raised by same-sex parents will no doubt impact you. It’s more common than when your mother and I were growing up, and far more accepted these days, but still, there will probably be obstacles to overcome because of our family’s make-up. Your mother and I hope—though we don’t pray; as you know, your Mama is wary of anything religion-adjacent—that those obstacles will not be too high, too egregious, too harmful. Still, there is no way of knowing what the future holds. What we do know is that, like we both did, you girls have the incredible privilege of growing up white and middle-class in the United States.

Coming of age in America for people like us involves discovering who you are, what you like, and who you love. Eventually, you will find what you like to do, and if you play your cards right, you will spend your life pursuing your dreams—dreams that not only lead to personal fulfillment but also, I hope, allow you to help others and improve the world we live in, even if only in some small way. Those are the big picture items. The day-to-day is learning in fast-forward: how to walk, how to talk, how to read, how to write. And in our house, how to play soccer, a course of study that each of you began before you could walk.

I feel amazingly lucky to be on this journey of discovery with you, my girls, because every time you learn something new, I get to pause and reflect on the awesomeness of the human experience. Each of you began as a tiny egg in your mother’s belly, too minute for the human eye to detect. With the assistance of technology and your mama’s incredible strength, you grew inside her body until you were able to enter the world. I may not be religious, but I consider you girls a bona

vide miracle. Watching as you each grew from a seed into a fruit-sized fetus into an actual baby blew my mind. Add in the fact that with Ellie and Sydney there were *two* babies growing concurrently in your mother's belly—mind-boggling in a way I could not have grasped before experiencing it.

Since your not un-traumatic births, all three of you have continued to grow into the smallish humans you now are. With luck and love and the support of the people who care about you—and there are many, including some you might not ever meet—you will continue to grow, learning along the way about this amazing world we live in. I hope you never lose your curiosity about the places and creatures around you; your tenacity in learning new concepts and skills; the kindness you extend to each other and to those outside our family circle. Each of these traits is a gift that someday I hope you will pass on to your own children, should you choose to raise families of your own.

So, my girls, I thank you for adding a depth of joy and love to my life that I didn't know I was missing. I thank you for giving me someone other than myself to live for. I thank you for challenging me to be a better, more patient, more thoughtful version of myself. I know I'm not always the best parent, and I will never be perfect any more than anyone else you meet will be. But Mama and I will always love you the most and best of all.

You might not always get the kind of family you want, but if you're truly fortunate, you'll get a family that wants you. And the three of you, my dear girls, never have to wonder about that.

Now go outside and play (soccer). Mama and I will be with you soon.

*Mimi*

Seattle, WA

June 2018

## In the Beginning\*

We found out that Alex, our oldest daughter, would be a girl earlier than most parents learn their child's sex when, one morning 12 weeks into the pregnancy, Kris called me into our bathroom, her voice panicked.

*Not again*, I thought, my heart sinking. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m spotting,” she told me, her forehead furrowed.

She had said the same thing two years earlier just before miscarrying her first pregnancy at 11 and a half weeks. That event had left both of us shaken and wondering if she would be able to carry a baby to term. Eventually, we’d decided to put our baby-making plans on hold for a year to regroup. My previous surgeries for endometriosis and fibroid tumors meant that I wasn’t a candidate for biological motherhood. If Kris couldn’t have a child, we would need to explore other parenting options.

When we resumed trying at the end of the designated year off, Kris, to our mutual surprise, got pregnant on the first insemination attempt. We tried not to get too invested this time—or, at least, I did. Kris restarted her weekly review of *What to Expect While You’re Expecting*, but I refused to join in. I was too busy—too busy writing, too busy looking for a job that would provide health benefits for the three of us, just too busy.

Fast forward 12 weeks, and as Kris gazed at me, her face ashen, I realized that it didn’t matter if I read the book with her or not. I was just as attached this time as the last.

We took the first ultrasound appointment we could get at a local clinic. As the ultrasound technician passed the wand over Kris’s belly, her fixed expression quickly cleared.

“Here’s your baby,” she said, smiling as she turned the monitor toward us.

I refused to look until Kris nudged me. “It’s okay,” she said, her voice wondering. “Look.”

Carefully I peeked at the screen, still dreading what I might see. But instead of the lifeless fetus we’d been shown two years earlier in the ER, this baby was alive, her heart beating and limbs moving.

That’s right, *her*. “See these three lines?” the tech asked, pointing at something I couldn’t actually make out.

“Yes,” Kris said.

“They mean you’re probably having a girl. Not to brag,” she added, clearly bragging, “but I have a pretty good record for this sort of thing.”

The ultrasound at 20 weeks confirmed the first tech’s finding: We were having a girl. Which, honestly, was a relief to me. I’d grown up with a sister, gone to a women’s college, and had never been around boys or men all that much. For my first and possibly only parenting experience, I was only too happy to be having a girl.

