

***Note:** The narrator of **Mothers**, William Bouvier Hirsh, is thirty-five and has just become a father when he begins telling his newborn twin girls the story of his mothers and their grandmothers, Claire Hirsh and Theo Bouvier, a lesbian couple who decide to have a child in New York in the sixties when such a thing was not only not done, it was illegal. With the perspective of an adult and the unreliable memory of a child, he tells of his mothers meeting, their search for his father and his early years within a loving and slightly eccentric extended family. The following excerpt is from Chapter 8 where the rift between Claire, a gifted fine arts photographer and Theo, a successful caterer, that will eventually sunder the family, is foreshadowed. In it, Willy negotiates the rough passage between a cosseted childhood and the brutality of second-graders, as well as the cruelty of adults, befriending the one child he considers worse off than himself.*

In 1972, there were no picture books entitled *Heather Has Two Mommies* or *Daddy's Roommate*. Gloria had not yet gone to Gay Pride. There was just Claire and Theo, anger spilling over the sides of the small school chairs from which they lodged endless complaints. And there was my seven-year-old belief in the benign nature of the world and the fact that my mere presence in it conferred instant love, friendship and understanding.

Every day another of these illusions fell hard and lay at my feet, glittering in the sunlight like so many dangerous shards of glass on the asphalt of the McCall School yard. In that sunless, fenced-in lot, boys like me learned to defend the delicate manhood budding fiercely inside our pounding hearts and angry fists. Here, conformity equaled acceptance and all differences were pummeled into the sameness mistaken for strength. At any age, a boy with two mothers is a threat, an aberration to be dealt with harshly. In the second grade, it is a serious liability.

"Willy, Willy, poor little tyke," they taunted, "he must be a fag, 'cause his mothers are dykes!"

One day, just as the final bell signaled the rush for the exits, Theo swooped into my classroom to demand an explanation of how I came to know this word dyke, which was not part of any civilized curriculum she had ever heard of.

“And maybe you’d like to tell me why my son has a black eye?” she asked my teacher, Miss Langelotti.

“It would have been so much better, uh, Mrs....Miss, uh, Bouvier...if you and your uh...had agreed to present a more conventional relationship – well, I mean, for Willy’s sake,” my teacher stammered. “You know how boys can be in the formative years.”

“No, I don’t, actually” snapped Theo, eyes blazing with fury, humiliation and hurt enough for both of us. “Perhaps you’d care to define ‘conventional’ for me, Mrs. Langelotti,” “I seem to be having trouble understanding.”

Sleet battered the tall window as we waited for my teacher’s reply. The radiator sputtered and clanged.

“Well, I just meant – you could have told him something would have been more acceptable here at school,” said the young woman. The scarred old desk seemed too big for her, as if it contained the ghosts of all the teachers who had ever intimidated a roomful of school children. From behind it, she could cast about for what her teacher’s intuition told her would be the one small victim who did not know the answer to the question dangling in the air, her search punctuated by the lowering of heads and the sound of feet nervously shuffling under desks. In the edgy silence of the universal mantra – *Don’t pick me, don’t pick me* – a teacher’s cruelty always lands on the one who least expects it, who least deserves it.

I waited at a safe distance, the pain in my eye receding in the wake of this fresh embarrassment. It was three-thirty, but I listened hard for the sound of a witness who might have lingered on the empty linoleum outside the classroom door.

My teacher looked across the giant aircraft carrier of a desk and down at my mother sitting in the small student chair next to her, as if she knew Theo’s shining anger could not be avoided, that she was not safe behind her authority as my teacher. Her open purse stood between them, a brown leather barricade raised against what? Mrs. Langelotti kept it there the whole time as if it could protect her, not only from what my mother had to say, but also from what my mother was.

“Are you suggesting that we should have drawn straws to see which one of us would pretend she was his maiden aunt? Or maybe you think we should have told him we were roommates; then, when he saw us kissing and hugging, or barged in on us in bed, he could see his own parents as something nice and dirty, something he could spend the rest of his life trying to hide. Or maybe you would prefer it if he developed a really sick attitude toward women and grew up to be a rapist or a mass murderer. Is that what you mean by ‘more acceptable?’ Maybe you should think about what’s right for Willy instead of what’s comfortable for you. You have no idea how dangerous you are, do you Mrs. Langelotti.”

