



# LIKE FAMILY

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*Narratives of Fictive Kinship*

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MARGARET K. NELSON

**Like Family**

## Families in Focus

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For Maya Ruth Nelson and Sadie Klein Nelson.

May they have the richness of family, friendship,  
and fictive kinship throughout their lives.



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## Preface

Accurately or not, I've come to think of my natal family as operating like a force field, forcefully embracing the seven members and forcefully rejecting outsiders. Force should not be confused with intimacy; of that there was little. We were a 1950s suburban, White, upper-middle-class family with carefully delineated age and gender roles. And although we had our own quirks, we also structurally resembled most other families in the neighborhood: fathers worked outside the home; mothers stayed home; children went to school and played in the neighborhood; maids cleaned and looked after children. Each evening, after my father came home from his job in the city—and sometimes we picked him up in the (literal) station wagon as he got off the train—he had a drink. Then we ate dinner together. Some of us shared rooms and secrets; we did not share secrets across the generational divide.

Whatever the intimacy or lack of it inside, there was a clear line between who was in and who was out. We all had friendships outside the family, some of them very strong ones. Years later, I can still name most of my four siblings' best friends. But, aside from a live-in maid for a few years, no one else ever lived with us, and the comings and goings of outsiders were announced and predictable. We asked permission before we invited our friends to stay for dinner. Other children did not come in without ringing a bell or calling beforehand. My parents "entertained" other couples. I know my mother had close friends and I remember her talking with them on the phone. But neither they—nor the cousins, aunts, and uncles who lived in close proximity—ever simply dropped in. Family was family. Everyone else was a guest.

My four siblings have largely created the same kind of arrangements: all have long marriages and nuclear families with clear boundaries between family and "not family." Some of my siblings have had others live with them for brief periods. Most if not all of those "guests" have been members of the extended

family. Two of my siblings invite nuclear and extended family members to regular Sunday night dinners. None of us holds regular, even ritualized, dinners with friends. Years ago, when the parents of one of my son's friends died, my husband and I spoke to our children about whether we should ask this young boy if he wanted to live with us. When we broached that offer, he refused, saying that he did not know whether he could live in a family that ate dinner together every night. I think he meant that we had our own family force field. He was right. My husband and I had also created a carefully bounded family.

My fascination—one might even say obsession—with the topic of this book stems in part from its novelty to me. I have never had a relationship in which I could walk into someone else's house without at least a peremptory knock on the door. Although I have been very close to many people outside my family over the course of my life, I never really thought of any of those people as being "like family." The members of my natal family have been there for me during moments of casual need and serious distress, as I have been for them. Some have also been both critical of and hurtful to me, as I am sure I have been to them. These dual characteristics have made it unlikely that I would use family as a model for the relationships I create.

There is another aspect to my family's relationship to "outsiders," even more difficult to discuss. When I was an infant, my mother had three children ages four and under, a husband who was in the Navy in the South Pacific, and for a brief period during World War II a full-time job outside the home. She hired a live-in maid, a woman called Martha, a pseudonym I use here but also one my sister Emily and I used when we wrote about her. Martha was African American and the mother of two school-aged children. She moved from her home in Charlottesville, Virginia, to live in Washington, D.C. Some years later, she moved with us to the suburbs of New York. She stayed until I was in second grade. She had her own room and, as I recall, her own mealtimes. I loved her passionately. I do not know what my mother's relationship to her was, but a year or so after our mother's death, Emily and I wrote the following:

We were taught from a young age to view this relationship as a form of class and race exploitation. Despite her domestic arrangement, our mother was a leftist. One story illustrates the gulf between her politics and the reality of her life, as well as her desperate, sometimes bizarre attempts to close that gulf. When our mother died, we wrote to Martha. She responded with a long letter in which she reminded us of a time during grade school when one of us had brought home an African American girl who asked our mother whether Martha was our maid. Our mother had answered, "No, she's my cousin."<sup>1</sup>

Emily and I also wrote that "our family's reliance on Martha, our own deep attachment to her, and our mother's discomfort with the contradictions

of her life helped to shape [our] research agendas . . . when we became social scientists.” We both separately and together studied caregiving by family members and by hired caregivers.

In my work, I initially largely focused on childcare, dissecting the relationships that develop among providers, children, parents, and providers’ own families. I have also been interested in the enactment of reciprocity, that is, how people carry out obligations to family and friends in similar and different ways. More broadly, I am fascinated with families: I have written about how economic circumstances shape family life and how single mothers “do” family. I have also, most recently, written about how a sense of family is created through genetic links when children are conceived with donor sperm or donor eggs.

A distinct life-changing event led me to analyze again the border that defines family. In the fall of 2002, when she was fifty-eight years old, Anna Meyers (pseudonym), my friend and colleague of almost thirty years, was diagnosed with what would turn out to be terminal cancer. She had neither partner nor children. She was geographically and emotionally distant from her only siblings (two brothers) and was equally distant on both counts from her elderly parents. After considerable deliberation, she asked Louis (another friend of hers; this name is also a pseudonym) and me if we would take on the responsibility of durable power of attorney for her health care should she become unable to make her own health-care decisions. We both said yes.

For almost two years, our “durable power” remained an abstraction—a scary, albeit sensible, arrangement to be enacted at some later point. But after Anna fell, broke her hip, and began to fail mentally, Louis and I had to start making critical decisions. Eventually, with input from some of her other friends, we changed her designation at the hospital to “comfort care” with a do-not-resuscitate order and signed her up for hospice services. A month later, Anna died in her sleep.

For the three months between Anna’s fall and her death, I found it nearly intolerable to have to make these decisions. I did not think that, as a “mere” friend, I should have such authority. Nothing in my own family life had prepared me for acting as if I were family for someone who was not kin. I tried to analyze my unease in personal essays. I also tried to understand it through more scholarly analyses. Eventually, I decided to write this book. Although it does not answer all my questions or resolve my uneasiness, it has helped me make sense of how other people create relationships that are neither family nor friends, but something else entirely. And writing this book has helped me appreciate the creative generosity of the many people who have given me permission to tell *their* stories of the unique relationships in their lives.



**Like Family**



## Introduction

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Carol Kennedy's words come out in a rush as she begins to tell me the story of how she met a six-year-old girl from Poland and then, seven years later, permanently welcomed that child into her home.<sup>1</sup> Even through the rush of words, the key points are easy enough to follow. Carol's husband, Paul, had become good friends with his longtime yoga instructor, a man named Anton. Following a visit back to Poland, Anton brought his daughter (whom he had not seen for four years) home with him to the small New England town where Carol and Paul lived with their three children. Even before fully unpacking, Anton introduced his daughter, Dana, to the Kennedys and their children: a boy who, like Dana, was six years old; another boy who was three years younger; and an infant girl. Carol instantly assumed a mother-like role: "I was the person Dana cried with; I was the one that read her stories." Carol also instantly fell in love: "How could you not love this beautiful little blonde, straight-haired little girl, with a beautiful smile, who was lost?"

In the following years Anton moved among jobs, homes, and relationships. During the difficult times—when he was homeless; when he had no money; when a girlfriend wanted to be with him alone—he usually left Dana with the Kennedys. Sometimes, he left Dana to cope on her own. Eventually, the relationship between the Kennedys and Anton began to fray. Carol and Paul believed Anton had become negligent if not abusive, and they resented being asked repeatedly to feed, comfort, and house Dana only to have her repeatedly yanked from their home. For his part, Anton resented the growing attachment between Carol and Dana, even as he remained dependent on Carol's goodwill. The tension reached a peak just as Dana was turning thirteen, when Anton's then-girlfriend would not allow Dana to live in her home. Instead of turning



to Carol for a solution as he often had in the past, Anton decided to send his daughter to his family in Toronto; these were people Dana had never met, and all of them only spoke Polish. This time Carol fought back and won a court order granting her temporary legal guardianship. Carol was overjoyed. And Dana, Carol tells me, was overjoyed too. The day Carol picked Dana up “for good,” Carol says, “[Dana] jumped into my arms screeching at the top of her lungs, ‘My dreams came true, my prayers have been answered, my dreams came true, I can live with you.’”

In our first interview, Carol remembers that after she had won guardianship she worried more about how they could fit Dana into their house than how they could fit her into their family. The house, which originally had two bedrooms, had already been reconfigured (but not enlarged) to accommodate the couple’s third child, who had been born after Carol and Paul had assumed they were finished having children. Now the house had to be reconfigured again. This time Paul and Carol moved into the basement and finished off the attic, so each of the now four children could have a separate, albeit tiny, room of his or her own. But money was as tight as housing. The two incomes from Paul’s job as a physical therapist and Carol’s as a teacher had been strained almost to the breaking point to support the three children the couple already had; now those incomes had to be stretched still further. Hard as that stretching might have been, Carol insisted that Dana would have the same as Carol’s own children: “If my kids had nice winter jackets, then she wasn’t going to get a Walmart jacket. She deserved the same thing every other child in my house deserved.”

In retrospect, Carol believes she probably should have been as attentive to the emotional needs of her husband and Joey, her oldest son, as she was to Dana’s material needs. Indeed, although Carol had bonded with Dana from the start, and the two younger children adapted easily to this addition, both Paul and Joey, each in his own way, struggled to accommodate to these new arrangements. Twelve years after Dana came to live with the Kennedys, Carol tells me that some tension remained and that the existing relationships were not as close as she would have liked them to be. She also tells me that two times during Dana’s teenage years, when she and Dana had major conflicts, she had threatened to make Dana leave. Three years after that first interview, when we speak again, Carol openly acknowledges difficulties: “Dana has had a huge impact on our family across time.” But she also rejoices: “She’s now given us a granddaughter who’s lovely.”

Carol’s comments point to inconsistencies in her understanding of just who Dana is to herself, her husband, and her children. Carol says that she, along with Paul and their three children, have a family in which Dana may not be a full member but on which Dana “has had a huge impact.” Still, Carol insists that she treated Dana much as she did each of her original three children, and she celebrates Dana’s baby as her grandchild.

I had known about this particular set of relationships for years—the Kennedys were close friends of a colleague—before I started in earnest to conduct my research on a broad variety of intimate, non-kin relationships among people very much like the Kennedys. My initial interests were these: to explore the motivations for, and dynamics of, these non-kin relationships; to understand the manner in which people like the Kennedys differentiated between family members and people who were like—but not quite fully—family; and, finally, to learn how that differentiation might inform an understanding of kin relations within today’s White middle-class.

### **Going Down the Wrong Paths**

My interests led me first to the scholarship that investigates the creation of new family forms and then to a massive body of scholarship referring to the concept of fictive kinship.<sup>2</sup> Neither examines in depth the precise phenomena in which I was interested. The focus of the first always turns out to be innovative relationships of people other than straight, middle-class Whites. Scholars looking at these new arrangements have told us (actually some decades ago) that gays and lesbians create families of choice, especially when their own families of birth reject them.<sup>3</sup> Scholars also frequently report that people of color, immigrants, and poor folk depend both on the members of their extended family and on what is known as “fictive kin.”<sup>4</sup> Lately, research shows that older people find themselves needing to rely on communities of support that include both paid caregivers who feel “like family” and their own sets of fictive kin.<sup>5</sup> People living alone and people living in “polyamorous families”—defined as “those with adults in openly conducted multiple-partner relationships”—are also appearing more frequently in the literature.<sup>6</sup> But when scholars publishing in our major journals study straight, middle-class Whites, they usually portray them as living in strictly bounded nuclear families. Scholars then report on how those families struggle to solve the problems their family form creates: obtaining sufficient resources, finding a work-life balance, helping children with homework, deciding just who is going to do the darn housework, and dealing with the sequelae of separation and divorce.<sup>7</sup>

The research on fictive kinship also initially proved to be a dead end. Precise definitions of the concept vary; most are similar to the one Carol Stack uses in her widely cited 1974 book, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, in which she explains that she is referring to “non-kin who . . . conduct their social relations within the idiom of kinship.”<sup>8</sup> However, most of the discussions of the concept are very brief: they tell us that people sometimes rely on fictive kin for social support; they also often describe the conditions leading people to do so. But, except for Stack, these studies barely scratch the surface of the phenomenon and offer next to nothing about the texture of the

ensuing relationships. Moreover, almost all of these studies assert that fictive kinship is a custom particularly common among people of color but rarely found within the White population.<sup>9</sup>

There is something odd here. Marginal peoples—as defined by such variables as race/ethnicity, income, immigration/citizenship status, age, sexual orientation—are depicted as being *creative* enough to mix up their relationships so as to ensure that their needs are met in configurations of affiliation that extend well beyond the membership of a traditional nuclear or extended family. Conversely, these same marginal peoples are depicted as being *generous* enough to meet the needs of the members of their broadly defined communities. Straight White folk, by comparison, are depicted as being both unimaginative and stingy.<sup>10</sup>

### Evidence of Fictive Kinship among Whites

Once I chose to challenge this characterization of middle-class Whites, I was surprised to find among precisely that group of people compelling evidence of novel arrangements that could fit under the umbrella of “fictive kinship.” First, I came across a study conducted in 2010 by Dawn Braithwaite and her colleagues, who asked students, faculty, and staff of three universities (two in the Midwest, one in the West) whether they had relationships with “those people who you perceive and treat as extended family, yet are not related to you by blood or legal ties.” It turned out that (through students in communication courses, postings on departmental and campus listservs, and personal and professional contacts) the researchers easily located 110 respondents who self-identified as having this kind of relationship; it also turned out that the vast majority of their respondents (88.1 percent) were “Caucasian/Anglo.”<sup>11</sup>

Second, Robert J. Taylor and his colleagues asked 6,082 respondents in a nationally representative sample (which included 3,570 African Americans, 891 non-Hispanic Whites, and 1,621 Blacks of Caribbean descent) the question, “How many people are close to your family who are not really blood related or marriage related but who are treated just like a relative?”<sup>12</sup> A reanalysis of these data revealed that the proportion of people who reported having fictive kin was high in each of three separate racial/ethnic groups: 91 percent of Blacks of Caribbean descent, 90 percent of African Americans, and 83 percent of Whites said that they had these relationships.<sup>13</sup>

These two sets of data make it abundantly clear that something like “fictive kinship” is a common phenomenon in US society among Whites as well as among those groups to whom it is more commonly attributed. Indeed, the studies tell us that sometimes White people intentionally develop meaningful relationships with people who are not family or kin and that they then consider

these other people to be of enough importance that they think of them as being “like” family.

In this book I build on these findings. I focus on White, essentially middle-class people, most of whom self-define as “straight,” because these are the people most studies of fictive kinship ignore.<sup>14</sup> In the remaining portions of this introduction, I cover five issues that had to be resolved in order to conduct my research. I show how I settled methodological problems of finding respondents and conducting interviews. I then turn to conceptual issues and discuss how I narrowed my definition of fictive kinship and developed a typology of the kinds of fictive kinship I explore. In the next section, I identify my specific research questions. In the last two sections, I explain how I chose to handle ongoing language issues and how I differentiate the practice of “fictive kinship” from other practices to which it might be compared.

## Settling Methodological Issues

### Finding Respondents within a Narrow Population

In collecting my data, I was not trying to assess frequency of representation of fictive kinship among Whites. Rather, I chose to use a sample of convenience, designed to understand the characteristics of family-like relationships among those typically left out of studies of this topic. And I had no problem finding respondents.<sup>15</sup> Eagerly, my overlapping circles of family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances told me stories: “I know someone who has hosted over a dozen foreign students at the local college”; “I know someone who always had at least one extra teenager living with them”; “I know someone who was partly raised by people to whom he was unrelated”; “I know someone who is making all the health-care decisions for, and providing daily care to, an elderly woman who is not a relative.” To supplement these stories, I also simply posted on an electronic bulletin board in the small New England college town where I live, asking for the accounts of these non-kin relationships.<sup>16</sup> Because friendship circles and neighborhoods are so segregated in terms of class and race, it is not surprising that I was led to people who were White and, at some level, either middle-class or well on the way to being so through attendance at an elite four-year college or university.

To round out my sample I traveled around the country—interviewing from the East Coast through the Midwest to the West Coast and from New England down to the Washington, DC, area. I tracked down stories that sounded particularly interesting and, sometimes, when I had started with only one side’s account of a relationship, I also obtained the other. Altogether, I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with seventy-five different people (sixty-one women; fourteen men) in sixty-eight different households. (I conducted seven interviews with the two members of a married couple at the same time.)<sup>17</sup>

My respondents ranged in age from their early twenties to their late eighties.<sup>18</sup> Sixty percent of the respondents were married; most of those who were married had children of their own through birth or adoption, as did some of those who were not married. As a group, my respondents were well educated: 9 percent were students in a four-year college when I interviewed them (several but not all of these were at the college where I taught); 1 percent had an AA degree, 29 percent had BAs, 33 percent had MAs, and the remaining 27 percent had professional degrees (including thirteen PhDs, five law degrees, one medical degree, and one divinity degree).<sup>19</sup>

### Conducting Interviews

I started each interview by asking my respondents to tell me the story of their relationship with a particular individual to whom they were not related by blood or marriage but whom they considered to be “like a member of their family.” I probed for information about such issues as how the respondent met that person, how the relationship changed over time, how family and friends reacted to this relationship and how the respondent felt about that person in relation to how the respondent felt about members of his or her nuclear and extended families. I also asked how respondents made decisions about the degree to which they might be involved in the lives of their “fictive kin.” As snippets of interviews will show, I pushed for answers to difficult questions and, on more than one occasion, irritated a respondent who did not like the framing of a particular question or, indeed, the question itself. I also gathered background information about education, marital status, number and ages of children, and occupation. The interviews generally ran at least an hour; several ran for several hours; and I interviewed each of three people on two separate occasions. Most often, I traveled to the home of my respondents; some preferred to meet in my home; and some chose to meet in a “neutral” space such as a café.

## Conceptual Issues

### Broad Definitions

In the existing studies—and in mine—the operationalization of the concept of “fictive kin” is subjective (relying on the *respondent’s* language usage, perceptions, and treatment). People who are considered fictive kin by one individual might not be so considered by another. These operationalizations are thus both potentially overinclusive and potentially overexclusive. They all also rely on the language of, and an analogy to, family to make their meaning clear. This is the case because these operationalizations refer first to the family, albeit in a negative way (e.g., “not related by blood or marriage”), and because each relies on an implicit understanding of how it is that family members act (e.g., “consider to be like a member of the family”). The operationalizations thus imply that

everyone knows how kinship or family is enacted—and how people in those relationships treat one another—although many scholars write (and many write a great deal) about the variability among families in both enactment and treatment.

To be sure, we do not need to go back to Tolstoy for a reminder that families (maybe especially, but certainly not exclusively, unhappy ones) differ on just about any dimension we would choose to describe them. How we “do family” depends on the normative expectations for our particular social group as defined by such variables as class, race/ethnicity, religion, community, region of the country, and sexual orientation. We also engage in the imaginative and creative construction of these relationships through interaction. The sociologist Graham Allan writes that “the construction of family life is intrinsically both institutional and interactional.”<sup>20</sup> Allan also identifies some norms—kind of reciprocity, sense of commitment and obligation, legal privileging, flow of money, and symbolism of blood—that he thinks mark family as being a unique relationship.<sup>21</sup> His list mixes the institutional (e.g., legal privileging) with the interactional (e.g., sense of commitment). His list also might tell us more about how we believe family members should act toward one another than about how family members actually behave. In fact, even if we limit our sights to the White, middle-class family (as I will for the most part here), we are always going to find great variation in how people believe they should “do family” and the degree to which they live up to any idealized notion of what they believe they should do. In short, there is no obvious family with which we can compare the relationships of fictive kinship. To a great extent, then, I simply rely on my respondents—and what they say about differences between fictive kin and blood/legal kin—to make sense of how they understand each of those categories of relationships and draw distinctions between them.

### Narrowing Down

From the beginning, I was selective about the kinds of fictive kinship I wanted to study. Essentially, I chose to include only what might be called voluntary or intentional fictive kinship.<sup>22</sup> The word *intention* is carefully selected (intended) here. The word is meant to imply that these relationships do not develop by chance or at random but instead are chosen. The word also is meant to imply that these relationships do not merely exist (as do those of formal kinship) but are created and sustained through action. As I will show in what follows, when these relationships persist over time, they may develop complexities so that at moments they do not feel voluntary at all (even though individuals are clearly free to leave them). However, they *begin* with choice.

By opting to focus on intentional relationships, I exclude relationships that occur among people simply because they are living in a special set of circumstances. Thus I exclude people living in marginal settings (e.g., street kids; those

who are down and out),<sup>23</sup> people housed in institutions (e.g., group homes; prisons; schools),<sup>24</sup> people sharing membership in the same voluntary organization (e.g., fraternities; a religious congregation),<sup>25</sup> and people bound through paid caregiving (e.g., caregivers and clients in various settings).<sup>26</sup>

I narrowed my focus in other ways, excluding what could be thought of as “ritual kin” (e.g., godparents) because these relationships are often assigned to participants rather than being freely chosen and also are, to some extent, institutionalized. For much the same reason I excluded those relationships simply inherited or created by parents (e.g., a child who grows up with a “fictive” aunt who felt like a “real” aunt).<sup>27</sup> Even within these parameters, I narrowed further to exclude relationships I felt had been adequately analyzed by others (e.g., the “families of choice” among gay men and lesbians). Some of these “excluded” relationships appear from time to time as comparisons. Yet, even without them, I had many examples among my respondents. And so I narrowed still further.

### Defining Varieties of Fictive Kinship and Creating a Typology

The stories I heard portray a wide variety of relationships, which resist any easy categorization.<sup>28</sup> Even so, as I analyzed my interviews, I found that, whether the bonds formed were lateral or vertical, became a key way of distinguishing among types of fictive kinship: in the case of lateral bonds, the relationships involved equality; in the case of vertical bonds, the relationships involved hierarchy. I thus carefully differentiate between, on the one hand, one set of fictive-kinship relationships that involve the creation of lateral bonds between adult peers (or people who considered themselves to be peers even when there was a significant age difference) and, on the other hand, what appeared to be two different sets of fictive-kinship relationships that involve the generational divide of adults and children or adolescents.<sup>29</sup> I add to this categorization other distinctions that emerged as having significance in determining the dynamics of these relationships: whether the fictive kin share a residence, whether the length of the relationship is spelled out in advance (as it would be in hosting a child through a program like that sponsored by the Fresh Air Fund), whether a formal organization (like the Fresh Air Fund) arranges the relationship, and whether the relationship ever transmutes into an “actual” (or legal) family.<sup>30</sup>

Using these distinctions, I introduce three ideal types of “intentional” fictive kinship: peer relationships that I simply call “like-sibling” bonds, and two sets of cross-generational relationships involving adults and dependent children. The first of these vertical relationships I refer to as “host families and guest teens”; the other I refer to as “informal parents and unofficial children.” These ideal types are depicted in table I.1.

**Table I.1**  
**Ideal types of fictive kinship**

	Like-sibling bonds	Guest teens and host families	Unofficial children and informal parents
<b>Generational divide (adults and children)</b>	no	yes	yes
<b>Age of people involved</b>	adults	adolescents and adults	children, adolescents, and adults
<b>Co-residential</b>	rarely	usually: temporary or continuous	often: long-term, episodic, or continuous
<b>Original relationship terms</b>	open-ended	delimited	open-ended
<b>Formal organization involved initially</b>	no	occasionally	no
<b>Relationship becomes “legal” family</b>	no	no	occasionally

### Shared Features and Different Features

I did not go out and look for these three types of fictive kinship (and not everyone I interviewed fit into one of these three types). They emerged from among the cacophony of stories I heard in my interviews. Although each of the three ideal types has its own section of the book, the three are *all* fictive kinship, and as such they share some features. To reiterate, these are intentional relationships between at least two people not otherwise bound by kinship. Unlike family, with its elaborate system of naming (e.g., mother, uncle, cousin), none of these broad categories of relationships has a given name. Significantly, because each pattern entails a relationship between at least two parties (and occasionally more than two), possibilities emerge for different interpretations of what the relationship means. That is, unlike blood/legal kinship, with its assigned positions of interdependent relationships (e.g., husband and wife; mother and son; uncle and niece), in fictive kinship a mutual understanding of the significance of the relationship need not occur: one person might consider another to be “like family,” while the other does not think of the relationship in those terms. In what follows, I do not assume shared expectations, and I include representatives of both sides of each set of relationships: sometimes these are parties to the *same* relationship; sometimes they are parties to the same *kind* of relationship.

The differences among the three types of fictive kinship matter as well. *Like-sibling bonds* do not usually involve shared residential arrangements, although respondents might have lived together (e.g., as housemates) sometime in the past. The relationship emerges as an open-ended attachment between two or



more people; no formal organization promotes or shapes the development of the relationship. As I will show in what follows, a prominent characteristic of these lateral—or peer—bonds is the identification of the other (or others) as being “like family” (or “like a sibling”) but not being family (or an actual sibling) *and* an accompanying definition of the other (or others) as not being “just” a friend.

The relationships I refer to as *host families and guest teens* come about when an adult or a couple of adults provide a temporary home for dependent children (i.e., under the age of eighteen or enrolled in college) who have parents of their own (in the sense of parents with whom they usually live). Commonly known forms of organized generosity abound: for example, foreign exchange students regularly arrive in the United States through programs like the American Friends Service (AFS) Intercultural Programs to live for a year or so with a host family.<sup>31</sup> Other, less organized forms of generosity exist: children having difficulty at home are shipped off—or take themselves off—to another family to give everyone a break, or a family moves and a child chooses to stay with another family in her hometown to finish up a last year or two of high school. Interestingly, I found that most of the families who hosted children under these kinds of arrangements—whether through formal organizations or not—did so more than once. On the other hand, I found that the teens had just one such experience.

In a different pattern, in which adults assume responsibility for unrelated children on an entirely casual and, even more important, entirely open-ended basis, adults become *informal parents* to children who are not “officially” theirs. These relationships also almost always involve some period of co-residence, but that co-residence might be episodic: children may move back and forth between their family of origin and another household on a daily, weekly, or even yearly basis.

While I distinguish between temporary host-guest relationships and open-ended, informal parenting of unofficial children—because the issues *are* different—the boundary between the two categories can be fuzzy, and in some cases the line is crossed. Some relationships that start off as temporary become long-term (e.g., a Fresh Air child who comes to a family for a week or two returns to stay with the same family for years both through the program and then independently as someone deeply integrated into the lives of host family members) and the meaning of the relationship shifts from something clearly delimited to something quite open-ended. Moreover, once the relationship becomes open-ended, it might evolve from being *like* family to *being* family, as the “child” becomes a full-fledged family member with all the rights and privileges that other children of the family had. Some of these relationships are formalized through adoption; in other cases the informal arrangements are simply understood by all concerned to be “forever.”<sup>32</sup>

## Refining Analytic Questions

Having identified respondents and created a typology, I could refine both my specific and more general research questions.

As I explore these various kinds of fictive kinship, I ask what happens within a relationship when someone is identified as being like family. How and why do people arrive at this designation? What kinds of interactions are then permitted or prohibited? How are relationships with fictive kin conducted differently from and similarly to the ways in which people relate to the members of their own blood/legal families? How and when does it matter that these relationships are not institutionalized and have no name? How and when does it matter that the participants might not share identifying characteristics of social class, race/ethnicity, or sexual orientation? At the broadest, or most general level, I am interested in why people develop fictive kinship and what can be learned about how straight, White middle-class folk think about “the family” when they look at it from the side, so to speak—from the angle of their relationships with people who are decidedly *neither nuclear nor extended* family members.

Some of the questions I pursue run throughout the investigation. To avoid repetition, I may focus on an issue of relevance for all three types of fictive kinship more in one chapter than I do in another. To take one example, people who are bound to others by choice alone often offer an origin story, a narrative account that implies predestination; I explore this practice most intensely in part I, chapter 1. To take another example, I most closely examine the issue of motivations when I describe the host family–guest child relationship in part II, chapter 4.

Other questions emerge from the *differences* among the three types. I ask whether—or, more precisely, how—lateral relationships are experienced differently from cross-generational relationships. More generally, I ask whether factors like intention and the absence of institutionalization (and names) matter more (or differently) in one type of relationship than another. I explore also the difference delimitation makes in comparison with an assumption of open-endedness as I investigate how some created kinship relationships evolve into something quite different. Finally, I consider the effects each type of fictive kinship has on a pre-existing nuclear or extended family and how people create and re-create boundaries within changed household configurations.

## Resolving Language Issues

### Not So Fictive

Unfortunately, scholars do not always use the same terms to convey these intentional fictive-kin relationships. Even in studies of people of color, different

terms have been used. For example, the term *fictive kin* is used for the African American population. However, the name given to a specific type of fictive kinship within the Latinx population—which involves the creation of a godparent who ties a child to a broader community—is *compadrazgo*.<sup>33</sup> And newer terms have cropped up. Starting in 1991 with Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays and Kinship*, a specific terminology came to describe kin-like relationships within networks of gay men and lesbians.<sup>34</sup> Braithwaite and her coauthors, in their study of these relationships, explained why they rejected the use of both the term *fictive kin* (as had Weston) and the term *choice*, opting instead to introduce the new term *voluntary kin*:<sup>35</sup>

The term *fictive* is fraught with problems for us. Rather than focusing on the deficit model, we wanted to understand how persons involved in these relationships understand them. We agree with Weston (1991)[.] who argued that the term *fictive* only adds to the stigmatization, suggesting that these are not “real” relationships. Based on Weston’s work, we also considered the label *chosen kin*; however, this term is used in the literature to describe gay and lesbian families [and] we wanted to broaden our lens to all non-blood and legal relationships. In addition, the term *chosen* positions members of these alternative families as objects of selection. . . . *Voluntary kin* implies a mutuality of selection, rather than framing these relationships as asymmetrical structures of chooser and chosen.

By way of contrast, I opted to follow more common usage in my analysis. I refer to the general topic under consideration as *fictive kinship* even as I apply names to various types under that umbrella: like-sibling bonds; guest teens and host families; and unofficial children and informal parents.

To be clear, none of my *respondents* uses the language of “fictive kinship.” In fact, and not unreasonably, they become quite irritated when I do. They feel “dissed” by a language that suggests that what they have is made up, not real, not significant. At the same time, the participants in all three sets of relationships use—at one point or another—the metaphor (actually, a simile) of having a family-like relationship with another person in which the family represents some idealized notion of ongoing social, emotional, or material support. And, as participants use the language of family, whether intentionally or not, they bolster their fictive-kin relationship. That is, by using the language of family (e.g., “like a brother”), participants demonstrate how this one person is different from (and given a higher ranking than) other people outside the family or kin group with whom participants are engaged. Moreover, at a concrete level, we will see that the metaphor not only indicates something about the nature of the relationship, but also actually *does* something within the relationship itself: referring to family sets up expectations about how people are supposed

to treat one another (e.g., with kindness or obedience) and how they are *not* supposed to treat one another (e.g., sex among siblings). Yet, saying that someone is “like” family modifies at least some of those expectations, insofar as fictive kin may not be expected to do everything that family members are expected to do and may be allowed to do some things that family members are not allowed to do. That is, the analogy both draws in and stresses similarities to family even as the word *like* pushes away and stresses differences. It is this dual function that I explore throughout.

### Nuclear Family and Extended Family

Other scholars’ discussions of fictive kinship rarely make a sharp distinction between expectations inherent in nuclear family relationships and those in extended family relationships. Taylor and his colleagues, for example, become ambiguous midstream, referring first to “family members” and then “extended family”: they write that “fictive kin are accorded many of the same rights and statuses as family members and are expected to participate in the duties of the extended family.”<sup>36</sup> Braithwaite and colleagues recruit respondents by asking about “people who you perceive and treat as extended family, yet are not related to you by blood or legal ties.”<sup>37</sup> But in their examples, these scholars include someone who speaks of her voluntary kin as being “like a son” to her. I do not mean simply to carp here. This distinction is important because, in general, we have different expectations for how we handle each set of relationships—those with the members of our nuclear family and those with our extended kin. We also have different expectations for different members of each of those two sets of relationships—for example, sisters versus parents; uncles versus grandparents. Age and gender shape relationships as well. Because these things matter, I will try to be specific about which “level” of family—and which position within a family relationship—the fictive kinship is being compared to.

### Fictive Kinship Versus Kinship

Yet another bothersome language issue emerges. One day, shortly after I had published an article proposing a new, complex typology of fictive kinship, anticipating exuberant congratulations, I eagerly opened an e-mail from a colleague. She rebuked me: “Why don’t you just call them family,” she wrote, “rather than introducing new terms?” But that is precisely what I do not want to do here. It is striking how often someone uses the phrase *like family* and just how loosely they do so.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes a like-family analogy is imposed from above in an attempt to create a close-knit community.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes the like-family language emerges spontaneously among the members of an activity or group.<sup>40</sup> Usually, when someone uses this metaphor what is being conveyed is some idealized combination of strong bonds of affection, emotional interdependence, and sharing of resources: people who are like family are the people

you can count on. Sometimes of course, it is just the reverse: a relationship is so bad and irritating that someone says it feels like family, as in “We fight all the time in my department; it’s just like a family.” Some people use the metaphor in an almost tribal way: in a place like Vermont, Jews sometimes report that other Jews in the community have felt like family. And sometimes it means almost nothing at all except some vague sense of community, as in Sister Sledge’s song “We Are Family.”<sup>41</sup> As I write, I try to avoid this looseness by explicating just how my respondents use the language of family and what it means for their interactions with others, whether in the past, present, or future. And I try to balance the possibility that my scornful colleague was right when she insisted that these relationships were all simply family with my own growing conviction that, at least for the population I was studying, *like family* was demonstrably different from *family*.

Maintaining this balance still leaves me with nagging language problems. I resolve them this way. When people are talking about their family of origin or (if different) their current nuclear family, I refer to these as blood/legal family or simply family (even though, on occasion, as in cohabitation, the members of these families are not related by blood or by any legal procedure like adoption or marriage). When people are referring more generally to extended kin, like grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, I talk about blood/legal extended kin or simply kin. I also try to draw a distinction between the blood/legal family and the household: at any given time, the former may not be co-residential, while the latter by definition is.<sup>42</sup>

One more set of sticky language issues emerges. Because my respondents do not use the language of fictive kinship, when I am summarizing their ideas or quoting them directly, I use the language of like-family relationships. In addition, because the parties to the like-sibling bonds I describe in part I are *neither family nor friends*, I must make do with the awkward notion of “affiliates” (or, as I have just done, with the term *parties*) as a shorthand for people involved in what they describe as significant relationships.<sup>43</sup>

## Differentiating Fictive Kinship from Other Practices

Not only can the three categories of fictive kinship be distinguished one from the other, but they can also be distinguished from other types of relationships to which they might be compared. Like-sibling bonds obviously resemble friendship. However, as I show in chapters 1 and 2, my respondents themselves differentiated between these relationships and those they had with people they called “friends.” Moreover, I draw that distinction because the like-sibling bonds have so many family-like characteristics (such as generalized reciprocity) that friendships often do not. Other scholars—most notably Ray Pahl and Liz Spencer—might consider these “fused” relationships resulting from a

process of suffusion whereby there is a “blurring of boundaries” or mixing between the content of relationships that are “chosen” (friends) and those that are “given” (family).<sup>44</sup> I will argue otherwise; indeed, I will argue that like-sibling bonds are their own phenomenon that cannot be subsumed within a process of “suffusion.”

The two sets of cross-generational arrangements I describe bear obvious similarities to a variety of other practices we can observe in the contemporary world. One of these is the practice of “othermothering,” which, like fictive kinship itself, is widely assumed to be frequent within African American communities.<sup>45</sup> The term refers to occasions when community members (usually women) step in to provide assistance in child-rearing. For several reasons I draw a distinction between what I am analyzing and othermothering with my use of different (and admittedly even clumsier) terms. First, the patterns of assistance I discuss are not unique to women: men, too, participate in the care of unrelated children. Second, othermothering can include activities as simple as offering advice and as complex as informal adoption (a practice I discuss next): I wanted to distinguish between the issues arising in short-term daily care as opposed to those emerging in open-ended care, whether it was daily or not. Third, discussions of othermothering assume that the blood/legal mother and the othermothers are members of the same community and have a shared interest in the well-being of the child. By way of contrast, the occasions of cross-generational fictive kinship I examine are often between people from very different types of communities. Also (especially in my category of informal parents), the relationships between the two sets of caregivers are usually competitive rather than cooperative. In fact, often, informal parents take responsibility for other people’s children because they believe the “real” parents to be deficient.<sup>46</sup>

Informal adoption is defined as a pattern whereby “dependent children are informally reared by adults who are not their natural or formal adopting parents.”<sup>47</sup> As I demonstrate in appendix B, this is also identified as a practice most common within the African American community. In addition, much of the scholarship on this practice assumes that the adults engaged in informal adoption completely take over the role as parents of dependent children. But the relationships I study (whether short-term or open-ended) do not necessarily involve a shift in the understanding of a child’s parentage: in many cases children move back and forth between two homes and two sets of caregivers.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, although at one level each of the cross-generational forms of fictive kinship in which an unrelated child lives with a family who are not kin might resemble foster care, these arrangements differ: the state is not involved and no one is paid to provide the care.<sup>49</sup> Most significantly, the arrangements are voluntary: no one is separating parents and children against their will.

## Brief Outline

I divide my analysis into three parts, each of which deals with one type of fictive kinship. In part I, I explore lateral, like-sibling bonds between adults. I privilege the stories of two women—Linda Sandor and Meg Peters—who are involved in an intense relationship built on almost three decades of intimacy, care, and trust. The first chapter in this section explains how the family is both a positive and negative model for fictive kin. The second chapter turns to the issue of what happens to these relationships over time and the limits associated with like-sibling bonds. The conclusion of that chapter analyzes these relationships more fully with respect to the pre-existing categories of friendship and kinship. As an overview, I refer broadly to the narratives of these fictive-kin relationships as *true life stories*, a concept that acknowledges both efforts at telling the “truth” and the inevitable constructions, omissions, and exaggerations of storytelling.

In part II, I turn to one of two separate categories of cross-generational, fictive-kin relationships, those in which adults and adolescents share a household for periods of time that are essentially delimited and agreed upon in advance. In the first chapter in this section, I focus on the experiences of four different guest children. In the second chapter, I focus first on the experiences of host parents, as told mostly through the voices of a middle-aged couple—Susan and Richard Macy—who have taken in more adolescents (each for a delimited period of time) than they can easily remember. I then turn to the children in these host families; these are the least proactive of all the players. I analogize these relationships to one-act plays; the analogy highlights how family membership remains intact while household membership is repeatedly altered.

In part III, I discuss the other set of cross-generational relationships, those that begin in an open-ended manner. I start with the voice of Nicole Evans, an “unofficial” child who had, at the time of the interviews, been attached for more than a decade to Joyce and Don Nowak, a couple I call her “informal” parents. The second, paired chapter turns to the perspectives of Joyce and Don, along with those of other informal parents. Throughout I make an explicit analogy to fairy tales and how these stories tell us what happens when we turn the page from “happily ever after.”

In my conclusion, I reconsider issues of similarities and differences among the various categories of fictive kinship and similarities and differences between fictive kinship and other forms of family and kin relationships. And I seek to offer insights into what the White middle-class believes about family today, insights that come from looking at it sideways.

**Part I**

**True Life Stories**

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# 1

## The Texture and Dynamics of Like-Sibling Bonds

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For almost three decades now, Meg Peters and Linda Sandor have maintained a relationship with each other that each describes as being “like family.” They first met during law school and within months of that meeting decided to share a house for the rest of their student years. Then, for over two decades, they lived some distance apart from each other. Meg lived with her partner, in a broad lesbian network of the type described by the anthropologist Kath Weston in *Families We Choose*; during those years, Meg gave birth to two girls.<sup>1</sup> Linda lived with her husband and their one daughter in a different part of the same state. Four years before the interview took place, Meg, who was by then separated from her partner, came to live close to Linda again. She now lives in the “garden apartment” of a small building in which Linda and her husband live on the first floor. And although residence just one floor from each other intensifies the relationship between the two women, and gives it a special piquancy, it is not essential to their story.