And then one day not long before Alex was due, Kris said something innocuous that included a reference to Alex as my daughter. *My* daughter specifically, not hers or ours.

“Whoa,” I said, drawing back from my wife.

Kris blinked at me. “What?”

“I mean, my daughter? *My* daughter?”

“Well, yeah. That’s what she is, isn’t she?”

I paused. “I guess so. I just never thought of her that way.”

“What are you talking about? What other way is there to think of her?” Kris’s voice was

rising, not unusual for the third trimester when she was tired and hungry more often than not. And don't forget her problematic bladder, which almost always felt full thanks to the nearly full-term baby pressing on it.

“No, of course,” I said, and quickly changed the subject.

The unease stuck with me, though. Why had I reacted so strangely to Kris referring to our soon-to-be-born child as mine?

It took me seven years to parse, but I think I finally understand what happened that day. I was too frightened to think of Alex as mine because I worried that she might not be. I worried that she would be born prematurely and not survive. I worried that something would happen to Kris and that Alex would be taken away from me. I worried that Alex would grow up and one day say to me in a fit of hormonal rage, “You're not my real mother!” I worried that Kris would get angry with me and say the same thing.

Most of all, I worried they would be right.

#

A couple of years ago when I wrote *Training Ground*, a YA novel about a pair of high school soccer players, I discovered that inhabiting my young characters' minds for months on end brought me spiraling back to my own teenage-hood, better known as the years-long period of my life when I felt actual despair. Like one of my protagonists, if not for soccer, if not for the endorphins, the team goals, the chance to vent my anger and frustration on a small leather ball, I honestly don't know how I would have made it through junior high and high school.

It's not something we talk about often, but as a teenager, my older sister struggled with suicidal ideation, much of it revolving around the two-year relationship she had with another girl at

our high school. I found out about my sister's girlfriend from A., one of a pair of identical twins who lived in our neighborhood. A. was the more dynamic of the two boys, i.e. the one who suggested he and his twin switch clothes and classrooms every so often in elementary school. We could all tell them apart, of course, but the adults? Not so much.

A. was also the one who, in seventh grade, announced to our lunch table that my older sister was a "dyke." Apparently, he'd forgotten the reputation I'd earned in elementary school for beating the crap out of any boy who told me I couldn't do something because I was a girl. Or maybe he just thought that now that we were in junior high, I would act more like a regular girl and less like a tomboy despite my Kate Jackson pageboy haircut and my habitual uniform of athletic shorts, tube socks, and Puma sneakers.

Either way, he seemed to realize his mistake almost immediately, because as my fists clenched and my eyes narrowed, he backed away.

"Take it back!" I roared, pushing away from the lunch table.

That's when he made his second mistake: He whirled and ran. I chased after him, adrenaline surge fueled by his frenzied flight.

The chase was pathetically short. A. had quit soccer long before and was more interested in smoking weed with the other future wake-and-bakers in the neighborhood. I caught him in the courtyard outside the lunchroom, tackled him to the ground, and sat on top of him, yelling at him to take it back. Naturally, he did.

When a hall monitor finally picked up on the disturbance in the lunchroom force, our friends pulled us apart and we all retreated as if nothing had happened. At least, outwardly. For the next few days, though, I walked through the school halls with a question battering my brain: "Was she?" And even more disturbing, "Am I?"

Junior high was where my difference from other girls had become more pronounced. Not only did I have crushes on more girls than boys, I was still resolutely gender nonconforming, although more out of cluelessness than by design. My female friends had recently begun to speak what seemed to me almost a foreign language as they worked to fit themselves into a traditional gender role I couldn't begin to fathom. My furious pummeling of A. in the lunchroom courtyard marked me as an outlier even as it reinforced that I was someone not to be messed with, a reputation that, along with my athlete status, would insulate me from outright bullying in the years that followed.

My sister, who identifies as bisexual, wasn't as lucky. When news of her relationship with her girlfriend got out at Kalamazoo Central High School, she was harassed in hallways, bathrooms, and classrooms while the school's teachers and administration largely looked the other way. After witnessing her experience, I retreated into myself, focused on soccer, schoolwork, and writing, and, in a 1980s version of "It Gets Better," waited out high school. Leaving my family and hometown behind was, I imagined, the only way I would ever find true happiness. Or if not happiness, then at least some sort of contentment. I pictured my adult self living alone in a cabin in the woods where I would have my dogs and my books and my fictional characters for companionship. It would be a quiet life without a spouse or children; a blessedly (or so I thought) empty life where I wouldn't have to worry about being despised for who I happen to be.