Theo drew out the “Mrs.” as though it were something obscene, as though by virtue of that appellation my teacher was in some way defective; marriage and an unseen man had somehow caused her to abdicate all responsibility for integrity and independent thought.

Theo came in for the kill.

“Do you understand that I pay this snooty private school the ridiculous sum they charge for tuition, so that it can pay you to teach my son his lessons and to keep him out of harm’s way until he’s old enough to make his own decisions about what’s bad or good, right or wrong? Do you understand, Mrs. Langelotti, that your personal bias toward me or toward my partner has no place in your class room.

My stunned teacher sat very still behind her big desk.

“Good,” said Theo, arising from that tiny chair like an heiress from a priceless antique. “See that you remember it. And see to you keep those little savages from hurting my son again.”

With that, Theo turned her back on Mrs. Langelotti and fixed her gaze on me where I stood as close to the door as I dared.

“Come Willy darling,” she said, “Claire is going to meet us somewhere special for a surprise.” Suddenly her voice was too soft, too loving, and too full of her lack of regard for the opinions and judgments of others to be real. She raged, every muscle struggling to contain her fury. Even a little kid could see that.

“Miss Bouvier...”

Theo turned and stared coldly at the small woman, dwarfed even more now by the size of the desk and Theo’s distance.

"*I am* thinking about what's right for Willy," said Mrs. Langelotti quietly.

"That's my job," said Theo, slamming the door hard and sending up a fresh cloud of chalk dust, which left a silky film on the two stick figures I had dressed in the brightest Crayola skirts I could find when we were asked to draw our family portraits. Now they wore a wad of Bazooka bubble gum and the mark of the class graffiti artist, the word *dyke* scrawled across my mothers' names in a mean shade of magenta.

After supper, while I was looking for a picture of a cow to paste on Argentina, it started.

"There's one in the blue cookbook in the basket under the table, sweetie," said Theo, absently pointing to the kitchen. "I don't need it."

"It was bound to happen," said Claire.

"Knowing that doesn't make it better," snapped Theo.

"I know," said Claire, looking up from her contact sheets, grease pencil in one hand, loupe in the other.

All afternoon, Theo had tried to concentrate on the museum party. It was her biggest, most visible catering assignment yet. If she could carry it off, she would have all the "ladies who lunch" eating out of her hand. As she whirred and stirred and chopped, brushing the glaze on a test duck that would be lacquered as richly as a Fifth Avenue living room and go unappreciated in my lunchbox the next day, Theo tasted a bit of the sauce from the back of her hand and chuckled. "What irony, a caterer whose success rests entirely on people who never eat."

But just as this small amusement released a bit of the day's tension, the events came rushing back. Mrs. Langelotti's pinched face rose before her and she marched into the living room again, pastry brush in hand, pouncing on her anger from another angle, attempting to rid herself of her confrontation with my teacher, the bitter aftertaste of which no amount of cooking could cancel out. Talking was the only thing that helped. Talking to Claire.

"You should have heard that officious bitch, telling me we should have made up a story for Willy. Practically telling me we've ruined him, with her damn purse sitting open between us like Harridan's Wall," Theo huffed.

"Hadrian's Wall," said Claire without looking up.

“My version is more accurate. God I hate stupid, intolerant people who pick on little kids because they don’t have enough guts to pick on us.”

Without waiting for Claire’s response, Theo stomped back into the kitchen, only to return in less than a minute.

“The nerve of her calling you my ‘friend.’”

“I am your friend, sweetie. I’m your best friend.”

“Claire made a playful grab for Theo as she paced close to her chair, but missed.

“Don’t be simple, Claire. And don’t try to calm me down. I’m really furious.”

“Okay.”

It was still going on when I brushed my teeth and kissed them good night.

Whenever Theo got really mad, which was almost never, she cooked, even if it was three o’clock in the morning. She also became clumsy, which was very unusual for her, so Claire got up and followed her into the kitchen many times that night just to make sure she was chopping only the food and not her fingers. This little problem of Theo’s could be a real liability for someone in her line of work; once when some junkie had attempted to hold up the store, the anger that had replaced Theo’s initial terror had engulfed her so completely, she cut off the tip of her pinkie.