Linda tells how this new living arrangement came to be: “Meg needed help . . . And [my daughter] Rose was leaving for college so it seemed like I would have more time to help . . . and then the downstairs apartment opened up. . . . So that’s how that happened. And that worked out pretty well.” On one level, “pretty well” is an odd way to describe the last several years. Wryly, Linda acknowledges that her involvement with Meg and her daughters “sort of took on much more of my life than I anticipated.” In her interview, Meg provides the details that Linda’s understatement obscures:

My kids, especially my older kid, she flipped out, sometimes and sometimes Linda and [her husband] Samuel would have to come down and literally pick up my daughter Laramie and put her in the car or help her get dressed, and that would be several times a day they had to help. So Linda would be doing the things that a mom or an auntie would be doing, and she could come in sometimes unlike a parent, and be able to calm Laramie, or switch her up, or say to my other daughter, Madison, “Come on upstairs.” . . . She has worn many hats with my kids and me. . . . She’s in, like, every part of our life.

And again, later in the interview, Meg described Linda’s immersion in her life and her children’s expectations of that immersion: “Well, especially when Laramie was still living at home . . . Linda would be down here helping five out of seven mornings. . . . If Linda heard anything going on down here, a kid crying or screaming or yelling, . . . she would be down here. . . . So that kind of dailyness . . . I mean, like, if Madison has something going on at school at night, there’s a performance she’s in, she’s, like . . . ‘You’re coming. You’re Linda—you’re going to be there too.’”

All that intensive involvement notwithstanding, on another level, “pretty well” is an understatement of a different sort. Neither Linda nor Meg explicitly focuses on Laramie and Madison when the two women talk about the nature and importance of their bond. They focus instead on their love for each other, their ongoing reciprocity, and their intimacy. Linda says, most briefly, “We’re just kind of there for each other.” Meg gets a bit more graphic: “She would cut off her right arm for my children or me.” And, in one of the more curious echoes in these interviews, Meg and Linda use the same kind of quasi-religious language, to describe each other: each of them finds something unique, magical, and holy in the other. Meg says about Linda: “I feel like her middle name is ‘the Dalai Lama.’ She’s Linda the Dalai Lama Sandor.” After I have walked upstairs to interview her, Linda says an hour later, “I think that Meg is an extremely unusual person. It’s not like I’m a big nirvana kind of person, but to the extent that one believes that one goes through multiple lives, ultimately to get to nirvana, I think that Meg’s a very, very advanced human being. So, I’m lucky that she’s a part of my life—a big part of my life for thirty years.”

Other respondents did not get quite as mystical as Linda and Meg when they described their bond, but all referred to some special quality of these relationships. Sonja Larson, a woman in her sixties, approached what Linda and Meg had said when she explained how for more than four decades Marsha had been not just her soulmate but also her soul: “I met my best friend my freshman year in college, and we have been friends—I think she counted up 46 years, and other than [my husband] Jack, she’s kind of my soul, she’s the person I can complain [*whispers*] about Jack to. . . . She’s totally got my back. . . . She and I

might not talk for six months and call each other up and pick up right where we left off.” Like Sonja, many other respondents also spoke about relationships that resumed seamlessly after long absences. For example, Clare Murray, a bisexual woman who is married to a man and is the mother of two daughters, spoke about a (heterosexual) woman, Natalie, with whom she and her husband had shared a house for some time: “Recently Natalie and I went and we spent four days together. It was amazing to get to connect with her and be with her in that way. . . . Time hadn’t erased the bond. . . . Our connection to each other is never going to change.”

I begin my investigation of like-sibling bonds with a discussion of the range of people among whom such bonds develop and then turn to the ways in which the parties invent origin stories to demonstrate the significance those relationships have for them. I show also that my respondents draw a distinction between these relationships and the ones they have with their spouses or partners, with people they regard as “friends,” and with the members of their blood/legal families. I show that, in drawing these distinctions, respondents often offer a critique of those more well-known bonds, and I discuss the experiences my respondents have when they combine their worlds of friendship, family, and fictive kin. I conclude the chapter with a review of the language of family.

## Who Does This?

My research strategy does not allow me to determine what makes some people define a special relationship as being “like family” while others do not. I know the common denominator is not simply gender, sexual orientation, or age. My sample of respondents with like-sibling bonds included men, women, and one trans man; self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight people; and a broad range of ages (although all respondents were at least eighteen). The common denominator is not marital status either: some of my respondents were married; others were not. It is also not the frequency of other kinds of friendship: some of those I interviewed had many friends; others had only a very few, if any.

Moreover, the common denominator is not the presence or absence of—or even the degree of attachment to—blood/legal kin, as much of the scholarship suggests when hypothesizing that fictive kin make up for deficiencies in one’s kin network.<sup>2</sup> Some of those I interviewed had warm and loving (albeit complex) relationships with blood/legal kin. Clare Murray, for example, is explicit that the fictive kin in her life are supplements rather than substitutes when she says, “I find my life is more rich for having those like-family relationships, and it’s not because my extended family is lacking. I’m extremely close to my parents. I’m very close to some of my cousins. I’m very close to some of my husband’s cousins now.”

However, other respondents did acknowledge that their like-sibling bonds created opportunities for reliable, loving relationships that their families had not. Meg Peters describes her relationship with Linda Sandor as being “like family” even as she is clear that this is not the meaning of family she learned at home: “Both my parents were alcoholics and dysfunctional to the point where they didn’t parent us at all. . . . There wasn’t that sense of family in . . . the positive attributes of family showing up for each other through thick or thin.” Moreover, Meg goes one step further and reverses the direction of learning. Even if it was the deficiencies of her blood/legal family that impelled Meg to seek out relationships like that with Linda, the process did not stop there. Meg continues, “Then that creation of family . . . enabled me in ways to go back and repair some of the biological family relationships [so] that now my siblings are a bigger part of my life even though they’re just a part. I feel like now we are able to do family in a way that’s really different from before but that wouldn’t have happened but for having what I learned about creating family through friends.”

Ruth Stern and Mandy Lord have a long-standing bond, emerging originally from doing the same freelance work as web designers and solidified (and even glorified) through the care of each other’s cats. Ruth recognizes that it is strange to use the word *family* to describe her relationship with Mandy when she has had only problematic relationships with the members of her natal family and has “no extended family” at all. She continues, much as did some others: “So, when I use the language [of family], I’m using something that I wished were there.” And unlike Clare, she believes that both for herself and for Mandy, fictive kin *do* make up for the deficiencies of blood/legal kin:

Mandy and I both have siblings who disappoint, and we’re both just delighted when they come through. One of my sisters is abusive to me, [and] my relationship with the other one isn’t bad but it’s stressed. And I’m never quite sure where I stand with her. With Mandy I always am quite sure where I stand. Mandy’s brother comes through or doesn’t come through. . . . And so I think that [Mandy and I] have this sense that we fill this gap. This you can depend on. Nobody else is really dependable. Biological kin turn out not to be dependable. Or worse. But after almost 25 years [*pause*], we seem to come through for each other.

In short, no single variable—or set of variables—predicts who will develop this type of like-sibling bond, even if sometimes people attributed their having done so to something particular in their backgrounds, either positive or negative.<sup>3</sup>

## Origin Stories

My interviews with Linda Sandor and Meg Peters took place back to back. On a windy Saturday morning in Berkeley, after talking for well over an hour with

Meg in her ground-floor apartment, I walked out her back door and up the flight of exterior stairs to talk with Linda on the first floor. When I arrived for the separate interviews, each of the two women was alone, ready with coffee and chat. Each woman equally valued the peaceful solitude I was interrupting on a Saturday morning: each holds a full-time demanding job as a lawyer. The similarities end there.

Meg's interview time was colored by anxiety. Meg's eleven-year-old daughter, Laramie, had recently been institutionalized on a finding that her psychological condition made her a danger to herself and to others; Meg's other daughter, the nine-year-old Madison, who was a difficult child in her own right, was spending the weekend with Joanna, Meg's ex-partner. As she talked about her children, Meg expressed more anxiety about this younger daughter, Madison, than about Laramie because Meg was not confident that Joanna would care for her appropriately: "Joanna treats my kids as if they are little adults so I have to say, . . . 'You must make sure that Madison is fed breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You must make sure that she brushes her teeth. You must make sure that she's changed her underwear.'" The stress of the last several years had left its mark on both Meg and her apartment. Meg herself was physically tiny, painfully thin, and almost feline in her precise movements. Her apartment was dark and spare: what was left was what Laramie had not destroyed in one of her rampages.

Linda and her apartment presented sharp contrasts. Fully above rather than half below ground, the apartment was light and airy. The couch was plush; the knickknacks on the shelves and tables revealed a fondness for kitsch; and Linda herself, though not fat, had sufficient flesh to look robust and healthy. Linda's primary concern as we spoke was whether she would be able to say all she wanted to say and still make a noon yoga class. Like Meg, Linda was reveling in the break from Madison and Laramie: for the past two years, she had been just a text (or scream) away from the ongoing crises in Meg's life. Linda's own nuclear family produces little of that kind of stress: Linda's husband is a workaholic and rarely home; Linda's daughter was at the time successfully finishing her last year at college and heading off to medical school the next fall.

Given the very different situations of these two women and even the ten-year age gap between them, it was somewhat unnerving to hear echoes of the first interview during the second. The two not only accorded each other quasi-religious powers, but they gave similar accounts of how they met in law school, hit it off, and chose to share an apartment for the last two years before graduation. The two also similarly narrated the year of living together, in a way that elided physical and emotional closeness. Meg described it this way: "We lived together in . . . this little postage stamp of a house. So we were incredibly close all through law school, and it continued." Linda's recollection involves the same description of an intimate time in a tiny space: "We lived in a very small house, and it was really, really fabulous. . . . We loved it."

Both Meg and Linda have come to regard their relationship as being of special importance. Their accounts of the origin of that relationship resemble what Signe Howell, in her study of foreign adoption in Norway, calls “kinning”: “By kinning, I mean the process by which a foetus or new-born [*sic*] child (or a previously unconnected person) is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom.”<sup>4</sup> Howell explains that in the case of the type of adoption she studied, a kinning moment began when an agency assigned a particular child to a particular couple. This moment provided an origin story to explain the deep connection between parent and child: “Upon allocation, expecting parents are sent a photograph of the child and its personal details. From this time onwards, the kinning of the distant and unseen child is actively pursued. The photograph is duplicated and widely distributed and the child’s room made ready.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar move, the anthropologist Helena Ragoné explains how women who adopt a baby born in a surrogacy arrangement can ultimately claim that it is the mother’s desire to have a child that make the child hers; the desire itself creates the “kinning.”<sup>6</sup>

If relationships that become kin outside the typical, ascribed arrangements of birth and marriage require some process of kinning, what I am calling like-sibling bonds (as a type of fictive kinship) require some analogous process (creating “like-siblingness”) to demonstrate that this relationship has special significance and maybe even is meant to be.<sup>7</sup> Linda and Meg reiterate what we might think of as an origin story that points to the unique elements of their relationship at its inception and, thus in a sense, almost to its inevitability—at least in retrospect.

Other people I spoke with also offered up origin stories. Recall Mandy Lord and Ruth Stern, both in their early fifties, who met through their work as freelance web designers. Mandy describes feeling a strong, almost instantaneous, connection at their very first meeting: “We spoke the same language, I guess, and we talked and talked and talked and talked [*laughter*] the way you do in high school.” That pleasure quickly evolved into a relationship that came to include not only great enjoyment in each other’s company but an ongoing commitment to care. From Mandy, I heard the story this way: “I was married and I followed my husband to London, and I had two cats and I had to put them somewhere, and I put the oldest doddery cat with my mom and the other cat with Ruth, who was wonderful about it and gave her back to me when I came back in two years. And that’s, to my mind, a very serious thing.” Ruth also uses this example of her taking care of Mandy’s cat—and then of Mandy’s taking care of one of hers—as evidence of their almost inevitable connection to each other: “Cats figure very large in this relationship. . . . You can’t take a cat to London, so I took one of them. I had just met her. I barely knew her. We did not really talk about what this might mean. I had this second sense that this was

the right thing to do, and I made the offer without really thinking about it. . . . Last year I had this tabby and I said to her, ‘I can’t take care of him right now’ and Mandy took him.”<sup>8</sup>

Emilia Lyons, whose like-sibling relationship is with a man, Ronnie, who, like her, is now in his mid-thirties, tells a different kind of origin story. That story reveals a relationship that was significant from the start, in this case because it was based on profound love from a very early age: “He was my first boyfriend in fifth grade. [*Laughter*] . . . And then we ended up—whatever, as fifth grade romances go, you move onto the next boy . . . and then in middle school, we started dating again. And again it was not physically intimate and [later] he confirmed that he was gay. . . . I never had such a deep love for a man or even a person outside of my family as I’ve had for him since fifth grade.”<sup>9</sup> Much to my astonishment, calls to and from her midwife punctuated my conversation with Emilia. Expecting her second child any day now (and maybe that day), Emilia was feeling some twinges that she wanted checked out. She was hoping Ronnie would arrive before the twinges turned into labor. He was scheduled to land at the closest airport that evening; the plans included his staying for the following week. Although he would not be in the delivery room with Emilia (who was allowed only two “guests” and had chosen her husband and her sister), Ronnie would be next in line to hold the baby.

Another young woman described a relationship forged even earlier, when she was four, which had its origin in physical similarities that the two girls built on and enhanced with new elements. In claiming—and then creating—physical likenesses, this young woman draws on an established element of kinship as evidence that these two people are predestined to have a relationship:<sup>10</sup> “I’ve known Tanya since kindergarten. And I don’t really know if we looked the same from the outside or we just decided to shift our appearances in the same way, but probably from like first or second grade on, we basically wore the same outfit. [*Laughter*] And we both had the same short brown curly hair. . . . No one could separate us or tell us apart.” This relationship remained central in Tanya’s life up through the time when I interviewed her as she was about to graduate from college.

Among those I interviewed some (but not all) of the men (and especially those in their forties and fifties) told origin stories about relationships forged through adversity; they mentioned less often than did women an immediate attraction. Peter Jones, for example, at first found Jonah, with whom he rode on the local volunteer ambulance, to be quiet and distant. One night, when Jonah had come over to Peter’s for barbecue, they got a callout. With enormous bravado and laughter, Peter described the seventy-mile-an-hour ambulance ride, with plates of fried chicken and coleslaw sliding around on their laps, as the event that cemented their relationship. Another man told of a relationship initiated through shared involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous: “We bonded in



that fellowship.” For both men and women, the origin stories—told and retold—created a collective memory, solidifying the bond they shared.

## Partners without the Romance

Meg Peters self-identifies as a lesbian (and has had only women partners); Linda Sandor self-identifies as heterosexual (and has had only male partners and is now married to a man). It is interesting (in this context) that Meg frequently uses the word “partner” in describing her relationship with Linda. However, when she does that, she does it to differentiate her relationship with Linda from her *romantic* partnerships because, Meg says, unlike romantic partnerships, her relationship with Linda gave so much and demanded so little. Meg explains with a story:

Last night, when I had child care, Linda said, “Go in my room, get in my bed, I’ll put on for you your favorite show,” which she knows, and then she made dinner and she brought it into the bed and let me eat in bed dinner without any—you know—without any of the kind of the weird stuff that can happen with partnerships, like “What are you going to do for me in return?” Like I don’t have a partner, let alone I don’t know that I’ve ever had a partner who would be that attentive, who’s ever been that attentive in my life.

As she talks, Meg makes clear that much as Linda and she are intensely close, and even though she gets into Linda’s bed, Linda is *not* a lover. To her, Linda is “better” in attentiveness than any romantic partner Meg has ever had. This relationship also, she says, lacks “the weird stuff” that can happen with sexual partnerships.<sup>11</sup> Meg is explicit about the absence of an erotic element even as she flirts with the idea of marriage to Linda: “If I weren’t a lesbian or if she were, we would be married. It’s like we often say, ‘We should just go get married,’ even though it’s not a romantic relationship. But, I feel like we share, and have shared, more about who we are and our life struggles and what’s in our hearts more than I think probably she shares with her husband. I also think it’s of a different level, also.”

I do not know whether Meg has had to make efforts to handle potentially erotic elements in her relationship with Linda (or vice versa). Other respondents do actively make the effort to “neuter” relationships that might have sexual potential. A recent college graduate when we spoke, Liz had an on-again, off-again flirtation with a classmate. Eventually, she decided that a platonic relationship with him was more important than sex with him. Although she says that “flirty” elements remain, she has essentially turned him into someone quite different:<sup>12</sup> “[Our relationship] has gotten to the point where it’s pretty clear if I get married he’s going to be the best man at my wedding. . . . This is a person I want to have around, to have my back for a long time, and I’m not going to

jeopardize that with sex.” This young woman clearly indicates that she believes there is a greater probability for disruption in “dating” relationships than in those of fictive kinship.

As the women and men I interviewed “do” fictive kinship, they sometimes imagine a future where they end up spending their lives together with this non-romantic partner.<sup>13</sup> As the typology indicates, the relationships are thus not only open-ended in their origin but the participants foresee the possibility of a long future of affiliation. Sonja Larson says this explicitly about Marsha, her “soul,” after having known her for forty-six years: “We often say that if we outlive our husbands, we could have a lot of fun living together and drinking Diet Coke and playing cards and all the stupid things we used to do when we were young.” Ruth Stern says she and Mandy Lord not only share the care of cats, but they are beginning to think about how they might have the privileges of family members vis-à-vis each other and what might bring about the opportunity to spend their later years together: “Lately we’ve been talking about contiguous condos. . . . We don’t have any plans to do this. . . . Twenty years from now, we’ll be almost eighty, which feels as if we might want to have made a plan.”<sup>14</sup>

Linda Sandor claims only one like-sibling bond. Meg Peters claims many because she is also bound to a group of women who constitute her family of choice.<sup>15</sup> Most of my respondents were more like Linda than Meg in identifying a single “soulmate.” However, several had more than one, suggesting that these relationships differ from partnerships also in not expecting monogamy (whether or not that expectation is more honored in the breach). In addition, because like-sibling bonds do not depend on the vows a partnership demands (e.g., going steady; saying “I do”), participants may be unaware of the absence of mutuality. I happened to interview one woman who explicitly named Clare Murray as being one of *her* like-family affiliates. Clare, however, had not included that woman as being among *her* fictive kin. I have no way of knowing how commonly these situations occurred among my respondents; nor do I have any way of knowing whether overt recognition would have been hurtful had it been exposed.

## Not “Just” Friends

When I ask Linda Sandor what differentiates her relationship with Meg Peters from her friendships, she hesitates. Linda is patently uncomfortable articulating the reason for the choice of one relationship over another. Of course, as is the case for kinship in general, fictive kinship *is* selective. It involves designating particular people for special attention and special affection. Other people in one’s social world are thereby demoted, placed on lower rungs of some mental social ladder. Of course, friendship also allows for differentiation through the

shifting designation of “best” friend. That designation, as anyone who has ever been in middle school knows all too well, can be hurtful to others. But “like family” is not even simply “best”; creating a lateral bond of fictive kinship involves placing someone in an entirely different category. This kind of positioning might be especially discomfiting to acknowledge because it is also not simply based in kinship; that would provide a ready-made, socially acceptable explanation for selectivity. Linda indicates such discomfort when she pauses, pauses some more, and then pauses again shortly after she begins to answer my question: “It’s indescribable in a way, it’s [pause] let’s see, constant, [pause] clear, unambiguous, nothing unresolved. . . . I have a few friends that I’m very close to, so it’s not like—it feels weird because it feels like I’m just saying I like her better and that’s not really what it is. I don’t know [pause], it’s something about the bond and I don’t even think it’s because we’ve been through so much together because at this point those old friends, we’ve been through a lot together too.” Again, later in the interview she expands on the nature of her tie to Meg, on the way that Meg knows her intimately and touches her soul: “[In] this book that I loved called *Sister of My Heart*, there’s this one scene where this woman is very despondent about something and the other woman is still in India. The despondent one is in the United States [and] the woman in India calls her [and] that kind of brings her back, because she knows what to say. That’s the only thing I can think of to describe how it feels.”<sup>16</sup>

Meg does not go literary on me when I ask her to describe what makes her relationship with Linda of such significance. Instead, she focuses on the ongoing reciprocity in a relationship built on trust, humor, a nonsexual physical intimacy, and emotional openness: “I’ll be there for her. . . . We’ve been through it all. . . . She’s cleaned up my vomit, I’ve cleaned up her vomit—I feel like we know each other through it all, there’s no secrets, there’s nothing shocking.”

Others also seek to explain how their like-sibling bonds differ from friendship.<sup>17</sup> One respondent is a bit more confused than Meg is about why she has a like-family relationship with one particular person—a man whose family is part of her current co-housing arrangement—and not someone else, when her life is full of rich relationships. She cites longevity and the circumstantial factors that kept them especially close; she acknowledges that their being young when they first became friends might have played a role in the formation of their eventual like-sibling bond. She also mentions an unknowable element when she says, “It is a mystery as to why you think that with some people and not with other people.”

Emilia Lyons, the woman about to give birth, also differentiated her relationship with Ronnie from the relationships she has with her friends. She says she has many friends she “loves dearly,” but that her relationship with Ronnie is different. She and her friends “don’t call each other and check in” in quite such a casual or constant way: “I’ll be like, ‘I’m just driving, just wanted to say

hey, or how you doing,’ or something silly and ridiculous.” Emilia continues to draw a contrast: “And I think the quality is that I would share things with him that I would not share with anybody else, and also to be able to call each other out on things that we see in each other or say, ‘Why do you?’ without getting defensive. Whereas I think in other friendships you can tend to be a little more reserved or conservative in how you respond to them. And we’ve always been very open.” Peter Jones similarly notes that it is in his relationship with Jonah that he is most open: “I have other friends, but I just wouldn’t confide [as I do] with Jonah.”

### A Critique of Friendship

Not only do the people I interviewed describe a fictive kinship as being different from friendship, but they also suggest that that connection provides a position from which to assess friendship itself. This is quite clear when Mandy Lord talks about how her relationships with Ruth Stern and with one other woman have unique qualities. She focuses on issues of accountability and trust:

Well, I can’t say exactly [what makes these two relationships different from other relationships,] but I can say it has to do with not judging each other but at the same time not letting each other get away with anything. . . . So if I do something that they think would represent poor parenting for instance, . . . they will call me on it, and I would expect them to. If I do something in my work life that they think is really shooting myself in the foot, they will say, “Hey Mandy! Don’t you understand you’re being idiotic?” And I trust them to do that and I do the same back. . . . I think there’s a recognition that we can trust each other in those ways.

In fact, for Mandy, it seems that trust extends still further: “I think . . . the best way I can tell you who is like family is that it’s the people who stay even when things are grim.” Ruth offers some of the same—and some different—explanations for why, from her perspective, the relationship between herself and Mandy is so much better than ordinary friendship: “We don’t annoy each other in the ways that other people annoy us. [And] we both take responsibility for our own decisions. . . . So, when we are sounding boards for each other, it’s with the understanding that whoever’s got to make the decision isn’t ever going to say, ‘But you said. . . .’ It’s never happened, and I think that’s really important.”

The young woman who turned her flirty friend into both a “best man” for her as-yet-nonexistent wedding, and a “crazy uncle” for her as-yet-nonexistent children, explains that the nature of their relationship meant that she did not have to try as hard to maintain the bond as she did in her friendships. In fact, she explains that although the two are not really very close (or not as close as

she is to some friends), she could turn to him in distress: “We don’t have heart-to-hearts constantly or bare our souls in the same way. It’s just a very comfortable, ‘I know you’ll be there, and I can call you at three in the morning and have a panic attack’ and you’ll be, like, ‘It’s going to be okay’ and that’s it, it doesn’t have to be dramatic. It’s safe. Very safe.”

Embedded in this comparison is a critique of the demands of ordinary friendships, which (at this relatively young age of her early twenties) this woman believes require “baring one’s soul.” Another young woman made a similar statement about the easiness of her fictive kinship in comparison with the stress of her ongoing friendships: “I feel, a lot of times when I’m hanging out with the people I consider my friends and even my good friends, I feel I need to be doing something with them, like we should be getting coffee, or getting lunch, going to a movie, or we should be actively doing something together. But with Joshua, I don’t have to be talking about anything; we just talk.” In short, like-sibling relationships are better than friendships because they offer greater ease and safety.

### **Paradoxically, Better Than Family**

Both Linda Sandor and Meg Peters find a parallel between how they feel in their relationship with each other and how they feel about their blood/legal kin. Other respondents also sometimes draw on a specific family position to explain the fictive-kin relationship, as when someone says, “She’s like the sister I never had.” Even so, my respondents almost invariably differentiate between the emotional components of their fictive-kin relationships and the emotional components of their relationships with the members of their blood/legal families. (In the next chapter I argue that other significant differences between these two sets of relationships exist as well that are relevant to the limits of fictive kinship. Here I am focusing on how these relationships are often defined as being “better” than are those with blood/legal kin.)

Linda likens Meg’s love to the unconditional love she got from her mother: “Meg is kind of like with my mom, where all I had to do is wake up in the morning and breathe and it’s like, ‘Whooo, I’m so glad you’re here, you’re alive.’” Yet, Linda does not consider Meg to be in other ways motherly toward her. And rather than likening her relationship with Meg to those she has with her sisters, Linda carefully distinguishes between her relationship with Meg and the complexities of her current sibling ties. Linda loves her older sister and, when we spoke, she was making extraordinary efforts to care for that sister, who had recently undergone major surgery. Admixed with the love and deep caring bond, Linda says she often senses that her sister is judging her. And again, later, Linda reiterated the difference between the relationship with Meg and the

relationships she has with her two sisters: “I would say that the relationships are similar but there’s parts that are easier [with Meg,] because with your growing-up family there’s weird histories, dynamics and things like that, and I would say there’s none of that with Meg. None.” It is important to stress here that what Linda is expressing is that whereas she counts on Meg to love her unconditionally, she does not count on the same from her sister. In this way Linda reverses the kind of expectations that the sociologists Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl (along with many others) believe are associated with each of the two sets of relationships of friendship and family, in which “love” is expected from family but not necessarily from friends.<sup>18</sup>

Meg’s description of the difference between her relationship with Linda and the one with her siblings is more straightforward than Linda’s description of the difference between her relationship with Meg and the one with *her* sisters. When I ask Meg whether she is as close to any of her siblings as she is to Linda, she responds, “No. No. No. No. No.” She then expands a bit, explaining that her older sister—with whom she has the same age difference as she does with Linda—was more like a mother than a sister or a friend and that although her sister might have taken care of Meg on occasion, the two of them never were as intimate as she is with Linda. (Recall also that Meg said she learned how to “do” family through her intimate nonfamily relationships and that that learning enabled her to repair some of her kin ties.)

Although Linda and Meg both make comparisons—to partners, to mothers, to sisters—neither woman puts a single label or specific family position on the relationship: the two of them are not partners, or siblings, or mother and child. And when they do make comparisons, often the like-sibling affiliation is preferred: Linda is more attentive than any partner Meg ever had; for Linda, Meg is easier to deal with than either of her sisters and can easily hold a candle to a loving mother.

Others also make comparisons that acknowledge the density of blood/legal family relationships and something more straightforward in their like-sibling bonds.<sup>19</sup> Emilia Lyons talks about the complexity, hurt and tension (perhaps what Linda called “weirdness”) that exist when she interacts with her sister and the absence of those qualities when she interacts with Ronnie, her erstwhile elementary school sweetheart: “My relationship with my sister is very complicated [and] there’s a lot of pain . . . whereas with Ronnie I don’t have that pain. . . . [My sister and I] had more times in our lives where our relationship has been strained, whereas my relationship with Ronnie has never been strained.” Whether or not Emilia is romanticizing her interactions with Ronnie, what is important here is how she identifies it as steering clear of the intense emotional complications that almost invariably develop among siblings who grow up together.

## The Nature of Obligations

Long ago the sociologist Lillian Rubin made the frequently repeated statement that “friends *choose* to do what kin are *obliged* to do.”<sup>20</sup> And in one sense, of course, she is right. However, a statement like this discredits actions within families while elevating those among friends when, in fact, some combination of obligation and choice can occur in *both* kinds of relationships. When my brother is sick, I call out of a sense of family obligation. But I also choose to do so because I care about him. When my friend is sick, I choose to bring over dinner, but I also feel it as an obligation because she needs help. Seeking to disentangle motivations is as fruitless as trying to disentangle free will from structural constraints.

At the same time, it is quite clear that the partners in like-sibling relationships evaluated the obligations in those relationships differently from the way they evaluated the obligations toward kin. The major difference was that (as Lillian Rubin would guess) they located the genesis for the obligations of like-sibling bonds in choice itself. Again, take Mandy Lord and Ruth Stern as an example. Mandy explained how trusting Ruth to do right by her had an entirely different valence from trusting her brother: “I can trust my brother because he’s obligated in some way because he’s my brother, whereas I can trust Ruth because she’s Ruth and she knows me. And I think that’s a separate thing, that’s a dividing thing.” In short, for Mandy, obligation rooted in a normative expectation to respond is different from obligation rooted in intense, personal knowledge of another’s needs and desires. Another woman articulated a similar kind of difference between family and fictive kinship: “If one of my aunts who I’m not close with needed me, I would be there because of obligation but I wouldn’t choose to [be there]. You know what I mean? I think there’s a difference between people that you choose and people that you don’t.”

Several women reported on like-sibling bonds with people considerably older than themselves. When I asked one of them how her relationship with an older couple (she refers to them here as “friends”) felt in comparison with her relationship with her parents, she laughed and then responded: “I’m indebted to [my parents]; I need to take care of them. It so happens that not only do my friends not need to be taken care of, but I don’t feel any sort of debt to them in any way. [My relationship with this couple] feels like a more equal relationship than with my parents and also, it’s lighter, it’s just a lighter relationship.” Another young woman also explained that she rooted the responsibility for her like-sibling affiliate, Amy, in choice and the one to her mother in obligation:

I think the thing about any person that you are choosing to have a family-like bond with versus somebody you actually have one with, there’s a different kind of obligation. . . . I can recognize that when it comes to [my mother] asking me

to do things, sometimes the reason I do them is out of the sense of family obligation and not *truly* wanting to. And I feel like with people like Amy the difference is that it's not the same obligation. And sometimes it's not obligation at all, like when she wants to talk to me. . . . As an example, I might ask my mom to do something where I know she's going to do it because of obligation, and I know that's not something that would enter into my relationship with Amy because we're not family to begin with.

Circular and tautological as her explanation is, this woman makes an odd kind of sense when she draws a distinction between obligation that feels like obligation and obligation that feels like choice.

Finally, for some respondents, the fact of choice without normative expectations meant that like-sibling bonds were less likely to prove unsatisfactory. As one woman put it, when talking about a woman who was “like a mother” to her and “like a grandmother” to her daughter, “If it's biological or legal family, we imbue that with a relationship, and we have expectations of it that sometimes are met or sometimes not met [whereas with her] it's all a gift—she can't disappoint.”

In short, relationships with fictive kin do not carry the normative obligations that blood/legal kin relationships carry. Nevertheless, something that resembles obligation *is* there: one woman expects her like-family affiliate to take very good care of her cats; one woman listens when her like-sibling affiliate needs to discuss some issue. In each case, the fact that this is obligation assumed out of choice rather than social norms makes gestures—of love, support, advice and care—appear that much more valuable.

The sociologists Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl write about “suffusion” as a way to signify that in the modern world personal relationships that might have previously been thought of as either family or friendship now share qualities of the other.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, they argue that our personal relationships have begun to move away from a single pole of being *either* friends or family. I return more fully to this point in the conclusion of the next chapter. For now, I suggest that what they call “suffusion” does seem to be happening in the like-sibling bonds I describe here. Yet I also suggest that the concept of “suffusion” is appropriate only *if* we begin our analysis by assuming that the bonds have developed out of friendship. As we have seen, fictive kinship is often differentiated from friendship from the very beginning. And even if friendship is the starting point, eventually these relationships exist on a different plane.<sup>22</sup> These like-sibling bonds are valued because the parties are unique to each other; they are not family and they are not “just” friends. Moreover, when talking about obligation to like-sibling affiliates, my respondents often suggest that these relationships are not fully “suffused” (in Pahl and Spencer's terms), because if they were based in the obligation of family ties, the like-sibling relationships



would lose some of their value. The obligation they recognize remains rooted in choice.

## Combining Worlds

### Integrating Friends and Fictive Kin

Peter Jones says that his bond with Jonah is special among his non-kin relationships. However, he does not keep that relationship separate from those others. Not only were he and Jonah part of a larger crew of volunteer ambulance drivers when they originally met, but they now often socialize in the company of the other EMTs. Other respondents also integrated their fictive kin into their broader networks of friends (and, as I will discuss further next, family).

Some people make efforts to bring together these various elements of their life. Karin Olson, a professor in Madison, Wisconsin, has a close group of friends around her own age. She is also very close with Doris, an older woman who has no relatives nearby. For years, Karin included Doris in celebrating Thanksgiving with her friendship group, especially when she was hosting the meal. For her part, Doris had opened her house on more than one occasion to Karin and her family when they lost power during a storm. Thus, Doris soon knew Karin's friends, and Karin knew Doris's. Karin says that these days, the feeling of being like family is enshrined by her son Matthew's calling Doris "Auntie Doris."

In these examples, geography is a necessary precondition for the integration of fictive kin and friends. However, it turns out not to be sufficient. Some people keep the parties in their like-sibling bonds separate from their other associations. This differentiation might have to do with the unique nature of a bond that—because it was formed at a certain point of time in one's life or in conjunction with a distinctive activity—has no place in the context of one's other sociable relationships. In one such example, although Ruth Stern and Mandy Lord both live in Washington, D.C., Ruth has no relationship with the bulk of Mandy's friends, many of whom Mandy chose for friendship because, like her, they are also single mothers. And Mandy does not know the people who are most important to Ruth, many of whom are friends Ruth established in her new professional life of full-time employment for a web design company.

If living near one another does not necessarily mean overlapping worlds of friends and fictive kin, living far apart makes the integration of the two kinds of relationships less likely and, quite probably, less desirable. When Sonja Larson and her soul, Marsha, were younger and embedded in the same social world of a college dormitory, their friends all knew one another. Now that Sonja and Marsha live across the country from each other, they have entirely separate social circles. Because they see each other so infrequently, when they get together

these days, they want to *be* together and thus they are unlikely to introduce each other to their “local” friends.

### Integrating Family and Fictive Kin

As was the case for the intermingling of fictive kin and friends, among my respondents I found a range of styles of dealing with interactions between fictive kin and blood/legal kin. Some of the respondents I spoke with had integrated like-sibling affiliates into their kin networks, and some had not.<sup>23</sup> Both approaches were true for Linda vis-à-vis Meg’s several families. When I asked Linda whether she had anything to do with Meg’s ex-partner Joanna (who is the genetic mother of the two girls, having given her eggs to Meg), Linda responded with a definitive “No.” Moreover Linda has nothing to do with Meg’s other set of “fictive kin”—the “families we choose” relationships Meg maintains in Santa Cruz. However, Linda does have a relationship with Meg’s former in-laws. They stay upstairs with Linda when they visit Meg and the girls; the in-laws call Linda when they are worried about what is happening downstairs.

Linda’s family is also unevenly integrated into her like-sibling bond with Meg. Linda’s daughter, Rose, grew up loving Meg, but the two have been less close since Rose went off to college and Meg’s life became so much more difficult. Although Linda’s husband helps out when there is a crisis downstairs, he and Meg are friendly rather than intimate. Relationships that are even more complex are present between Meg and some members of Linda’s natal family. When she was alive, Linda’s mother had always invited Meg to holiday celebrations. Thus, both of Linda’s sisters know Meg well. Recently, Linda’s younger sister has become jealous of the bond between Meg and Linda, and Linda is no longer comfortable during occasions that include both her sister and Meg. Linda explains: “[My younger sister] wrote me this card out of the blue. . . . And she writes this weird stuff on the card: ‘I hope someday you will love me as much as you love Meg and you love your cats.’” By way of contrast, in another case, a relationship that began between two women gradually extended to the partners of each of them so that all four adults now have a strong bond: “It took a time for [us] to integrate our partners. Now I would say [all four of us] are sort of all really in a very family-like relationship.”

### The Language of Family

Even as the people with whom I spoke differentiate between their feelings toward their like-sibling affiliates and their feelings toward the members of their blood/legal families, respondents repeatedly revert to the *language of family* to describe fictive-kin relationships. Linda Sandor knew what the interview was going to be about, and she had prepared a gift of a framed postcard of

1940s bathing beauties dancing in a mock chorus line, with the subtitle, “Friends are the family we choose for ourselves.” As we talked, she expanded on why she thought of Meg Peters as being “like family”; that is, she provided evidence of just how significant this relationship had become. That evidence included three items: strong feelings, and both the material and the emotional support Meg had given her over the years. Once again, words almost fail, but she conveys her meaning clearly: “We’re like family just ‘cause of the way we feel about each other, I mean we’re—I mean there’s so many things that she’s done for me over the years—financial help and just emotional support over the years, you know, through all kinds of hard times. I guess when my mom died was the biggest one.”

To say that someone is “like family” covers a multitude of sins: everyone experiences family differently. The phrase thus means something different almost every time it is used. To be sure, the like-sibling bonds share some common features: they are all between adults; none now involves co-residence; each started as an open-ended relationship; none relied on organizational sponsorship. Yet, as the evidence here has shown, like-sibling bonds also vary. Some involve only people of similar ages. Some cross gender lines.<sup>24</sup> Some cross differences in sexual orientation. Some bring together only two individuals, while others involve couples who bond with a single individual or with both members of another couple. And some are clearly and openly mutual in the sense that each member of the bond names the other as someone with whom they have a like-family relationship, while others are not.

The content, intensity and dynamics of these relationships vary as well. In fact, Clare Murray, who wants to give the “richness of extended and expanded family” to her children, and who was named by people she did not name as being fictive kin, began our interview by asking what kind of “like-family” relationship I wanted to discuss because, she said, she had different kinds with different people: “When I say that my relationship with Natalie transcends friendship and my relationship with Stephanie and her family transcends friendship I mean different things.” Regardless of these differences, all of my respondents (by definition) were able and eager to say of at least one relationship with a person who was not kin that it stood out from the other relationships in their lives as having special qualities, a special meaning: this relationship was “like family”; it “transcended friendship.” That is, despite the variations among them, for each person interviewed, a like-sibling bond exists as something distinctive and special. Yet, distinctive and special as these bonds were, they often changed over time, and they had both private limits and public limits. I turn to these issues next.

## 2

### **The Limits of Like-Sibling Bonds**

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Because I asked about relationships that were currently important to my respondents, I heard little about relationships that might have once felt like family but no longer did. Still, I did hear some discussion of change. Some like-sibling bonds attenuated; some ruptured more dramatically; and one woman I interviewed lost a like-family affiliate to death. In addition, some like-sibling bonds transmuted into something that might have been less balanced than had been the case before and were now marked by care delivery on one side and care receiving on the other. Clearly, each of these shifts can—and do—happen within relationships with family members.<sup>1</sup> These shifts also happen with friends.<sup>2</sup> Yet, my respondents revealed distinctive features of these changes in relationships with fictive kin.

I start below with what is, perhaps, the least complicated and least painful of these changes, that of attenuation. I then move on to ruptures. While dealing with changing relationships, I show how these processes differ from similar processes in relationships with the members of one's nuclear or extended family. The second section of the chapter moves from issues of change to issues concerning the limits of like-sibling bonds as these become relevant first vis-à-vis the public and then in comparison with blood/legal kinship. I then turn to the special case of caregiving. I explore how my respondents evaluated their actions when they found themselves providing care for fictive kin. In the final section, I return to the broader theme of how like-sibling bonds differ in their enactment from the more well-known relationships of friendship and family.

