



Confronting Infertility

The trip home is a two-hour drive. Larry and Bonnie, a couple in their mid-thirties, say goodbye to Larry's family after a festive Thanksgiving dinner.

"You want me to drive?" Bonnie asks Larry. "Are you sleepy?"

"No, I'm fine," Larry replies, settling himself behind the wheel. "Fun Thanksgiving, huh Bon?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"What's wrong? I hope you're not going to start complaining again about how my mother treats you."

"No, it's not that. She was Okay."

"Come on, Bonnie, something's the matter. Tell me."

"It's the same old thing. I always get depressed when we're around families with kids. What's wrong with us, Larry? We've been trying for almost two years now."

"It takes a lot of couples a long time. You know that. Just be patient."

"Look at your brother and sister-in-law. They had their first baby ten months to the day after they got married."

"I wish you wouldn't compare me with my brother."

"I'm not; I'm just saying lots of people have no trouble at all getting pregnant. I feel useless. I keep thinking there's something wrong with us. I bet everyone else thinks so, too."

"Bonnie, you're imagining things. No one is sitting around judging us. Plenty of people actually choose not to have kids."

"Well, not us. We always knew we wanted a family. Even before we got married."

"Are you saying it was a mistake for us to get married? That we're not meant for each other?"

"No, Larry. But at this point, it seems we're officially an infertile couple."

"What do you mean, 'officially'?"

"I've been doing some reading. The standard medical definition of infertility is 'the inability of a couple to conceive after twelve months of intercourse without contraception.'"¹ Bonnie takes a pamphlet out of her purse. "It says so right here."

"Say the definition again?"

"The inability of a couple to conceive after 12 months of intercourse without contraception."

"Why does it say 'couple'? Either the husband is infertile or the wife is, right?"

"Yes, but these days the emphasis is on the couple. That's so no one gets blamed, I guess. See, it says here: 'Fertility is the product of interaction between two people and so the infertile *patient* is in effect the infertile *couple*.'"²

"What if an infertile couple gets divorced? It's still one person or the other who's infertile."

"Larry, what are you quibbling about? This is *our* problem, not just mine or yours."

"Mine? How could it be mine?"

"Sometimes it's the man who has the problem, you know."

"Of course I know that. But I don't think it's me. There's no history of infertility in my family."

"What does that show? There's none in mine either," Bonnie says. "You

know, there are doctors who specialize in problems of infertility. Maybe we should go see one."

"I don't like the idea."

"Why not?"

"They start poking and sticking needles into you, giving you drugs and doing all sorts of tests. I'm a healthy guy. I believe in going to doctors only when you're sick."

"Infertility *is* a disease," Bonnie asserts.

"That's ridiculous. We're not sick. We function perfectly. People who have a disease can't function. They can't go to work, can't make love, don't feel good. We don't have any of those problems. How can you call infertility a disease?"

"It's not my definition. It's what some of these experts are saying. If doctors can treat it, then it must be a disease. Besides, you're wrong about our being able to function. We can't function the way we want to. I want to be a mother. We want to be parents. I feel miserable whenever we're with friends who have children. My parents can't wait to have grandchildren. Let's face it, Larry, infertility is a disease and we've got it!"

"I think we should stop talking about what's wrong with us—or you or me—and start doing something. Going to a doctor may cure a disease, but there's another way to solve our problem. Why don't we just go ahead and adopt?"

"We've already gone round and round on that one, Larry."

"Well, I'm suggesting it again."

"It's so difficult."

"What's so difficult? You go to the adoption agency, put your name on a list, wait for your number to come up, and that's all there is to it."

"But wouldn't you rather have a child with our genes?" Bonnie asks.

"I don't think that much about genes. If my son can play basketball, what difference does it make whether he has my genes or not? Maybe he'd do better with some other guy's genes. How about a high school basketball star who knocks up the prom queen and she gives the baby up for adoption?"

"Larry, you're so crude. But maybe you're right. Maybe we should try adoption," Bonnie says. "It's not as easy as you make it sound, though. I was talking to a woman I work with who adopted. Jenny and her husband had to wait six years for a baby."

"Six years! We'll be over forty by then! That's too old to start raising kids."

"Jenny said it's hard to get a baby that doesn't have birth defects."

"How come?"

"It's sad, but some people who have babies born with handicaps decide not to raise them, so they give them up for adoption."

"I wouldn't want a handicapped baby either."

"No one does, Larry, but that doesn't mean you should just give it away. A baby isn't like a broken appliance."

"Well, at least when you adopt a baby you have a choice. I'm certainly opposed to adopting a handicapped baby. What about you?"

"I'm not so sure. We could give some poor baby a wonderful home."

"Bonnie, life is tough enough as it is. Let's just go for a normal kid, Okay? What do we have to do to start the ball rolling?"