I floated above their voices under the painted clouds of my sleeping loft, listening to the sounds below me, sharp and crackling like bursts of gunfire, then receding as I strained to follow their muffled words into the kitchen. Curled in my Peanuts quilt, I was acutely aware of the fact that I was the reason for all the trouble.

Theo stood in the kitchen doorway watching Claire work, completely absorbed in the images around her. Later, when things got worse between them, she would say, “they’re all strangers, Claire. Just pictures of damn strangers.” But that night, Theo whispered “maybe she’s right” to the back of Claire’s head. “Maybe this is the part that gets harder on us, so it can be easier on him.”

“What do you mean?” asked Claire, bracing for wherever this was going next.

Theo’s voice was very small now. “You should have seen him today, Claire. He wanted to disappear. He wanted *me* to disappear.”

"Don't be ridiculous, he worships you. You're his mother," said Claire, surprised by the bite of this unalterable fact.

"I know. That's the point."

Theo moved across the room to rest on the arm of Claire's chair, her pastry brush still in hand, forgotten for the moment.

"He doesn't love us because we're lesbians and we're doing this swell thing and aren't we just a couple of rebellious modern women. He loves us because we're his mothers. End of story."

"But we are, sweetie," said Claire.

"What?"

"Lesbians. We're lesbians, Theo."

"Do you have any idea how selfish we've been?" asked Theo.

"No. But I have a feeling you're going to tell me." Claire uncurled her legs, rearranging herself in the chair, as though finding her balance would keep her from being knocked over by this.

"We've been so busy demanding our rights as parents, shoving our lives in everybody's face, forcing people to accept us, we're forgetting Willy's feelings. He's just a little boy who is different from the other kids, and I think we ought to start biting our tongues with his teachers and thinking about how we can make it easier, not worse, for him, don't you?"

Something angry and raw appeared in Claire's face, but Theo continued.

"Claire, I know how it feels to be different all the time, to have crazy parents who live in a broken-down trailer, sing labor songs and hide migrants in the bunk beds. I know how it feels to wish you were just like everybody else."

Theo had spent her anger in great heaving gulps and in the physical exertion of cooking. Now the force of her own memories held sway, but the sight of a solitary tear rolling down Claire's cheek stopped her cold. With a mixture of guilt and tenderness, she wiped it away.

"Don't you think we should give him the chance to choose us, the way we chose him?"

Something inside Claire rose up and pushed Theo's hand away. "I'm not going to pretend to be your roommate or your old-maid cousin, if that's what you mean." The faces on

the floor shone out of the pictures at her feet, her witnesses. But Claire no longer saw them, just felt Theo at her back, pushing her out of the picture.

“It’s not going to stop at Willy’s teacher or some classroom bully, Claire. It’s going to get worse.”

“It is not. All kids go through this in some way or another, especially boys. They tortured my brother at this age,” and our parents were perfectly normal – well, for them,” Claire said. She was tired of Theo trying to make this more than it was. She wanted to get back to work.

“This isn’t art, Claire. This is life. You can’t crop out what you don’t like,” Theo said just before she slammed the kitchen door.

People with a small amount of power over others are very dangerous. This is especially true at free clinics, unemployment offices, military installations, and, of course, in schools, where a certain kind of sadism lives just under the surface of things.

This was something I always felt, but never could articulate until after I’d smashed both legs in a skiing accident. The orderly assigned to wheel me down to the physical therapy department at Lenox Hill deliberately smoked a cigarette in my doorway. With every languid puff, he relished the fact that I needed him, loved the idea of keeping me waiting.

His eyes said, “Who do you think you are? Don’t you think I know you wouldn’t talk to me if you weren’t here? I will make you pay for being special. I will make you pay for the fact that I am not.”