## Change over Time

### Attenuated Ties

Beth Moretti intentionally sought to create for herself, her husband, and her children what seemed to her to have been natural for her parents growing up in the old North End of Boston: a close-knit community of people raising children together, with the elders acting like aunts and uncles to the children and the children feeling like cousins with one another. As an adult Beth has now been party to two relationships that she described to me as having like-family elements. In one case, the conflicts that arose between the two couples were sufficient to loosen the bond; in the other case, the adults changed their interests as their children grew so that the two couples began to follow different paths. Beth has allowed each of these attenuations to transpire.

The first relationship grew from a significant tie between Beth's husband and his closest childhood friend; when each of the two men became part of a couple, they included their partners in their intimate bond. Each was the "best man" at the other's wedding, and the two couples frequently traveled together. Hoping to mark the relationship as having significance for their children, they used kin terms: "We had similar-age kids, and we always talked to our children about them as Uncle Brad and Aunt Julie, and they talked to their children about us as Aunt Beth and Uncle Andrew, and the children always referred to each other as cousins." When "Uncle Brad" and "Aunt Julie" converted to being Jehovah's Witnesses, the relationships among the four adults altered. Beth's pauses show her discomfort with the story she is telling: "Brad and Julie became Jehovah's Witnesses [*pause*] and they didn't necessarily have a problem with us, they didn't try to convert us, it was pretty much okay, but the problem came into play more as our children became adults and [*pause*] the husband in the couple doesn't necessarily approve of the 'worldliness' with which we've raised our children. [*Pause*] So we have fallen out of that at this point."

Even before this like-family bond dissolved, Beth was trying to create on another front the intimacy within a cohesive group she idealized from her parents' generation. This time she sought affiliation with neighbors in her rural town of Bridport, Vermont. Although they did not use the language of family, the two couples raised their children together: "It's interesting that my children will talk about Sally as their second mother . . . because she's always been part of their life, and she would have been an aunt had we used that language because it's that type of relationship."

Close as they had been when the children were younger, Beth feels that this relationship lacked whatever it was that had created the depth and longevity of her parents' affiliations. She believes that the greater dissimilarity in backgrounds, the less intense period of living close together, and the shorter period of knowing each other might account for these differences and allowed a

growing distance to develop. Beth is sad about the alterations of these bonds, but she has accepted them; she is not making efforts to hold on to something that is gone. She is rarely in touch with the Jehovah's Witness couple; she and the Bridport couple are now cordial but no longer intimate.

### Ruptured Bonds

Attenuation carries its own sadness; ruptures can break one's heart. Clare Murray told of a relationship she had shortly after she graduated from college. She characterizes the abrupt end of that relationship as being like the end of a marriage: "There was some discord between us . . . and when the relationship ended, it felt like a divorce to me. That's what it felt like. And we hadn't been romantically involved, but it felt like a divorce because our way of being with each other had been so intimate." Another respondent told me a long story about the rupture of a like-sibling bond that, for him, had offered "friendship and support . . . seemingly without any expectations and demands in return." He also described his relationship in concrete terms that indicated just why it had felt "like family": "[She] was the person in Los Angeles who knew when my birthday was, who had met my parents, who helped me through the crumbling last days of my relationship with my ex-partner. I was the person who helped her move her things up to Berkeley for her sabbatical year, who went hiking with her on her birthday." The dramatic conclusion of this relationship—an argument over a departmental hiring decision—left this man bereft: "In the end, I am okay; my life goes on. But it is emptier. [I have] a smaller network of support and exchange."

Both attenuated and ruptured bonds caused pain. Of course, this might also be the case in friendship, although one would guess that the lesser intensity of those relationships might mean a lesser degree of anguish when they end.<sup>3</sup> My respondents did not draw that distinction but they did draw a distinction between the maintenance of fictive-kin relationships and an analogous process in kin relationships. This distinction implies that kin relationships can be put "on hold," while relationships with fictive kin require work to avoid attenuation. One young woman described the difference this way: "With my cousins, like, they're my cousins, so they're always going to be my cousins even if we didn't talk for ten, fifteen years. . . . But there's definitely a little bit more of like work that has to happen in, like, my relationship with Noah. We're going to have to put in a little bit of time to, like, remember we have this connection. . . . And so, it is a choice and in some ways it is performative." Similarly, Clare Murray spoke of allowing a distant relationship with her brother to develop while nurturing ties with fictive kin:

I'm not very close to my brother actually. I never want to be estranged from my brother, but I have a limited amount of time and emotional energy in my life

and I want to focus that time and emotional energy on the relationships that I find most rewarding, and my relationship with my brother is not one of those. So, like I said, I'm not estranged from him, I'm open to the possibility that at a different stage in my life that relationship will become important in a different way, but my sort of, my people, are here, you know, and those are the people I'm investing in.

In short, on the one hand, blood/legal kin remain kin without effort, even when the bonds feel loose; on the other hand, fictive kinship requires practice to ensure that attenuation does not transform the bond itself.<sup>4</sup>

The death of a partner in a like-sibling bond might also be experienced differently from the death of kin. When Naomi, an older woman Mary Fischer considered to be “like family,” died, Mary—who identifies Naomi in various ways—was entirely grief-stricken: “I just cried for days, it was like when my *grandmother* died, I just was beside myself because I really considered her to be one of my closest *friends* in the world, even though she was eighty years old. It didn't matter with her. She was like my *sister* [emphasis added].” Mary was unable to attend the funeral, but she sent Naomi's daughter a card and a hand-knitted prayer shawl. In the months that followed, she tried to maintain contact with Naomi's daughter. Initially, the daughter was communicative, but she soon stopped responding. Mary reflects on what the loss of contact has meant: “It's so strange to have gone from this really intimate, loving, sisterly kind of relationship to just *nothing*. . . . It's really, really upsetting that that's how this all ended because there's absolutely no closure to it. . . . It's like I had this big sister who was snatched from me and no way to find out anything about anything associated with her at all.” Insightfully, Mary recognizes that because this was a like-sibling bond—with what she called a “dotted line” (rather than the solid line of a family tree) connecting her to the other people in Naomi's life—the possibility of a void rather than continuity was ever-present: “You need to have at least this dotted line to some of the people in their life. And if someone decides to sever the dotted line, it's gone. . . . It's surreal that it's gone.” Mary Fischer thus brings to the foreground the peculiar nature of fictive kinships as relationships that can exist outside of the routine arrangements of work, leisure, friendships and family. When the partner of a like-sibling bond is not integrated into (or nested within) one's ongoing life, death can produce its own kind of absolute rupture—grief without the “normal” accoutrements of shared rituals of mourning and, perhaps, reminders at significant moments such as a birthday or day of remembrance. That is, because like-sibling bonds have no formal context, when they are severed, they leave no trace except in the hearts and minds of those left behind.

## The Formal Limits of Like-Sibling Bonds

The lack of context matters in yet another way. Because fictive kin have no institutionalized position and no “name,” there is no way to mark publicly the intensity of loss. When very close kin die, we change status: we become orphans, widows, widowers. We can explain that we have to miss work to attend the funeral of a sister or uncle.<sup>5</sup> However—and this is true of friendship as well—the loss of fictive kin is unlikely to be acknowledged by others.<sup>6</sup> Some of my friends and I experienced this for ourselves when we spent months caring for Anna, a mutual friend of us all.<sup>7</sup> During those months, we found that not being family left us with little standing. Colleagues made few alterations in the demands they placed on us. Some other friends and family members were sympathetic, but some chided us for being unavailable and distracted. And, at the memorial service following Anna’s death, the president of our college addressed his formal condolences to Anna’s blood/legal kin, none of whom had participated in any significant way in those months of care. Three weeks after the service, I ran into a former colleague who said that he wanted to acknowledge Anna’s death with a card of sympathy. Did I know to whom it should be sent? When I responded that he could send it to me, he missed my meaning, assuming that I meant that I would forward it to her family. When I tried to explain that I would keep the card myself, he again misunderstood.

Even more so than the members of my (not so merry) band of friends who cared for Anna, Meg Peters needs official recognition of her relationship with Linda Sandor because Linda accompanies her on those occasions when Meg seeks public assistance for the ongoing care of her two difficult daughters. Under those circumstances it is not just a kindness to Meg, but of vital consequence, that Linda be given appropriate respect. Yet, as Meg is well aware, there is no language sufficient to persuade others:

When Linda came to these meetings with the school district deciding are they going to pay for my daughter to be in residential placement . . . I’m saying to them, “She’s the godmother, she lives upstairs.” . . . There’s not a label that explains how well she knows my daughter. I mean she was there at my daughter’s birth, she has seen my daughter trying to kill herself, she has seen my daughter through everything, and yet when she’s speaking at this meeting and she’s saying, “You’re not describing Laramie correctly,” they’re able to go, “Well, you’re just the friend, or the neighbor, or the godmother.” . . . And I can say, “Linda’s my best friend” and it does not describe the intensity, the degree to which she makes sacrifices for my children and me. And what word describes that—partner? Mother?

Thoughtful as she is, Ruth Stern recognizes the irony of using a like-family metaphor to describe her bond with Mandy Lord, because her blood/legal



family is so very disappointing. At the same time, Ruth knows the term might be the only way to indicate to others just how significant this relationship is: “Mandy and I talk and say we’re family, but by god we’re not really. But the label could be helpful to present to the world.”

Those respondents who provided ongoing care for fictive kin found it useful to complete official paperwork to present themselves as legitimate to health-care proxies. As one woman said, without that paperwork “[the hospital staff] couldn’t tell me anything. They wouldn’t be able to tell me whether they gave that medication or whether she saw a doctor today.” Moments of care like these were at the forefront of the concerns gay men and lesbians had about recognition for their relationships before they could legally designate each other as domestic partner or spouse. Unless they have taken care of this issue in advance, people in like-sibling bonds still lack authority at critical moments. They also lack any way to refer to the other in a manner that acknowledges significance at less critical moments such as introductions at a social event. Emilia Lyons uses some version of “best friend,” silly as it sounds, when, as a thirty-five-year-old woman about to give birth to her second son, she introduces Ronnie to people who do not know him; on other occasions, she turns him into something “like” a sibling: “It depends who it is. If it’s my husband’s family here or something, I would say, ‘This is my best friend in the world, Ronnie.’ And that’s something that I feel almost is so childish. [*Laughter*] Or I’ll even say, ‘This is Ronnie, he’s like my brother.’ I’ll qualify what he means in my life.”

### **The Private (Family) Limits of Fictive Kinship**

Discussions with respondents reveal obvious, and telling, limits to the ways in which they enact their like-sibling bonds. As the evidence has suggested already, along with friends, fictive kin might often be preferred over family members for intimacy, adventure, and simple fun. But not only are some significant activities like holiday celebrations reserved for blood/legal kin, but blood/legal kin have pride of place when it comes to making decisions about the long-term, financial well-being of children through inheritance and are also taken into consideration when it comes to making decisions about guardianship for dependent children. Moreover, family stands in a different relationship to care than either friends or fictive kin, both vis-à-vis the public world *and* in people’s private beliefs about what is appropriate.

#### **Celebrations, Guardianship, and Inheritance**

Like many contemporary middle-class adult Americans, most of my respondents lived a great distance from other members of their families of origin. As a result, they shared many holidays with friends and fictive kin rather than with

the members of their family. Nevertheless, when blood/legal kin expected their presence on a special occasion, my respondents almost invariably acceded to this request.<sup>8</sup> Sonja Larson, for example, adores her former college roommate, Marsha. However, both women turn to recognized family when it comes to significant holidays: “Marsha would celebrate the holidays with her family and their kids and, there’s things like that. We probably don’t get together for Thanksgiving or Christmas or those kinds of special holidays or occasion. Family ritual was our model too. We went to my grandmother’s house for Thanksgiving, and my mom’s sister and her kids would go, and it was just what we did, year after year after year. And Christmas was always about family. . . . Being with family is kind of what you’re supposed to do.”

Alexandra Martel’s like-sibling bond is with Amy, a considerably older woman; that bond, she says, is considerably more intimate than the ones she has with her own sister and mother. Yet, Alexandra, who is now in her mid-thirties, explains that although she would like to respond affirmatively to an invitation from Amy for Christmas, she would have to turn it down. She says that doing so indicates something important: “I would say, ‘Amy, I don’t think I can do it and I think you know why,’ and she would say, ‘Yeah, okay.’ . . . I think she definitely understands that for me, this idea, like, you have certain obligations to your family that are irreversible . . . and were I to deny those things that would say something about my character.”

Holidays provide a ritual occasion to re-create the significance of ascribed kinship.<sup>9</sup> Obligations usually go from children to parents: the younger generation travels “over the river and through the woods” to celebrate those important moments. Inheritance, on the other hand, goes from parents to children; it is a way that people ensure the future well-being of their progeny. Here too, as the scholarship on this topic would predict, my respondents privileged blood/legal family over their fictive kin.<sup>10</sup> In fact, when I talked with Linda Sandor about inheritance, she became quite indignant at the mere implication that she might do anything other than leave her money to her daughter: “I’d leave it to Rose, oh god, yes.” On the other side of this relationship, Meg Peters’s daughters are *her* only heirs.

Linda and Meg are not the only duo with like-sibling bonds in which the *like* became prominent when it came to the issue of inheritance. Mandy Lord plans to leave all her worldly goods to her daughter, and Mandy has made her brother the executor of her will. For Ruth Stern, who has no children, the like-sibling bond with Mandy was more prominent when it came to her heirs. Yet Mandy was not the sole beneficiary of Ruth’s will. Ruth still believes she should leave something to her sister even though their relationship has been so fraught and so limited: “I’ve already made Mandy the beneficiary in my work-related insurance policy. I have also left something to my little sister, whom I feel I owe something to for providing me with some measure of biological kin.”

Many people I interviewed—and even those who were well into middle age (if not well beyond that)—had not drawn up their wills; they seemed to know that their money would go to their own children. As a woman in her fifties with multiple like-sibling bonds said, when I pointed that out, “Yeah, there again, there’s another one of those distinguishing lines [between like-family and family]. Because it’s not like I’m not leaving my house and my possessions to my friends. I’m leaving them to my children.”

Expectations about what might be passed on by fictive kin also differed from what one might expect to be passed on by family. Mary Fischer is clear that although she would like some token by which to remember Naomi, the older woman who died recently, she does not expect to be the recipient of a large share of the estate. As she thinks about this issue, she clearly differentiates between blood/legal family and fictive kin in what is owed to each: “I think their money would go to their children specifically. [Our relationship] is definitely familial, but when it comes to something like that, I think there is that sense of responsibility to your blood relatives. . . . I think there’s maybe that tradition of you take care of your blood family before you take care of other people. That’s kind of how it’s drilled into my head.”

Guardianship for minor children seemed less likely than inheritance to go exclusively to blood/legal family. As we will see, parents introduced other concerns, such as the financial and emotional well-being of their kin and their children’s attachment to a particular place, when making these decisions. But parents’ comments about this issue suggest both that kin were considered first and that choosing someone other than kin required what the sociologist Janet Finch would call a “legitimate excuse.”<sup>11</sup>

Linda and Samuel Sandor had never drawn up legal guardianship for their daughter, Rose; in that case, as they (both lawyers) must have known, were something to happen to them, care would have remained within the family. The situation for Meg Peters’s children is more explicit. Meg conceived her daughters with donor sperm while she was living in a lesbian partnership. Joanna, Meg’s partner at that time, provided the eggs but was then, and has largely since remained, uninterested in being a parent to these children even if she does care for them from time to time—as she was doing on the weekend I visited. Over the years, Meg has relied on emotional and practical help from other sources: Linda and her husband and the members of her “families we choose” community in Santa Cruz. Yet none of the people in these significant relationships would have legal responsibility for the children were something to happen to Meg. Rather, this would go to a blood/legal family member—Joanna’s sister. Meg offers an account that openly acknowledges that her legal status conflicts with her daily practices: “At this stage, it’s my ex-partner’s sister [who would get the children] only because Joanna didn’t want to be that person and asked that it be her sister and I agreed. . . . She wanted it to stay in the

biological family and my in-laws did too, so I said okay even though in the reality of everything else it's Linda. So, the legal paperwork [about guardianship] is not consistent with our life."

However, guardianship did not always remain within the family, and fictive kin were often considered appropriate, even when these decisions were not mutual. In one of several such cases, Sonja Larson and her husband had denoted her like-sibling affiliate Marsha and her husband as the people who would have responsibility for the Larson children when they were minors: "If something had happened to my husband and me, Marsha and Jim would have been better caregivers for our boys than my sisters—their life circumstance would allow them to do that. My older sister was single and struggling financially for a while and would have done it willingly. But I don't know if that would have been good, and my younger sister wasn't in a place in her life where she could have done it." Sonja justifies her decision with reference both to what Marsha and her husband could offer at the time (they were quite wealthy; they had a stable marriage) and to what her own family could not (they were neither stable nor wealthy). However, Sonja did not reveal this decision to her sisters: "I talked to my mom about it and she thought it would really hurt their feelings, so I didn't tell them." Subterfuge like this reminds us that keeping the peace is important; Sonja does not openly challenge the expectation that blood/legal kin get priority.

Beth Moretti had also assigned guardianship to fictive kin. As does Sonja Larson, Beth Moretti feels a need to explain why she and her husband made this decision rather than turning to family: "Sally and Bill . . . would have had legal guardianship. . . . My sister at the time was single and we didn't feel like it was a burden that we would put on her, and the *main* reason that it ultimately came down to was we felt like this is where the children had grown up . . . and we felt like it was more important for them to have that stability of place." Even as she acknowledges the importance of continuity, Beth asserts the central significance of blood/legal kin, as people who would always be there for her children: "Our families were so deeply woven into their lives that they would still be woven into their lives, so we put a certain value on a sense of place." Beth Moretti also acknowledges that the decision to place guardianship with neighbors was "a problem" for her family. In short, with issues like the location of holiday celebrations, inheritance, and guardianship of minor children, when decisions had to be made, blood/legal family members were often given priority; when they were not, explanations were offered and, sometimes, uneasiness remained.

## The Special Case of Care

In those cases in which the like-sibling bond included significant age gaps, caregiving often became not just a future concern, but a daily fact.<sup>12</sup> Several

examples help frame the issues that emerge. These examples show that respondents believe not only that family care is the best care, but also that family members have an ethical obligation to care that is not necessarily shared by fictive kin or friends.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, respondents not only accord family members the power or right to make decisions about care, but also accord them the moral authority to have those decisions prevail.

As we were tying up our interview, Angela Jansen, a married woman in her fifties, with two college-age children, introduced something new: “I don’t know how much more time you have, but the other thing is there is one other person that I do consider to be like family.” Reassuring her that I had all the time in the world, Angela allowed this story to unfold. Having helped through the church at the funeral of an elderly neighbor’s husband ten years earlier, Angela found herself feeling responsible for that neighbor’s well-being. Originally, Angela and her husband simply kept an eye on Dorothy—making sure her driveway was plowed, bringing up her mail, and inviting her for Sunday night dinners. Gradually Angela developed a more intimate relationship with this neighbor. Eventually she was drawn into caregiving. In taking on this kind of care, Angela fits well into patterns (described both among my respondents and in the scholarship) that show that non-kin caregivers step in to offer support for the elderly, especially in those situations where neither a child nor a partner is present.<sup>14</sup> In other ways, Angela does not fit the demographic profile of non-kin caregivers: although like most she is female, she herself is neither single nor elderly, and before she offered care, her relationship to Dorothy had already been defined as being “like family.”<sup>15</sup>

Now that Dorothy has moved into an assisted-living facility, Angela’s practical responsibilities are limited. However, she continues to have a significant social and emotional role. When asked what she does for Dorothy, she responded: “Mostly just visit, take her shopping when she needs to go, but mostly it’s just to be there, to remind her why she’s so important.” Angela then immediately explained that because Dorothy has her own family, she believed that she should not be the one making decisions about Dorothy’s care.

For a brief period, when Dorothy was first in a hospital, Angela had secondary power of attorney; she thought that without a legal claim, the doctors and nurses would not provide her with information or listen to her, reminding us that like-sibling bonds have little public standing. As soon as Dorothy was once again able to make her own decisions, Angela eagerly gave up that right; she wants the responsibility to return to blood/legal family: “I asked to be taken off again because . . . I feel like her son is the family.”

“The family” has thus become the proper “should” when it comes to the obligation to care. Angela thinks that Dorothy’s son *should* “drop everything [and] come here”—that he *should* act like “more of a family.”<sup>16</sup> Angela also backs off from her condemnation, acknowledging that she has “never had that situation,

so who am I to judge.” Yet, having made the earlier statement, she cannot undo it. For Angela, family has obligations and responsibilities; family has an ethical obligation to care.

Other respondents also suggested that family was preferred in serious cases. Like Angela in relation to Dorothy, Rachel White was helping to care for an older woman—her daughter’s piano teacher—who had become increasing “like family” as they bonded over their shared interests, shared religion, and shared love for Rachel’s daughter. Because the piano teacher—Joan—had no relatives close by, once she became frail, Rachel was often on call. However, even if she accepts being on call, Rachel, like Angela, places ultimate responsibility on the blood/legal family. She said making decisions about care had still never gotten to a point where she felt uncomfortable and that it would have “if Joan didn’t have her kids.”

What respondents say about why family is preferred tells us much about how they understand the meaning of both family itself and their like-sibling bonds. Let us return to Angela and her care for her older neighbor, Dorothy. When I asked Angela how she felt about making decisions when she had power of attorney, she peppered her answer with evasive words: “Sometimes I feel like it’s not my right in some ways to make some of these decisions—especially anything that’s related to financial which her son is covering and whatever. So, it’s sometimes an internal conflict. . . . Sometimes I feel that her son is leaning sometimes a lot more on me than he would if he was living down the street. . . . I’m here and I’m right next door, and it’s sometimes easy for him to just say, ‘Oh, let me know what’s happening.’”

When I asked her to be more specific about her meaning (to avoid the evasions), Angela referred to the issue of money that, it turns out, looms large in this account: “It’s not my money. He’s supporting her and . . . it was a huge financial change [for her to move into the assisted living facility] and how could I suggest that to just someone?” In using the phrase “to just someone,” Angela is creating distance: she is *not* family. Moreover, Angela suggests that because money is involved—and because she can be “overruled at any second” if she offers an opinion—she *chooses* “not to get too invested” in any particular decision at any particular point in time. Clearly, she uses these distancing mechanisms to make her peace with, and perhaps occasionally curb, her level of involvement in (and quite possibly her emotions with respect to) the care she offers Dorothy. Clearly, as well (and the language of “overruled” implies as much), something else is at stake here.

To be sure, money is a touchy subject. For Angela money seems to be not just touchy but a stand-in for something profound. More specifically, as Angela talks it becomes clear that money is the stand-in for the kinship bond that provides not only the ethical obligation to care but also the right and authority to make the tough decisions. As noted earlier, money remains within a family,

passed from generation to generation as gifts and inheritance; that money carries its own set of obligations and rights. To be clear, as I make these points, I am not suggesting that family obligations and rights rest on money alone: families also influence their membership by demanding loyalty, evoking love, and arousing guilt. Nor am I talking about “mere” legality when I mention rights: Angela could get power of attorney when she needed to. Her uneasiness with that power and her willingness to give it up as soon as possible speak to her more serious concerns about where authority ultimately should lie.<sup>17</sup>

In a parallel situation, Rachel White explains that she felt comfortable making day-to-day decisions about Joan’s care because Joan’s children made the most difficult decisions (which hinged on money but were, obviously, not about money alone): “I don’t have to make the really hard decisions like what happens if she runs out of money? I don’t have to. I can talk about it with them, but I mean, my god, if I [were to] have to take responsibility for that? That would be a huge thing.” In fact, Rachel feels that she is in what she calls “a really good position, I mean this luxury position” because “I get to have a lot of the closeness but I’m not necessary in the really difficult things.”

Other evidence points in the same direction. Not only does legal authority rarely go outside of family, but non-kin experience disquiet when they take on responsibilities that are normally the domain of kin.<sup>18</sup> For example, when interviewed after having provided care for friends and neighbors, the respondents in Young, Seale, and Bury’s study dwelled especially on the times when they had to make important decisions, and in retrospect they repeatedly “reviewed and justified” those decisions. The authors of that study went on to explain that the “decision-making role appeared to be less comfortable for the respondents compared with the practical caring role.”

Given the strong ideological commitment to leaving rights and authority with family, it is interesting to observe what fictive kin do when family is not present. My respondents suggest two strategies. One is to redefine themselves as family; the other is to characterize themselves as being even “better” than family. Michael and Patricia Gabor illustrate the first strategy. When they first moved to Texas twenty-five years before we spoke, the Gabors met Murray and Patsy Gold, a married older couple. The Golds provided the Gabors with an entrée into the local community; eventually a warm, “family-like” bond developed among the four adults.

Before Murray died, Michael assisted Patsy as she applied for the services associated with hospice care and visiting nurses for her husband; after Murray died, Michael helped Patsy settle all Murray’s financial affairs. Several years after that, Patsy came to live with the Gabors (who had since moved to the Midwest). They anticipated that she would remain with them for many years. However, Patsy was only there for a brief time before she too became ill. She died quite suddenly. Neither Gabor ever questioned whether they should take

on intense responsibility for either Murray or Patsy. The bonds among them had long since become something that was like family for all of them. Even so, when Patsy was living with the Gabors and quite suddenly found to be dying, Patricia felt that Patsy would have preferred to have a niece rather than herself provide the end-of-life care: “She had a niece in Edinburgh, and truthfully I think she would have been deliriously happy if that niece would’ve stepped up. And she did not. . . . I felt bad because I thought that Patsy always deep in her heart wanted her niece to step up and *be* her niece.” Patricia’s husband, Michael, finds a solution to Patricia’s feeling that she should not be the person providing care when he describes her as the “substitute” niece: “Patricia was a confidante, a person you could talk to, a person that was always there—the niece that was there, rather than the niece that was not there.”

Karin Olson’s story of more protracted care illustrates a second strategy that involves defining oneself as not just as good as but maybe even “better” than family. After we had been talking for about an hour, Karin launched into the account of her current relationship with Doris, who is now desperately ill. As we talk Karin rehearses what she does each day for Doris: “I check on her first thing in the morning, call and make sure she’s okay, and then I go over make sure she’s eating breakfast and hang around until lunch time, and then I come home for a while, and then usually late in the afternoon I go back, make sure she’s okay, and we talk before she goes to bed.” Karin says that this level of care is “very much what I would be doing if she were my mother,” acknowledging that family care is the ideal and thus the evaluative frame of reference. However, Karin also reverses herself, using what she does as the evidence for the full measure of being “like family”: “I’m there whenever the social worker comes to the house or the home health worker comes to the house. I’m in on every decision, you know, so this is really like family. I’m acting like her family.” At another point, when I ask whether she offers “personal care,” she is definitive. “No. And Doris does not want me to.” She then adds, immediately, that “she doesn’t want her cousins to either,” suggesting, now, that Karin is like family because she is *not* involved in some aspects of daily care.<sup>19</sup> Karen thus asserts that family is not just something that is, but something that is done in particular places with particular norms.<sup>20</sup>

When I ask Karin whether she finds making decisions a “comfortable place to be,” she hedges. And as always, the hedge informs. Her initial response is that she gets irritated by the amount that she is asked to do, adding, “It’s always the little crap that makes me feel testy.” She then goes on a bit of a rant about how Doris will not allow anyone else to help her. Suddenly, this testy moment morphs into a claim of taking care of Doris out of entirely pure motives. Indeed, contradicting what we saw earlier, Karin suggests that the unusual responsibility (which might otherwise go to blood/legal kin) sits comfortably because she will not profit from—indeed has no financial investment



in—this death: “I have nothing to gain. I don’t, you know. I don’t assume she’s leaving us anything. . . . I don’t have a horse in the race . . . I’m not doing it for anything.” A financial “stake” is, once again, brought in as a touchstone, this time as the evidence of altruism and therefore superior moral authority.

To explain more fully, let us return for a moment to both Angela (caring for an elderly neighbor) and Rachel (caring for the elderly woman who is her daughter’s piano teacher). Both of them had referred to money in part as a stand-in for what is conferred by blood—both obligation and rights. However, each also implied that money (i.e., inheritance) constitutes a piece of the “baggage” of complex family relationships. As such, it contaminates. Angela wants to keep any mention of money (or any thoughts of inheritance) out of the relationship she has with Dorothy. Angela knows that Dorothy is leaving her a painting that Angela had admired. But she does not think she will inherit anything else, and she says, adamantly and clearly, that she does “not want that in [their] relationship.” Rachel also knows that Joan’s will does not name Rachel, and she is fine with that, although she adds, “I hope she earmarks something for me that meant something to her. That’s all I hope.”

Karin Olson (who is so assiduously caring for Doris) believes that money would enter into care of the members of her natal family because her mother constantly refers to what Karin may or may *not* get from her will. After saying, with respect to Doris, that she is “not doing it for anything,” Karin admits that care for her mother would involve this other dimension: “That’s what would be different in family. Even though intellectually I feel like nobody owes anybody an inheritance—and I try to stay in that place even with my own family—[it’s hard] because my mom’s one of those [people who will] jerk you around with ‘If you don’t call me, why should I leave anything to you? Your brother calls me every day.’” Perhaps suddenly aware of how this might sound, Karin backs off and stumbles over herself as she insists that if she were “doing all this for [her] mom,” she “wouldn’t be doing it for that.” Then, she adds, “but I do figure I’m one of her heirs.” Still, with Doris it is different. Karin *knows* she does not have “a horse in this race.” Indeed, she insists (as did Rachel and Angela) that she does not want to know whether she herself is being left money: “I don’t know, I don’t want to know. I don’t need it.”

In sum, Karin initially evaluates what she does against the standard of what she would do for her mother. That is the first test of quality care. And because her caregiving meets that test, she defines what she is doing as being “*really* like family.” Later, with respect to personal care, she implies that *not* giving that kind of service is what makes her “family.” Recall, however, that when asked whether she is comfortable making hard decisions, and acting “like family,” she does not really answer. Rather she allows herself a testiness that shifts into an evaluation that uses the idea of family again, but with a different valence. Now she says that if she actually *were* family she might be self-interested and thus

less “selfless”; because she is not caring for a family member—and she assumes she is not an heir—she is being better than family.

Whereas for Rachel and Angela, rights and moral authority went to relatives with a stake in inheritance, for Karin—who is thrust into (and has accepted being in) quite a different position—rights and even more so moral authority come from *not* having a stake in the disposition of Doris’s estate. Karin’s hedging and circumlocution imply that she—like others—believes that blood/legal kin should have priority at moments like this. Worrying that she is acting “out of place,” she justifies her actions by claiming superiority to kin.

### Neither Fish nor Fowl (but Better)

As we have seen in this and the previous chapter, like-sibling bonds are with people who are *like* family *but not* family; in addition, these bonds are with people who are not “*just*” friends. The relationships stand on their own—neither fish nor fowl nor, for that matter, anything else easily named. In making this argument I differentiate my work from that of Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, who write about “suffusion” and “fusion” as signifying the ways that our personal lives are no longer so clearly made up of separate categories of family and friendship now that each often shares qualities of the other.<sup>21</sup> More particularly, Spencer and Pahl look at the nature of the bond (on the dimensions of choice, responsibility, importance, continuity, and affection) and the nature of the interaction (on the dimensions of practical help, emotional support, confiding, and companionship and fun) to show how in the contemporary world relationships are moving away from a single pole of being *either* friends or family. To take but one example, Spencer and Pahl say that friends are becoming more family-like in the realm of choice as they more often are perceived as being “an ascribed or given relationship,” while family is more often becoming more friend-like on the same dimension, as being more often perceived as “a chosen relationship.”

To be sure, in many ways the like-sibling bonds I describe here are “suffused” with elements of both family *and* friendship. Consider, for example, how, through a process analogous to “kinning,” like-family relationships are created as having elements of “ascribed or given” relationships so that these relationships often appear predestined. Even so, I would argue that the concept of “suffusion” muddies the water. My respondents carefully distinguished between the elements of their relationships with fictive kin and the elements of their relationships with *both* family and friends. For them, being “like” family meant *not* family as much as it meant that the relationship carried with it some of the positive elements of an idealized family such as love, continuity, care, and support. Similarly, for them, “like family” meant *not* merely friendship as much as it meant that the relationship carried with it some of the positive elements of an idealized friendship such as confiding, companionship and choice.<sup>22</sup>

The sociologist Graham Allan, in his essays about these issues, also adamantly disagrees with the approach taken by Spencer and Pahl. Allan acknowledges the variety of sociocultural influences that shape the enactment of both family and friendship. Neither, he notes, are stable entities: they are “done” in different ways in different times and different places.<sup>23</sup> Yet, at the same time that Allan grants that Spencer and Pahl appropriately highlight the increasing “flexibility” in our contemporary lives, Allan holds out for a difference between these two sets of relationships: “The normative and institutional framing of family and friendship ties remain distinct in many important regards. In other words, people’s everyday understandings of what family entails are different from their everyday understandings of what friendship entails.”<sup>24</sup> In making this distinction, Allan does not allow for the possibility of a separate relationship that is neither family nor friendship but a category onto itself. But that is precisely what I am proposing.

Allan puts the issues of commitment and obligation in a central position in his statement of the difference between friendship and family: “Perhaps most importantly . . . the sense of commitment and obligation that people have to family relationships, especially their partners, parents, and children, typically differs from their sense of commitment and obligation to their friends.”<sup>25</sup> But we might simply turn to the intense, daily interaction existing between Linda Sandor and Meg Peters (or the care now being provided by Karin to Doris) to illuminate like-sibling bonds in which “the demands [that they] consider legitimate to make of [one another], and in turn the calls on their emotional, practical, and material resources that they are prepared to honor” transcend what any of these women has either with her friends or perhaps even with any member of her blood/legal family.<sup>26</sup>

Allan also finds in the type of *reciprocity* that prevails a distinction between friendship and family, locating generalized reciprocity (long one-way flows) as a feature of family and more balanced (tit-for-tat) reciprocity as an attribute of friendship.<sup>27</sup> However, by way of contrast to what Allan believes, many of my respondents suggested that it was their relationships with fictive kin—and neither those within their family nor those within most friendships—that entailed generalized rather than balanced reciprocity. This was certainly the case for the bond between Meg Peters and Linda Sandor.

To be sure, some of what Allan suggests as being unique to family is rarely found within like-sibling bonds. Families come with established hierarchy (as in the authority granted to parents over children and often older siblings over younger ones); by choice rather than law, “the large bulk of most people’s estates is bequeathed to family members” and one-way transfers are common in family relationships.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Allan appropriately points to the “symbolism of blood,” as something unique to kinship.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, let us turn back from the abstract scholarship to a concrete case study. Rachel White's like-family bond (and provision of care) is with (and for) her daughter's piano teacher. She had been drawn to Joan in part through what felt like a tribal (almost ascribed) connection—both of them Jews in a (literally) cold, largely Christian, New England town—and they had become very close. Rachel goes in and out of familial language as she talks about her relationship with Joan. At one point she says, “Actually, I'm pretty close to being a family member [to Joan] in a lot of ways.” When I ask her what she means by this, she refers to a quality of frankness, to the fact that Joan's grown children talk openly with Rachel about Joan and that Joan talks openly with Rachel about the children.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, not long after speaking about frankness, Rachel noted that the obligation she had toward Joan differed from the one she had toward her parents because the former was “rooted in choice”: “The choice is something that makes it seem not like family.” Rachel then clarifies: her relationship with Joan is “like family but not family.” And for her the “not family” is also because of the quality of the relationship: “I'm not sure I would say it feels familial . . . but I guess it does [feel familial] but without all the baggage of family. My family has a tremendous amount of baggage. So, if you take that away, it's not really family anymore.” She concludes the distinction by referring to blood: “I guess blood means an awful lot to me. Blood means forever in some way that non-blood does not necessarily.”

For Rachel, then, the symbolism of blood is part of what differentiates family from fictive kinship insofar as “blood” creates a bond that is simply there for the long haul, a bond that simply exists. Also differentiating between the two kinds of bonds is a related issue of the long-term history of interaction, with all the baggage that involves. Yet intimacy, a sense of responsibility, and an attitude of something close to ascription (in feeling a tribal connection) remain elements of Rachel's fictive kinship. In short, for Rachel as for so many others, the distinctions between blood/legal family relations and like-sibling bonds are probably similarly profound as are the distinctions between like-sibling bonds and anything described simply as friendship. Referring to someone as being “like *family*” draws the person closer than a friend and marks the person off as having a different place in the firmament.<sup>31</sup> Yet, referring to someone as “*like family*” keeps the person distant enough that the pleasures of choosing and being chosen remain central.

Importantly, whether created in the context of deficiencies in existing family *or* in the context of richness in that set of relationships, like-sibling bonds might shift responsibilities off the shoulders of blood/legal kin. In that case, family no longer has to carry burdens it is unable to carry—or no longer has to bear sole responsibility for those burdens even when it *is* able to carry them. In a parallel way, we might think about fictive kin being there to embrace burdens

that “mere” friendship might find difficult to sustain. And, finally, we might think of fictive kin as providing the emotional feelings of support that neither blood/legal kin nor friendship can supply, or as simply serving as a supplement for either or both—that is, becoming another place in which people can end up feeling good in the world.

At the end of a long discussion of what they call “voluntary kin,” the scholars Braithwaite and her colleagues raise the question of whether the voluntary kin relationships they study are “really” family or whether family is simply a metaphor in those cases.<sup>32</sup> As my discussion to this point should make clear, I am choosing not to go down that particular rabbit hole. Rather, I contend that relationships with fictive kin have their own dynamics and their own characteristics. Of course, saying that someone is “like family” *is* a way of describing something that constitutes an ideal of what a family might be. As Lillian Rubin said, “the idea of kin is so deeply rooted within us that it is the most common metaphor for describing closeness.”<sup>33</sup> But my respondents just as often explained how their relationships that felt “like family” were, in fact, *not* like family and especially not so because they did not contain the same “baggage.” In making each comparison, my respondents suggest that kinship itself is at one and the same time both a shining promise and, equally often, a tarnished reality.

## **Part II**

### **One-Act Plays**

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### 3

## Guest Teens

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### Learning Boundaries

Four young adults with whom I spoke had each, in their late teens, spent a period of time—ranging from two months to almost two years—closely integrated into the daily life of a family that was not their own. Each talked about how the members of the family with whom they stayed came to feel “like family” and yet, at the same time, how those individuals decidedly were *not* family. Each of these young people, with a natal family of their own, learned to feel at home elsewhere without actually altering their sense of what was “really” home. Each of these teens had but one experience of living with a family who was not their own; each acted in but one performance.

One of these teens is Jessica Ames, a college sophomore when we spoke, whose mother died when Jessica was eight. Once her brother had left for college Jessica lived alone with her father in Northern California. When her father had the opportunity to earn more money by relocating for a year to the southern part of the state, Jessica was devastated. She had only one more year of high school to complete and she loved her school, her extracurricular activities, and her friends. Fortunately for Jessica, one of her friend’s parents had an open-door policy with respect to membership in their household: on a regular basis they did foster care for both young children and teenagers, and they had recently adopted one of the children they had fostered. Now they invited Jessica to live there during the year.

Logan Smith’s situation was different and not nearly so urgent. As a college student who became aware of my research through a friend, he asked to be



interviewed because he was eager to share the story of the special living arrangement that had developed toward the end of his high school career. Faced with a long daily commute from one part of town to another so that he could attend a selective Catholic school, Logan frequently opted to bed down at the home of one of his friends, a boy his age whose mother, coincidentally, had been Logan's mother's college roommate. This arrangement lasted for two solid years.

Another young man in college, Adam Ryan, told of becoming close to a friend's family even without moving his sleeping arrangements. Adam was at loose ends the summer after he graduated from high school and he found himself drawn to—and becoming increasingly responsible for—Zach, a fourteen-year-old boy with Down syndrome. Throughout the summer, Adam and Zach spent countless hours together and, when Zach was unavailable, Adam hung out with Zach's family anyway. Indeed, Adam said, he did not think he had eaten more than a handful of dinners at home that last summer before college.