"I'll call Jenny; she knows a lot about it. Maybe we won't have to go through an agency. I'll find out what I can. You could ask around, too, you know."

"I don't mind. This will give us something positive to do for a change."

Larry and Bonnie fall silent as they continue the drive home. They look forward to beginning the process of arranging to adopt a baby.



Bonnie learns from her co-worker that in their state there are two primary ways for adoption to take place: private placement, and agency-arranged adoption. In a private arrangement a child is placed directly with the adoptive family. Agency adoptions are conducted either by private agencies licensed by the state, or by the state's own child welfare agency. The agency is responsible for placing the child with an adoptive family that it has investigated and approved.¹ Since Bonnie and Larry don't know anyone with whom they might arrange a private placement, they decide to go to a private agency. Bonnie telephones to gather information. She is put in touch with a social worker at the agency.

"Yes, how may I help you?" asks Lola Winston.

"My name is Bonnie Roberts. My husband and I are interested in adopting."

"You'll have to come into the agency in person for an initial interview. That's how we begin. We have to determine a family's appropriateness for adoption. Following the initial interview, a home study process begins. The whole thing takes several months to complete."

"Several months? Is there a long wait for a baby?"

"That depends. May I ask, what is your race?"

"White."

"Caucasian," the social worker writes down. "We have many more black babies than white ones for adoption, and many more white parents seeking to adopt, so the wait is much longer for a white infant. We place babies only with adoptive parents of the same race."

"Could you put our names on the waiting list before the interviews begin?" Bonnie asks.

"No, I'm sorry, we have to assess your eligibility before we can put you on the list," Ms. Winston replies. "Would you like to set up the initial appointment?"

"Yes, I guess so. Are you open on Saturdays?"

"Weekdays only, nine to five," the social worker answers crisply.

"I'm sorry, then, I'll have to call you back," Bonnie says. "My husband and I both have to arrange for time off from work."



"The woman at the adoption agency wasn't very nice," Bonnie says to Larry that evening. "And she's a social worker. I thought social workers were into helping people. This woman sounded like a clerk at the Department of Motor Vehicles."

"Never mind how she sounded. What did she say?" Larry asks.

"She said we have to come down in person for an interview. That's only the beginning. The home study process takes months, she said."

"We've waited this long. What's a few more months?"

"They're only open on weekdays, nine to five. Can you arrange to get off work?"

"Sure. When's the best time for you?"

"As soon as possible is the best time for me," Bonnie answers. They check their calendars, and Bonnie sets up an appointment with the adoption agency for the following week.

In the meantime, the agency mails them a form letter describing the assessment procedures in more detail. The home study process, it says, consists of joint and individual interviews of the applicants and all members of their household. They must provide employment and personal references, and the agency will carry out background checks of state and federal criminal records. When the assessment is completed, the agency then decides whether to approve or reject the couple's application.⁴

Bonnie and Larry arrive at the agency for their appointment with Ms. Winston. The social worker begins by asking for details about their finances, including their income, savings, the mortgage payments on their

home, the payments on their auto loan, other installment plans, other indebtedness, and their health and life insurance.

"I see you both work. What are your plans for after you bring the baby home?"

"My wife plans to stay home and care for it," Larry says.

Ms. Winston looks at Bonnie. "Is that correct, Mrs. Roberts?"

"Yes, it is," Bonnie replies, fidgeting.

"Your joint take-home pay is only a little more than you need to cover your monthly expenses. With the added expense of the baby, how do you plan to afford living on only one income?"

"We'll work it out," Larry says. "We've never had any money problems," he adds confidently.

"That may be, but it's our responsibility to make sure every child we place is properly provided for," Ms. Winston says, making notes on the intake form. "We can't leave things to chance, you know," she smiles primly.

The social worker asks about their family background and current family relationships. She informs Larry and Bonnie that before making a home visit, she'll have to meet with each of them separately. She asks them to have their physicians forward copies of their medical records, and requests copies of their employment records for the years since they graduated from college. Consecutive appointments are made for the separate interviews before the couple leaves the agency.

"Whew!" Larry exclaims on the way to the car. "I wonder if that woman was trained by the FBI."

"I don't think she liked all our answers. I'm especially worried about the financial stuff. She made it sound like if I quit my job we can't afford to adopt a baby."

"It's a catch-22," Larry adds. "If you'd said you plan to keep working, then she'd probably have asked how we could afford child care. Or maybe the agency thinks child care isn't good for kids. Who knows? Are there any right answers?"

"I don't know. Let's just be honest with her and hope for the best. Maybe everything will work out."



At their individual interviews, Bonnie and Larry are both surprised by the nature of the questions the social worker asks. Ms. Winston inquires into their philosophy of child rearing and discipline. In her responses,