The knowing of a child is such that whenever a parent takes on his teacher, he understands he will be made to pay, as I knew I would be. She would soon make her stand, in the silences between her words, in the nuance of her questions, in the bright light of an afternoon I would never see coming. But that day, listening to Theo cutting my teacher off at the knees, I thought, *You don’t want to mess with my mother.*

I'm sure Mrs. Langelotti would have been shocked to see she was making me pay for her discomfort at my unusual family situation. Even so, she picked on me with a vengeance usually reserved for people who are more equally matched. She started the day after Theo's visit.

"Did everyone have fun during the holidays?"

"Yes, Mrs. Langelotti!"

"Will someone tell us what they did?" She scanned the room, looking away from me, lulling me into thinking she would call on someone else, waiting until the very last second...

"Willy, how about you?"

I was too young to know how to tell a story without mentioning the key characters, how to invent a version that was more acceptable. I learned to do that much later.

I stood on wobbly legs and looked into the smug faces of my classmates. I looked for the squinty eyes of the one who defaced my picture and saw no damage on the fat lids or the pig snout on which I was sure I had landed a punch and told a hostile audience about New Year's Eve. How Theo had taught Claire and me to wrap little balls of dough around a list of all the things we didn't like anymore and wished would go away, then throw them in the fireplace.

"My mothers let me have a sip of champagne and stay up with them to throw little piles of dough into the fire at midnight with all the things we wanted Baby New Year to bring," I told the class. "In the morning, our living room smelled like a brand new loaf of bread."

Somebody giggled and Mrs. Langelotti said, "Be polite, girls."

I remember not saying, but thinking, how I wished Claire would go to sleep and turn into a real father, but still be Claire. I didn't tell my mothers that part either; I just balled up my dough and wished it with all my might.

By the time I got around to telling how we visited uncle Peter and aunt Molly on New Year's Day and Harry and I played in the barn until dinner, and we had a picnic on the front porch so we could watch the snow, they were twisting in their chairs, smirking at one another. No one noticed that I deliberately left out the part about not wanting to go home, wanting to live with Harry and Charlotte and pretend I was their brother.

My face burned hotter every time I mentioned my mothers and I heard more snickering, each time a little more brazen. Notes were being passed and the tapping of paper on wood

sounded like mice scurrying in the thick walls of my bedroom at Uncle Peter's farm. Mrs. Langelotti did nothing to stop them and I hurried the story about the snowman we built so I could sit back down on the tip of my spine and be invisible instead of the big, red haired kid with a swollen eye I was.

Carrot head. His father's dead. He got two mothers instead.

Just before recess that morning, as everyone got ready to tear down the stairs for lunch, Mrs. Langelotti said: "Don't forget to remind your parents that tomorrow is Parents' Day and they can come early and watch you in class."

"Willy," she said, rounding her eyes with innocence and saving the zinger for last, "that means your mothers, too."

She delivered this parting shot with impeccable timing, winking at me, turning her back for a moment, allowing the snickers to reach a climax, a spitball to reach my collar, and the promise of renewed violence on the battlefield that was lunchtime to reach my ears.

Hey Willy Willy, got no dad...

I dreaded the morning and the jeering bus trip across the park to the place where Claire and Theo paid thousands each semester to have me tortured. I would have run away, out to Uncle Peter's, if it had not been for Carl Jacoby.

He was small for his age, dark and solemn, like a drawing in one of my books. He swayed a little as Mrs. Langelotti introduced him to the class that day, but he didn't seem to mind that he was the focus of all the attention. He didn't smile and he peered out from under black lashes that kept us from seeing that he was really looking at a point in the middle of our foreheads, a technique I would later borrow to calm my nervousness in front of large groups.

"This is Carl Jacoby from Chicago," she said with one hand clamped firmly on his shoulder. Did she think he was going to run away? Or faint? I didn't really care. They had forgotten about me for the moment.

"What do we say, class?"

Thirty angelic faces gave no sign of their capacity for cruelty. "Welcome, Carl!" they sang.

By noon, the sleet had given way to a cold so chilling, the drawings taped to the big casement windows were stiff with front. The schoolyard was dangerously slick, determined unsafe for children by the headmaster who almost broke his neck on it that morning. So that day, we filed down to the dark cafeteria, where no matter what was being cooked, nothing ever tasted the way it did at home. Down there, all food became one big lunch smell; even pizza and hot dogs took on the stale odor of the steam table. I always lost my appetite down there, especially on the days mashed potatoes were on the menu. Especially when Mrs. Ryan, our school dietician who always wore a hairnet and had patches of gray kitchen sweat under the arms of her pink uniform, plopped lumpy balls of the stuff on each plate with an ice cream scoop.