The last of the four, Ana Reiter, told of yet a very different situation. Fleeing an overcrowded apartment in a war-torn area of Eastern Europe in the 1980s, Ana had arrived in the United States through a family reunification program; she first lived with her father's cousins and her grandfather's seventy-four-year-old sister. Six months later, Ana realized that living with relatives who spoke no English provided few opportunities to develop her language skills. Eventually, she summoned up the courage to ask her volunteer language teacher, Miriam Bauman, whether she could live with her family. In still-imperfect English, Ana explains that request as an act of independence, a way to find housing while preparing for college:

I was just looking for the way to just find my own room, rent it somewhere. And then I asked Miriam, "Would you be willing to let me live with you? I would be happy if I have my own space, my room. I would pay for it." She said, "No, we wouldn't want you to pay for anything, but I could talk to my husband and I can see what we can do and I'll let you know." And then we connected again and then she said, "Yes, I think my family is fine with it. We would love to have you."

I tell and analyze the stories of these four respondents here. Each of them was for some time a "guest teenager" in someone else's home; each of them came to feel as if he or she was a member of someone else's family during the period of co-residence.<sup>1</sup> In the next, paired, chapter, I turn to the point of view of host families who took in adolescents in situations like these four. There I start with the adults and then continue with the children in those families. (Only one of those host families included a guest child from whom we hear in this chapter.)

Combined, these two chapters point to the difference between an engagement in family activities and full family membership. As the chapters do so, they also show the difference between the open-ended, lateral fictive-kin relationships (as analyzed in part I) and delimited, co-residential relationships between adults and adolescents (as analyzed here). In the latter, because the initial terms of the relationship are essentially specified from the start, we might expect to find a relationship trajectory that builds on daily interaction, becomes something that appears to be family membership, and then diminishes once the guests leave. Moreover, because the relationship between guest teens and host adults has a structural similarity to that between children and their parents, issues of rights and authority might well be present here more than in relationships between peers. In both sets of relationships, people think of each other for at least some time as being “like” a member of the family. Yet, the meaning and enactment of that likeness turns out to be quite different in one from the other. A fictive-kin relationship between peers develops from an initial emotional bond; a fictive-kin relationship between adults and co-resident children develops from mutual engagement in the daily activities of family life.

In addition, what we will see in this chapter is that when people live together, particular ways of designating who is—and who is not—a member of a certain family emerge. The sociologists Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu (among others) describe a backstage area as being open only to family members; my respondents would resonate with this notion.<sup>2</sup> They also recognize that their integration even on the (occasionally shifting) front stage of family life is temporary and that eventually they will be integrated back into their natal family (or go on to build a new family of their own).

## Doing Family

The notion of “doing family” has been adapted from the concept of “doing gender,” a concept whose meaning is far more fully theorized, even as that meaning is debated and contested.<sup>3</sup> As originally defined by the sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman, doing gender involves “creating differences between girls and boys and women and men”; it also involves engaging “in behavior at the risk of gender assessment.” West and Zimmerman thus make clear that gender is social in two important senses: it emerges through interaction in particular institutional settings, and individuals are evaluated according to the norms that prevail in those settings.

Scholars are often far more casual in their use of the phrase *doing family*, most often taking it to mean the interactional work and activities through which connection is created and rehearsed in the private domain.<sup>4</sup> For example, in *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life Among Lesbians and Gay Men*, the sociologist Christopher Carrington writes, “a family, any family,

is a social construction, or a set of relationships recognized, edified, and sustained through human initiative. People ‘do’ family.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in her deeply insightful, personal essay, “A Member of the Funeral: An Introspective Ethnography,” the sociologist Nancy Naples argues that doing family, like doing gender, involves construction and achievement rather than the enactment of a “naturally” existing set of interpersonal arrangements.<sup>6</sup> As Graham Allan writes, the “thrust of this approach is that family behavior cannot be understood simply as being based on shared normative principles that are followed in a guileless fashion.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, Allan also makes a case for a difference between family and friendship based on the presence within family of the influence of unique material and cultural practices that constrain and guide behavior even as he acknowledges, as do others, that those “influences are often invisible to us.” In my conversation with Allan’s ideas about family, I agreed that the like-sibling bonds studied in part I were not fully “family” relationships even though I highlighted the many characteristics of fictive-kin relationships that overlapped with what is normally assumed to be unique to families. I also challenged the idea of having only the one alternative placement of friendship to describe strong, intimate relationships, rather than creating an entirely different category. I make a similar case here in suggesting that a guest child never entirely becomes a member of a host family but that the guest child’s situation—of co-residence—makes the distinction between family and “like family” a subtle, ongoing balancing act for all parties. That is, all parties understand that some activities are open to everyone in the household while others are reserved for family members alone, even if the edge of (or components within) that distinction might shift over time. Moreover, I would suggest that the narratives of the four young adults discussed further in this chapter highlight how thinking about “doing” and “not doing” helps us understand how people simultaneously come to feel “like” a member of a family *and* come to recognize (and even choose to maintain) their outsider status. Or, from the other perspective (as presented in chapter 4), thinking about “doing” and “not doing” helps us understand how host families can both include and exclude nonmembers at one and the same time.

### The Actions of Doing

To give substance to these abstractions, let us return to Jessica, who was delighted to be offered a home with her best friend’s family when her father relocated for a year. For Jessica, the fact that her friend’s family had already established an inclusive pattern for the household made it easier for her to imagine being there. She knew that this was a family that was used to opening—and then closing—the doors of its home: “They had foster babies there while I was there. They had had teenagers there before in their house, but they have babies most of the time.” And, fortunately, she felt that her friend Lauren could

handle an invasion of her private space: “She had it happen before. . . . Lauren’s grown up with having foster kids in her family, so she’s used to people being in her house all the time. She loved it when I moved in.” Jessica loved it, too, for female companionship: “It was kind of like having a sister, which I always really wanted. Then she has a younger sister, so it was like a houseful of girls.” The fact that Lauren, conveniently, wore the same size clothes was an added bonus. However, even if Jessica was comfortable exchanging outfits, she initially felt awkward. As one indicator of that awkwardness, she told me that for the first few months she felt she could only invite friends over if they were also Lauren’s friends. Gradually, she said, the awkwardness evaporated. By the middle of the year not only was Jessica issuing invitations as she wished, but she felt comfortable getting food out of the refrigerator when she was hungry. Several years later she says that when she goes back to the area, she might still simply “walk into the house without knocking on the door” and be greeted casually: “And they’re, like, ‘Jessica’s here.’”

The other guest teens also spoke about not knocking on the front door and taking what they wanted out of a refrigerator without asking permission as indicators that they felt at ease, that they were doing family things in those homes. Over time, Logan Smith said he became comfortable “crashing” with the Murphys and not standing on ceremony: “It’s not like the wait-at-the-door, call-and-answer greeting. I don’t remember the last time I did that. . . . I can just really go and open the door and they will just be, like, ‘Oh, Logan is here again.’ It’s like when I went over there, I can get water. I can get anything I want to have in the fridge.”

Sensitive initially to this “Oh, Logan is here again,” he came to hear the phrase as welcome rather than rebuke. And over time, the welcome transmuted into a strong relationship with each member of that family. In fact, Logan ended up spending enough time over at the Murphy home that eventually Mr. Murphy both gave him advice about where to apply to college and, when he saw him speeding, disciplined him. And, because Mrs. Murphy often chimed in as well, they became not just hosts, but stand-in—or “like”—parents: “Once the parents started to give me advice on things and sort of disciplining me, they were like regular parents. They would talk to me like I was one of their children. A lot of barriers were broken over those two years.” Logan reflects on the years he stayed so often at the Murphys’. He explains how during those years one element of the perceived border between family and not family—represented for him by more careful speech—began to break down:<sup>8</sup> “I think when you need to stop thinking about what you’re saying to people, and stop standing on any ceremony besides just basic respect for people you like, I think that’s when I transcend—that’s when it becomes more like family.” Note how Logan defines his feelings as both a general pattern *and* an individual one (with his shift from *you* to *I*). His use of the word *transcend*—like Clare Murray’s use of the same

root (in chapter 1)—indicates the transformation of a relationship. For Clare that word connotes the difference between “ordinary” friendship and a like-family relationship; for Logan the word connotes the difference between being an “ordinary” guest and a position far more comfortable than that. So close does Logan feel to this family, after participating in so many of their family dinners, that he occasionally (after a moment’s hesitation) refers to them as literal kin—parents and siblings without adding the qualifying “like”: “It was fun being there. I’m very lucky to have two very—four caring parents and basically six siblings.”

Over time, the O’Brien home, where Adam Ryan had forged a bond with Zach, a fourteen-year-old boy with Down syndrome, became a place Adam could walk into without knocking on the door. When I asked him whether he also felt comfortable opening the refrigerator without asking permission, he acknowledged that as “a big litmus test” and said that at a certain point he “had those privileges.” And as he explained this comfort and the acquisition of that privilege, he referred to the similarity of customs at the O’Briens’ home and within his own large (also White, also middle-class, also Catholic) family as what made it easier for him to feel as if he were a member of this other family:

I kind of felt accepted by all of them as a kind of member, where I could just like walk in and hang out unannounced. . . . I have a very big Catholic family too, not necessarily sibling-wise, but cousins-wise. And there’s just kind of a loose, casual nature to things where it’s just like people are in and out all the time. I kind of slipped into that at the O’Briens’, at least in their context, for a while. I could just show up whenever and they sort of expected that I’d be around and hanging out. It was just a sort of informal arrangement, I guess, where I would eat meals there and I would hang out with Zach.

Logan Smith had been close to both of the Murphy parents. Adam became closer to Zach’s mother than to the father. In time, Adam learned to feel comfortable in her presence and in her efforts to share her insights into the next stage of his life:

She was always there, and there was always a sort of running joke that she was like second mom to me or something like that. . . . I don’t remember exactly what I confided or what exactly we talked about, but there did develop a kind of closeness. . . . There was just a lot of casual sort of downtime spent there, and so she and I probably talked a lot that summer now that I think about it . . . . She was probably dispensing a fair amount of advice because she had had two kids go off to college by that point.

Over the sixteen months Ana Reiter lived in the home of her English teacher, Ana became entirely comfortable with both Miriam and Nathan Bauman. She

explains how she came to arrive at a feeling of ease: “We just talked about the day, and we shared dinner together and I would tell them my stories from my work, they would tell me their stories from their work.” Even more important for Ana—whose mastery of English remained partial—was sharing music because that activity did not rely on language alone: “What I’ve really loved so much about Miriam and Nathan is that . . . we connected through music as well. They played a lot of songs at night, Nathan would play guitar and Miriam would sing and that’s also how we connected—through singing.” As did the other three teens, Ana found that an engagement in family practices led to a sense she was, at least for a time, part of the family.

### **Doing “Not” Family**

Comfortable as she became during the years she spent in the home of her friend Lauren, Jessica says she never developed an easy relationship with the mother, whom she found “really intimidating.” Jessica also minded the occasional efforts the mother made to “parent” her. While she did not object to having the same curfew and chores as her friend, she wanted it to be clear that her father was “still present and active in parenting.” True family membership, she says, depends on a long history, not simply doing family-like things together for brief periods. She does not need a blood connection to create family, but she does need a history of shared experience and mutual support:<sup>9</sup> “I don’t fully believe that biology intrinsically means you’re fully connected to someone emotionally. I don’t think that I’m connected to my brother because we’re biologically related. I think that I’m connected to my brother because we’ve gone through the same experiences and gone through them together and helped each other through them.” Jessica believes that she also has a very close bond with Lauren and that, as is true of the one with her brother, it too builds on shared experience: “We’ve gone through things together, which connect us more than I think a blood relationship would.” Nevertheless, she still describes that relationship as one that is “sisterly” rather than being sisters. One year of living together is clearly not a sufficient match for the many years of being in the same family as her brother.

Logan also is clear about who is family. Even as he welcomed the advice—and endured the discipline—Mr. Murphy provided, and thus accepted his being like a father to him, Logan is no more confused than is Jessica about who the real parents are. The Murphys are not his parents: “So it was like my second family. It wasn’t my primary family.” When Logan came out as a gay man during his first year in college, he told his parents first; then he told the Murphys. Now, as a junior, when he needs advice he goes to his parents first and usually does not turn to the Murphys at all. Asked to explain the difference between how he feels about his parents and how he feels about the Murphys, he pauses

for many seconds. Hard as it is for him to articulate the difference, he can do it. And when he does, he indicates that he finds it in the deep knowledge his parents have of him and in the deep comfort he has in that knowledge. As is the case for Jessica, history matters to him:

I would say that the first people I go to is still my mom and dad for affirmation, for help with advice, and that kind of stuff. And it's not that I don't trust the way I handle things. It's more a lot that I like my parents. So when they give me words of advice on how to handle situations they know what I need to hear. And the Murphys, they're not the ones that I would turn to for that. It's not that I can't go deeper with them [but] I would be more, like, I think, I'll think more about what I'm saying. . . . My parents have just this level of flow that I just can't match [with the Murphys]. I just can't—I don't know if it's because of blood, the family, or it's just how our personalities worked and how they foster our environment.

Logan thus notes that in some respects he still stands on ceremony (front stage) with the Murphys, whereas with his family he can be less guarded (backstage).

Logan has developed strong friendships with all of the Murphy children: he attends the same university as the oldest brother, and the two of them run a radio show together; the brother close to his age was his best friend and teammate throughout high school; the youngest boy asked him to be his sponsor for his Catholic confirmation. Even so, Logan knows that he is not “in” the Murphy family in the same way that he is in his own family. He also knows that his relationship with his own brother is “safer.” History is relevant again, along with a kind of trust that Logan feels can only emerge with the airing of one's dirty laundry:

My brother is younger than me and really close. I think the ways I missed out [with the Murphys] is they have a huge history of brotherhood. They have years before I'm really a part of the equation and they're really, really close. And they always have dynamics—they criticize each other more and I would be uncomfortable doing that. While I do feel like I have a lot of leeway of what I can say. . . . I think there still is that difference and it comes when you can criticize the person unconditionally. I think that's a sad way to describe it but I think [*laughing*] that's one perimeter for it is that you could be more honest.

Logan thus locates the difference (what he calls the perimeter) between being “like family” and “real family” not just in history, but also in being part of unpleasantness. In addition, he evokes a notion of boundaries in behavior. As he does, Logan transforms family “baggage” into something positive, the dynamic that indicates intimacy and trust:

I'm not at the Murphys' enough—I know the dynamics and what things are like—but I'm not there for the arguments really over the little things. . . . I was there for two years but I wasn't there all the time. Like you come on that destination point where your friends are like your family and you keep this perfect idea of what a family is. The real family's always like—you actually have to deal with them. Them criticizing like that and you criticizing them back. It's safe [in a family]. You're not going to have that with friends who are like family.

Logan sees enough of the Murphys to know that not everything there is perfect all the time. He knows he does not see everything, that the backstage is closed to him. He knows also that only in his family does he feel “safe” enough to do some of the hard work that transforms even close relationships into enduring ones.

Ana chafed a bit from the mothering she received while she was living with Miriam and Nathan. She offers two explanations for why that she felt that way. First, by the time she came to live with them she was in her late teens, had traveled around Europe with a singing group, and had lived through intense regional conflict. She thought of herself as being sufficiently “grown-up” that she did not need pampering. Second, Ana, like the other teenagers, was comfortable with, and close to, her own parents, even if they were many miles away. Quite simply, she wanted something she thought of as being friends or mentors, not additional parents:<sup>10</sup> “So I looked to them as my mentors, it's people who just could show me the way to live in this country, and I needed that direction, I needed someone to show me what to do. And so I felt they were the right people, I felt I was comfortable with them, I was safe with them. . . . I never really took them as parents, it was more like a friendship type of thing, it was like, ‘I will be a responsible, independent, young woman who can work and I'm just looking for a space.’”

## **Back “Home”**

Each of the “guest” teens I interviewed had only one experience of living with a family that was neither their own nuclear family nor extended kin. In this way these teens differ from foster children, many of whom move from placement to placement and who learn, through constant movement, strategies for adapting to new sets of norms and behaviors.<sup>11</sup> These teens differ from foster children also in that they could—and did—move out (or back home) by their own choice. No state agency dictated that they had to stay with someone else and away from their own family members. Moreover, with the exception of Jessica (whose father provided the host family with a small monthly payment to cover expenses), no money exchanged hands. The other three teens knew they were welcomed simply for who they were and what they could contribute to the host family, and not because they carried with them a stipend.



Even though the teens had not had this experience of living with another family to whom they were not related before the co-residential stints described here, each appeared to learn over time how to act as a guest who is no longer “just” a guest; each found patterns of interaction that helped him or her feel at home. Yet, even as they grew attached to the members of their host families—and found their relationships there to be both powerful and important—the teens understood that the living arrangements were temporary and the relationships with host family members would be established on altered terms following the period of co-residence.

When I interviewed Jessica, it had been several years since she lived with Lauren’s family. Jessica had retained the sense of comfort with the family as a whole (“Jessica’s here”), but the intimate tie remains with Lauren alone—the relationship she defines as being sisterly. By way of contrast, Logan has ongoing ties with many members of the Murphy family. The Murphy parents had recently been visiting their son at the university both he and Logan attend; Logan spent much of that visit with them. On his brief trips home, Logan still spends time with the Murphys; he explains, “it’s pretty important to be at the Murphys.” As he looks forward, he believes that he would take a partner to meet the Murphys. However, when he says this, he is actually referring less to his relationship with the Murphys per se, than to what he thinks it would be important for a partner to know about his adolescence: “I would say, ‘We should stop by at the Murphys’ house.’ . . . I was with my dad and his family when they went back to where they had lived before, and they showed us places they went when they were kids. The Murphys would be a place, like, definitely you showed. I’d show them my high school. I’d show them my house, and I’d show them the places that I spent a lot of time in.” Clearly, Logan knows that if it is not yet over, his time of being like a member of the family will be in the past. He anticipates a shift wherein a like-family relationship will become a memory. In the future, the Murphys will be more like distant friends, and Logan accepts that shift in status without guilt or remorse.

Adam Ryan has already let his relationship with the family to whom he was attached recede to the outskirts of his life. Initially, during his first year of college, he maintained close ties with the O’Briens. Gradually, he ceased being so involved with them, even though there was no absolute rupture but rather slow attenuation, so that what had been like family no longer was: “At the beginning of my freshman year I was really in touch with them a lot and stuff like that, and then as that year went on . . . it wasn’t like things ever fell off, or I stopped emailing or stopped calling, or I stopped seeing them when I went home, but it was just less frequent the following year.” Occasionally Adam gets some lighthearted teasing from Zach’s father for not being around as much as he had been in the past: “Their dad’s kind of like a jokester or prankster sort of guy, and so he’ll kind of rib me every once in a while about, ‘Where have you

been for the last six months?’” Ultimately, Adam recognizes that these people are separate from him. When asked about long-term obligations, he was interestingly precise. He will not ever be a central actor in the caregiving that might be required down the road. That level of care he believes will appropriately come from kin: “I wouldn’t be, like, ‘Here I am, I know that you needed me.’ I think I would sort of like ‘make myself available’ is the way I would term it, if I could, because they kind of have each other. They’re a big clan. I wouldn’t be the one to set up camp and cook the meals for the whole family and keep everybody going if something bad happened, or if they were in some sort of situation that needed that, because that family as a whole, I suppose, has that already.” Adam says he will invite the O’Briens to his wedding (when and if he has one) but they will not have a special role, whereas his brother will be his best man. And when Adam returns home, he will simply “stop by and say hi, maybe have a meal.” He does not anticipate ever again being as fully absorbed into the life of that family as he was during that last summer before he went off to college.

Not surprisingly, Adam’s relationships with his parents and siblings are entirely different from his relationships with the members of the O’Brien family. Adam attributes that difference both to having a long-term relationship (history) *and* to being around each other (shared experience); those he identifies as the preconditions for creating a solid “family” foundation. He neither had the first—nor now has the second—going for him in relation to Zach’s family: “When people are your family, and they’re there all the time because they’re your family and that’s the way things are set up, so to speak, the time and the proximity just sort of solidifies things a little more, and so transposing that . . . things have sort of loosened, I suppose, between Mrs. O’Brien and Zach and I, and, you know, sort of by extension, the rest of the family. I think it’s just a question of time and nearness, or time spent and the nearness or distance between us.” Adam wants me to know that even though he described himself as being a lonely kid at “loose ends” the summer he spent with Zach, and that even though now events—a serious girlfriend, new friends, an unexpected excitement about his college courses—have created a “loosening” in his relationships with the O’Briens, he still finds significant value in what he had. Sharing important moments is part of what made those people *like* family for him, even if they no longer are:

I just didn’t have a whole lot more going on. That doesn’t cheapen or take anything away from what I did have going on with the family and stuff like that, but other things just sort of came in. . . . And so the people that [have been] around for those meaningful things became the people I was a little closer to—the same way that the O’Brien family, when I was, particularly that summer, hanging out with Zach and skipping rocks together, that was like meaningful stuff. . . . I wouldn’t call it romantic, but it is sort of idyllic. Just

that one summer. That was meaningful for me, and he and his family members were the people who were around for it and were part of it, and so at that time in my life they were sort of quasi-family.

Moreover, Adam, insightfully, acknowledges that being able to casually wander in—and then casually wander out—is part of what differentiated his relationship with the O’Brien family from his relationship with his own family. Along with history and shared experience, Adam differentiates between ascribed and achieved relationships, locating family in the first set: “With the O’Briens there was a sort of familial bond, a familial-like bond. But, unlike most families, it kind of came and went, more or less as a result of my own volition, I guess. Most people, I would venture to say, don’t just choose not to be part of their family, their, you know, legal biological family and all that.”

By the time I interviewed Ana Reiter, she had finished college, married, given birth to two children (a twelve-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter) and found employment helping immigrant children adjust to life in an American school. During those years, her parents had emigrated to the United States, and they had chosen to live in a neighboring town. Throughout those events, Ana stayed close to Nathan and Miriam, whom she considers to be another set of grandparents to her children. Thus, although she resisted the mothering Miriam provided, she has enshrined the like-family relationship as one that is family for the next generation. If her children now have an extra set of doting grandparents, the two sets of adults have very different locations in Ana’s heart: “My parents know me since I was born and it’s a bit different, it’s stronger of course and it’s not necessarily the same. It’s like Miriam and Nathan would be my best friends, like one of my best friends who I can talk to about anything, but they’re not my parents [*laughter*]. So I still feel my parents are my parents. I think I have equal respect for all of them, it’s just a different feeling, a different connection, a different kind of love [*laughter*].” As do the younger respondents, Ana relies on history and the strength of a relationship to differentiate family from not family—or what she calls friendship.

## Assessing Guest Experiences

In each of these examples, a young high school student walked in an open door and became, for a period, a member of another household and “like” a member of the family that lived there. For Jessica, the immediate need had been acute: without a place to stay, she would have had to interrupt her high-school career. Ana also felt her need to be acute: she wanted very much to live with people with whom she could practice her developing English-language skills. Logan neither had so acute a need nor actually ever moved into a different household: the occasional (but frequent) accommodation was more one of

convenience. And Adam neither needed a different household nor found another one to be more convenient. Rather, the O'Brien family—and especially Zach himself—offered a safe haven to a teenager at loose ends.

By some measures—bringing friends over, walking in the front door without knocking, taking food out of the refrigerator, and joining in a family songfest—each of these four teens found a way to feel comfortable and “at home.” In this way, they were “successful” guests. Had these interludes been less successful, probably none of them would have identified how they felt during their guest period as being “like” a member of the family. That is, in describing a series of affirmative interactions, I am not suggesting that all such experiences of being a guest have “happy” outcomes. What I suspect, however, is that it is only in the ones with happy outcomes that being a guest comes to feel for any period like being a part of a family. At the same time, I would say that none of the respondents I interviewed is at all confused by that likeness: each can identify ways in which they remained outsiders who would, eventually return to their own—or create for themselves a new—family configuration. That is, although co-residence creates its own sets of opportunities for the development of like-family relationships, co-residence also allows for moments of differentiation. On the one hand, a host family is enjoyed, practiced, and celebrated. The sense of its being like family is created through “doing” activities that are defined as familial or family-like. These include such things as eating together, sharing living quarters, understanding “inside” jokes, and feeling at ease. On the other hand, as we have also seen already with respect to people who do not live together (i.e., the like-sibling bonds analyzed in chapters 1 and 2), some kinds of “doing” are reserved for the people one considers members of one’s blood/legal family.

The adolescents talk about similarities and differences between the way the two different families are done and the way they feel about each of those families. Being with another family (like being a tourist in another country) brings into sharp relief contrasting styles. Logan Smith explicitly talks this way. Although he gets pleasure from the two very different patterns, he prefers the one in his own family:

They have this perfect family ideal that my family didn't have. But I don't think that was a big part [of why I went there so often]—like I wasn't yearning for that. My family never sits down for dinner. We eat. We all have meals. We're all talking at the counter, doing homework. It's kind of a good chaos that I love. But I did like this traditional setting too. Yet, it's always kind of foreign to me a little bit. I wouldn't like it all the time. I like how my family did it. But that's kind of a nice look too.

Unlike most teens, guest children have intimate experiences with two different sets of family practices.

By making note of the different family practices, and claiming one as one's own ("I like how my family did it"), my respondents reaffirm blood/legal family membership. Each of the teens can identify the pull of their own family and identify what it is about their own family that they most appreciate and value. But of course, again, this need not always be the case: time away from one's family might well offer (social, material, and emotional) comforts that diminish, rather than strengthen, the pull of kin. Guest children might not want to return home, and they might choose not to.<sup>12</sup> They also might want to stay in the host household and, if they do through repeated returns or over a period beyond the initial expectation, their status might change from being a guest to being what I call an "unofficial child" (as discussed in part III).

However, these last possibilities were not what happened to the teens I interviewed. Whether or not Jessica was looking for a replacement mother in Lauren's mom, she had spent enough time there to know "that she was not the maternal figure that [she] would ever seek out." After a year, Jessica was ready to go back and live with her father, as the only parent to whom she would turn in the long run. Although Ana adores Miriam, she wants her to remain a friend, not a mother; her own mother has the central place in her heart. Logan also finds a difference between being "like family" and being family: he prefers what he calls the "level of flow" he finds at home. For Adam, the same kind of difference may be there but he settles more on the fact of choice and volition—on being able to wander in when he wanted to and then being able to withdraw when the O'Brien family was no longer at the forefront of his daily needs and concerns. In addition, for each, if there was a "pull" from home, there was a "push" from the host family. The respondents each recognized that they were not involved in backstage practices, the "baggage" of family life that includes strife and ways of working through that strife. That is, each respondent observed times when the "real" family engaged in private conversations or referred to activities and relationships in which as outsiders they had no part.<sup>13</sup>

In short, guest children remain *like* family; they do not become members of the nuclear family that existed before they came and will remain long after they have gone. They enjoy access to some kinds of backstage moments. They "do" lots of family things. Yet, even *that* access and that doing is defined as being temporary; they always remain outside another kind of border that defines who is inside the family and privileges family members alone for participation in the full range of backstage events.

## 4

### Host Families

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#### Inclusion and Exclusion

My good friend Bethany suggests that I interview her good friends Susan and Richard Macy in Takoma Park, Maryland. “They always have someone living with them,” she says. And indeed, as we sit down to talk on the first beautiful spring morning of that year, what she says turns out to be true. Susan and Richard stumble over names and dates, and interrupt and correct each other, as they try to get straight the story of all the people who have come and gone. They do not even agree about either the beginning or the end of the list because, as Richard says, “there are so many.” Richard thinks “eight or nine or ten at the most over the years.” Susan thinks “nine or ten—twelve at the most.” They try to locate this person and that, and identify their interconnections, one to another:

SUSAN Remember Jennifer? She was a friend of our daughter Jodie’s friend.

Jodie would say, “Oh my parents will let you stay at our house.” And then there was Kim.

RICHARD Yup, Kim was a friend of Craig’s.

SUSAN And the one we called “Big Ryan” came through Kim.

They also forget the gender of their various “guests.” Richard, at one point says that everyone who stayed with them was a girl, and each became an “honorary daughter.” But over the course of the conversation they also remember, first, Craig and “Big Ryan,” and then later, Morris and “the other Ryan.”

When I press them to start at the beginning, to tell me about the first person who stayed with them in this way, Susan thinks they should talk about Melanie, the friend and classmate of one of their daughters. Richard disagrees that that is the best starting place even as he acknowledges that, indeed, Melanie “was the first person who stayed a long time.” Susan prevails, and we discuss Melanie. The origins of this first staying are casual both in the enactment and in the retelling. Apparently Melanie called them crying when she learned that her parents were going to move and she would no longer be able to attend the charter school where Richard was the principal. Her situation was thus much like Jessica’s, described in the previous chapter. And, like Jessica, Melanie was lucky to find a welcoming host family. Richard recalls responding to Melanie’s call by saying, “I don’t want you to not come to school, so come live with us.” And, although Susan and Richard said they had discussed with each other this possibility of inviting in a guest child and mutually decided to make the offer, Susan modified that when she said they “didn’t *really* think about it” before they suggested Melanie move in with them for her last year of high school.

Over time, they say, the “process of inviting [young people] into our home became a little more formal in terms of meeting them, making sure that both of us were comfortable, and talking to parents so by the last one, we went and had brunch with the family.” Even before they formalized their procedures, Richard and Susan were explicit about some of the terms: kids could not simply run away from home; Richard and Susan had to “discuss it with [the] parents and make sure it’s okay.” But formal or not, neither of them could at that moment remember the name of that last student who had lived with them (with whose parents they had had brunch), although they could remember the brunch was in the nearby town of Bethesda. Richard and Susan also count among the guests several nannies who lived with them, each for a year, and who in doing so became “like” a member of the family. And then, of course, after years of people moving in and out of the household, people regularly come back to visit: “One was here two weekends ago with her fiancé and her dog. She called us up and said, ‘We got to get out of New York City, can we come down?’ ‘Of course you can.’ It was a totally inconvenient weekend but she’s your kid, your kid said she’s coming home, you just say come ahead.”

Over the years, whether the arrangements were structured or not, people came for “various reasons”: as nannies; as teens locked in adolescent battles with their parents or as teens who simply needed a place to stay when their parents moved; as graduate students in a six-week program; as an old friend doing a theater performance in a nearby town; and as previous guests back for a visit. Whatever the reasons, the word was out both through their children and through a local grapevine: “Kids could come here.” Thus, over time, a broad community became aware that this was a welcoming home.

This is a refrain I heard from others who also have an open-door policy and who take in children without asking for any payment in return.<sup>1</sup> Faith Park, a middle-aged, White woman who lives in Japan with her Korean husband, was visiting relatives in Vermont when I interview her. She speaks with considerable pride about the openness of her home: “People like my house. From the time the kids were little they liked to bring their friends home and kids at church liked to be at our house.” Mia Brunelle, a single woman with a comparable approach to inclusiveness, describes how in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, her house, a bright blue among the many more subtle colors, is visible to everyone: “This house is called ‘The Big Blue’ and you can tell why. . . . So everybody around [my son’s] age knows it just because there’s always people here. And everybody knows that I let kids stay here if they need a place to stay.” Similarly, in Portland, Oregon, Tom and Ellen Walsh are known throughout their kin network and among their friends as the people with whom adolescents and adults can stay for a bit should they—for whatever reason—want or need to.

## **A Variety of Hosting Arrangements**

### **All Informal**

None of the young people who lived with Susan and Richard Macy were related to them even if, eventually, they came to feel like members of their extended family. Moreover, with the exception of the nannies, all arrangements were essentially informal, even if they were later clarified through understandings with parents. That is, the children and young adults came without official intermediaries; no officer of the court, social worker, or representative of any private or public agency assessed these relationships or made the assignments. This was not formal fostering, in which someone matches an available family with a child in need.<sup>2</sup> These arrangements differed from formal fostering in another way as well. Susan and Richard never accepted money when kids stayed with a kind of family membership: “Yay, we have extra room. You come and live here.”<sup>3</sup> Although they do not refer to their own social class position, it was clearly relevant: Susan and Richard did not need to be paid for the care they provided; they could extend their generosity through actions that involved extensive material support. Like the families that three of the teens discussed in the previous chapter joined, resources were sufficient to cover the expenses of feeding another mouth, even if it was that of a growing adolescent.

### **Only Formal**

Many formal programs that place children in the homes of strangers—the American Friends Service (AFS) Intercultural Programs and the Fresh Air Fund among them—rely on host families being willing and available.<sup>4</sup> That is, they institutionalize generosity among people wealthy enough to house and



feed an additional child for periods ranging from a week or two to an entire year. Angela Jansen trusted these kinds of programs to find guest children. She first participated in the Future Leaders Exchange Program operated by the U.S. Department of State<sup>5</sup>; later, although she found it less satisfactory, she accepted children through AFS Intercultural Programs.<sup>6</sup> Once her children were grown and out of the house, Angela decided it was no longer appropriate to have someone so young living with the three remaining family members: herself, her husband, and her mother. She then signed up to be a host parent to foreign students studying at a nearby college, thereby transforming her home into a place where young folk could come for a home-cooked meal, stay during vacations when the dormitories closed, or stop in and chat if they were feeling homesick. Over the years, in addition to the four exchange students, each of whom had lived with her family for part or all of an academic year, Angela had hosted fourteen college students from abroad.

### Mixing Formal and Informal Arrangements

Other homes with revolving doors mixed formal and informal arrangements, often focusing more on one than the other. Take Klara Weber, for example. Originally, she used an agency to hire an au pair from Sweden. Klara stays in contact with this young (now married) woman through an occasional email and Facebook; they are not otherwise particularly close. When her children were older, Klara took in two teens through a sponsoring program that brought Indonesian children to the United States for a year so that they could learn English. The first girl had been miserable with the host family to which she had been assigned and so it was determined that she would live with the Webers for a couple of months until a new host family could be found; somehow that two months turned into three years, and the relationships among the members of Klara's household grew considerably closer. During some of that period Klara added another Indonesian child through the same program; she stayed with Klara's family for ten months. Klara also took someone into her home less formally. Drawing on a friendship among the parents, a German girl who wanted to learn English came to stay with the Webers for a year.

### Mixing in Extended Family

Ellen and Tom Walsh mixed formal arrangements (having once fostered a child for a year) and informal arrangements and, within the latter, both kin and non-kin. Three of the many adolescents and young adults who came to live with them were a kind of kin—the children of a woman who had been briefly married to one of Tom's four brothers. Not only did Tom and Ellen make room in their home for these quasi-relatives along with, in later years, their boyfriends, but they also, if space was available, opened their home to others. Most recently, a graduate student with whom Ellen had formed an attachment when she met

him through her work at a university had been living with them. When I interviewed Ellen and Tom, they were still mourning that young man's recent departure.

### Different and Shared Characteristics

The differences among these arrangements mattered in some ways. Adults who took in kin were most likely to have their own relationships with the “sending” parents; these adults were also most likely to have known the children prior to taking them in; and these adults were also most likely to anticipate that they would have an affiliation of some sort after a guest child left. Adults who relied on arrangements through formal organizations had a place to turn if they had questions about how to handle an issue with a guest child. Moreover, some guidance was offered in advance, and the adults could be certain that the “sending” parents were aware and approved of the arrangements. Adults who relied on informal relationships did not have the same kind of backup understandings but they were less likely to be taking in absolute strangers.

Another set of differences might have mattered. Adults who relied on formal programs generally had the experience of working across lines of race/ethnicity and often social class as well. This was also sometimes the case for adults who relied on informal contacts. By way of contrast, those who gave a home to members of their extended families were more likely to live with people of the same race/ethnicity if not social class. Some of these arrangements would thus arouse public curiosity about how a group out for a day's activities might be related to one another; other groupings could easily pass as kin. Curiosity and passing might have created very different experiences of feeling “like family.”

Yet, different as these arrangements were both within and among the families I interviewed, they shared some features that allow me to combine them. All were co-residential. All were delimited: these arrangements were not designed with the intention of creating “forever” families; they were defined from the get-go as temporary, even if the participants hoped that strong bonds of attachment might develop and even if the texture and dynamics of the relationships changed over time. All involved a generational divide so that hosts were responsible for, and older than, guests and thus included the element of hierarchy that Graham Allan says is found in family but not in friendship.<sup>7</sup> And, under these circumstances, everyone involved had to negotiate (and find ways to display) a boundary between temporary household membership and long-term family membership; that is, they had to determine what it meant to live *as* a family, in the same household, and yet not become family. Having looked at these arrangements from the perspective of guest children, in this chapter I talk about the receiving family—first, from the perspective of adults and then from the perspective of the host children. I start with adult motivations for this practice. The remaining discussion of the adults explores the ways

in which family is both done *and* undone during co-residence and what happens *after* guest teens leave. When I turn to host children, I explore occasional ambivalence with respect to the practices of their parents.

### **Adult Motivations: Following Family Traditions, Creating New Paths**

When I describe my research to people, nobody is confused by the like-sibling bonds detailed in part I of this book: while people might not think about their close friends as being “like family,” they understand deeply meaningful relationships with peers. However, when I mention people like Susan and Richard Macy, who regularly and repeatedly open their homes to outsiders, I get varied reactions. Some people launch into a story about someone they know who did something very similar. A slightly more typical response differentiates: “I could never do that,” they say. Even more commonly, I find suspicion: people ask, “Why do they do that?” or “Are they some kind of do-gooders?” Of course, I too was curious about motivations even as I noticed, almost immediately, that on many levels these people were not so very different from me. In fact, not only were some of them friends of my friends, but some of them were *my* good friends, people whose company I had enjoyed for many years.

As my respondents explained why they became host parents, they elided individual motivations with individual comfort in living this way. That is, they often mentioned background experiences that made hosting easy for them and offered those experiences as a reason they now wanted to create something similar in their adult homes. For example, Richard and Susan Macy each identified their own motivations for their open-door policy. Susan grew up in a working-class neighborhood, one of five kids, and although no one else lived with her family, there was usually one or another kid hanging around and a sense of communal responsibility for the well-being of the children: “We had a community of kids, so we were always back and forth between each other’s houses.” Susan said she found pleasure in enacting the tradition from her childhood. Richard grew up in a much narrower environment without outsiders. Sometimes outsiders came into the home—Richard remembers “a cleaning woman and relatives for holidays”—but otherwise the family was clearly bounded: “There were no other kids. There was not an open house. I didn’t bring my friends home. We didn’t hang out there. My mother had obsessive-compulsive disorder, to say the least, so bringing friends there was not a good option.” He links his current interest in opening the boundaries of his home to the fact of his “loving kids” and to an experience with a Unitarian Universalist retreat that taught him a very different way of enacting family, one that he now likes to practice: “Families go there all summer long, and most of them will tell you they’ve been coming there forever—their grandparents came, and

their parents came. They come and . . . it's this community when they're there. Their kids are out everywhere, and no one worries about them because they know every other adult is taking care of them. It's that old-fashioned community that doesn't exist with people anymore."

In some families, one or both parents decided to experiment with hosting out of curiosity rather than prior experience; these families were less likely to make the deep investment of inviting someone to live with them for a long period but rather entered hosting arrangements more cautiously. Margaret Green had grown up in a carefully bounded family but, having heard good things about the relationships her neighbors formed when they sponsored international students at the nearby college, she decided that it would be "lovely to have some older sibling-like people" for her two sons. Having only had boys, she said, "Let's have some daughters" and indicated that they wanted a girl. Her husband, who grew up in a similarly carefully bounded family, was less enthusiastic: "Jonathan, I think, in particular, was freaked out by what this meant, and liked his private quiet time and isn't as gregarious as I am, and not so comfortable with strangers." But after forming a strong bond with Rebecca, the first student they hosted, Jonathan also became "excited about these other relationships."

In short, some respondents took a childhood model of doing family with relatively open borders as a guide to how family *should* be done: recreating the generosity of their parents made these respondents feel good about themselves. Other respondents either felt, or had particular experiences through which they learned, that the closed borders of their families of origin had deprived them of opportunities that they now wanted to experience for themselves and provide for their own and other people's children. Finally, some respondents offered particular motivations: one woman said she wanted to create "diversity" for the children she is raising in a predominantly White New England town; she believes that the various kids who come to live with them are a way for her "kids to learn about something larger than themselves." Taken as a whole, these individual interests also reflected an awareness that no single nuclear family could—or perhaps even should—be the be-all and end-all for its members. Ultimately, host families simultaneously recognize both the power and draw of contemporary, nuclear family life *and* its profound limits. This recognition is both a motivation for, and a reward of, having an open-door family life.