Seeking solitude as a teenager wasn't a blessed experience, though. It was incredibly lonely. Whenever anyone reached out to me, I responded only half-heartedly. I was so afraid of being rejected, so far inside my own head and heart it would have taken someone incredibly strong and dedicated to break down my defenses. I told myself I was happy being alone, and in truth, it was often a relief to roam the woods near my house with just my dog at my side; a relief to play soccer alone in my old junior high schoolyard after everyone had gone home for the day. I studied hard and

watched television and read and wrote science fiction and fantasy, anything to distract from my daily life. And I waited.

With all that studying, I did well academically, and soon my dream of escape was within reach. I visited schools, read view books, and listened to my gut, and somehow I determined sight unseen that Smith College in Western Massachusetts, a women's college 800 miles away from my Southwest Michigan hometown, was the right place for me. Smith's viewbook contained a handful of photos of smiling tomboys in among the regular girls, including a picture on the back cover of two athletes on a brick pathway casting wide smiles over their shoulders, autumn leaves swirling around them, an ivy-colored building in the distance. In that image, I saw the possibility of being accepted and no longer alone. Maybe even, dare I think it, happy.

When I visited Smith in Northampton, Mass. (a.k.a. Lesbianville, USA) at the end of my senior year of high school, I knew I was on the right track. Soon, things really would get better for me.

And yet it took a full year at Smith for my heart to thaw, an entire year wondering if I could put myself out there, doubting that anyone would like me if they got to know the real me. Not until my sophomore year did I gain enough courage to cut my hair short and match my outsides to my insides, to come out far and wide as a genderqueer lesbian. As soon as I did, an amazing girl asked me out. She thawed my frozen heart the rest of the way, and though I imagine she probably grew frustrated battling the emotional iciness I retreated into whenever I felt threatened, she was more than generous with her patience and love.

My first girlfriend and I were together for a year during which my old dream, of solitude and dogs and loneliness, faded completely away, overtaken by visions of a partner and home and even, maybe someday, children. My parents adored her, and even after we broke up—she graduated ahead

of me and moved overseas—they continued to ask about her for years. Once, I asked my mother why, and she explained that my first longterm relationship had made me a more open and loving person, for which my parents would always be grateful.

Nearly 30 years later, I am not the same teenager who left home wondering if I would ever find a place to belong. And yet, somewhere inside of me is that broken girl, that scared girl, that hopeless girl. Sexuality isn't everything, of course; it's just a part of who we are. But if your sexuality and/or gender identity fall outside cultural norms, they become objects others can and do use to hurt you, to ridicule you, to chip away at your sense of self. To beat you down, figuratively and sometimes literally. They become the reason your teachers might withhold help and acceptance, the reason your best friend from childhood might reject you, the reason your family might stop loving you.

For me, they are the reason I fear my children might one day turn away from me—because I am not their real mother.

“Of course you are,” Kris says whenever I mention these deep-seated fears. “Of *course* you're their real mother.”

And in all the important day-to-day ways, I am. I held each of my daughters and pledged my love and protection to them moments after they were born; I fed them and kept them clean and clothed until they were old enough to do so themselves; I rocked and sang them to sleep for years upon years. Actually, Kris and I still sing to them each night—three songs, one for each girl as we rotate bedsides in a prescribed circle. But there is still a part of me that doubts, a part that wonders what my daughters will one day think of my place in their lives.

A friend with adopted children asked me recently at a play date, “Do you ever worry that when they're teenagers they'll reject you?”

“Oh my god,” I said, turning fully to face her. “Totally! Do you?”

“All the time. I worry that my son will tell me he doesn’t have to listen to me because I’m not—”

“—his real mother?”

She nodded and we shared a long, silent look.

“But it’s worth it, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Completely,” she agreed, and we glanced at the trampoline where the children we love more than anything else in the world were spinning and laughing as they leaped higher and higher.

I wanted to be a parent long before I became one, but I’m not sure I truly believed I would ever have the chance. At some level, I think I believed I didn’t deserve to be a parent. There are certainly enough voices in our culture chanting that a lesbian nonbiological mother is no mother at all.

Sometimes I still struggle with that internalized homophobia. Now, though, it’s mostly the ghost of a thought. After seven years of raising children with Kris, I can see how far I’ve come. Best of all, I can see my own love reflected in the eyes of my daughters.

“I love you to the sun and back,” Ellie, one of the twins, said the other day when I told her the sun was farther from Earth than the moon.

“Oh, yeah?” I replied. “Well, I love *you* to the Trappist-One system and back.”

She stared at me blankly while Kris rolled her eyes and laughed.

I may have outgrown most of my youthful self-doubt, but at the end of the day, I’m still a huge nerd. A mostly happy one, though, with a family I adore and who adores me back; a family I told myself not to dream of but who, secretly in the back of my mind, I couldn’t help dreaming of

all along.

For some of us—most of us?—it really does get better.

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