Outside, we were free to eat lunch from home in relative anonymity and Theo always packed something wonderful – hand-ground peanut butter, French raspberry jam on homemade bread, a cup of her thick soup in the thermos – and I enjoyed it unmolested. Inside, people who did not buy cafeteria food were sissies.

I didn't see Carl Jacoby standing behind me as I slipped my lunch into the trashcan outside the noisy lunchroom.

"Cool bag," he said.

"My mother's store," I answered, eyeing the smaller boy beside me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said, emptying the sturdy paper sack into the can's gaping mouth.

"Could I have your banana before you throw it away?"

I handed him the banana while continuing to dispose of the remaining contents of the Latest Dish bag, careful to keep my distance from the can's foul smell.

"You know I've got two mothers," I said, wondering why he was still standing there, why he hadn't joined the noisy group pushing through the cafeteria's swinging door.

"I've got a grandmother," he said hopefully, his mouth full of banana.

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Dead."

"Yeah?"

"They were in a plane crash," said Carl, his solemn eyes darkening at the memory.

“After the funeral I had to move here to live with my grandmother. She said they shouldn’t have been sitting on the wing, but I don’t think it was their fault.”

“Are you an orphan?” I asked.

Carl shrugged.

“Maybe I could borrow one of your mothers some time.”

Wary of each other at first, Carl and I spent the next few weeks and all the time we were not rendered silent by the stern looks of our teacher, nibbling at the edges of our friendship. Slowly, as our trust in each other grew, we filled in a little more about our lives. I began to dream of lost parents, dead people in picture frames who cannot touch you, cannot tear you in half, people who sit in shining perfection on the lids of grand pianos in dark apartment buildings with cool tiled lobbies and doormen who treat schoolboys like gentlemen.

I dreamed of people who died in grisly plane wrecks, strapped to fiery wings, or in the backs of highway emergency vehicles, their sirens screaming “Move, move, move, move over now!” behind the cars of the living, people on their way to work, to the movies, to the beach.

I was haunted by thoughts of those who withered away slowly in stale shuttered rooms, one following the other a few sad months later, their best and happiest moments forever frozen in heavy silver -- a strong-jawed dad, a pretty mom, a smiling boy between them, reaching up to hold their hands.

Sometimes I dreamed of Jimmy, the parakeet who slid down a slippery rubber mat into Mrs. Jacoby’s kitchen sink, chirping “Jimmy’s bath, Jimmy’s bath” as he showered under the tap. I loved watching him perform these and other equally amazing feats for an old lady with skin that rustled like the tissue paper in Bergdorf boxes, a woman who doted on her lonely grandson from Chicago.

I dreamed of the way Carl lowered his eyes when the teach announced Parents’ Day, how he’d look wistfully at the sky when the Scout leader talked of merit badges and sleep-away camp, and how the other kid would draw him back, telling him their dads said it was okay for him to come along with them. Watching him acquiesce, I imagined how I, too, would accept their gift without eagerness, as my due.

I played shortstop in the McCall Junior Little League game and didn't have to endure Claire and Theo flipping a coin to see who would pinch-hit in the father-and-son game because Uncle Peter lived too far away or Uncle Baxter was in Bermuda or Burundi or somewhere buying stuff for his store and Thad didn't know how and Grandpa Barnaby's knees were too old to slide into home plate.

In my dream, Claire did not win the toss (or lose it, depending on how you looked at the matter) and get her period right before the game and miss every ball because she had cramps. She wasn't out there slipping on the grass and acting like she was my father, while all the real fathers laughed at her behind her back and Theo sat in the stands, hollering her head off, taking us out for pizza afterward. In my dream, we weren't the only family not invited to go to The Flick and have banana splits.

Dead parents can't embarrass you.

I suppose that's why Carl Jacoby and I became best friends.

Copyright © Jax Peters Lowell
All rights reserved.