## Creating Insiders by Doing Family

All of these adults intuitively understood that doing family-like things helped engender a sense of being like family. At the simplest level, host parents created insider status by requiring the same rules of all the children in the

household. Susan Macy is explicit about this when asked: “Yup, for the kids who lived here, rules were the same. We were clear.”

In Ellen and Tom Walsh’s case, the same rules for the first of several young (former) step-nieces who lived with them meant, more or less, no rules. Ellen says, “Oh, those kids never had any responsibilities. They were supposed to keep their rooms clean,” to which Tom replies, with a great deal of sarcasm, “Right. Supposed to.” Looking back, Ellen says she wishes she had been stricter, but at the time she demanded little of either her son *or* the guest children.

Even more than abiding by rules, the young guests were partially transformed into insiders by being expected to participate, and then actually participating, in the daily life of the family. In fact, Richard and Susan Macy suggest that the ones who were difficult for them were the ones who did not share in the family’s regular activities. Susan articulated this most clearly: “The only ones that weren’t great were the ones who didn’t join in, [people] who were sort of here and we didn’t see much of them. That felt weird.”

For Ellen and Tom Walsh, as for so many families—and as prescribed by pundits who tell us how to conduct our lives—the regular activity that “made family” in their home was sitting down and sharing the dinner meal.<sup>8</sup> Angela Jansen explains how Aidana, one of the girls who stayed for a year through an international exchange program, became like a “real” daughter. That girl, Angela said (using the present tense to describe something that happened five years earlier), is “someone who I love that lives with us, someone who treats my relationship with her as a mother-daughter relationship.” And Angela goes on to describe how family is enacted and done:<sup>9</sup> “She, I sat on the bed and cried with, and sat on the bed and talked about homework and talked through teachers and how to get your classes. I think a true family is more about just living in your house, it’s more about just the stupid everyday stuff, and so when someone lives with you they become family.” Similar to the teens who focused on behaviors unique to family members (e.g., walking in without knocking on a door; taking food from the refrigerator without asking) as evidence that they were like family, the adults draw attention to the ongoing arrangements (e.g., obeying household rules, eating together, and what Angela calls the “stupid everyday stuff”) that indicate meaningful participation in family life.

## Maintaining Borders

Even those teens in close relationships with host parents—as was the case for Aidana with Angela—are also established as *not* family, as outsiders. The names used are often one simple indicator of how some family practices are preserved for family members. Richard and Susan are called by their first names by guest children but “Dad” and “Mom” by what Susan calls “our kids” and Richard calls “our actual children.”<sup>10</sup> Other patterns are relevant. Outsider status

emerges in the language used to describe these “guests.” Outsider status also emerges in the application of a different set of norms about privacy, liking, disliking, and sexual behavior as well as in different levels of authority and long-term expectations.

### The Language of Exclusion or Separateness

As Richard and Susan Macy begin to recount the people who came to stay with them before the last student whose name they have momentarily forgotten, Richard remembers that even before Melanie, they hired “nannies” to live in.”<sup>11</sup> Having finished talking about Melanie, Richard and Susan say more about these earlier relationships. The language used places these various people as simultaneously inside and outside the family. The nannies, they say, “came to take care of *our* kids [emphasis added]” and then “became family members.” Susan and Richard also mention an earlier relationship with someone—it is not clear whether she was a nanny or not—named Tracey. Richard and Susan consider her to be like one of their own: “It just feels like Tracey was our kid. We didn’t raise her, we know that. We didn’t meet her until she was eighteen, but it feels like that kind of connection.” And Richard and Susan tell me that their three children “consider Tracey their older sister.” Yet, they also say of Tracey that, many years later, “she is still a good friend,” that “she came from the Channel Islands and stayed very close.” Thus, ultimately, the language they use for Tracey, like that for the nannies, simultaneously invokes a family relationship (“one of our kids”; “older sister”) and then rejects it, moving the relationship now to the outskirts (“still a good friend”; “stayed very close”). Ultimately, people like the nannies, Tracey, and all the others who stay in touch are felt to be related in some way but, the language suggests, decidedly not as members of the nuclear family. Susan says, “We love to share *our* positive family events [like weddings]. They invite us to *theirs*. It just feels like we’re related that way. I don’t know [emphasis added].” Susan and Richard thus remind us that the typical arrangements that make kin are not the only ways to create a sense of being related to another, that kinship is but one type of relatedness.<sup>12</sup>

In other ways also Susan and Richard use language that both incorporates and excludes. On the one hand, people become like family. On the other hand, people are evaluated and considered in terms of the effect they have on the *host* family.<sup>13</sup> Susan raises this issue with respect to the first nanny, Jackie, who came from South Dakota: “We used to say that she made our family better actually [because] there were five of us and she sort of evened it out.” Richard agrees, while amplifying: “You know *we* are intense; *we* have a lot of emotional charge, and I say *we’re* all pretty driven and *our children* unfortunately got that genetically and environmentally. So when someone like Jackie came who’s laid-back and a farm girl, she was just a *great addition*” [emphasis added]. So, Jackie made their family better; she was a “great addition”; she was not one of “our children.”

And although she was special, others also contributed to the family. Richard talks in a general way about the impact of the various guests who came and lived with them: “I felt like it’s adding something. It didn’t take away, it added.”

While Angela talks about having a mother-daughter relationship with Aidana, Angela also uses language to articulate a difference: on the one hand Aidana is a daughter; on the other hand this daughter is differentiated from Angela’s own children:

- MKN If I asked you, “Who’s in that picture?” What would you say to me?  
 ANGELA I would say that she’s my Kyrgyzstani daughter.  
 MKN And if somebody saw a picture of her on [your daughter’s] wall and asked, “Who’s that,” what do you think she would say?  
 ANGELA I don’t know. You have to ask [my daughter] [*laughter*]. I mean if she was asked to identify her, today on Facebook she would probably say, “She’s my Kyrgyzstani sister.” Mostly because it’s clear we’re not related. I mean she doesn’t look anything like the family.

Interestingly, much as Angela has said that Aidana is a daughter, she brings in race/ethnicity as creating the shared physical appearance that defines actual kinship. In a previous chapter, I noted that a young girl claimed and created physical likeness to help establish a kin-like relationship with someone who might otherwise have been “just” a friend. Here Angela is using physical difference to separate kin from non-kin and to suggest that the meaning of being a daughter is limited to those who are kin. That is, because Aidana does not look like anyone in the family, Angela and Aidana are (despite having something like a mother-daughter relationship) *not* related as are kin.<sup>14</sup>

### Different Norms and Different Attachments

Although at one level, inviting guest children into one’s home appears to break down the divide between the front stage and the backstage, at another level, it is clear that, as the teens in chapter 3 so astutely noticed, some elements of family life remain backstage. The father in a household that serves as a host family to international students periodically asks, “Are people coming tonight? Is anyone coming tonight? Can I stay in my pajamas?” He thus suggests different norms for how to appear in front of guest children and how to appear in front of his “own” children.

Needless to say—and as the discussion has already implied—Richard and Susan Macy (like most hosting adults) become more attached to some people than others. Although Richard jokes that “they’re all honorary daughters—they’re all women by the way” (a comment that as we have seen turns out not to be true), he and Susan agree about the special ones. One person who has a special place is Jordan, who Susan describes as “one of the sweetest, easiest kids, you

can ever help raise” and about whom Richard says, “she was the one we got the very closest to.” Jordan is one about whom (along with Tracey and Jackie) Richard says, “definitely all our children consider them sisters essentially.” Richard and Susan become momentarily expansive while differentiating their relationships with these three (Tracey, Jordan, and Jackie) from their relationships with others. Others also identify the most successful guests. We have already heard how Angela singles out Aidana, her “Kyrgyzstani daughter.” Margaret Green remembers Rebecca, the first exchange student they hosted, who convinced Jonathan that this was a practice he would enjoy. Thus, not only do the hosts prefer their “own” children, but they pick and choose favorites from among the guests in private, at least, if not in front of the kids. In short, in contrast with what psychologists are likely to recommend as good family practice, favoritism for one child over another not only flourishes but also is openly acknowledged, to each other and to an interviewer.

As Susan and Richard describe the “addition” that guest children brought to their family—and acknowledge favoritism—the couple also suggest that some inclusions were less successful than others and that, again, unlike family, they could *easily* let some people go. Together they remembered “there was a student who was really in the breaking-all-the-rules, testing kind of time in their life and it spilled over into the school” so that Richard and Susan could no longer have her living with them.<sup>15</sup> Angela Jansen hosted one exchange student who stayed for the whole year but about whom she said, “We possibly could have passed up on her anytime.” Angela also told me that she had to ask one of their exchange students to leave: “She lived with us for about a month and a half, and we tried to have it work out, but then I just had to let her go.” That is, as do like-sibling bonds and relationships with kin, guest-host relationships appear both to attenuate and even rupture. However, they seem to do so with less pain than in those other two sets of relationships.

These relationships differ from relationships with kin in yet another way. In part I, I noted that the people I interviewed were explicit about “neutering” lateral, like-family relationships. The issue of sex came up explicitly only once in my interviews with host parents. Klara told me that while her daughters considered Madeline (who stayed for three years) their sister, “the relationship with my son is a little bit different.” She then went on to explain: “None of them are really admitting to this but I think the last six months Madeline lived with us, they had a little fling going on and I think my son was in love with her.” When I asked her how she felt about that, Klara both implied that she accepted that there might have been a modest romantic relationship between her son and Madeline *and* suggested that she would have preferred that it not go too far:

I didn't really know about it until my younger daughter made a couple of remarks. . . . You know if I would have said no or I would have tried to interfere,



I think they would have found a way around it, and I knew that she would be leaving for college, so I mean she was nearly eighteen when this all happened and my son was fifteen. I mean we go to Europe so often so my kids know that kids there are raised very differently than the kids here, much more open when it comes to sexuality and drinking and all of that stuff. No, I didn't mind. I don't know if they had sexual relations. I have no idea. I hope not [*laughing*].

Clearly, in this one instance, the tacit acceptance of a romantic relationship (without “sexual relations”) is an indicator that much as she became *like* a daughter to Klara and *like* a sister to Klara's daughters, Madeline was neither.

### Rights and Authority: Being Not “Real” Parents

Perhaps the most important way that Susan and Richard Macy, along with others, create differentiation is by drawing limits around what kind of rights they will assume and authority they will exercise when decisions about care must be made. Ultimately, they suggest that because the guest teens have parents, as hosts their position is only advisory. As was the case for caregiving between peers (in chapter 2), host parents imply that family members retain both rights and authority whenever possible.

Richard calls the various young folk who have lived with them his children. At the same time, he explains that although he and Susan were parental, they were never “actual” parents to any of the kids who stayed in their home. All the teenagers had their own parents involved in their lives; what Susan and Richard thought the teenagers needed—and what the couple was offering—was something distinct. And even though the language and even the precise word is the same (“parents”), in Richard's account the meaning differs from how the word is normally used: “They needed parents here. Or they needed parents that were going to be with them for a while or they needed parents that will give them a safe place for a while or stuff like that.” “Parental” or not, Richard and Susan were not going to adopt these children or keep them for the long term; the co-residential arrangements were always conceived of as being temporary. These relationships were bounded from the start.

Mia Brunelle says something quite similar about parenting. She thinks of herself as an “other” mom rather than a “real” one.<sup>16</sup> This became clear when she answered the question of how many children she had. Highly articulate at some points, she stumbles, starts and stops as she talks about these relationships and how they are different from the one with her own child: “Oh, I just say ‘the one son.’ No—these—none of these kids would—I think—would call me—I'm kind of like their other mom, but I'm not . . . And I don't presume to take—be a parent because that comes with—I'm not sure that's fair to their parents.” Mia describes the distance, the not being a “parent,” as an issue of fairness to the blood/legal parents. She also describes this distance as having to do

with long-term expectations concerning care for people who will be dependent as they age:

MKN What does “presume” mean, when you said, “I don’t presume” to be a parent?

MIA It means [*pause*] there’s no strings attached. [*Pause*] I love them to bits and if they want to love back, that’s great. But I don’t—I’m not—there’s an expectation about moms and parents, and that’s a much more formal relationship.

MKN An expectation of what?

MIA I don’t know. I’m trying to think, an expectation—I don’t expect them to have to take care of me when I’m older. I can see that. But [*pause*] it’s not a parent-child, it’s not a formal relationship, I guess. I think they all think of me probably as friends [*pause*] or they will address me as Sean’s mom.

Other respondents suggest as well that it is important to keep the blood/legal parents in the loop and not to overstep boundaries.<sup>17</sup> Part of what is being negotiated or handled with these insider-outsider relationships is when to call in the “real” parents and when to take charge. Klara Weber had a difficult moment when Madeline got into a financial difficulties in college *and* wanted to have an abortion. Over Madeline’s objections, Klara decided to involve both the organization that underwrote Madeline’s initial visit to the United States and Madeline’s parents

Ellen Walsh denies that she has a different *quality* of feeling for the step-nieces and other people who have lived in her home than she does for her own child.

MKN How are these relationships different from your relationship with [your son] Jeff?

ELLEN I would say quantitatively rather than qualitatively. . . . I feel very committed to the last guest and to the step-nieces in the same way, in the same quality of feeling that I have for Jeff. It’s just the quantity is different.

Yet, she says she keeps a kind of distance because she wants to avoid a confrontation with what she calls “the real mother,” who is already jealous enough that her daughters turn to Ellen and Tom at moments of trouble.<sup>18</sup> Ellen marks the difference in levels of authority with names. She refers to herself (*vis-à-vis* one generation) as an aunt and (*vis-à-vis* the next) as a grand-aunt and never as either a mother or grandmother: “I think aunts and uncles are advisory just as I think there’s a difference between being a grandparent and a grand-aunt. . . . I would take more direction from a grandparent than from a grand-aunt . . . [grand-parents] have more authority.”

## After Co-Residence

Now that they are grown and out of the house, Richard and Susan Macy's children stay in very close contact, coming home often and calling regularly when they cannot; this is the way they do *their* family. With the former guests, the contact is less regular and as much through Facebook as through phone calls. And although Richard says that "it feels like [the people who stayed are] a member of our family even if they were only here for two years or three or four months," what he seems to be describing as family membership in these cases is a form of relatedness that is neither that of nuclear nor extended kin. Richard and Susan go to graduations and weddings when they are invited. They buy presents for babies when a birth announcement arrives in the mail. However, they are not otherwise embedded in the broader kinship structure of their "honorary daughters." Nor are those "honorary daughters" embedded in theirs. Relatedness here depends solely on the relationships that remain among Richard and Susan (along with their "actual" children) and the guest children. Moreover, Richard and Susan are also explicit that, much as they have loved some of their honorary daughters, "luckily [they] don't have to send them to college." "Doing like family" thus turns out to be quite different from "doing family." When pushed to clarify that difference, Ellen Walsh acknowledges a difference that extends beyond the quantity of feeling and levels of authority. She explains, that Jeff is her only heir and that (as with the like-sibling bonds described in part I) this marks a significant distinction. Tom agrees:

ELLEN I'm trying to think of things that we would do for Jeff that we wouldn't do for the others. Our will is the difference.

TOM Yes, that's the difference.

ELLEN Our will says everything goes to Jeff.

Interestingly, Ellen then suggests that she knows Jeff will "allocate money to the girls" by which she means the series of (former) step-nieces who have lived with them. And although Ellen and Tom *are* attached to these "girls" through some kind of kinship bond (even if the legal bond is now broken), Mia Brunelle, who has no kinship bond with any of the young people who have lived in her big blue house, says much the same thing about inheritance when I ask about her will. Sean, her son, is her only heir, but Mia assumes he will take care of her other "dependents"

## Host Children

Richard and Susan Macy are breezy when I ask about the impact of outsiders on dynamics within their family; they believe their children have never felt

threatened by the kids who have come to stay with them. Several other parents also reported only positive reactions on the part of their children. However, some parents with open-door policies suggest reactions that are more varied. Tom and Ellen Walsh now believe it was not good for Jeff that they hosted Sasha, the first of their several step-nieces; while Tom and Ellen define the problems as “just you know, sibling rivalry kind of stuff,” their full discussion acknowledged the stress.

However, we do not need to rely on the interpretations of the parents alone.

### Differentiating Brothers from “Brothers”

When I sit down with Karin Olson to ask about her “family-like” relationships, she begins with the family in which she grew up, using the concept I have adopted in this and the previous chapter: “Here’s the story. My mom always had what she called an open-door policy. ‘We have an open-door policy,’ she said, and I think that she just felt ‘the more the merrier.’” Karin then describes each of the four people who lived with her family while she was growing up. The first of these—and also the one who stayed the longest—was an extended family member who needed a place to stay to finish high school: “He was a cousin of my dad’s . . . and when he was in high school his parents moved to Arizona, and he just didn’t want to go and . . . so my mom said, ‘Let’s let Randy come live with us.’ . . . I think he was maybe there two, three years.” And although she can tell in one long breath (and sentence) who this person is, the ambiguity about what he means to her emerges in her speech: “I have two older brothers. I’m the youngest. He was like the older yet brother—he was kind of like, I thought of him—kind of in that way, as a familial figure. He was like a member of the family.” So, Karin, as do other respondents, uses language that both claims and distances. She makes Randy “like a member of the family,” and yet at the same time she differentiates when she says, subsequently, that “he had lots of his own siblings,” and she had her “own two brothers.” And when asked whether she had a different relationship with him from the ones she had with her brothers, she makes the distinction based on familiarity (as we have seen guest children do), on knowing her brothers “better.” She then quickly reverts to saying that Randy “felt like family,” by which she means that he was “enmeshed in our household,” “was special,” and “was not just one of our many cousins.” Even so, she acknowledges that her mother mediates her relationship with Randy, whereas Karin maintains her own relationship with her brothers.

As Karin describes the other three men (her mother’s preference, perhaps like Richards “honorary daughters”) who lived with her family while she was growing up, she relies on language (as do host parents) to differentiate guest children from members of the host family: “I have two brothers that I call brothers and I have three ‘foreign student brothers.’” When asked to define her relationship with the first of these “foreign student brothers”—the one to whom

she was closest—she uses the language of instant reconnection that people use in like-sibling relationships: “I feel like he’s one of those people if you saw each other you’d start up where you left off and that would be very, very comfortable. I’m very comfortable with him. I don’t know him as well now. I haven’t been to his house, and I have never met his son. So, I don’t know him the way I know my brothers, but I feel like he’s family; I feel like he’s among the family orbit.”

Here again—as was the case with her hesitations—Karin indicates that defining just what this relationship is has become difficult. In placing this person “among the family orbit,” she suggests that he is both like family and also not quite fully family.<sup>19</sup> Karin has nothing but good memories of her relationships with the “foreign student brothers”; she acknowledges something more complex in her relationships with her blood/legal brothers. Not only does she know them better than the guest brothers, but she has a competitive relationship with them, and especially with the one her mother seems to have made her favorite. By implication, she acknowledges “baggage” and occasional dissonance as elements in her family relationships.

Like Karin, Steve Wilson is a university professor; he grew up in upstate New York and now lives in California. When he was a child, his parents hosted a Fresh Air child who came regularly for years; they also hosted innumerable neighborhood children who needed a place to eat or stay. One of these children, a boy close in age to Steve, ate with the Wilsons several times a week during much of their adolescence. Steve is proud of his parents’ open-door policy: “My family always did have permeable, very permeable boundaries. . . . Most of my friends in life know my parents and brother well because I’ve always brought them [to my house,] because my parents are cool and really accepting.” Accepting as his parents were, Steve is very clear about who is in and who is out, and he wants to protect those borders. He does not want to bring home his current girlfriend because he is not sure she is “marriage material”; when his brother’s family comes to visit, Steve encourages his young nephews to call his girlfriend Alice—and not Aunt Alice—because she is not yet *really* in the family. As he explains his reasoning about this, he articulates an entirely different view of his family than the one of “permeable borders.” Now he says that the family exists as something he feels he needs to guard against outsiders: “I think probably my family is very—especially my immediate family—is rather sacred or something or very, very important to me, and I don’t want to fuck it up or bring in people who I don’t think are always going to be there.”

Steve can also see that his parents applied different standards to the “outsiders”—most of whom were of a different race, class, or both—and to him. On the one hand, Ralph, the local adolescent who spent so much time there, was held up to Steve as being a hard worker and a source of pride to his parents, who felt they had had a hand in raising him: “They were proud of Ralph

for having a lawn-mowing business, and they rewarded him for doing it monetarily, and they would tell their friends, ‘Oh, if you want a lawn mower, call Ralph, he’ll do it.’” On the other hand, they always told Steve that he need not work, that “work was for adults; kids shouldn’t have to work.”

### Ambiguous Borders

The ease Karin Olson feels with the “foreign student brothers” might be because all of them are boys and all of them are considerably older than she is; none of them displaced her from her position in the family either as the youngest or as the only girl. Similarly, Steve Wilson recognizes that he was the “real” child in a middle-class family (for whom middle-class rules applied) and that the lawn-mowing neighbor was no competition.

For Melissa Park, the situation feels far more complicated, perhaps because her mother created relationships that Melissa found more ambiguous. Melissa’s mother, Faith Park, described her frequent inclusion of other children in her household as something “that was not really reaching out and adopting anybody [but] just letting people come close if they wanted to.” And Melissa would agree with that characterization with reference to one boy who spends a lot of time with her family. She does not feel threatened because, although he stays with her family and “fits in very well,” she feels “like he still holds back to some extent.” By way of contrast, she believes two girls her mother has also embraced *are* different. She feels that neither of them shows the same restraint and that they cross some boundary that should separate the host family from the guest children.

Melissa’s mother, Faith, denies that these two girls are a threat to her daughter. She says her feelings about her own daughter are complex and broad. By way of contrast, she says that her relationship with the two girls “is not strong enough to really support that much interaction. I think it’s very narrow. It’s like one filament. Very intense but very narrow. It hasn’t broadened out.” Even so, Melissa remains directly competitive with these girls, and she is frank about how she feels: “I just felt a lot like I was being replaced.”

### Repeated One-Acts

Most of the adults I interviewed who acted as host parents to other people’s children on a temporary basis did so repeatedly.<sup>20</sup> Like Karin Olson’s mother, they stated that they had (even if they did not use her words) open-door policies. Susan and Richard Macy cannot remember or agree on how many people stayed with them; Mia Brunelle did not even try to recall the number (“I have no idea”). These hosting adults initiated the action, even if they could not entirely control the scripts: they decided who would be included, how often, and for how long. Their pleasure in these arrangements led them to repeat performances. In

each of these households, sufficient material resources—these were solidly middle-class families with stable incomes—enabled adults to offer a room in their home and to cover the expenses of having an extra mouth to feed.

Because all hosting adults had children of their own, this repeated engagement affected those children. Karin Olson told me about having had four different “brothers” over the years and of having somewhat different relationships with each of them; Melissa Park talked about two girls and one boy who stayed often with her family, the former being more difficult for her; Steve Wilson remembered “permeable boundaries” in his family, which embraced local adolescents in need of succor and sponsored a Fresh Air child who came for a portion of each summer.

In each of these households, and in those of others I interviewed, family life was enacted year in and year out, with an ever-changing cast of characters: a central permanent cast and then “extras,” but rarely more than one of those extras at a time. Like a series of one-act plays, as soon as one reached its conclusion, after the briefest (and sometimes no) intermission, another performance began. In each, the curtain rises on a scene in which someone who is not a family member moves in to live with the host family; in the second scene people go about their daily lives in a manner that makes little apparent distinction between hosts and guests; in the third, the guest leaves and the original family members are the only ones left on stage. From these repeated performances, actors learn how to engage one another in a way that is sufficient to create a like-family experience and then—whether with pain or relief—learn how to disengage and let people go. The repetition helps to solidify the boundaries of “real” family membership; it is the “real” family that remains constant throughout each individual performance—and over the course of many different ones.

The three separate sets of actors—host parents, host children, and guest teens—hold their own overlapping, shared, and competing understandings of the meaning of this experience. What is common to all three perspectives is the acknowledgment that engaging in everyday family practices is what makes these relationships *feel* like family. Susan and Richard Macy found it weird when people did not participate in whatever it was the family members chose to do on a particular day. Host children like Melissa Park were unsettled precisely because guest children were sometimes indistinguishable from themselves in their daily actions. For their part, as noted in the previous chapter, guest children like Logan Smith loved feeling as if he could walk in the Murphy house without knocking on the door and open the refrigerator when he was hungry. As the family practices perspective suggests, a sense of family is done and displayed in the important *and* trivial routines by which we live.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time the members of each of these three sets of participants also experience family as “a reality transcending its members.”<sup>22</sup> This understanding

is obvious among the host parents when they speak of the impact a nonfamily member has on their family or identify their family as having distinctive sets of behaviors, expectations, and obligations. Host children also understand that they have a family independent of the guests and they might be willing to speak their minds about the impact guests have on them. Moreover, whether they appreciate the presence of outsiders or are discomfited by them, they learn that some people are not really members of the family and that different expectations apply.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the guest children, even before (but especially after) they return to their own families, acknowledge that they remained guests rather than acquiring membership in a new family. Whether they are delighted to return home, or wish they could have stayed away even longer, these children understand the limits of their inclusion in the host family.

In short, these temporary arrangements (in which guests are included in the daily activities of the household) transform family life and create a sense of being “like family” but do not fundamentally alter understandings of who is (and who is not) a member of any given, nuclear family. Ultimately, then, no one is confused about the actual border of family membership, even though a host child might be threatened by a parent’s relationship with a guest child and even though the language can get confusing, especially when the word *like* is dropped in casual conversation or the word *parent* is used to mean two different kinds of relationships—one temporary, one permanent. Once guest children move out, subsequent contact, obligations, and relationships *are* clearly different for guest children than they are for the ongoing (*real*) family members; the guests now recede into the background. At most they might be treated like “extended” kin, who see each other at important ritual events like weddings; at least, the relationships might devolve into sporadic visits or even entirely disappear.

By stressing the continuation of family membership, I do not mean to imply no one is changed by these arrangements. In fact, I would suggest that the host family is often both *re-created and reinvigorated* through the constant movement of others in and out of the household. That is, the temporary transformation of household residence almost requires ongoing reconfirmation of the boundaries of the existing nuclear family. Some analogous reconfirmation might take place in the home of the family of origin when a guest child returns there. As these families—both those of the host and those from which the guest came—are returned to their “original” state, they reveal the significance of structure as well as that of process. Guests and hosts alike “do family” with many different people, but only some of those people actually *are* family.

In short, in families like the Macys, guest children were appreciated for what they could offer but were not made into full family members.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this was sufficient for the guest teens too: they did not want to give up their own family membership; they just wanted to get what they could from being a



tourist in someone else's family. As we will see in part III, full family membership is more difficult to achieve, even when that is what is desired by both children and adults.

At the time when I conducted my interviews for part I of this book, in addition to being lateral, the like-sibling relationships were all nonresidential; they existed in addition to, and side by side with, whatever the participants thought of as being their kinfolk. The fictive-kin relationships could thus provide a safe vantage point from which respondents critiqued their *own* families of origin and their current nuclear families.

Something analogous (but often less explicit) happens in these host-guest relationships. The guest children learn about different ways: no matter which the children end up preferring, they now know that other patterns exist and offer their own satisfactions. Even more so, because they initiate the action, the adults who enact family by opting to include "outsiders" on a temporary basis inevitably acknowledge some kinds of limits to, or inadequacies of, their own families and of other families as well; perhaps without an open recognition of what they believe to be those limits, these adults would not or could not do what they do. Without help from outside, they cannot care for their members (hence live-in nannies) or provide diversity of experiences (hence exchange students). These adults state openly that they know that their own children should have access to other adults, that the parents cannot be the be-all and end-all for their children. Richard Macy articulated this belief for himself and his wife: "We always said, 'God forbid we would be the only adults who our children had a close relation with.'" In saying as much about their children and in offering to be these other adults to children who are not their own, the Macys hint at the structural inadequacies of the nuclear family as an institution in society.

The circumstances that prompt these host families to be hosts sometimes lead to direct criticisms of someone else's family. Richard and Susan Macy, for example, say, "Jordan had to be one of sweetest, easiest kids, adolescents you can ever help raise, but her parents found her impossible and they were treating her that way." Yet, Susan and Richard have not given up on the notion that just about any parent-child relationship can be repaired with time, and they see themselves as facilitating that repair: "Well, we went and had brunch with her parents and really talked it through, because this was a kid who was really banging with her parents, really rebelling in every way you could. They really didn't want her to come and live with us, but they understood that a break would be good for all." The "real" family is thus a site for occasional pain and hurt; the host family is a site for restoration and healing; once healed, the child will be returned to her "real" family.

At one level the middle-class parents I interviewed "did family" in a very traditional way. Depending on when the census takers came around—and

whether a guest child was living there or not—they might well have been included in that rapidly shrinking category of married, White, heterosexual parents living with their children. And yet that very traditional appearance rested on a frank recognition that no one family would (or even could, or maybe even should) necessarily meet all the needs of all its participants. Once again, as with like-sibling relationships, the nuclear family is both idealized and acknowledged to be less than perfect in its usual enactments.



**Part III**

**Fairy Tales**

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## 5

### Unofficial Children

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#### If the Shoe Fits

I first met Nicole Evans as the friend of a daughter of some of my friends, and I am not even sure why she mentioned her relationship with Joyce and Don Nowak. I also do not recall what specific language Nicole used to describe the Nowaks, who turned out to be the people with whom she had spent most of her adolescence and early adulthood, and who had subsidized those portions of her education (in boarding school first and then in college) that were not covered by scholarships. Whatever language she used, I am certain that it was not the simple language of parents or even that of godparents. I stored the reference away, knowing that this was a relationship I might very well want to know more about down the line.

And I did. A couple of years later, when I began in earnest to do the research for this project, I emailed Nicole to ask whether I could interview her during a stopover in New York City on my way to Washington, D.C. We agreed on a time and place—a noisy cafe in the late afternoon. I took her out for dinner afterward, and our interview melded into good conversation over good food. At the end of the evening, Nicole said that she would put me in contact with Joyce and Don Nowak. They too agreed to be interviewed, and so four months later I took the train to New York explicitly for that reason. Thus, I have *three* distinct voices here. And these three participants in this relationship told essentially the same origin story about how their affiliation had come to be.<sup>1</sup> At least they provided the same outline; the emotional tone and meaning was, of course, quite different for each person. The outline suffices for now.

Nicole's mother left when Nicole was two years old and her brother was twelve. For the next decade, Nicole lived with her father and, occasionally, a stepmother. When Nicole was on the cusp of adolescence, her father and the stepmother of the moment moved from Southern California to a small town in Montana. Both Nicole and the Nowaks told me that during the period when the family lived in Montana there were occasions when Nicole's father's actions were downright scary. Nicole tries to make it sound like fun when she describes a car trip at night when the lights on his car went out and he drove fifteen mountainous miles in the dark, guided only by the light of the moon and the occasional taillights of other cars. The quiver in her voice makes it clear that she had been terrified. Joyce and Don Nowak describe Nicole's father's actions with even less humor and even more concern, especially since by the time they became aware of his actions, Susan, the stepmother, was on her way out:

DON What people were saying was it was getting so out of hand that the state was thinking about intervening because he was doing silly things like he had a motorcycle, it's winter, and it's like Vermont, it's hilly—

JOYCE [*Interrupting*] Much worse than Vermont.

DON Yeah, worse because it's black ice all over the place and he's bringing her to school on the back of a motorcycle and he's all whacked out.

JOYCE Actually they were going to lose their house and he was going to buy a school bus keeping in mind we have only [*stressing with sarcasm*] 450 inches of snow a year in winter. He's going to buy a school bus and they were going to live in the school bus and he was going to hire this ex-con who was about twenty-two at the time to take his twelve-year-old to school every day.

By the time Nicole and I spoke in New York, she had been “with” the Nowaks for just about half her life. Not only had they sponsored her six years of boarding school and then her four years of college, but they had also routinely provided her with a home during vacations; they had covered medical and dental care; and in many ways they had come to treat her as if she were their child. The “as if” carries a special weight in this situation for both the adults (Joyce and Don) and for Nicole herself. “As if” is simultaneously a fantasy, a promise, and a reality.

Although I start the story of Nicole and the Nowaks from Nicole's point of view, I represent neither Nicole nor either of the Nowaks as accurate narrators. I know that all three are telling their own story to suit their own purposes and understandings. In choosing to begin with Nicole's narrative and to have it color the entire account, I do not mean to say that she is any more (or less) honest or any more (or less) accurate as a reporter than either Joyce or Don. What I am doing is, of course, in one sense, privileging a dependent child's feelings over that of the adults involved (as I did in part II when I began with the guest

teens). I have only the one case here of a young person who spent an open-ended period (that became years) entangled with, dependent on, and emotionally tied to adults who were not her parents. I deal with it at some length. I supplement it with a couple of quotes from the published memoir—*In Gratitude* (with its pun intended)—written by Jenny Diski (an author in her own right), who at the age of fifteen moved into the home of the author, Doris Lessing.<sup>2</sup> I also draw on the voice of one adult I interviewed to clarify specific points.

This chapter explores a young adult's perception of what was involved in leaving her family of origin and moving in with people of a different social class; the chapter also explores Nicole's perception of the significance of having no name for—and no model to follow in—a relationship that resembles but is not precisely that of parent and child. In the next chapter, I intersperse the Nowaks' narratives with other voices. These various narratives cover issues concerning motivations for taking in an unrelated child, negotiations with a child's natal family, the strings attached to these constructed relationships, relationship trajectories, and the actions each side takes to test the relationship and measure the depth of love. Taken together, these narratives suggest that this initial story is not all that unique but is representative of some of the complex dynamics found in this set of unusual relationships.

All the fictive-kin relationships examined in the preceding pages involve the intentional creation of a bond between two or more people who are not related by blood, adoption or marriage but who, for at least some period, apply the family idiom to their understanding of at least some aspects of their relationships: they say of these others that they are “like” family. The relationships examined in part II (between guest teens and host families) and those I will examine here in part III (between unofficial children and informal parents) resemble each other and differ from those in part I (the like-sibling bonds between peers) on two grounds: the relationships in part II and part III each involve bonds developed between independent adults and dependent adolescents or children, and they each usually (albeit not invariably) entail lengthy periods of co-residence during which members of two separate families are brought together to engage in family practices.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, however, the similarities between the relationships studied in part II and part III end there. The two sets of relationships have quite different characteristics, and almost all of those differences are consequential to their meaning and enactment.

Age is one of those significant differences. Guest teens are almost always (by definition) adolescents (or older); they are, like their host parents, intentional about initiating the co-residence even if neither party knows for sure what will happen next. (In these relationships of host families and guest teens, the only people *not* being intentional are the host children; they might not even be consulted in advance, and they are often the ones who are most unsettled by the experience.) As we will see in what follows, some of the relationships described



in these two chapters (part III) involve a degree of intention on both sides.<sup>4</sup> However, many of the arrangements I study here begin when the children are quite young. Nicole was only twelve when she was presented with a series of forced choices in a life outside her control. To be fair, for their part the Nowaks could not have known what they were getting into when they formed a bond with Nicole. Yet, the material—and maybe even most of the emotional—resources were on the adult side.

This brings me to several other sets of differences between the two categories of fictive kinship each of which has a generational divide. Although not highly relevant to most of the guest teen–host family arrangements I studied, formal organizations were sometimes involved. No formal organizations were involved in any of the arrangements between unofficial children and informal parents. More significantly, the vast majority of the hosting adults I interviewed for part II had explicit open-door policies: they had long since determined that, as one respondent said, “kids could come here.” By way of contrast, no informal parent I interviewed (and will discuss in chapter 6) had a policy in place, or experience to draw from, to guide them through the new affiliations they formed with a dependent child. In fact, all of these informal parents were flying by the seat of their pants as they developed relationships with children to whom they were not related. The same was true, of course, for the children themselves, as they sought to understand what role these new adults would play in their lives. One of the major uncertainties for *both* parties emerged from the open-ended nature of the relationship. Unlike exchange students—who come for a year and then leave—kids like Nicole Evans might end up staying “forever.” Underwriting this possibility of “forever” was the perception on the part of informal parents that the blood/legal family was at the least ineffective and at the worst downright abusive; this too is in sharp contrast with the open-door policies, which acknowledged only the need for respite and repair.

Research exists on a practice of “informal adoption” in which parent surrogates take over the care of children to whom they may or may not be related.<sup>5</sup> Courts also refer to a similar practice when they use the concept of “de facto” parent, defined as “a person who has been found . . . to have assumed, on a day-to-day basis, the role of the parent, fulfilling both the child’s physical and psychological need for care and affection, and who has assumed that role for a substantial period.”<sup>6</sup> Although I have used the term “informal” (for the parents), and was tempted by the term “de facto,” neither is an accurate portrait of what I describe here; nor is the term “parent” (even with the modification “informal”) appropriate—but I can find no other. Many of the fictive-kin relationships I analyze are partial and sporadic. When the arrangements become more routine, perhaps we could talk about “informal adoption” or “de facto” parenting relationships; it is unlikely, however, that even the Nowaks—who cared for Nicole for over a decade—could have won a custody battle in court

should Nicole's father have claimed that they had "stolen" her from him. But more to the point, as we will see, not even Joyce and Don Nowak call what they have done adoption (whether informal or not), because they know Nicole has her own parents. The Nowaks do not refer to their rights (as "de facto" parents), and not only because they have no need to do so; they know they are something other than Nicole's parents even if that something has no name.

Most of the cases considered here involve adults and children who live in different social class settings when they first meet; in all cases of difference, the adults have higher status than the children. Almost invariably, then—and we will see this very clearly in Nicole's relationship with the Nowaks—a child is expected to conform to sets of behaviors quite different from those of the child's family of origin; these expectations constitute the "strings" attached to the bond. The higher status of the adults is frequently conjoined with—and we will also see this clearly in the Nowaks' attitudes—contempt for the structure and dynamics of the life their unofficial children experience when they are with their families of origin. Not only do the children in these relationships have to learn to code switch, but they also have to learn how to absorb the implicit and explicit critiques directed at their parents.

Many of these relationships cross lines of race/ethnicity as well. Adults and children both have to make decisions about how much value to place on alternative norms and traditions. Does an Anglo family encourage a Latina child to continue speaking Spanish in their home? Does a Swedish child ask a Jewish family to celebrate Christmas so that she feels more at ease? Difficult as the issues might be, the complications created by difference are not only cultural ones. Nicole, Joyce, and Don can easily pass as the members of a related family unit when they go out together. They can decide for themselves whether to pretend to be something they are not and may never be. When the adults are of one race/ethnicity and the children of another, the unexpected groupings might raise questions about how the parties are related. Those questions would require ready—if not accurate—answers.<sup>7</sup> In short, different groupings face different challenges, both in feeling like and appearing to be a family.

As a final note of introduction, I would point out that relationships between informal parents and unofficial children have the most uncertain and varied trajectories of the three sets of fictive-kin relationships I examine. Some end with rupture. Some end with something quite different, which is the full inclusion (possibly but not always made legal by a formal adoption) of an unofficial child in the family of an informal parent. And some, like the relationship between Nicole and the Nowaks, retain elements of uncertainty and ambiguity over a long period.

## Nicole's Story

### Getting to Know Each Other

The move to Montana with her father and stepmother had been a difficult one for Nicole Evans. She had no friends in the new town, where all the kids had pretty much grown up together. Money was tight: her father, who had previously been a contractor, no longer had the connections (or the mental stability) to do anything more than casual construction work; her stepmother, who previously had been a scuba-diving instructor, first worked as a housecleaner and, six months after the family arrived in Montana, took off and began divorce proceedings. Nicole outlines her daily life:

I would make myself dinner, and do my own laundry, and stuff like that. Once my stepmother left, when I was twelve, I was pretty much taking care of myself. So I had a really hard time and I didn't have a lot of friends, but we had five acres of land and I would just roam around in the forest by myself. I was a great reader from a very young age and so I just read incessantly. I read all the time. And you know I had a dollhouse, I had books, I had stuff, so it was okay.

In this outline, Nicole acknowledges loneliness; she also suggests that she was resourceful enough to find in her immersion in books and dolls an "okay" substitute for friends and family. Indeed, as was often the case in the interview, Nicole both admitted difficulty and denied it. Still a young adult herself—Nicole was twenty-four when I interviewed her—she might not have been quite ready to acknowledge the pain of her mother's having abandoned her, life with a verbally abusive stepmother, and a father's increasingly aberrant behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Not only did Nicole's father seem to outsiders to be making potentially dangerous choices about Nicole's care, but he also seemed to them to be relying heavily on drugs. Nicole remembers that her first contact with Joyce Nowak took place during this time:

My dad started working for this couple who lived maybe a couple miles away. . . . And Joyce decided to hire me to do kind of like chores for them. So I was doing this project, cataloging their CD collection, and stuffing envelopes for this benefit they were doing, stuff like that. . . . And I was getting essentially an allowance from them to do it. . . . And I just started spending more and more time with them, with this couple. . . . And Joyce kind of started taking care of me when my father and his wife were going through their divorce. . . . And when they were gone I would stay at Joyce's house. And she would take me to school, and make me dinner, and stuff like that. . . . She was really fun and great, and she doesn't have any children of her own and she thought I was pretty fun, so we spent a lot of time together.

Nicole's account again denies her need for care, but this time acknowledges it as well. Her account also reveals confusion about her position in the Nowak household. Was she someone hired to perform certain tasks? Or was she a child who was getting an "allowance," being fed dinner, and being taken to school? Finally, her account suggests that, even though there was a generational divide, she felt (or wanted to believe) there was a rough equality between herself and Joyce, with each of them deriving the same satisfaction of "fun" from the relationship.

### A New Life Course

What happened next was that decisions loomed. Nicole remembers being told she could opt for one of three "choices"; she also remembers that she was far too young to take charge of her life at that moment, and none of the so-called choices made emotional sense to her. She knew that her father was unreliable and that he "wanted to go back to California." If she followed him "home," not only would she be at risk, but she would lose her contact with Joyce and Don Nowak, who had increasingly offered stable, everyday care. Joyce offered two additional alternatives, each one scarier than the other: "And Joyce said, 'You know you don't have to go back to California and go to school there and live with your dad. There's other options for you. You could come to New York and you could stay with us and you could go to school in New York. You could also go to boarding school.'" The first of these meant moving to a new city and living with people she barely knew and barely trusted. And Nicole initially viewed the second as a form of punishment. Ultimately, she was willing to go along with that idea once she visited the school that (although I have changed it) had a similarly fairy-tale name:<sup>9</sup>

And I thought, boarding school, that's, like, you see that in the movies. Who goes to boarding school? It's like that line from *The Sound of Music*, "Oh, darling, haven't you heard of the little thing called boarding school where you send the kids away." And so to me that's what it was—it's like bad kids go to boarding school, I'm not going there. And then we had met a couple . . . and they were driving there to visit their daughter and I drove with them to Rainbow Mountain School and I thought, "Okay, this is kind of nice."

Nicole might have thought, once again, "okay," but following that route also meant that she would now have some significant dependence on the Nowaks. A warning Nicole received from the mother of a friend suggests that Nicole had previously found other people interested in protecting her in some way:<sup>10</sup> "There was another woman who was helping take care of me. I was very good friends with her daughter. And I would spend the night at their house a lot. This mother said to me, 'You should not take this offer because this is a lot of money, and

you don't want to owe these people anything.'" Nicole did not ask the Nowaks what they might want from her in exchange. She simply told me that when she was accepted at Rainbow Mountain School, she agreed to go there. She adds as well that she thought this was what her father wanted her to do: "It was a hard decision to make, but also my dad really wanted me to go." Thus, Nicole suggests she got her father's blessing for the action she took, an action that tied her in a relationship of dependence on the Nowaks and brought about some form of separation from her father and her blood/legal kin.

### A Golden Slipper

Accepting dependence on the Nowaks also meant crossing social classes. Nicole is explicit about (even if she possibly exaggerates) the effort required to change what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would call *habitus*—the physical embodiment of cultural capital and the profoundly ingrained habits, skills, and disposition that we acquire as a consequence of life experiences within a specific social class.<sup>11</sup> Along with the acquisition of new knowledge, the change was felt in the body—through moments of hunger, squeezing into more constraining clothing, and performing unfamiliar activities. Nicole is also explicit about (even if she possibly exaggerates that too) the elements of what she refers to as both the cruder and more down-to-earth practices she was giving up:

[The Nowaks] had a very different lifestyle. Like, I remember when I stayed with them, I said, "Why aren't you guys waking up and eating breakfast?" Because that's how I always lived. As soon as you wake up, you go to the bathroom, you go to the kitchen, and you eat breakfast, and then you start your day. And so I remember being starving at like 11 a.m. and just looking at my watch, like when are we going to eat something. Because they lived in the land of brunch . . . [and] they played golf and tennis and had me take lessons. Like, I took golf lessons, [which] didn't interest me really at all. I took tennis lessons, which I liked. And then I would go to Florida with them and wear—like, Joyce bought me, like, a Lilly Pulitzer dress. It's just so funny to me now like I was wearing a Lilly Pulitzer dress and a cardigan. Prior to that I was like a tomboy. I used to wear, like, Teva sandals and huge baggy T-shirts. And Joyce bought me training bras and stuff. I didn't know there were things like that, like cultural things.

Nicole is both pained and bemused by the cultural impositions; she is even more pained and less bemused by the ways in which, even with her father's blessing behind her, she felt that the involvement with the Nowaks disrupted her affiliation with her kinfolk. In fact, the moments of discussing this disruption caused Nicole such congestion from unshed tears that she could barely talk. Once again, she refers to a countervailing lifestyle that she believes is more firmly rooted in straightforward affection and simple pleasures. Once again she

suggests that by being allied with the Nowaks she was actively participating in her own alienation from what she believes to be her birthright:

And so, from high school through the middle or even end of college, I kind of set myself apart from my family. And I was kind of apart from them. . . . There's something to be said about people who have known you all of your life, you know. . . . I have a connection to the lifestyle that my family members have in California, which is very centered around food, like grocery shopping and making food at home, and listening to music, and making music. I don't know. It's like a sense of belonging, which you can't really fabricate elsewhere.

Nicole's descriptions of what she gained and what she lost place the two lives in stark opposition. Nicole is aware of the contrasts she makes. She is also aware that these contrasts are not quite "fair" to either party. Nevertheless, she seems unable to stop making them: each vision represents a yearning to feel that she truly belongs someplace, that there might be a home where she is loved and accepted as she is.

There are two more such moments in the interview. One I report a bit later. The other I recount now because, with its contrast between down-to-earthiness and what Nicole regards as a form of upper-class pretense, the moment resonates with the earlier contrast of music making and golf lessons. Nicole believes that it was because the Nowaks had experienced the negative effects of the 2008 recession that they had decided to have a more "austere" Christmas than usual that year. In retrospect, Nicole suggests she had no problem with that decision: the Nowaks had always been generous with her; the Nowaks would be generous again if they were able. For Nicole, the issue was that they had not communicated with her about the extent of their difficulties and the consequences those difficulties would have for gift giving.

Of course Nicole could have been entirely wrong about what was going on, but the point is not that. The point is that she attributed their behavior to secrecy rather than openness with her: "But they didn't tell me and it was embarrassing . . . and [not telling] just doesn't align to my beliefs or style of communication." Being disappointed, she went to the imaginary model of her blood/legal family: Would they have acted like that? She continues, "And had it been—" She does not immediately finish the sentence. Perhaps she does not like what she is about to do. But, she does it anyway. She compares the two families, claiming one as hers (with the concept of biology and the word *my*) and the other (with the distancing language of Joyce and Don) as *not* hers:

I hate to compare my biological family and Joyce and Don because they're totally different. They are existing on different dimensions. It's not fair either,

to compare . . . my family who didn't live up to Joyce and Don and what they did . . . or Joyce and Don who didn't live up to these standards that my family would've done. Because that's too harsh and that doesn't make sense because they're not the same, they're not the same people, apples and oranges. But then I do think that had it been my family [with a financial crisis], you know like my cousins or my aunts and uncles, I think they would've said something. I think they would've come up with like some alternative plan. Like, we're going to make something.

Repeatedly, then, Nicole places the two families in opposition, drawing on the evidence of difference she has observed and, at the same time, creating a caricature of each one, not only as a signal of longing to find a home, but also as a way of resisting what is being offered now. One offers the comfort of familiarity; the other the discomfort of novelty. One offers grocery shopping; the other brunch. One offers music; the other golf and tennis lessons. One acknowledges a momentary shortfall in income and comes up with a plethora of handcrafted gifts; the other is tight-lipped and offers only a few store-bought items. In short, one is natural, homemade belonging; for the other, Nicole chooses the word *fabricated*. But it is not quite clear what, exactly, emerges from this fabrication.

### What Is Being Fabricated: The Relationship That Has No Name

As noted, I do not remember how Nicole first described the Nowaks. Perhaps, she used no name at all because she had no name with which to refer to either Joyce or Don. And Nicole found the absence of a name for this relationship unnerving—especially in relation to Joyce. Nicole tried various solutions—including that of letting people assume, simply, that Joyce *was* her mother—something she could do because by age, appearance, and behavior Joyce more or less fit that role:

All through high school I struggled with that, what am I going to call her. . . . At first I called her “my aunty.” And then it was uncomfortable because people would say, “Oh, your mother’s sister or your father’s sister?” and I was, like, “Well, neither.” And, okay, well, that doesn’t work. And then later in high school, people would call her my mom and I didn’t really correct them because all of the correspondence between the school, anything that had to do with me like my emergency contact, or billing, or anything, that was all going to her.

Later Nicole mentioned that the word *godmother* handled some of the external problems except when she would “forget” and talk as if the Nowaks were her parents, or as parental as her father was (not). Some of the terms Nicole used were cold and bureaucratic; some of them drew on notions of kinship; some were pure fantasy: “But those were all terms that were loosely used, like *aunty*,

*guardian, mentor, godmother*, those were all kind of used interchangeably. And by the end of high school I just called her my godmother. And in college too I called her my godmother, but then when people say, like, ‘Oh, where do your parents live?’ I would often talk about [the Nowaks and my father] interchangeably—which again was very confusing.”

Nicole found none of these solutions satisfactory in the long run, even if from moment to moment any one of them might have fulfilled fantasies she had about the meaning of that relationship. Even projecting into the future, Nicole remained uncertain about what name the Nowaks would have in their relationship with any children she might have. She said she had thought about what her own children would call Joyce and Don and was having trouble committing to the everyday language of grandparents. As Nicole answers my question, she indicates again that this issue of names taps into a very deep anxiety: “I think I don’t know [what my children will call Joyce and Don] because they would kind of probably be around, a lot. So maybe they’ll call them ‘Grandma’ and ‘Grandpa.’ I don’t know. It’s like so weird to say that.” Nicole still worries about whether Joyce and Don would be there for her and she hedges not once (“kind of”) but twice (“kind of probably”).

When the author Jenny Diski was dying, she composed a memoir about her life. As she tried to make sense of the period during which she had lived with Doris Lessing, she expressed a similar conundrum around the issue of names. Although Diski said she knew Doris for fifty years, Diski also said she “never managed to figure out a designation for her that properly and succinctly describes her role in my life, let alone my role in hers.” Diski insists that none of the “handy set of words” used to describe relationships fit her situation, and none of them was useful when speaking to others. She rejects “foster mother,” “my benefactor,” “my friend, Doris,” “my fairy godmother,” and “Auntie Doris.” As did Nicole, sometimes Diski would simplify, and call her “my mother.” Years later, she noted that that solution had its own drawback: “That made me so inordinately uncomfortable, ‘mother’ and ‘my’ being more than doubly cringe-worthy, that even now I feel the need to reiterate that she wasn’t really my mother.”<sup>12</sup>

Although I do not like to substitute the voice of an informal parent (as I refer to people like Joyce and Don Nowak, or Doris Lessing for that matter) for that of an unofficial child (as I refer to people like Nicole and Jenny Diski), I do so as I turn again to Carol Kennedy to reiterate how in these situations the forms of address are indicators of the confusion about what these open-ended relationships mean. Carol and Paul Kennedy took Dana in when she was thirteen years old. After a year of living with the Kennedys, Dana started calling Paul “Dad” because, as Carol interprets it, drawing on Dana’s stated explanation, Dana’s own father (Anton) had lost the right to that intimacy after he had essentially abandoned her. And even though Carol could have passed as Dana’s mom by virtue of age (Carol has children the same age as Dana) and



coloring (both light-skinned; both blondes), Dana did not call Carol “Mom” until three more years had passed. The discussion about what Dana called each of the Kennedys takes place after a crisis when Carol became furious at Dana about smoking cigarettes in the house and threatened to make her leave. When Carol said to Dana, at the end of a fraught discussion, “So I’m assuming that you’re going to abide by the rules of this family because we’re a family. We watch out for each other, and we take care of each other,” Dana starts to cry. Carol narrates what happened next:

Dana said, “I don’t always feel like I’m a member of this family,” and I [Carol] said, “Why?” She said, “Well, everybody else calls you ‘Mom.’” And I said, “You can call me ‘Mom’ if you want.” She said, “I can’t.” I said, “Why? You call Paul ‘Dad.’” She said, “But he is my dad. Anton is my father. He birthed me but he’s not my dad. A dad is somebody who does things with you and who loves you and who takes care of you and hugs you. That’s a dad. Anton just birthed me.” I said, “Well, I love you, I hug you, I take care of you.” She said, “But I have a mother.” I said, “Dana, your birth mom will always be your mom. I’m not going to take her place. She’s not going anywhere.”

At that point, Carol turns to me to remind me of some crucial facts about Dana’s history: “Remember Dana left her mom when she was six, loving her mom, knowing her only as someone who loved her and took care of her. Dana’s mom killed herself when Dana was eleven. Dana never had closure. I mean Anton was horrible to her so it was easy to switch those roles. But she felt that that to call me ‘Mom’ was in some way disrespectful to her mom.” Having explained the backdrop, Carol tells me that she quickly came up with an alternative mode of address for Dana to use:

I said, “What’s the Polish word for mom?” She said, “Mama.” I said, “So maybe she can be your Mama, and I can be your mom.” And she said, “I would like you to be my mom.” And I said, “I’ve always been your mom. I’ve been your mom since you were six years old and you visited this house for the first time.” I said, “You call me whatever you want, I’m still your mom.” And she started calling me “Mom.”

Implied here is that Carol believes she has resolved the issue of ambiguity (she *was* Dana’s mom) along with the issue of how Dana should address her. The situation might have been less clear to Dana (especially when Carol threatens to make her leave at least one more time after this episode).

The situation certainly was *not* clear to Nicole Evans, who reports that her questions about who the Nowaks were to her and who she was to them remained perplexing even as—or, more aptly, especially because—the anxiety over that

ambiguity deepened over time. At some points one of the major issues at stake between Nicole and the Nowaks was that of adoption and whether this relationship could, would, or even should be situated in legal kinship with legal obligations. Nicole distinctly remembers that when she was in high school and first started spending time with the Nowaks, she wanted clarity. And although she sometimes attributes the lack of clarity to *other* people's misunderstanding, it is clear that the burden of ambiguity weighs heavily on her: How could she understand what this relationship was for her? How could she function without road maps and guides? A straightforward parental model as she imagines might be seen in other homes did not work: "I think a source of frustration for me was that I looked to other people's parents, and our relationship didn't fit that."

Nicole might not know precisely what it is she wanted from Joyce and Don but she is certain the reality never quite matched some ideal. If at some points Nicole yearns to be reunited with her father, and perhaps also with her mother, as *their* child, at other points she wants the Nowaks to make her legal family, to turn the "as if" into an "is":

And I kept flip-flopping on whether I expected them to fit the model of parent, or beneficent uncle, or sponsor, mentor—I don't know. And it was frustrating to me. There was a while, when I first started high school—because it was so hard having people not understanding what this relationship was, and me not even really understanding fully what it was—it was so frustrating that all I wanted was for Joyce to adopt me and then I could just have it over with, like, "Okay, she's my mom, fine, I'm adopted, there." Wouldn't that just solve so many problems?

But Nicole did not tell the Nowaks that. She was young, vulnerable, and afraid that they did not or would not want her for good.

The author Jenny Diski explains that when she first came to live with Doris Lessing, she was consumed by the related questions of whether Doris Lessing actually liked her and of what would happen if Lessing did not. After considerable hesitation, Diski put forward her concerns: "My memory now, as I try for an accurate recollection, is of excruciating hesitation, bursts of speech, as if the half-sentences layered over each other, a tower of Babel tottering as I tried to get to the right words and failed. Did I look at her as I spoke or did I look down? I don't know." The words she chose conveyed her acute anxiety about what would happen if Doris did not like her because, being unable to live with either of her parents and having come to Doris from a mental hospital, as Diski phrased it, "there's nowhere [Doris] could send me back to."<sup>13</sup>

Nicole does not quite say so explicitly, but her reported actions suggest that she is constantly asking the same questions, looking for clues as to what she means to the Nowaks and whether they will keep her. And sometimes it seems

that she cannot quite accept the hints she is offered. During her junior year in high school, Nicole is experimenting with her sexuality, seeing whether a lesbian relationship fits what she wants and needs. Nicole believes that the Nowaks are unsympathetic toward homosexuality. When they find out what is going on, Nicole thinks they are about to expel her from their home.<sup>14</sup> But Nicole did not get rejection, although she did get an admonition, if not to change, at least to work through the issue in therapy: “So Don had this conversation with me, and I think I just, like, blacked out—I don’t even remember what he said, I was so terrified. . . . Then Joyce said, ‘You need to go to the counselor and figure this out.’”

As Nicole deals with her terror about the Nowaks’ reaction, she both acknowledges that she has no idea how her blood/legal family would have acted *and* simultaneously imagines that they would have handled the situation much better than the Nowaks did. Once again, she uses her idealized family, and what she hopes would have been the response there, as a way of resisting the idea that what the Nowaks offer is the best she can get: “I don’t really know what the reaction would have been. Like, let’s say that routes diverge and I went to high school in California, and I was around my family a lot and I lived with my dad and I had a relationship with a girl. I know the reaction would have been totally different. But that’s not what happened.” And she uses this moment again as a basis for rejecting Joyce’s version of what she refers to as unconditional love during a moment in a counseling session that the two shared:

[In the counseling session] she was saying things about unconditional love and she was, like, “Do you even know what that is?” And I was, like, “Yeah I know what that is.” And she’s, like, “Well, how do you know?” I was, like, “Um, Bible stories or something, everyone knows what unconditional love is, it means that you love a person absolutely no matter what they do.” I remember I just couldn’t believe it when she said, “I have unconditional love for you.” I was, like, “Are you sure?” And I thought to myself, “Are you sure?” Because wouldn’t a person who loves someone unconditionally say, “Oh, you know what, you have a girlfriend, or you think you might be bisexual, okay, I’m with you, we’ll figure this out, maybe you are or maybe you aren’t, but I support you.” To me it was, like, “Well, there are a lot of things that you [Joyce] do that are not unconditionally loving to me.”

At some moments during the interview, Nicole sounds more confident about the Nowaks. Yet, she repeatedly comes back to the fact that she still looks for clues about the permanence of this relationship. She hopes that being an heir for both heirlooms and money could represent that permanence:

Oh, we’ve talked about [their will] actually. Because, I can’t remember now if it was Joyce or Don who brought this up, but I think it was Don actually being

kind of sarcastic, because he struggles with direct communication. Like, he'll say "I love you," or, like, "I'm so glad you're here" and stuff like that, but other more difficult issues he struggles with, like, you know, money. I think their original plan was to take whatever their assets were and donate it probably to Don's college or something like that. And then Don kind of was jokingly saying, "Well, I just figured we'd give it all away, but Joyce wanted to make sure you were taken care of." So that was his way of saying, like, I was in their will.

Nicole denies need and expectation: "And I said, 'You don't have to give me anything.' I said, 'I'm not, like, you know, banking on that, and I wouldn't care if all of your money went to your college or not.' So I just said, 'Just know that I'm not going to feel slighted.'" However, she cannot deny her feelings:

And then Joyce said one day, "Oh I'm going through my jewelry and getting rid of some things, but why don't you tell me if there's anything you want." And I was like, "Eh that's not really my style." But then—this was kind of sweet to me—she said there were a couple of things she was saving for me. And she's, like, "You know, this was my grandma's and maybe you want it, but if you don't, it's fine." And there were some things I didn't want, but I thought that was kind of sweet, she was saving heirlooms almost for me. And I appreciated that, you know, it's like I am their family in their mind.

Although Nicole seems to both reject ("not my style") and trivialize ("sweet") what Joyce is offering—and cannot fully believe what she is hearing ("almost")—she also acknowledges that she is grateful for the sentiment, the implicit statement that she now belongs with them. And when I asked her to expand, to say what she meant by saying she was in "their family in their mind," she responded:

[I mean] that I am part of their family, I'm their child—and, like, for better or worse, you know. And Joyce likes to say things like, "Well, you know you can't choose your family but we chose you." Well, no, she actually just says, "You're born into your family but you can choose your family too, and you can choose who you spend time with and stuff." And so she acknowledges that she chose me. But it's also kind of funny because, "Well, you chose me, but you know it doesn't mean everything is perfect all the time."

Nicole here both stresses the choice that underlies this new kind of family and insists that being chosen did not resolve all interpersonal dynamics in this new family form. When I remind her that blood/legal families do not necessarily achieve perfection either, she responded: "Well I think what Joyce meant was, usually it's worse in families [because] you can't choose the people that are going to be in your family. So she's kind of lucky because she got to choose

someone she wanted to be in her family. And maybe she didn't know at first that I would be what she wanted." In this comment, the issue of choice is ever-present. So too is the anxiety that choice represents: what is chosen can be unchosen. However, Nicole is not only passive. As we have already seen, she too is creating obstacles to complete acceptance of life with the Nowaks by way of her competing commitment to, along with her idealization of, life with what she simply calls "my family."

## Happily Ever After?

The story Nicole tells—a wicked stepmother, a fairy godmother, tests to see whether the "golden slipper" fits—quite obviously evokes a comparison to Cinderella.<sup>15</sup> The author Jenny Diski suggests that a similar narrative both characterizes and does not characterize her relationship with Doris Lessing: "It's like something out of a fairy story' was a phrase people often said to me when they learned how I got to live with Doris. To which I would answer yes, or sort of, or say nothing at all." In her private rumination, Diski explains that rather than being a fairy tale, the story of the life she shared with Doris was "a rare instance of life after the ellipsis at the end of most fairy stories," a response that complicated the simplicity of the fairy-tale ending "they lived happily ever after": "I did proceed into another life. Or at least into a life that was probably different from the one I might have had if Doris had not issued her invitation."<sup>16</sup>

For Nicole too, "life after the ellipsis" was far from simple. The underbelly of the Cinderella narrative has been exposed for the case of adoption. Indeed, a vast scholarly enterprise of critical adoption studies, along with personal narratives, combine to tell us that loss and separation are sometimes part and parcel of whatever might also be celebrated in that arrangement.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, children in foster care—even when they have experienced significant abuse—tell us that they want to go home and live with their parents rather than in the "better" home provided through social service agencies.<sup>18</sup> Nicole also indicates that her lost family has significant appeal to her (especially when it becomes a countervailing ideal).<sup>19</sup> Unlike children who are adopted or in foster care, Nicole's situation appears to lie within her control. No agency or official requires her to stay where she is. But Nicole is too young in her early adolescence to make informed choices about what is best for her. As we will see in the next chapter, whether their own families are appealing or not, some people in a situation like Nicole's eventually do decide that the costs of acceding to the requirements of life with their "informal parents" add up to more than they want to bear, and they (maybe willfully, maybe unwittingly) precipitate ruptures. And, as we will also see, these arrangements—with all their insecurities and vulnerabilities—have costs for people like the Nowaks as well.

## 6

### Informal Parents

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#### Promises Broken, Promises Kept

People like the Nowaks, who offer an alternative family to children on a possibly “forever” basis, describe the motivation for doing so as some combination of perceiving an unmet need, falling in love, and, almost invariably, being chosen as well.<sup>1</sup> The first of these elements always involves some form of arrogance: the blood/legal parents are cast as being inadequate. That is, like the fairy godmother of fairy tales, informal parents believe a child is in need of rescue. The second element—the emotional connection—need not be instantaneous, but it is usually represented as if it were. As we will hear repeatedly, people who assume the position of being an informal parent talk about falling in love with their unofficial children. In addition, the third element, of mutuality, offers a relief from questions about whether someone is making the right choice: because they are loved in return, the adults also are chosen.

The narratives suggest the combination of these three elements happens but once in a lifetime. The Nowaks made arrangements to meet the financial and educational needs of nieces in the past; they never established the same intimate relationship they create with Nicole Evans. When Nicole comes into their lives, something distinctive happens. First, they see “a person who needs help,” and they believe that what they have to offer—whether at that point they define it as parenting or not—is far superior to what Nicole is receiving from her father. Second, need is not the only issue. Joyce immediately recognizes Nicole as

someone with very desirable characteristics: “I mean she was fun to be with. I like being around her. She’s very easy. She’s always been very, very, very smart. Very smart.” (When Joyce says this during the interview, Don reminds her that the attachment grew quickly: “You also had a really tight bond with her. You really grew tight.”) Third, both Nowaks believe that Nicole had been an active participant in the establishment of this relationship and that as much as Joyce had chosen Nicole, she had chosen Joyce and Don as her protectors. Don says, “And she had developed very good survival instincts, so she knew her own situation was not sustainable even at a young age, and so she pretty much picked us as well.” Wryly, he adds that they could tell that Nicole had selected them because she “never went home again.”

Each of these three themes appears in various other accounts as well. Recall that Carol Kennedy told me she both saw need in, and felt instantaneous love for, Dana, and that Dana herself spoke of coming to live with the Kennedys as having her dreams come true. Similarly, Diane Bates describes how she had been drawn in a heartbeat to her daughter’s teammate: “The social daughter appeared in my life when she, Gabrielle, was seven and [my daughter] Lisa was eight, and they were on the swim team together, and this little girl just slipped herself into my heart.” Diane also stresses vulnerability (repeating that Gabrielle was seven) and what Diane believes is bad parenting at home:

I was being a good parent and going to swim practice . . . and there was this African American kid who I know now was being abused at home, and was being really pushed academically and athletically so that she could get a scholarship. And she was a pain in the ass. She was a mess. I always liked little girls who don’t exactly behave. I mean she was hitting other kids in the locker room, and she was furiously determined to win, to beat everybody at swimming. And so I just started hanging out with her. . . . And her parents were never there. . . . She was seven.

And, importantly, Diane explains that Gabrielle quickly grew to love her in return: “And she had a little five-year-old sister that the same thing was happening to. But Gabrielle was the one that I hooked, we just hooked. And she just loved me. And she started calling me ‘Momma Diane’ pretty early on.”

Judith and Larry Gerber, who are both White, helped raise two biracial children from infancy and now also help raise the child of one of them, a girl they call their granddaughter. Judith Gerber speaks casually about how the first of the babies came into her life:

JUDITH So I can’t even remember if we ever got friendly [with the mother].

I don’t think so, but all of a sudden she was having a baby, and [the father] left, or she kicked him out, or whatever, and then there was this baby.

And so somehow here she was a single mother, and so we used to get to take care of the baby.

MKN What do you mean by “you used to get to take care of the baby”?

JUDITH Well she was bringing the baby across the hall and we would take care of the baby. . . . So, you know, so we just got into this habit. She liked to go out, and she also was a photographer and so she would go to demonstrations, and take photographs, and so we would take care of the baby.

Casual as these occasions might have been, the perception that the love was reciprocal shines through Judith’s account: “I remember, we didn’t have a crib or anything like that for the baby, so she used to sleep in the bed with us, and I remember sort of her, you know, glomming onto my chest and sleeping like that all night.”

Some of my respondents were single women who did not have children of their own living at home when they “took in” an unofficial child; some had had their own children, but others had not. The language of perceiving need, falling in love, and being loved in return is much the same as it was among women who were married. Brenda Washington, my sole African American respondent, who told me that she had grown up with a tradition of “helping,” spoke differently about the one biracial child who came to live with her (initially along with her White mother), than she did about a practice that was rooted in custom:

There’s a difference between “You help others” and crossing the line from “You help others” to “Now I take you on as my own,” and that’s the difference that Kayla crossed, [because] I just really was taken by Kayla. She just clung to me and I clung to her, and then something just transpired in my heart. And I can’t explain what that was, but I couldn’t love her any more if she was mine.

Similarly, Donna Miller stresses enchantment, a perception of need, and reciprocal love when she explains why she chose Amber, a Latina teenager, from among the children she taught at school: “There was something about that kid. She had such potential. . . . I started bringing her home for weekends, letting her see another way of living, other kinds of things you could have. And she loved to be with me.”

As I explore relationships between people like the Nowaks and Nicole Evans from the perspectives of the adults involved, I turn first to the dynamics of interactions with the child’s natal family and then to the dynamics within the home when a new child enters a pre-existing family configuration. I show that adults often indicate that these new relationships are conditional and that both adults and children engage in testing those conditions. Some of those tests result in ruptures; others result in firmer affiliations whereby unofficial children



become part of a family; and some remain in a land of uncertainty. Whatever the ultimate trajectory of these relationships, they represent a creative improvisation with traditional family forms.

## Negotiating with Blood/Legal Families

Bringing home someone else's child is never a simple act. Children are not necessarily just available for the taking: each child comes with his or her own family and with attachments to the members of those families. That is, negligent or not, many unofficial children had parents who were unwilling simply to give up a child, no matter how advantageous the alternative might appear to be. In addition, the children themselves might have deep loyalties to their parents and might also have siblings from whom they do not want to be separated if they change their residence (or even their family allegiance).<sup>2</sup>

### The Issue of Competition

In claiming an interest in and responsibility for Nicole, the Nowaks are clearly saying that they believe that what they have to offer is superior to what Nicole was receiving from her father. Her father, Joyce says, is "insane." She then allows a certain "niceness" even though she finds him totally incapable of providing care to his daughter: "Her father is an untreated bipolar. He's a nice guy, from a pretty nice family. He's just an untreated and total druggie alcoholic. He's totally crazy." The Nowaks have even greater contempt for Nicole's mother, who left Nicole and her brother when Nicole was a toddler. Don characterizes her as "a druggie with all this other sort of craziness" and introduces no ameliorating factor. At the same time, the Nowaks do have to keep their contempt and hostility in check when interacting with Nicole's father: because they have no legal claim to Nicole, they are dependent on his good will; if he so desired, he could take Nicole from them. They probably also have to hold their contempt in check when talking with Nicole. After all, these are her parents.

Joyce and Don Nowak are not offering a cooperative arrangement aimed at assisting Nicole's father in what he cannot handle by himself, as was the case for the host parents in chapter 4.<sup>3</sup> This is, rather, a form of outright co-optation that often results in competition between two families. When, as a young adult, Nicole takes her boyfriend to meet her mother, Joyce is clearly furious. When I ask her why she is so angry, why she cares so much that Nicole did this, Don answers first: "Because Joyce is very competitive." Joyce's correction suggests that she believes that she is competitive not just directly with Nicole's mother, but also with the fantasy Nicole has about that mother, a fantasy Joyce believes prevents Nicole from finding happiness—and from giving Joyce what she believes is her own due:

JOYCE No, it's not that. The biggest problem I had even with her now is what she really wants is to be loved by her biological parents, and that just isn't going to happen. I think there's almost no way for her to find happiness until she gets good in that. She hasn't gotten that yet. . . . I want her to be able to move on.

DON You also want her to acknowledge you more.

JOYCE I don't expect that for a while still.

DON Yeah, but you want it.

JOYCE Yeah, I want it.

Judith Gerber, who along with her husband, Larry, cared on-and-off for two generations of biracial children who are not their own, is open about her competition with Janice (who like the Gerbers is also White)—first as the mother of Ada and Emen and then as the grandmother of Ada's daughter, Chloe. Judith positions herself and Larry as “the more responsible adults” and then refers to herself as the mother who acted appropriately in that role: “I think [the competition] was there because . . . I thought of her as a bad mother, and I was a good mother. At one point I started trying to find about what the processes were for child welfare to report her.” Judith explains why she might have taken that step: “Well, when she had murderers living in her house, [and] then there was a period she brought back Emen's father, who got out of prison but was still on drugs. . . . As I said, I thought of her as a bad mother.”

As she remembers the years of care she provided, Judith acknowledges that Ada and Emen remained loyal to their mother (“I mean, her kids love her”), and so she could never “win.” She also suggests that, perhaps, Ada evoked some of the competition by playing the two women off against each other: “I mean, it's funny that Ada would call me—she's now in her late twenties, actually thirty—and she's still calling me whenever Janice [her mother] says something mean to her. No doubt, she told Janice things about me. So Ada sort of like had this two sets of parents.” The competition remained muted as long as Janice had the primal position as the mother; once Ada became the mother, and Judith and Janice both felt like grandmothers to Ada's daughter Chloe, the competition seemed to be on a more equal footing. Perhaps for this reason, Judith upped the ante: “Then,” she said, “it was a full-scale competition.”

Brenda Washington also finds herself in intense competition with a blood/legal grandmother—the mother of Kayla's mother. She fights back when she believes that her claim is being undermined:

[The other grandmother will] take Kayla and say, “You know Brenda is not your family, we're your family.” And so Kayla would come and she would be in tears, she would be like, “[My other] Grammy says that you're not my family and I can't love you because you're not my family.” And I said, “But do you love

me?” She says, “Yes.” I said, “Then I don’t need to be your family for you to love me, do I?” “No,” Kayla said. “So that’s not important,” I said. “They have to love you, I don’t. I chose to, that’s even better.”

Brenda’s response to Kayla is revealing: she is not bowing out of competition at all. Rather, as Nicole said Joyce did with her, Brenda says she is offering a better love because it is built on choice rather than obligation.<sup>4</sup>

### The Issue of Claims

Children with separated and divorced parents might also have at least two adults, living in separate locations, each of whom claims the children as the adult’s own. When stepparents are involved, there might well be additional people with an interest in, and claims on, a child. And while there might be enormous cooperation among these various parties, there might also be considerable hostility. Some of the same kinds of issues might arise for what I am calling “informal parents” as for stepparents, such as questions of how much parenting responsibility or even “ownership” they might “claim” for themselves.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, some of the same kinds of issues might arise for unofficial children as for stepchildren, such as questions of how to manage affiliations to two separate families and how much they are really loved—or even liked—by all those involved in their care. In both sets of arrangements, people must work out what they mean to each other in the absence of institutionalized expectations.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, I would contend that many of the issues in the informal arrangements described here are different. Stepparents become stepparents because they want a relationship with someone who already has a child; the stepchildren are the byproduct of the relationship.<sup>7</sup> In the case of informal parents and unofficial children, *an interest in the child is what starts the relationship*. If the two sets of adults with interests in the same child (or children) compete for acknowledgement and love, only one of those two sets has the legal right to make decisions about a child’s welfare, including how much time that child will spend with the “other” adults. Dana lived with her father, but she often stayed with the Kennedys for long periods of time. Even so, it was not until Anton threatened to send Dana to live with his relatives in Toronto that Carol insisted on her “rights.”

Another informal parent, Diane Bates, also says she has to exercise extreme caution about making claims. She recognizes that she has no legal status, and she engages in overt negotiation with Gabrielle’s mother over what she can and cannot do:

Gabrielle wasn’t my child. I had no legal anything. . . . I promised her mother that I wasn’t going to get in the way of her being her mother [when] Gabrielle

was probably about ten. . . . I said to her, “I’m going to be very careful and make sure that we all know that you are the mother, that I’m not the mother of this child.” So, what I was trying to negotiate fairly intentionally with Gabrielle’s mom was that both of us were loving her, both of us were trying to give her a strong sense of stability and morals.

Donna Miller did not have to compete directly with another mother when her student Amber decided to stay with her. When I asked Donna whether she had consulted with Amber’s parents, Donna responded that Amber had been pushed aside in a household in which a younger brother was preferred and that the mother raised no objection to Amber’s moving in with Donna as a seventh grader. Even so, in the absence of any formal recognition of her role in Amber’s life, Donna suggests that ultimately she failed with Amber because she had no legitimate authority: “[If she had been my child] we would have gotten counseling and I would have been in control. . . . Amber was able to come and go the way she was able to come and go because she wasn’t my biological child. Nor was I her formal guardian.” As we saw in issues of caregiving by people in like-sibling relationships (in chapter 2) and again in issues of adult care for guest teens (in chapter 4), rights and authority are not easily transferred from family to either of those kinds of fictive-kin relationships. The same is true in this third set of relationships, even when the blood/legal parents allow a child to remain, or spend long periods of time, with their informal parents.

### Preserving the Child’s Bond with Family: What’s Left and What’s Lost

Phyllis and John Gimbel become the guardians of Ricky, a fourteen-year-old boy they get to know through their daughter’s involvement with a summer-stock theater program. In explaining what happened at the end of one summer, they evince contempt for Ricky’s mother, who, they said, simply “drove up and literally dropped off Ricky and all his stuff.” Nevertheless, they try to retain a “cordial” relationship with Ricky’s mother, and they suggest that they are hesitant to come between Ricky and his mother even as they try to guide him into creating more distance there:

PHYLLIS I think he has bailed her out financially of some situations . . . even though we would never have suggested that he do that—

JOHN [*Interrupting*]—or not do it.

PHYLLIS Yeah. I mean I just feel like she’s always taking advantage of him.

JOHN I mean we talk to him about it. . . . Really, we were clear with him from the very beginning that she was his mother, and no matter what happened with us that we understood that he had a mother and a father and that we were not trying to challenge that or change that. And so we still talk to him, we still say to him, “She’s your mother, but at some point you have to

look at what's good for you and figure out a way to get her to understand who you are and what you need as an adult from her."

If the Gimbels honestly believe that they are not undermining Ricky's relationship with his mother, Ricky himself may very well remain unsettled. Phyllis speaks for both herself and John when describing what they believe to be Ricky's difficult relationship with his mother: "I think he has a really complicated relationship with her that he keeps trying to fix still, and we both feel that there's nothing he can do to fix that." However, it is not *just* that. Phyllis and John recognize that Ricky also feels bad that he has made something of himself while he has left a sibling behind:

PHYLLIS I think that he always—I think that there is guilt on his part that he left—

JOHN [*Interrupting*]—and that he's successful.

PHYLLIS That he's successful, that he left, and his sister didn't—

JOHN [*Interrupting*]—and she's a mess.

PHYLLIS I think she's a very capable young woman too, but when she was graduating from high school . . . she wanted to go to college and her mom said, "But you have this great job at Petco. Why would you leave that?" So she didn't. And so she's living back in the mom's house.

The sibling left behind is complicated for the Gimbels also. They feel guilty that they could not "rescue" her, but they acknowledge their limits—and Ricky was the child with whom they had fallen in love.

PHYLLIS What I feel bad about it is should his younger sister have been removed from that home, and we weren't going to offer that to her.

MKN Because?

PHYLLIS We didn't have a relationship with her.

JOHN And we also knew what was our limit.

Abandoned siblings are there as well in other stories. Diane fell in love with Gabrielle and not her younger sister.<sup>8</sup> Virginia and Dennis Mayer initially sponsor Tarone, a fifteen-year-old boy from the Caribbean, because they see that he has extraordinary talent as a soccer player. And although the Mayers worked hard to provide him with both a rigorous education *and* rigorous coaching in soccer, they do not offer the same for Tarone's siblings: "We said, 'Tarone, we just can't do this again. We should but we can't,' and we knew that by not doing this for [his brother] Donald, things wouldn't [go as well for him]." And later, when it turns out things did not go as well—or well at all—for Donald, Virginia both denies and accepts feelings of guilt: "Donald hates our guts. But we, I mean, I still feel guilty—I don't feel guilty because I couldn't have done this [again]."

## Internal Family Dynamics

The inclusion of unofficial children into a household that still had “official” children living at home is reported as having gone smoothly in only two of the five such cases I studied. In one of these two, it was the Gimbels’ daughter, Andrea, who was thirteen at the time, who originally put forth the idea of inviting Ricky to join the household. She believed, even at that young age, that he needed the kind of structure her family could offer. Phyllis recalls the conversation with Andrea and her own initial hesitation:

My daughter said, “Ricky and I were talking, and I told him that he should come live with us.” And I said, “Hang on there, that’s a big deal.” [*Laughter.*] Plus I work as a guidance counselor in a high school and if anybody asked me should I take in a fourteen-year-old boy who has lived in twenty places and does not do well in school, I would’ve said, “No, are you out of your mind? Are you nuts?” So I said that would be a family decision that we would have to make, and we would have to talk to Ben, our son, about it. I said, “Your father and I have to talk about it, and we have to think about that.”

It quickly turned out that not only did Andrea’s father, John, like the idea but that her brother, Ben, was entirely on board too: he loved the idea of having another boy in the family. Even so, the Gimbels were cautious, and they made it clear that priority would be given to the effects of this new venture on the current family. Phyllis explained:

We said to our kids and Ricky that we don’t know how this will go. We don’t know how this will impact our family. If we feel it’s a problem, then we’re going to make a decision about that. Everybody needs to feel okay about this process and if it seems like it’s not going well for any of us then we need to look at that again. . . . If I had felt that it was really detrimental to our children in some way that wouldn’t be right. . . . I think that we said, “We’ll see how this is going.”

John agrees with this assessment, that as a couple—even as a family—they moved incrementally: “We said, ‘We’re going to play it by ear and see how it goes.’”

In only one other household did inclusion not lead to resentment. The respondent, a woman in her eighties, recalling what had happened a good fifty years earlier, told me about a boy who was “with” her family “on and off for a long, long time” and how that boy became “just kind of like another one of our sons.” She implies that he was easily welcomed by the entire family and especially by the son who was this boy’s age, and that the two boys were “best of friends.”

In three other households, the situation was far more complex. Joanna Darling described relationships in her household after it included an Indonesian child—Verawati—who lived with Joanna and her daughters for three years. Joanna said of this girl,

She was the most loving, sweetest person ever, she just fit in and she loved us back with all of her heart, and it ended up that my next daughter grew up, so in the end it was Verawati, Celeste, and Clarissa who was a baby, and . . . it was just a really wonderful household, and Verawati was like this golden nugget in the midst of it, this heart, this heart person. . . . Celeste and Verawati . . . cared about each other; they were family.

In an earlier interview Joanna Darling had suggested that this “golden nugget” was not welcomed quite so eagerly by the older daughter (who for some time had lived with another family in order to resolve her own adolescent difficulties with her mother); in fact, Joanna implied that her older daughter felt displaced by Verawati. In this household, the inclusion of an unofficial child had mixed effects on the resident children.<sup>9</sup>

Carol Kennedy described an even more problematic situation. Recall that Carol now perceives that having taken in Dana was especially hard on her oldest son, Joey. As she explains why she thinks it was so difficult for Joey to adapt to the new arrangement, Carol curiously creates suspicion about Dana’s achievements while lauding her son’s efforts.

Dana treaded on everything about Joey. She was a pleaser, and in order to please she got straight A’s. Joey is smarter than she is, way more common sense, but academically he didn’t do as well. Dana came into the family and started trying to find her way, and in trying to find her way treaded on his friends, treaded on his relationships, told family stuff outside of school. I knew it was hard on Joey. He never said so, he was never mean to her, he never didn’t look out for her, but he worked hard to preserve himself and his friends. . . . And I will always look back and wonder did I look out for him enough? Should I have done it? Should I have seen earlier how hard that decision was going to be for him?

Even with her doubts, Carol whitewashes everything in the end: “But the reality is Joey’s an absolutely wonderful twenty-five-year old young man, our relationship with him is superb, and he’s not any the worse for wear. . . . We can all be together, we can all have fun together, we’re good.”

I do not know how often—or how ferociously—Diane Bates’s daughter Lisa was jealous of her teammate Gabrielle. But some kind of jealousy is clearly implied when Diane makes this statement: “Because Gabrielle was not legally

adopted, I never had to say to Lisa, ‘Look, she’s your sister, she’s my child as much as you’re my child.’ I could always say to Lisa, ‘You really are my child.’” The statement speaks volumes about tensions existing in Diane’s household. Moreover, as we will see, ultimately Diane’s perception of Gabrielle’s treatment of Lisa precipitated a final rupture between Diane and Gabrielle.

Respondents in two other households had grown children by the time they took in an unofficial child. Virginia and Dennis Mayer said that they simply asked their son Jason, who was at that point a graduate student, for “permission” before they invited Tarone to live with them and that Jason had fully supported the couple’s venture. Similarly, Brenda Washington suggested that her three grown children encouraged her developing relationship with Kayla.

In two couples a married woman had to persuade her husband that taking in an unofficial child was a good idea. Carol Kennedy is clear that the decision to take in Dana was hers and that she set the norms. She also admits easily that her husband, Paul, was more ambivalent and that he resented the new set of constraints on his behavior, especially having to be careful in showing physical affection to a child who was not yet his own. A physical therapist with a local practice, he was well aware of the possibility of being perceived as overstepping some line. Don Nowak speaks for himself when he says that he was not consulted and that he had to scramble to catch up with Joyce with respect to affection for Nicole:

DON Joyce screwed up because she makes these unilateral decisions without ever consulting me. . . . And she goes, “By the way Nicole’s coming to live with us.” I should have been consulted.

JOYCE I just said, “There’s no point to talk to you about it, there’s no other alternative.”

DON I didn’t get bent out of shape. I can get bent out of shape, but not about those things, plus Joyce and I have a good enough relationship—and I like Nicole, and the finances part weren’t an issue.

## Strings Attached

Babies and toddlers might simply be loved for who they are. Nevertheless, eventually even with them there are strings attached to a becoming a family member: the unofficial parents want them to acquire the cultural capital, and abide by the norms, that are part and parcel of their new class position. Judith Gerber is proud that Chloe, the child she calls her granddaughter, can tell the difference between expensive hotels and those her more indigent mother can afford; Kayla has to attend church with Brenda Washington although she does not do so with her mother. The “strings”—one could almost say the quid



pro quo—show up even more obviously for older children as conditions of membership in a new household.

Joyce and Don Nowak do not mince words when they describe the expectations to which they assumed Nicole would conform. Nicole recalled golf and tennis as the compulsory trappings of a new way of life. Joyce also remembers requiring ski lessons: “You know, we live on a ski mountain. You should go ski.” And when that turns out to be something Nicole excels at, Joyce takes pleasure and pride in her achievement: “Of course she is better than any other kid we ever saw. She’s just a natural.” Don plays his part too. He suggests he taught Nicole how to “entertain”: “When you have friends over [that’s your responsibility]. And you’re going to have to learn how to entertain them. Be a giver and if it’s not in your DNA, learn to fake it.” Clearly, as all sides acknowledge, there was much to be learned.

Diane Bates first met Gabrielle, the competitive swimmer, when she was seven years old. Initially the only requirement for receiving Diane’s love was love in return. But, as she grew older, if Gabrielle wanted to stay with Diane for more than just a meal, she had to follow Diane’s rules about doing her homework, reporting on her whereabouts, and obeying curfews. As we will see later, Diane also had another, implicit set of rules that Gabrielle eventually broke. However, for many years, it was simply stated that Gabrielle could not stay at Diane’s house unless she followed the spoken ones, and as Diane says, she let Gabrielle decide whether or not to move in: “I did leave that decision to Gabrielle. She never came to live with me because my rules were too strict. . . . So she’d eat at my house and then disappear. She wasn’t going to make the commitment to living with me because it meant that she’d have to abide by the rules.”<sup>10</sup>

Unofficial children appear to have understood the rules; at some level, the children also knew that the consequences of breaking the rules meant returning home. That return would have been especially difficult for some children, either because of distance or because the arrangements involved a more formal transfer of guardianship. In these cases, the contractual nature of what was being offered was made very clear from the beginning.

John and Phyllis Gimbel make an explicit arrangement with Ricky—the child with whom their daughter had formed an alliance in summer stock—when they decide to take him in:

JOHN I think one of the things we were clear with him about is that if he came to live with us, he really had to get with the program. That he had to go to school, he had to do his homework, he had to be involved in—

PHYLLIS [*Interrupting*]—an activity.

JOHN —an activity, that we expect him—

PHYLLIS [*Interrupting*] He had to be home on time, that there was going to be a lot more structure than he had experienced.

JOHN That he really had to be accountable to us and that just like our children—that we wouldn't expect more from him, but we would expect the same, and we were really clear about that.

## Testing the Waters

John remembers with amusement the first day that Ricky tested whether the Gimbels meant what they had said:

It's funny because I always remember the story about the first day when he came home from school and our children would come home and they would start doing their homework . . . and Ricky was sitting there and doing nothing. And I think Phyllis and I walked in and asked him, "Well, do you have any homework?" He said, "Yes." And we said, "So?" And he said, "You mean I have to do it?" We said, "Yes." And he said, "Really?" I said, "Ricky, you have to do your homework." And he started banging his head. . . . And we said, "You can pound your head as much as you want but you don't do anything else until you do your homework just like everybody else in this family." So he did it.

Ricky's testing seems to have been relatively mild. After just one episode of banging his head, he indicated that he was on board. But other children engage in more testing of the relationship—and of their place in it. As the adults tell these stories, they suggest that because they too feel vulnerable, they might engage in testing of their own. Indeed, it seems that because these relationships emerge from choice—and can always be "unchosen" by either side and at any time—all parties seek reassurances about where they stand.

### Adult Reports of Children's Testing

Joyce and Don interpret much of Nicole's behavior as consisting of tests, not just (as Ricky's was) of whether rules could be broken, but of whether or not Joyce and Don really care for her and whether or not they will be there for the long haul. Joyce defines the fracas over the lesbian relationship in these terms, as part of Nicole's constant seeking for guarantees with respect to her standing in the Nowak household: "I think every adult she's ever known has rejected her and in her mind has rejected her, so I think part of [her having that lesbian relationship] was a test and . . . I think Nicole might just always [do that]."

Even before the rupture described below, Diane Bates felt that Gabrielle had been testing her. Diane believes that she endured those tests for a very long time because she loved the child and understood the cause of the behavior:

From the very beginning there was something very lovable about that person for me, and I responded—sometimes, despite my best intentions—in a loving, gentle, open responsive way to her. . . . Her mother would probably say Gabrielle really never loved me. I don't think that's true. I think Gabrielle does love me, and I think that I speak to a part of her that she would like to cover up with bluster—"I'll take care of myself"—and limited attachment—"Nobody's going to dare hurt me because I'm going to hurt them first." And I can easily see why, where that came from. I put up with that for a very long time.

As she explains her reaction, Diane curiously and constantly changes tense, acknowledging current pain as well as past practice.

For months after Tarone came to live with the Mayers, he violated their curfew, saying, "I don't know why I have to come in on time." And Dennis would answer, "You have to come in on time because to live in this world, you have to be disciplined and blah, blah, blah." And the two of them, Dennis says, would "go nose to nose." Years later, Virginia says, even Tarone admits that he was testing. He was "trying to provoke Dennis." And he was "sure Dennis would hit him"—and then this new family would be, if not over, not perfect after all.

### Adult Reports of Adults' Testing

Adults also are looking for clues about how much they are loved and what this relationship means to the children they have embraced. Indeed, as Joyce Nowak shows clearly, she is needy too. She wants Nicole to give up her fantasy of what she will get from her parents and acknowledge what the Nowaks have given. Moreover, even though she and Don insist that Nicole chose them as much as they chose her, Joyce suggests that for years she was uncertain how much Nicole loved them. She tells a story about how meaningful it was when Nicole casually called them her family after they had been caring for her for at least five years:<sup>11</sup> "The biggest clue [about how she felt about us] I had was when she got into that leadership program in college. . . . And we get there [after she had been there for two weeks] and she's like, 'We were supposed to announce something [to the group and] I announced that I picked a new family.' That was the first time I ever heard anything like that. Dong! Like literally!"

Even as they look for clues, the adults I interviewed acknowledge that they occasionally devised tests of their own and sometimes even threatened ruptures. Their accounts suggest that at least at some points—and this is usually relatively early in the relationship but not always—the optional nature of the relationship comes to the fore. Finally, one day, Tarone's testing does provoke Dennis, if not into hitting Tarone, into threatening to send him back to the Caribbean island from which he came: "When we came home, I said, 'Tarone, that's it. You're going home. We're not putting up with this

anymore.” And he starts to pack. And he starts to cry. I made my point. I never had threatened him before, and I never threatened him after, but I made my point then.”

Carol Kennedy also threatened rupture when Dana acted in a way that she perceived as breaking household norms—norms that perhaps not so coincidentally privilege Carol’s biological children. This is the crisis that ends with Dana’s calling Carol “Mom”:

One day I grabbed a raincoat and found cigarettes in the pocket. Now Dana knew the boys were allergic to cigarette smoke and that no one was ever allowed to smoke in our home. And I walked in her room and I laid the cigarettes on the table and I said, “Make your choice. Cigarettes, pack your stuff and you’re out the door. Or you respect this family.”

On a later occasion, when Dana seemed to turn on her and deny the love she had been receiving, Carol threatened rupture again. The painful incident—and Carol openly acknowledges both her pain and her uncontrolled response to that pain—transpires after Dana had spent a summer in Poland, staying with her blood/legal grandmother:

And she came back and she was distant, and snotty, and borderline rude, and I said, “We need to talk.” . . . And she said, “Fine, if you want to know the truth, I appreciate all that you’ve done for me, I really do, but my family, my real family is in Poland and I belong in Poland with my real family.” Well, she totally and completely broke my heart. . . . She said, “I need to stay here and finish high school, and when I’m done with high school then I can go back. . . .” And I said—*I was really bad, I don’t know if you want this on tape, I was so bad. Edit the tape*—I said, “I’m not a bed and breakfast and I am not responsible to educate you. If you want to be a member of our family then you can live with our family as long as you want to live with our family. But if your other family’s over there then you’re not using this family so you can get on the next fucking plane and leave.” And I broke down crying and I walked away.

Whatever the motivation was for Dana’s behavior in that episode (and Carol suggests it had to do with a summer romance), Carol’s comments make clear that for her Dana’s membership in her family was still an open question; her phrasing of “our family” and “this family” indicates as much as a similar phrasing did among the open-door hosts. And while Dana continued to live with the Kennedys—and now has a daughter whom Carol happily calls her “first grandchild”—the hurt lingered for years. In fact, I interviewed Carol twice; the second time she started with this moment, telling me about this episode again, using almost precisely the same words.

From Dana's perspective, this moment might well *not* have been a test of Carol. At that point, Dana might have felt that she did not want the Kennedys to replace her blood/legal kin, and she had no other way to express herself. The dynamics of these relationships allow for moments in which the parties are not in sync.

## Ruptures

No matter what the motivations, tests do not always resolve themselves in a way that ends happily ever after. Judith Gerber goes into a rage over a forgotten Thanksgiving dinner, a time when Ada, Chloe, and Emen did not come when they were expected because they failed to tell Janice (who is the blood/legal kin) about their obligation to be elsewhere. When I ask her to explain why that moment evoked such anger, Judith responds explicitly in a language of testing: "I mean part of it was just rage, part of it was, I think, a test saying, 'We have this relationship, I've taken care of you since you were an infant. We have to agree that I'm part of this. Even if it's not family then I'm [still] part of your life, and Chloe's life. And if you can't say that to your mother then, you know, I'm furious at you.'" Judith does not insist that they call each other "family," but she does insist on an acknowledgment that she has played—and has every intention of continuing to play—an important role in the lives of Ada, Emen, and now Ada's daughter, Chloe, as well. This turns out to be a risky move, and the result is a rupture: Ada and Emen walk out with Chloe, and it is more than two years before Judith and Larry are "allowed" to have a relationship with them again. When I spoke with Judith the first time, during the period when she was not seeing Ada, Emen, or Chloe, Judith was so congested (as Nicole Evans had been when talking about her extended family) that she could hardly speak; when I met with her a second time, after a reconciliation (two years later), her words flowed freely.

Diane Bates had loved Gabrielle since the moment of laying eyes on her in the swimming meets and for years Diane allowed Gabrielle to come and go—to stay when Gabrielle wanted food and structure and then to leave when the requirements became too stringent. Whatever threats of ruptures occurred along the way, the actual rupture came when Diane believed that Gabrielle was mean to Diane's daughter Lisa. That proved to be the proverbial last straw. And although in Diane's account it is not quite clear what Gabrielle did to Lisa, it is clear that Diane felt Gabrielle had crossed some line: "Gabrielle said to me, 'Well, you know it's just a little thing [between me and Lisa,] and it's all going to blow over.' And I said, 'No, I don't think it is going to blow over, and I think Lisa's really, really hurt.' . . . And that's the last intimate kind of conversation or encounter we've had. . . . I took sides with [my daughter] Lisa."

When, several years later, Gabrielle calls Diane to tell her that she is having a baby, Diane does not pick up the bait. Having thrust Gabrielle out of her life, she is not about to become a grandmother to Gabrielle's child.

I didn't hear a thing from Gabrielle until about eighteen months ago I picked up the phone and she said, . . . "Momma Diane, you're going to be a grandma." And I was sort of not feeling very much like a grandma at that point, so I've not acted like a grandma. . . . I was mad at her. I was mad at her because she's been mean to my daughter. That's just the most rawest part of the whole thing.

If Diane feels ambivalent, she says, "the ambivalence is not in my head, it's in my heart," suggesting that she thinks she made the right decision, even if the rupture has caused her considerable pain. And the pain is obvious during the interview: Diane is as congested as Judith Gerber (and Nicole Evans) when she talks about her experiences with Gabrielle. Even so, Diane is not letting Gabrielle back in: "Gabrielle's the social daughter, she's a daughter that I acquired in, you know, my world of social relationships. I feel sad [about the rupture,] but at this moment I don't really feel like she's very connected to me."

By highlighting ruptures between unofficial children and informal parents, I do not mean to imply that relationships with blood and legal kin cannot also be ended; obviously, people do disown or simply drop out of touch with nuclear and extended family members, and people in romantic relationships and marriages separate.<sup>12</sup> Nor do I mean to imply that fictive kin are the only kin we choose. People make choices among their relatives, now favoring one sibling or cousin and now favoring another. And, of course, people also choose whom they marry, and they might even choose whom they formally adopt. Nevertheless, fictive kinship differs from the kin chosen through marriage or adoption because, by definition, the relationships exist outside the trappings of law.<sup>13</sup>

## **Part of a Family**

In no case did I find relationships between unofficial children and informal parents that simply attenuated, as was occasionally the case for like-sibling bonds and relationships between host families and guest children. The intensity of the bonds described here do not allow for that kind of ending. The relationships are either all or nothing, ongoing or ruptured. But what that ongoing "all" is, often remains undefined. And while it might be comfortable at moments to exist outside of culturally defined patterns and to be entirely creative, at other moments the lack of definition weighs heavily on people's attempts to understand who they are and what they mean to each other.

During the interview, Nicole reflected on how she had understood her relationship with the Nowaks. When I asked who Joyce and Don had been initially, Nicole gave her father credit for inventing the concept of a fairy godparent. Don has a different memory of who came up with that description; in his telling, the fact that he was bankrolling Nicole was at the root of his understanding that the term *fairy godfather* aptly applied to him: “We would just tease and say I’m her fairy godfather, and that’s how we felt then.” Don now thinks it was foolish of him to joke around, that he did not yet recognize how serious the issue of who they were to each other was for Nicole: “I was stupid. . . . She didn’t know whether I loved her like Joyce loved her.” Don added, “Nowadays we refer to her more as our kid. We refer to her as ‘our daughter.’” If he is comfortable these days calling her “our kid,” he is conscious of the facts both that he had to wait for her also to be comfortable with that label and that she has not always felt loved by him: “I remember going to FAO Schwarz for her birthday, and I got her one of those huge gorillas and sent it to her, and she just adored that. And that sort of started the path that she recognized that she wasn’t just Joyce’s toy, that she was part of a family. She was part of a family.”

When asked directly what *she* called Nicole, Joyce turned to Don: “What did I do? What do I do?” Joyce’s confusion about names reflects her deeper confusion about the relationship. If Nicole wondered just how permanent the relationship with the Nowaks was and for how long they would find her “fun,” the Nowaks clearly had their own uncertainty about how much Nicole cared about them. Moreover, although Don says that Nicole is their “kid,” he does *not* say that he is her father. This is not just an oversight. Don and Joyce both know that Nicole does have a father—and a mother too. So, Nicole might be given a status in the Nowaks’ lives, but they are not given titles that signify their position in hers.

The same distinction is made by Phyllis and John Gimbel, who took in Ricky when he was in his early teens. They say that Ricky (who is now in his mid-twenties) is their child and they say that they would do for him whatever it is they now do for their other children. But—and this is a significant *but*—they do not call themselves his parents. I irritate Phyllis with the questions I am asking in this part of the conversation—perhaps because the questions are too invasive, perhaps because Phyllis does not know how to answer them. I open the conversation about this issue by asking them what Ricky called the two of them when he first came to live with them. John answers first:

JOHN John and Phyllis. That’s how he still calls us. . . . I mean he has a mom and dad. I think he knows that at this point we consider him one of our kids, but I think that he doesn’t also call us Mom and Dad because we’re not. I mean we’re something else.

MKN What are you?

JOHN I don't know. [*Laughter*] We're people in his—we're his family. I mean he refers to us as his family. He has his mom and dad and sister but he refers to us as his family.

MKN And what do you think that means to him?

JOHN It means that we are the people in his life who are there and will always be there and are connected to him and understand him—I don't have—I'm not exactly sure but that what I—

PHYLLIS [*Interrupting with some irritation*] I didn't have that discussion with him.

JOHN But I really think that he knows that we don't distinguish between him and our other kids in terms of, if he needed something, we would do it as quickly as we would do it for the other two children. I mean that is something that evolved. We didn't make that commitment to him at the beginning, it was something that evolved.

John and Phyllis thus simultaneously acknowledge Ricky's parents (he has a mother and a father) and refer to the relationship as being one of "family" without claiming parentage.

The issue of namelessness for the relationship (and especially, perhaps, for the adults) is foregrounded as well in Judith and Larry Gerber's relationship with Ada, Emen, and later Chloe. While the kids called them by their first names in private, Judith says that the kids never knew how to define the relationship to others: "It was always interesting that they didn't know quite how to introduce us to people." Apparently, the three kids fudged in various ways and occasionally drew on the language of godparents (as did Nicole) although they knew they had "real" godparents.<sup>14</sup> Judith suggests that the absence of appropriate language left the relationship without a secure mooring:

So they would call us their godparents, but we weren't their godparents; they had godparents. . . . Janice had picked, even for Chloe, godparents. So we never got to be the official godparents of these kids. So we really never had any kind of formal tie to them. I never said to Janice, "I would like to be their godmother." I guess I felt like Larry and I were there for them and that it was our charisma that would keep them. And I guess I assumed we'd always keep them, and we'd always have a relationship with them.

Judith's response is telling insofar as she sees the relationship relying on their "charisma," on the children's desiring to be with them. Like Nicole's "fun," the optional component is there; the relationship is always up for grabs. It is chosen rather than obligatory and fragile rather than secure.



## Trajectories

Don and Joyce Nowak both talked about how their relationship with Nicole changed over time. Equally clearly, Phyllis and John Gimbel described their growing love for, and commitment to Ricky. What started out as an arrangement of “Let’s see how this works out” became a long-term venture. When I ask the Gimbels whether they thought Ricky ever had a hard time feeling that he was fully accepted, John’s answer suggests an evolution: “I don’t think Ricky is the kind of person who’d dwell on that. He was used to living day to day, and so I think that at some point, I think, he must’ve realized that it evolved for all of us and that at one point it was clear that he was part of our family. I can’t tell you what day it was, but I think that when he realized that when we decided to do things he was included—like when we went to Italy, when we went to Spain.” Of course John might be right—Ricky might have simply accepted what came along, day by day, and eventually (happily) come to the realization that he was “part” of the family because he was included in their expensive, all-family travel. But, of course, something else might have been the case.

At the end of the interview, when I asked whether there was anything either Phyllis or John wanted to add, John gave this response in which he defined family as an inclusive ideal: “To me family means somebody is part of your life that you are committed to. You don’t have to like everything about them, but whatever they need, you’re willing to give them, and if you need something, you’re willing to ask them, and you’re willing to accept if they can or can’t give it to you.” At the same time as John is expansive in his definition (and therefore suggests that he has lots of different fictive kin), Ricky, the child they have by now made one of their own, has a different status from the other people John includes in his expansive definition. And the evidence for Ricky is *not merely* “whatever they need, you’re willing to give” and “if you need something, you’re willing to ask them.” John, like every other respondent, makes a distinction between those who are “in” his family and those who are “like family.”

From the very beginning, the arrangement with Ricky had been different from the open door the Gimbels were long accustomed to offering to friends and casual visitors. This was no one-act play, even if it did unfold scene by scene. By the time we spoke, Ricky had become essentially indistinguishable from their “other” two children to John and Phyllis. When asked how many children she has Phyllis answers three; John says of Ricky that they would do for him what they would do for their children by birth; and both agree Ricky will soon be, although he is not yet, a beneficiary of their retirement accounts on the same terms as the two children born into the family.

Of course, different components of the transition happen at different times. It is a process to create relationships that are felt to be, not just like, but

*actually* family with people to whom one is not related by blood, marriage, or adoption. In some cases included here, the transition is made formal: Carol Kennedy adopted her Polish daughter Dana after Dana turned eighteen because, earlier than that, they would have had to get permission from her biological father; two years before then they had already changed her last name to theirs. However, even without formality, the sense of being family became increasingly apparent over time even as, at certain moments, that sense was challenged. Virginia and Dennis Mayer also speak this way about Tarone, the soccer player. Their language does not describe Tarone as being “like” one of their own, but as being their child as much as is Jason, the son to whom they had given birth:

VIRGINIA You know we don’t spend any more money on Tarone or any less money on Tarone than we did on Jason. . . . Tarone became our child very, very quickly.

DENNIS And he fell into that role. It wasn’t that we had to bang him on the head. Once we showed him that we were his parents, he became our child.

When we sat down together for our interview, Donna Miller skipped the niceties, so eager was she to talk:<sup>15</sup> “Well, I have a grandson, Daniel, who is not related to me by blood or family or anything like that. He’s almost thirty-three. . . . His mother, Amber, had first been a student of mine and [then she lived with me]. She was like my own daughter. She’ll be fifty-three in August.” Lest I misunderstood, I asked her to define these relationships for me. Once again, she was clear about the difference between them:

MKN Amber became like a daughter to you?

DONNA Yes.

MKN And Daniel was like a grandson?

DONNA No. He *is* my grandson.

And once more, during the interview, she reiterated this: “He calls me ‘Grandma.’ . . . He is my grandson. Period. End of discussion.”

The full-fledged claim that this is family represents one trajectory for fictive-kin relationships that begin with the informal “acquisition” of a child to whom the adults are not otherwise related. This is full citizenship, as “like family” becomes simply “family.” Yet, even this path diverges. On one path, the new status is “certified” by formal adoption papers and the informal parents become “actual” parents. On the other path, no formal adoption ensues but the new status is marked on the part of the informal parents by long-term commitments, by the end of casual (or not-so-casual) threats of rupture, by taking responsibility for and making decisions concerning the child, and by the

inclusion of the new family member in the rights of inheritance. In this instance, a new form of family is created: adults “share” children with other adults; children retain their blood/legal parents as well as acquiring another set of people who act like parents but are not actually parents. For the adults, either kind of action seemed to resolve uncertainty: “He is my grandson.” Those adults who already had children of their own made comparisons to those children to show that they were treating their newly included child as they did their other children.<sup>16</sup> I have already quoted two such families. Another respondent, Brenda Washington, was also clear about this: “Kayla’s in my will as my children are.”

At the other extreme, we have ruptures that seem permanent. Gabrielle tried to reestablish relations with Diane after Gabrielle was “mean” to Diane’s daughter Lisa, but Diane was no longer interested in having a like-family relationship with her.

In between ruptures and full citizenship—with perhaps vast differences among them as well—we have relationships that remain up in the air, if not for both sides, for at least one of the two. Nicole still wonders whether Joyce and Don will be in her life “forever after.” She still looks for clues that she is important to them, that she has become family. In her mind, she holds both a temporary visa in the Nowak household and citizenship in her natal family. And although, for their part, Joyce and Don seem to have moved into the “forever” realm, they also express uncertainty about what Nicole thinks and whether she has come to embrace their role in her life.

## Improvising Families

The adults I interviewed all initially lay claim to children without involving the state. Inclusion in a new family remains voluntary; no formalities designate the positions.<sup>17</sup> This is, in and of itself, a creative move insofar as (like cohabitation, especially when it is combined with a decision not to have an “official” marriage) the state is then removed entirely from the determination of rights and responsibilities. The Nowaks decide for themselves what role they want to play in Nicole’s life now and in the future; Nicole makes her own decisions about the Nowaks. If the two sets of expectations differ, the parties work it out themselves (or they do not).

Something else creative is happening here. Joyce and Don Nowak say that Nicole is their kid; they do *not* say that they are her parents. The same is true of the Gimbels vis-à-vis Ricky. This situation creates a distinctive category of adult and a new type of family in which the adults have no name. As we have seen already, none of the existing concepts works. Troublesome as that absence of a name might be, there is something grand at play here. Phyllis and John do not believe that Ricky will ever get what he wants from his blood/legal family;

at the same time, they are willing to be significant “other” adults in his life and to be his “other” family. Phyllis and John leave Ricky’s relationship with his blood/legal kin for him to manage on his own; they do not intervene. Joyce and Don Nowak do something similar (albeit with more competitiveness) vis-à-vis Nicole: Joyce and Don are there for her, and whether she wants to define them as her parents, they now think of her as their kid. They have not required her to give up her relationships with her mother or father, although Joyce and Don think it is pure fantasy for Nicole to hope that either parent will come through for her in any significant way.<sup>18</sup>

I have already noted that the children with complex arrays of “parents” do not always choose for themselves whether to become involved in these relationships.<sup>19</sup> As these children grow up, however, they, along with the children who enter into these relationships at older ages, are in a position to make their own decisions about whether to maintain their membership in an improvised family. The adults not only maintain but also enter into these relationships as a matter of intention, even if the adults describe doing so sometimes as “falling in love” and being swept off their feet. And the “choice” aspect of the relationships is often lauded (as it is in romance). Nicole reports that Joyce said theirs was better than “real” family because they got to choose; Brenda Washington tells Kayla something quite similar. However, the voluntary nature of the bond leaves unusual power in the hands of both parties. The possibility is always there that either party will, at some point in the near or distant future, make a different choice. That is both the simple delight and the heartrending anxiety of these relationships.

## Conclusion

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### Reconsidering Kinship

The women and men with whom I spoke use the language of family in two quite different ways, to refer to two quite different sets of relationships. At some times, the respondents in this study use the language of family in the completely straightforward way that reflects its usual meaning within the White middle class.<sup>1</sup> That is, they recognize and name as family that carefully bounded group of people who constitute their families of origin and, if they have established one, their current families consisting of themselves and whomever they include as being their partners and children. The respondents also recognize the broader group of “extended” family—grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles—as people tied to them through the bonds of blood/legal kinship.

At other times, my respondents are expansive about the *notion* of “family” and, when they want to explain why some people—their fictive kin—are particularly important to them, they draw on a cultural idealization of family as the site of generalized reciprocity, an obligation to care, deep affection, and trust; this is an idealization that is sometimes enacted and sometimes not. People who are not included in the bounded family (even as that family extends to distant relatives) become “like family” as relationships with these people develop, and then rest on, at least some of those idealized characteristics (of reciprocity, caregiving, affection, and trust). Indeed, fictive kin are significant people who populate and enhance respondents’ daily lives. Yet, even as they speak inclusively, the language of “like family” is simultaneously a way of drawing in *and* pushing out.

These are not just casual differences in name calling: how people define one another is part and parcel of how they think and feel about, and act toward, one another; definitions matter. The reverse is true as well: how people think and feel about, and act toward, one another often determines just how they define their relationships. Indeed, as I ask my respondents to consider the meanings inherent in these usages of the language of family, they reveal—whether wittingly or not—that blood/legal kin and fictive kin have some distinctively different places in their daily lives, in their moral compasses, and in their emotions. My respondents reveal as well that feelings, attitudes, and actions toward these two groups share some significant features.

The differences in treatment include the assignment of responsibility for dependent children, priorities around significant holidays, and inheritance. All of these privilege blood/legal family, and that privileging matters. When people turn first to their kinfolk as guardians for dependent children—even when those kinfolk are not present in their children's daily lives—they indicate that they have placed their trust in ascribed bonds and ancestral traditions. When people obey a relative's call to come for a holiday celebration, they refurbish and reinvigorate those bonds and those traditions. When they leave their worldly goods to their legal children and heirs, they participate in the private transmission of wealth that is one of the hallmarks of our capitalist society. As a consequence, whether hurt, relieved, or neutral in the face of these actions, fictive kin cannot assume that they will remain important figures in the lives of children they might have known well since birth; fictive kin cannot assume that they will be with people they value on holidays; and fictive kin cannot assume that they will receive a significant share of the estate of someone else, even when they are bound to that person by years of love and reciprocity.

The difference in how the two sets of relationships are regarded centers on a sense of obligation to retain an association with and even prioritize blood/legal family members. Whether or not my respondents meant to or wanted to, they indicated that these given (ascribed) relationships existed in time and space and had importance, even if respondents did not choose to nourish these relationships on a daily basis and even if respondents sometimes found that those affiliations offered no pleasure.

Respondents indicate also that the blood/legal family carries with it an obligation to care. While people might choose to respond to fictive kin when they are in distress, people retain the belief that doing so is a choice. The failure to respond to the needs of fictive kin might thus be felt as a violation of norms of kindness or generosity. However, the failure to respond to a family member in a similar situation might be felt to be a violation of profound social and cultural ethics. That is, respondents appear to feel they *owe* something more to family than they do fictive kin. Respondents might also feel as if they are *owed* something more in the former set of relationships. Relationships of choice are also

perceived to carry with them fewer rights than those of kinship. Fictive kin take over caregiving only if no “real” kin are available. Moreover, fictive kin often do so tentatively, without believing that they have the authority to insist on what they think is appropriate care.

Finally, while the elements of long-term family relationships are sometimes regarded as being emotionally wearing, they are also almost invariably regarded as having intense emotional importance. The term *baggage* that so many of my respondents use is revealing, indicating at one and the same time both what most weighs one down (for example, we might wish we had brought less with us on a trip; we’d love to have an entirely new wardrobe) and what is most valued (for example, we hate to check baggage at the airport; we are distraught when our familiar possessions are lost). By way of contrast, if fictive-kin relationships acquire “baggage” (and none of my respondents used that concept in describing those relationships), the complexities that emerge are of different (if not lesser) intensity and, therefore, probably, of different (if not lesser) consequence.

We can see these differences between relations with blood/legal kin and relations with fictive kin in each of the three ideal types analyzed here. People, who have like-sibling bonds with each other, think and feel about each other differently than they think and feel about their blood/legal kin. Their like-family relationships do not weigh so heavily on their minds. Those relationships feel lighter, more buoyant, more simply based in deep-seated affection than do those they experience with their “real” kin. These respondents are clear that they have intentionally created the bond between them and that choice itself is of significant value when they consider why they do what they do for one another. These respondents also act differently toward one another than they do toward the members of their nuclear families and their extended kin on some significant grounds: they give blood/legal kin priority on specific occasions and for specific purposes. Even if these different actions cause pain, they are accepted as being legitimate; the norms about how to behave vis-à-vis blood/legal family carry the day. And yet, in making many choices—who gets a present on her birthday; who is the recipient of a piece of good news; who is cared for when in distress; who is asked to care for them when they need care—these respondents might interact with “real” kin and fictive kin in much the same way. And in making still other choices—who is told about an extramarital affair; who is invited to share vacation travel—fictive kin might be much preferred.

The second type of fictive kinship involves host families and guest children. Here we frequently find strong bonds of attachment emerging from mutual involvement in family practices. Because at the dinner table everyone is talking, sharing food, and making plans for a weekend excursion, a casual observer might find it difficult to guess who is an insider and who is an outsider. Yet

adults, who have engaged in that pattern of hosting, also maintain a strong distinction between the “honorary” children and their blood/legal children, especially but not exclusively with respect to names, the “quantity” of love provided, the assumption of long-term obligations, the distribution of worldly goods, and the exercise of authority. Moreover, because what is at stake in these guest-host relationships is compatibility and getting along, the hosts are not necessarily trying to fundamentally change the guests (as they very well might want to do were the children their own). Host parents want guest teens to abide by household rules about washing dishes and obeying curfews, but rather than becoming a source of difficulty or discomfort, differences between the attitudes, customs, and values of host family members and guest teens might be part of the reason for having the latter there. Uncomfortable as they may be from time to time, the “real” sons and daughters in these hosting households understand the difference between being “like” a member of the family and being a member of the family vis-à-vis this same set of issues. And, for their part, guest children understand these distinctions too. During periods of co-residence, teens formed strong attachments not just to an individual member of a hosting family but often to all the members of the household. Yet, the teens felt it was the members of their own families who would be there for each other for the long haul.

By way of contrast, in the third set of fictive kinships, both informal parents and unofficial children acknowledge that these are relationships with strings attached, with the children expected to conform to and embrace the standards the adults establish. Here differences in orientations can result in tensions that extend well beyond squabbles over whether or not a child cleans his room or takes her turn walking the dog. The varied trajectories in these kinds of relationships are shaped, at least in part, by the outcome of struggles over children’s acceptance of adult-determined standards and adults’ acceptance of children’s behavior.

In one scenario, relationships between informal parents and unofficial children had abrupt and painful ruptures, initiated, perhaps, on one side but definitely affecting both parties. And while there is no way to know whether these ruptures are more or less frequent than ruptures among blood/legal family members, the adults involved all suggest that in the absence of formal bonds, they always believed rupture to be a possibility.

In another scenario, we see something that was felt to be “like” family morphing into something that was defined as “being” family, with the lines between the two categories of relationships essentially erased. In these cases, the child’s compliance with new norms appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the transformation in the relationships. Among some respondents, a new “traditional” family was created (as in the formal adoption of an older child); among others, a new version of a family was created (as in



the emergence of a family consisting of “not-parent” adults and their children). Whether the adults in either situation *actually* felt the same way toward their newly included children as they did toward existing “other” children is unknowable.<sup>2</sup> Adults in this situation said that although there had been differences before, they *now* treated these previously unrelated children *as if* the children were their own; they included their new children in the count when asked how many children they had; their new children’s spouses were in-laws and their new children’s children were grandchildren; the new children were included as equal beneficiaries in the drawing up of wills. And whether in any of these situations the included children feel that they are being treated like the other children in the family is also unknowable.

In the third scenario, relationships remained somewhere between becoming family and ruptured bonds. And in these relationships, struggles sometimes remained over values, styles of interaction, and priorities; in these relationships as well, occasional anxiety about what each person meant to the other competed with ongoing understandings of strong attachment and love. This third way, of course, is prominent in all arrangements of fictive kinship: everyone is aware that a relationship that is only chosen might, at any point, be “unchosen.”

In short, when my respondents peer sideways at the White middle-class family from the perspective of fictive kinship, they reveal that blood/legal ties matter intensely, that the exclusive bonds of family membership carry such great moral and emotional significance that people believe they should make efforts to sustain and repair frayed bonds, even when that fraying is the result of abuse and neglect. Respondents also reveal that they believe they have the obligation to provide care to and for family members and that family members have the obligation to provide care to them. In addition, respondents reveal that blood/legal family can withstand differences in values and opinions, bear the weight of heavy baggage, and still remain “family.” And finally, respondents reveal that bonds of kinship exist even in the midst of great ambivalence and without any love being lost among the members. By way of contrast, respondents indicate that outside the institutionalized routes of birth, marriage and adoption, achieving the status of being family is a hard-earned and hard-won struggle. That is, for all the occasional expansive language of this person or that person being “like family,” the word *like* carries important meaning. Fictive kin represent enormously valued relationships even as they remain something other than “real” kin.

## **The Differences and Similarities among Fictive Kinships**

My division of fictive-kin relationships into three distinctive types makes significant the issue of differences among the diverse forms these relationships may

take. The three clusters differ dramatically one from the other in whether they include a generational divide, the age of the participants, the matter of co-residence, the stated understanding of the relationship terms, whether formal organizations are involved, and the possibility for “real” family membership. But, of course, profound similarities exist as well and unite the three: the absence of a blood/legal kinship bond, the role of intention in the establishment of the relationship, the lack of institutionalized expectations or recognizable names, and of course the designation of being “like family.” Other similarities emerge because the clusters are so broad that at one end one kind can come to resemble another. This is most apparent when, for example, a guest child lives with a host family for a period that extends well beyond the original arrangement, eventually becoming what I have called an “unofficial” child. This is also apparent when, for example, a guest child becomes an adult who thinks of herself as being in a like-sibling relationship with someone who was previously a host parent.

Both differences and similarities among the three clusters produced analytic questions that can be reconsidered here. One such question has to do with explanations for engagement in fictive kinship. Research on varieties of fictive kinship offers explanations that refer to social conditions, individual motivations, and customary forms. The explanations of other scholars proved to be unsatisfactory in this analysis. With respect to the first, most commonly we hear that fictive kinship emerges in the absence of sufficient material, social, and emotional resources. Thus, we hear about these practices existing in slavery, in prisons, among street kids, among immigrants, and among the urban or rural poor.<sup>3</sup> The people I interviewed did not face any such deprivations. Yet, they too chose to create some form of fictive kinship.

In their analysis of “voluntary kin,” Braithwaite and her colleagues shift from social conditions to individual motivations: they argue that among their respondents practices of voluntary kinship were “legitimated in large measure because of attributed deficits in the blood or legal family.”<sup>4</sup> I heard some of these “legitimations” from my respondents as well, especially among those who lived some distance away from the members of their nuclear and extended families. Yet, the people I interviewed were as likely to view fictive kinship as something they simply enjoyed having in their lives as they were to suggest that those relationships were, in any way, making up for deficits.

Fictive kinship is also often described as a cultural practice unique to particular social groups. For example, the dictionary refers to *compadrazgo* as a practice of “the Spanish-speaking world.”<sup>5</sup> However, as we have seen, many of the White middle-class people I interviewed also could easily find models of fictive kinship in their childhoods.

Finally, the scholarship sometimes suggests that fictive kinship emerges spontaneously (even without necessity, deficiencies, or culture) as the result of

daily, intimate contact: this is often said to be the case between caregivers and care recipients. Indeed, spontaneous bonds were common among my respondents who found in another person some possibility for a profound relationship that was neither simply friendship nor family. So, while no obvious single set of motivations emerges, it is also clear that these respondents are looking for—and finding—creative ways to extend meaningful relationships to supplement (but not necessarily replace) those they find in kinship.

Choice is such a significant feature of all three sets of relationships that it makes sense to parse its impact on the three types of social interactions. When we do, we see that the significance of choice differs from one relationship to the next.<sup>6</sup> Adults generally fare reasonably (and maybe even very) well with choice. Adults in like-sibling relationships cherish the voluntary nature of their affiliations; adults also occasionally make note of choice as a valued basis for affiliation with children; and choice enables host families relatively easily to end temporary arrangements with guest children should they turn out to be less optimal than expected. Of course, choice can also be a source of vulnerability among adults. However, even more frequently than adults, children might find—especially when they become dependent on informal parents—more uncertainty in choice than they can easily manage.

In addition, because the open-ended nature of relationships between informal parents and unofficial children creates possibilities far beyond those created between host families and guest children, the absence of institutionalized understandings of (and names signifying) what those relationships means unsettles their participants. Unsettling is especially likely for unofficial children, because acquiring an informal parent can fundamentally alter relationships with the members of one's family of origin. These arrangements between informal parents and unofficial children can also fundamentally alter relationships within the "receiving" family.

Like-sibling relationships exist side by side with other social relationships, including those of blood/legal kinship. Kin might resent these relationships: someone might be jealous of the intensity of the bonds between, for example, a sister and her like-sibling affiliate. However, such relationships might also be seen as bolstering kinship by sharing burdens kin alone might not be willing or able to shoulder. A different kind of bolstering is even more likely to be the case within host family–guest children arrangements. Each new person sitting around the dining-room table brings a new perspective, while leaving family membership intact. In those arrangements the host family itself is constantly re-created as its own distinctive entity, flexible enough to engage others and strong enough to exist without them. Something similar is perhaps true of the guest child's own family: the child who returns home values anew the security of being there.

Of course, rather than bolstering, these arrangements might undermine each of the two families. Guest children (like unofficial children) might be the source of tension within the host family; guest children might expose fissures in relationships. Moreover, guest children (like unofficial children) will not always want to return home, especially if they find in the host family better support and greater warmth. In short, although the scholarly attention to fictive kinship often focuses on the way it extends the social, emotional and material resources of a given family or household, the effects of these kinds of bonds might be far more variable and complex than the concept of social support allows.<sup>7</sup>

## Rethinking Family and Kinship

This focus on differences among the three types of fictive kin and between fictive kin and blood/legal kinship should not obscure the fundamental similarities that span all these relationships. All are very exclusive, defining some people in one's social world as "more important" than others. All may rupture. All may involve unequivocal love and the assumption of a responsibility to care. All may also include deeply ambivalent feelings and a reluctance or even refusal to take on obligations.<sup>8</sup> All may rest on inequalities of generosity, power, and attachment; conversely, all might also contain rich opportunities for reciprocity, equality, and mutual affection. All may allow for the experience of meanness, jealousy, and mistreatment even as all allow for kindness, forgiveness, and intimacy. None of these experiences is unique to any one kind of relationship that exists in the world, whether as fictive kin, as blood/legal kin, as partners, as friends, or as something else altogether.

Family scholars know well that taken as a whole, middle-class, straight White people in this country hold different attitudes toward and make different arrangements vis-à-vis kin than do people of color, those who are less privileged, and those establishing queer family relationships. (Others have noted in this regard that Barack Obama was the only president who relied on his mother-in-law to help raise his children in the White House, although others also had kin live there.) The practice of fictive kinship might also be quite different for White people than for other groups, not least because other groups have sociocultural norms dictating just how fictive kinship should be treated.

Carol Stack, for example, is insistent that when her African American respondents said they were treating fictive kin as they did (other) kin, they meant it—"going for kin" meant "going for kin"; in the Flats that meaning included sharing material resources and the care of young children.<sup>9</sup> By way of contrast, as we have seen, my White respondents could articulate both differences and similarities between the two sets of relationships, and they were less likely to put the sharing of resources or an obligation to care for someone else's

child in center place. I have already noted that the practices of fictive kinship initiated by White adults with guest teens and unofficial children resemble the practices of othermothering and informal adoption found among African Americans. However, they cannot be folded into either of those concepts, not least because among my respondents the adults and children are often from very different communities even within a single geographical area. To take another example, the ritualized relationships of *comprazadgro* carry community sanctions to ensure that an elder takes responsibility for the material, emotional, and spiritual support of a younger person; this practice also ensures that the child is integrated into a broader community. Yet my respondents conducted their fictive-kin relationships on their own, without the oversight of a larger community, and these relationships frequently crossed lines of religious affiliation. Rather than integrating, then, these relationships often involved the separation of a child from the community of her birth.

In short, in the absence of established norms, patterns developed around each of the three types of fictive kinship; each of them simultaneously distinguished itself from and shared attributes with family relationships (e.g., siblings, parent, and child). These differences and similarities, for my respondents, derive from the particular understanding and conduct of family life—and fictive kinship—found in their social worlds.

Both the frequency of fictive kinship within the population of White, middle-class people studied here *and* the impact these relationships have on relationships with blood/legal kin have further implications for scholars interested in the family. While there is nothing new in noting how deeply family formation and family dynamics are shaped by broader social forces, studies of fictive kinship (like studies of family configurations) alert us to (and remind us of) the necessity for rethinking what we define as being the relevant social, material, or emotional support for any family in any given analysis. A long tradition of scholarship on the lives of people of color has noted that we cannot look only at the nuclear family or even only at the nuclear and extended family as defined by traditional kin relations.<sup>10</sup> Recall, for instance, how the feminist scholar Bonnie Thornton Dill could make sense of the lives of women of color only if she included in her analysis the significant contributions of the people she refers to as fictive kin, paper sons, and *comprazadgro*.<sup>11</sup> Much the same is true of the lives of the people studied here: How could we possibly understand Linda Sandor's life (with her husband, Samuel; her daughter, Rose; her sisters; and her mother) or Meg Peters's life (with her daughters, Madison and Laramie; her ex-partner; her siblings; and her former in-laws) without understanding how their two families are separate for some purposes and yet utterly intertwined for others. Similarly, take the Macys, who at one moment look like your traditional White, middle-class family (with two heterosexual parents and three children), and yet at the next are entangled in the lives of a broad range of individuals and

their families. And if we set out to analyze the lives of Nicole Evans and the Nowaks, we would need to expand outward until we had within our purview Nicole's relationship with the Nowaks as well as those with her far-flung kin.

### **Blood Is Thicker Than Water?**

Some years after I began this project (and after I conducted many of the interviews), I became involved in the very much related (and yet so very different) project of how the members of families in which a child was conceived through reliance on an egg or sperm donor understood their relationships with the members of other families in which the child was conceived through reliance on the *same* egg or sperm donor.<sup>12</sup> Among the early findings, what was of particular interest to me (in light of this current project) was the ease and frequency with which people used the language of family to describe those relationships. In fact, my co-authors and I found that the respondents described their relationships with people with whom they had a shared donor as being those of kinship even before they had made any form of contact with (and sometimes even before they knew for certain that they had) these genetic relatives.<sup>13</sup> To take just one example, among sperm-donor-conceived people, 15 percent responded that they would consider someone who had the same donor to be a member of their nuclear family even when they had not had contact with that person; when there had been contact, 30 percent gave this response. As for considering these others to be members of one's extended family, the corresponding numbers were even higher, at 21 percent (without contact) and 70 percent (with contact).<sup>14</sup> In short, that research revealed how easily a genetic connection alone provided the basis for what people defined as being some sort of "family." The frequency of DNA testing and the subsequent casual definition of those relationships, based initially only on shared genes, to be one of kinship is further evidence of the same point.<sup>15</sup>

By way of contrast, the relationships I have studied here—the sociability of like-family relationships between peers; the short-term co-residence of hosting adults and unrelated guest children; and the long-term attachments that form between what I have called informal parents and their unofficial children—do not so easily become identified as "family" relationships. They grow to be *like* family, but they usually do not exist automatically and instantaneously even as that.

Regardless of ultimate outcomes, all of these relationships (in all three sets) represent significant achievements in people's lives. On occasion, the bonds might have appeared to be spontaneous (as in falling in love); it took time and often effort for trust, reciprocity, understanding, and abiding love to emerge. I want to emphasize these points, because I want to make it perfectly clear that nothing that I have said here is meant in any way to disparage these

achievements. When I note that in most cases, relationships of fictive kinship do not acquire the sets of obligations and expectations that are part and parcel of how my respondents do family-based kinship—and that, not surprisingly in a capitalist society built on private wealth, money is a big component of that difference—I am not placing a judgment on that difference.

Rather, I am claiming something entirely different. These relationships demonstrate a generosity of spirit existing within the members of (almost exclusively) White, middle-class families of all stripes. They reveal the creative capacity people have to love beyond the confines of their own kinship structures and sometimes beyond the membership of their own race/ethnicity, class, and religion. The Native American author Sherman Alexie reminds us that loving our own is “easy”:<sup>16</sup> we have the scripts for that kind of love; we can easily enact the institutionalized expectations for our community or clan. But, to embrace “strangers” might require something more—some willingness to be generous, along with some capacity to relax judgment. It might also involve some willingness to be creative about the meaning of family. The men and women I interviewed perfectly embodied both that generosity and that creativity.

A final note: While I was doing the research for this book, I kept coming across two expressions that purported to show just how much more significant blood/legal family was than any other form of relationship. One is, of course, the common expression “blood is thicker than water.” When I looked this up, I found that some people believe, in quite a reversal of what we normally assume, that the expression means that “the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.” In this interpretation the expression asserts that blood brothers (or sisters) have stronger bonds than do biological siblings.<sup>17</sup> If the meaning of that expression is open to dispute, the other one is not. The line “Home is the place where, when you have to go there/they have to take you in,” is from Robert Frost’s poem “The Death of the Hired Hand.”<sup>18</sup> The oft-repeated line is spoken not by the dying hired man himself but by the farmer who takes in the hired man out of pity and obligation rather than out of family loyalty. In fact, the hired man had a brother who lived just thirteen miles away, but the hired man did not want to go there when he was ill and enfeebled; he went instead to the farmer whom the hired man had repeatedly treated badly and often left in the lurch. The farmer, then, rather than the sibling, became the “home” that took him in.

I mention both of these because they illustrate just how ready we are to assume that blood/legal kin provide the ultimate security while our invented relationships are far less reliable. As the stories I have told here suggest, the reality might sometimes be just the reverse: sometimes, it is in friendship, fellowship, and created kin that we find extraordinary opportunities for new kinds of social support and keen evidence for the generosity of the human spirit.

## Appendix A

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### Respondents

Tables A.1–A.6 provide information about the respondents interviewed for this book. I include information about gender, marital status, presence or absence of respondent’s own children, sexual orientation, age, level of education, and whether they were interviewed alone or as part of a couple. Table A.1 lists all respondents in alphabetical order and indicates their involvement in fictive kinship. Tables A.2 (like-sibling respondents), A.3 (unofficial children and informal parents), A.4 (host families and guest teens), and A.5 (other arrangements) list respondents alphabetically within each type of fictive kinship. The last column in these tables indicates by whom they were named or whom they named among the other respondents. Finally, Table A.6 provides more detailed information about the names used in the text for respondents and their family members and fictive kin.

As noted, Table A.5 refers to respondents whose relationships did not fit neatly into one of the categories I developed. I describe these relationships more fully here. As the table shows, two respondents reported about stepfamily relationships. One woman told me about her long-term relationship with a younger woman to whose father she had been married for some time; she related how, many years after that marriage had ended, she had cared for her ex-husband’s daughter and, at one point, gone to a Caribbean island to rescue her from an abusive relationship. Another woman told me about her long-term relationship with an older woman with whom she had lived for some time when



that woman was her stepmother married to her father. Years after that marriage ended, the former stepmother had come and cared for the respondent's three young children.

Two women told me about caregivers they had hired. In each case, the relationships had continued long past the time when the caregivers were being paid. In one case—Elaine Zimmerman—a relationship that began with a young woman being hired to care for Zimmerman's children morphed into the young woman's mother caring for Zimmerman's elderly parents. At one point, the young woman's entire family (including her mother, husband, and two children) lived rent-free in the ground floor apartment of Zimmerman's house. The other woman told me about the many different caregivers who became like members of her family as they cared for her severely disabled son.

Paid caregivers responded as well. Stephanie Carlson was originally hired to help care for an autistic child in a neighbor's home when she was in high school. Because she attended college in the same town, she continued to provide that care until she graduated. As a young woman in dental school, she was arranging to become the formal guardian of that child should something happen to his parents. In addition, two care recipients are included: two young men told of the close relationships they still had with the women who had cared for them when they were children.

In one of the more unusual stories, Curt Brooks spoke of wandering into a neighbor's yard when he was just five years old and forming a long-term relationship with the couple who lived there. On Saturdays, the man would often take Curt with him on errands. When, as a young father himself, Curt needed a loan to buy a house, the man gave him \$20,000, saying that it would otherwise have come to him in his will. Curt never lived with these neighbors but remained with his parents. Nevertheless, he said that this relationship with these neighbors provided a model for how he wanted to raise his own children.

Two women spoke primarily about relationships they had "inherited" from their parents. Beth Moretti is discussed more fully in chapter 3 in relation to her attempts to create similar relationships for her children. The other woman spoke about how close she had been to a "fictive" aunt (who had been a foster child in her father's natal family) and how difficult it had been in recent years when a family disagreement had created a rift in that relationship. One woman served an enormous number of migrant families in her community, through numerous acts of extraordinary and entirely unpaid social service. And, finally, one woman spoke about her relationships with two godchildren after their mothers (both of whom had been her friends) died. I refer to her in a lengthy footnote in chapter 6.

**Table A.1**  
**All respondents**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Position
Adler/Yates	Michelle	woman	two-person	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Adler/Yates	Sarah	woman	two-person	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Adams	Samantha	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	twenties	A.A.	other	inherited
Ames	Jessica	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	open door	guest child
Asfour	Shani	woman	sole	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Bates	Diane	woman	sole	married	yes	gay	sixties	Ph.D.	unofficial parent	adult
Bauman	Miriam	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	MD	unofficial parent	adult
Bauman	Nathan	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Benedict	Megan	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Bergeron	Georgia	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Bessette	Tammy	woman	sole	married	no	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Brooks	Curt	man	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.Div.	other	
Brunelle	Mia	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	open door	
Campbell	Kathleen	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Carlson	Stephanie	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	other	
Cushing	Rhonda	woman	sole	married	no	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	other	
Darling	Joanna	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Davidson	Debra	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Evans	Nicole	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	M.A.	informal child	child
Farmer	Rick	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	other	
Feuer	Robert	man	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	sixties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Fischer	Mary	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	thirties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	

**Table A.1**  
**All respondents (cont.)**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Position
Gabor	Patricia	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Gabor	Michael	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Gagne	Liz	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Gerber	Judith	woman	sole	married	no	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	unofficial parent	adult
Gimble	John	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Gimble	Phyllis	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	open door	host parent
Green	Margaret	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	J.D.	unofficial parent	adult
Hall	Laura	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	open door	host parent
Hall	Alex	trans man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	host adult
Harrington	Caroline	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	like-sibling bonds	
Henry	Russell	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	like-sibling bonds	
Howard	Ashley	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	other	
Jansen	Angela	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Jones	Peter	man	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	open door	host parent
Jordan	Kim	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	stepparent
Kennedy	Carol	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	other	adult
Larson	Sonja	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	unofficial parent	
Lord	Mandy	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	institutional
Lyons	Emilia	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	thirties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	

Macy	Richard	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	open door	host adult
Macy	Susan	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	J.D.	open door	host adult
Madden	Pearl	woman	sole	single	yes	gay	thirties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Martel	Alexandra	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	thirties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Mayer	Dennis	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	unofficial parent	adult
Mayer	Virginia	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	unofficial parent	adult
McDaniel	Nancy	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	other	
McIntosh	Sandy	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	other	stepparent
Miller	Donna	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Moretti	Beth	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
									other	institutional
									other	inherited
Murray	Clare	woman	sole	married	yes	bisexual	forties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Nowak	Don	man	two-person	married	no	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Nowak	Joyce	woman	two-person	married	no	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Olson	Karin	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	
									open door	host child
Park	Melissa	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	open door	host child
Park	Faith	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	open door	host adult
Peters	Meg	woman	sole	single	yes	gay	fifties	J.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Prescott	David	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	like-sibling bonds	
Reiter	Ana	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	thirties	B.A.	open door	guest child
Ryan	Adam	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	open door	guest child
Sandor	Linda	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	J.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Singh	Hamid	man	sole	single	no	gay	twenties	in college	other	
Slater	Charity	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	eighties	B.A.	unofficial parent	adult
Smith	Logan	man	sole	single	no	gay	twenties	in college	open door	guest child

**Table A.1**  
**All respondents (cont.)**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Position
Stern	Ruth	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Stevens	Scott	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Stewart	Anne	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	other	Godparent
Walsh	Ellen	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	ABD	open door	host adult
Walsh	Tom	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	open door	host adult
Washington	Brenda	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	other	adult
Weber	Klara	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	B.A.	open door	host adult
White	Rachel	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Wilson	Steve	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	thirties	Ph.D.	open door	host child
Zimmerman	Elaine	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	J.D.	other	

**Table A.2**  
**Like-sibling respondents**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Named by or naming other respondent
Adler/Yates	Michelle	woman	two-person	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	Clare Murray
Adler/Yates	Sarah	woman	two-person	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Asfour	Shani	woman	sole	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Benedict	Megan	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Bergeron	Georgia	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Bessette	Tammy	woman	sole	married	no	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Campbell	Kathleen	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Davidson	Debra	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Feuer	Robert	man	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	sixties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Fischer	Mary	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	thirties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Gabor	Michael	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Gabor	Patricia	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Gagne	Liz	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Hall	Alex	trans-man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Hall	Laura	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Harrington	Caroline	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	like-sibling bonds	
Howard	Ashley	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Jansen	Angela	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Jones	Peter	man	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Larson	Sonja	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Lord	Mandy	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Lyons	Emilia	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	thirties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	

Ruth Stern

**Table A.2**  
**Like-sibling respondents (cont.)**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Named by or naming other respondent
Madden	Pearl	woman	sole	single	yes	gay	thirties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Martel	Alexandra	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	thirties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Moretti	Beth	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Murray	Clare	woman	sole	married	yes	bisexual	forties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	Adler/Yates
Olson	Karin	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	
Peters	Meg	woman	sole	single	yes	gay	fifties	J.D.	like-sibling bonds	Linda Sandor
Prescott	David	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	like-sibling bonds	
Sandor	Linda	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	J.D.	like-sibling bonds	Meg Peters
Stern	Ruth	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	like-sibling bonds	Mandy Lord
Stevens	Scott	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	like-sibling bonds	
White	Rachel	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Yates-Adler	Michelle	woman	two-person	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	
Yates-Adler	Sarah	woman	two-person	married	yes	gay	forties	M.A.	like-sibling bonds	Clare Murray

**Table A.3**  
**Unofficial children and informal parents**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Related to other respondent
Bates	Diane	woman	sole	married	yes	gay	sixties	Ph.D.	informal parent	
Bauman	Miriam	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	MD.	informal parent	Ana Reiter
Bauman	Nathan	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	informal parent	Ana Reiter
Darling	Joanna	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	informal parent	
Evans	Nicole	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	M.A.	unofficial child	Nowaks
Gerber	Judith	woman	sole	married	no	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	informal parent	
Gimble	John	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	informal parent	
Gimble	Phyllis	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	informal parent	
Kennedy	Carol	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	informal parent	
Mayer	Dennis	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	informal parent	
Mayer	Virginia	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	informal parent	
Miller	Donna	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	informal parent	
Nowak	Don	man	two-person	married	no	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	informal parent	Nicole Evans
Nowak	Joyce	woman	two-person	married	no	heterosexual	fifties	B.A.	informal parent	Nicole Evans
Slater	Charity	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	eighties	B.A.	informal parent	Tom Walsh
Washington	Brenda	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	fifties	M.A.	Informal Parent	



**Table A.4**  
**Host families and guest teens**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Position	Related to other respondent
Ames	Jessica	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	open door	guest child	
Brunelle	Mia	woman	sole	single	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	open door	host adult	
Gimbel	John	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	open door	host parent	
Gimbel	Phyllis	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	open door	host parent	
Green	Margaret	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	Law	open door	host adult	
Jansen	Angela	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	open door	host child	
Macy	Richard	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	open door	host adult	
Macy	Susan	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	J.D.	open door	host adult	
Olson	Karin	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	open door	host child	
Park	Faith	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	open door	host adult	Melissa Park
Park	Melissa	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	open door	host child	Faith Park
Reiter	Ana	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	thirties	B.A.	open door	guest child	Baumans
Ryan	Adam	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	open door	guest child	
Smith	Logan	man	sole	single	no	gay	twenties	in college	open door	guest child	
Walsh	Ellen	woman	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	ABD	open door	host adult	Charity Slater
Walsh	Tom	man	two-person	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	open door	host adult	Charity Slater
Weber	Klara	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	B.A.	open door	host adult	
Wilson	Steve	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	thirties	Ph.D.	open door	host child	

**Table A.5**  
**Other arrangements**

Last name	First name	Gender	Type of interview	Marital status	Have own children	Sexual orientation	Age	Education	Type of fictive kinship	Description
Adams	Samantha	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	twenties	AA	other	inherited
Brooks	Curt	man	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.Div	other	nonresidential guest child
Carlson	Stephanie	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	B.A.	other	was paid caregiver
Cushing	Rhonda	woman	sole	married	no	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	other	voluntary social service
Farmer	Rick	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	other	recipient of paid care
Henry	Russell	man	sole	single	no	heterosexual	twenties	in college	other	recipient of paid care
Jordan	Kim	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	PhD	other	stepparent
Larson	Sonja	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	M.A.	other	institutional (Posse)
McDaniel	Nancy	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	B.A.	other	hired a caregiver
McIntosh	Sandy	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	Ph.D.	other	stepparent
Moretti	Beth	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	forties	M.A.	other	institutional (Posse)
Singh	Hamid	man	sole	single	no	gay	twenties	in college	other	institutional (Posse)
Stewart	Anne	woman	sole	single	no	heterosexual	fifties	Ph.D.	other	godparent
Zimmerman	Elaine	woman	sole	married	yes	heterosexual	sixties	J.D.	other	hired a caregiver

**Table A.6**  
**Names used in text for respondents and their family members**  
**and fictive kin**

Last name	First name	Relationship	Name
Ames	Jessica	host child	Lauren
Bauman	Miriam		
Bauman	Nathan	guest child	Ana Reiter
Brunelle	Mia	son	Sean
Evans	Nicole	informal parent	Joyce Nowak
		informal parent	Don Nowak
Bates	Diane	daughter	Lisa
		unofficial child	Gabrielle
Fischer	Mary	like-sibling bonds	Naomi
Gabor	Michael		
Gabor	Patricia	like-sibling bonds	Murray Gold
		like-sibling bonds	Patsy Gold
Gerber	Judith	husband	Larry
		unofficial child	Ada
		unofficial child	Emen
		unofficial child	Chloe
		mother of Ada and Emen;	Janice
		grandmother of Chloe	
Gimbel	John		
Gimbel	Phyllis	unofficial child	Ricky
		daughter	Andrea
		son	Ben
Green	Margaret	husband	Jonathan
		guest child	Rebecca
Jansen	Angela	like-sibling bonds	Dorothy
		guest child	Aidana
Jones	Peter	like-sibling bonds	Jonah
Kennedy	Carol	husband	Paul
		father of Dana	Anton

**Table A.6 (cont.)****Names used in text for respondents and their family members and fictive kin**

Last name	First name	Relationship	Name	
Larson	Sonia	unofficial child	Dana	
		son	Joey	
		husband	Jack	
Lord	Mandy	like-sibling bonds	Marsha	
		like-sibling bonds	Marsha's husband Jim	
		like-sibling bonds	Ruth Stern	
Lyons	Emilia	like-sibling bonds	Ronnie	
Macy	Richard	guest child nanny guest child daughter guest child guest child guest child guest child guest child guest child guest child guest child	Craig	
Macy	Susan		Jackie	
			Jennifer	
			Jodie	
			Jordan	
			Kim	
			Melanie	
			Morris	
			Other Ryan	
			Big Ryan	
			Tracey	
Martel	Alexandra		like-sibling bonds	Amy
Mayer	Dennis		Tarone's brother son unofficial child	Donald
Mayer	Virginia	Jason		
		Tarone		
Miller	Donna	unofficial child	Amber	
		unofficial child	Daniel	
Moretti	Beth	husband	Andrew	
		like-sibling bonds	Sally and Bill	
		like-sibling bonds	Brad and Julie	
Murray	Clare	husband	Rick Murray	
		like-sibling bonds	Natalie	
		like-sibling bonds	Stephanie	
Nowak	Don	unofficial child	Nicole Evans	
Nowak	Joyce			

**Table A.6 (cont.)**

Last name	First name	Relationship	Name
Olson	Karin	guest child	Randy
		like-sibling bonds	Doris
		son	Matthew
Peters	Meg	like-sibling bonds	Linda Sandor
		daughter	Laramie
		ex-wife	Joanna
		Linda's husband daughter	Samuel Madison
Reiter	Ana	host parent	Miriam Bauman
		host parent	Nathan Bauman
Ryan	Adam	host family	O'Brien Family
		host child	Zach
Sandor	Linda	like-sibling bonds	Meg Peters
		daughter	Rose
		husband	Samuel
Smith	Logan	Murphy	
Stern	Ruth	like-sibling bonds	Mandy Lord
		Mandy's daughter	Heather
		Mandy's brother	Mark
Walsh Walsh	Ellen Tom	guest child	Sasha
		son	Jeff
Washington	Brenda	guest child	Brian
		unofficial child	Kayla
Weber	Klara	guest child	Madeline
White	Rachel	like-sibling bonds	Joan
Wilson	Steve	guest child	Ralph
		girlfriend	Alice

## Appendix B

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### Studying Fictive Kinship and Informal Adoption

In order to study how the terms *fictive kin* and *informal adoption* have been used by others, I coded the references to those terms as they appeared in social science scholarship over a forty-year period. I used three separate databases to locate references to these terms and I conducted the analyses at two separate times. In the initial period, two people coded independently; at the later time period, only one person did the coding. The data are, therefore, meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. Alone, I also coded references to an article by Taylor and colleagues, “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks”; this research is widely cited as evidence of fictive kinship and is discussed in the introduction.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I conducted my own analysis of some of the data Taylor and colleagues offer. Those analyses are included here as well.

#### Fictive Kinship

In my analysis of the term *fictive kinship* I drew first on the most general database, Google Scholar. I placed the search term *fictive kin* in that database mid-2009 and made note of the first five hundred (unsorted) references in the literature. Because I was particularly interested in sociological depictions of, or references to, this phenomenon, I supplemented these 500 references with the

entire list of references to fictive kin in SocIndex and in sociology journals available through JSTOR. In that time period, all references were coded independently by two separate people—myself and an undergraduate student majoring in sociology.<sup>2</sup> In 2017 I repeated the same collection of data, going back to finish 2009 and continuing through most of 2017 by selecting the first two hundred references from Google Scholar along with all of those in SocIndex and JSTOR. In the later time period only one person—an advanced undergraduate majoring in sociology—coded the material.

In analyzing the data, I excluded the following categories of references: duplicates; references that were unpublished, unavailable, undated, or unclear; references that were irrelevant because they were historical, literary, or religious; citations and acknowledgments; references to my own scholarship; and references to non-U.S. populations. After these deletions, I was left with a total of 402 references for the first time period and 180 for the second period, amounting to a total of 582.

Before examining the findings, I want to note that by “references,” I mean just that. If you put the term *fictive kin* into Google Scholar, for example, the result is a very long list of documents containing at least one reference to the term. Some of these are a single mention in a lengthy article about something entirely different; some (but considerably fewer) of these are analytic pieces about what is called fictive kinship. In this appendix, I make no distinctions among these references, treating in the same way an in-depth study of fictive kinship and a glancing mention of that concept. Hence, Ebaugh and Curry’s long consideration of “fictive kinship” among new immigrant communities in 2000 is counted as one reference (to “immigrants”).<sup>3</sup> A simple notation in the same year by Glenn is also counted as one reference (to a “general” population).<sup>4</sup> This lack of distinction is intentional. My goal here is simply to see when the term *fictive kinship* is used and to whom it refers when it is used.<sup>5</sup> In fact, I would think it more likely that scholars are exposed to brief allusions to fictive kinship far more frequently than they are to the few more lengthy treatises that probably attract a specialized audience.

Moreover, I would argue that even short statements carry weight and are cumulative. Take Johnson’s statement in 1999 that fictive kinship is a “custom particularly common among African Americans.”<sup>6</sup> This is repeated a number of times in the years following. In 2004, Sarkisian and Gerstel, for example, cite Johnson when they assert, “according to the literature, African Americans are more likely than Whites to have fictive kin in their kin networks.”<sup>7</sup>

Since my original analysis of this topic (first published online in 2013), an article by Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, and Brown (also published in 2013) has become the go-to reference for issues of fictive kinship and the prevalence of that pattern among different communities.<sup>8</sup> In spite of these scholars’ finding that fictive kinship is far more common than they had expected among

non-Hispanic Whites, as well as among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks, most references to this article simply repeat the finding that fictive kinship is more common among Blacks than among Whites. In fact, out of sixty-two published references to that piece between 2014 and 2018 (excluding those that did not deal with the United States), more than two-thirds (69 percent) referred only to African Americans or to Black Caribbeans living in the United States. Many of the remaining references, even when dealing with diverse populations, noted that African Americans had more extended family support or that non-Whites were more likely to rely on fictive kin.

I offer two examples. First, Thomas and Mariske, in “Age Trajectories of Everyday Cognition in African American and White Older Adults Under Prompted and Unprompted Conditions,” write, “Many studies have reported the higher availability and use of informal social support for older African Americans (e.g., Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, and Brown, 2013), and drawing on social partners may be a disproportionately important part of the real-world context of problem solving for African Americans.”<sup>9</sup> Second, we could look at Jagers and colleagues, “Resources, Race, and Placement Frequency: An Analysis of Child Well-Being,” which cites another study in addition to the one by Taylor and colleagues to make its point: “White individuals are more likely to use formalized services such as guidance counselors and therapists while non-White families are more likely to rely on kin networks, such as family, fictive kin, and neighbors (Ajrouch, Antonucci, and Janevis, 2001; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, and Brown, 2013).”<sup>10</sup> While neither of these two statements is wrong, each conceals just how heavily it is that White families also rely on fictive kin.

My initial analysis of references to fictive kinship in five-year intervals is presented in table B.1. The table shows the categories of references for the entire period of study. During that time, only 2 percent of all references are to White people, a total of 38 percent of the references are to African Americans alone, 7 percent are to Hispanic/Latinx populations, and 10 percent to other specific racial or ethnic groups including immigrants but excluding Whites. Other marginal groups are also represented: people at risk (8 percent), elderly people (9 percent) and LGBTQ people (2 percent).

The data also reveal historical change. Prior to 1975, when the databases include few references to fictive kin altogether, a quarter of those (admittedly very few) references were specifically to White people; in the last period examined (2015 to mid-2017), only 2 percent of the references were to White people. References to the African American population become predominant in the late 1980s and then, after 1995, declined. References to fictive kin among the gay and lesbian population both emerge and peak in the 1985–1989 period; references to fictive kin among the elderly are most common between 1990 and 2005. Finally, references to fictive kinship in relation to people at risk (e.g., homeless children, the chronically ill) have blossomed.



**Table B.1**  
**Fictive kin in scholarship in five-year intervals**

	White	General	African American (and Black Caribbean)	Hispanic/Latinx	Other specified and unspecified minority peoples (including immigrants)	People at risk and deviant populations	Elderly	LGBTQ	Other and various (excluding unclear)	Total percent	Total number
2015–	2%	10%	24%	7%	7%	26%	0%	2%	21%	100%	42
2010–14	1%	12%	36%	6%	8%	12%	6%	4%	16%	100%	138
2005–09	0%	7%	27%	7%	10%	13%	9%	1%	26%	100%	89
2000–04	1%	6%	43%	6%	14%	3%	11%	3%	15%	100%	109
1995–99	1%	1%	54%	6%	9%	0%	15%	4%	10%	100%	81
1990–94	2%	10%	51%	0%	8%	2%	12%	2%	14%	100%	51
1985–89	3%	3%	38%	15%	13%	0%	8%	8%	13%	100%	39
1980–84	8%	8%	38%	23%	8%	0%	8%	0%	8%	100%	13
1975–79	0%	13%	38%	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%	100%	8
before 1975	25%	8%	8%	8%	8%	0%	17%	0%	25%	100%	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>582</b>

In my more detailed discussion of these issues in the published article in the *Journal of Family Issues* in 2014, I hypothesized why White people might be ignored in references to fictive kin. I suggested the following four possibilities:<sup>11</sup>

- 1 Fictive kinship has indeed become rare within White communities and therefore the absence of references reflects something significant about the way White people live in the United States.
- 2 A bias toward looking for a traditional family form among Whites means that scholars cannot “see” fictive kinship even when it occurs.
- 3 For whatever reason, scholars do not want to analyze White families and families of more marginal groups as being the same.
- 4 Or, conversely, using the terms *families we choose* and *fictive kinship* is a sign of respect for families when they take a different form from families of White people.

Given the evidence in the studies of Braithwaite and colleagues and Taylor and colleagues (as discussed in the introduction to this book), I now believe we have to reject entirely the first reason.<sup>12</sup> The evidence strongly suggests that White people do think of others as being “fictive kin” in the sense that they are “like family.” Whether these fictive kin are the same set of relations as what other people have that is called fictive kinship is, of course, impossible to tell; this is an issue I touch on briefly in the conclusion with reference both to African American practices and the Hispanic/Latinx practice of *comprazadgro*.

A reanalysis of some of the data supplied by Taylor and colleagues is helpful here.<sup>13</sup> These scholars concluded that “African Americans and Black Caribbeans were more likely to have fictive kin than non-Hispanic Whites.” Taylor and colleagues noted also that “non-Hispanic Whites received support from fictive kin more frequently than both African Americans and Black Caribbeans [and that their] analysis did not find any race or ethnic differences in the frequency of receiving support from fictive kin.” However, the scholars also found that “African Americans and Black Caribbeans . . . reported having a significantly larger number of fictive kin than did non-Hispanic Whites.” Taylor and colleagues give precise figures for the number of fictive kin each group has: Black Caribbeans, 8.9; African Americans, 7.1; and Whites, 6.5.<sup>14</sup> This finding rests on the inclusion of those respondents who had *no* fictive kin; that is, these are averages with “none” included. When those respondents who have no fictive kin are excluded, as my reanalysis in table B.2 shows, the numbers are not quite the same: on average African Americans now had the most at 9.9, while Whites had 7.9, and Black Caribbeans had 7.8. Moreover, the *median* number of fictive kin, at 5, was precisely the same for each group. I note here that respondents were clearly imprecise in reporting numbers of fictive kin, because for all

**Table B.2**  
**Reanalysis of “fictive kinship” using data from the National Survey of American Life**

	African Americans (N = 3475)	Black Caribbeans (N = 1384)	Whites (N = 864)	Total (N = 5723)
Percent of respondents saying that they have “fictive kin”	90%	91%	83%	89%

  

	African American (N = 3130)	Black Caribbean (N = 1257)	White (N = 718)	Total (N = 5286)
Mean number of fictive kin (excluding none)	9.85	7.8	7.87	9.07
Median number of fictive kin (excluding none)	5	5	5	5
Frequency of help from fictive kin (on four point scale)	2.6	2.5	2.7	2.6

NOTE: Data are from the Program for Research on Black Americans, National Survey of American Life: Coping with Stress in the 21st Century, <https://rcgd.isr.umich.edu/prba/>.

three groups there are clusters of responses around the numbers 5, 10, 15, and 20. Even so, whichever way you cut it, those who claimed some fictive kin often claimed quite a few such people in their lives.

But what did respondents mean when they said they had fictive kin? Taylor and colleagues asked respondents how often they received support from their fictive kin; that analysis is not included in the article. So I did a quick analysis myself. I looked only at those respondents with some fictive kin, and used a four-point scale ranging from “very often” (4) through “fairly often” (3) and “not too often” (2) to “never” (including those who volunteered that they never needed help) (1). These data are also shown in table B.2, revealing that on average Black Caribbeans had scores of 2.5, African Americans scores of 2.6, and Whites scores of 2.7. That is, all three groups stood somewhere closer to relying on fictive kin “fairly often” than they did to relying on fictive kin “not too often.” These findings suggest that reliance on these individuals occurs quite frequently. Moreover, the White respondents were the most likely to rely on their fictive kin. Of course there is no way of knowing whether this assistance came from each person evenly or from one or more most often. Nor is there any way of knowing, with these data, what *kind* of support was received and how much of it was material, emotional, or instrumental.

Although these findings challenge the hypothesis that Whites simply do not have fictive kin, the other three explanations remain plausible to me. However,

because all of them refer (at least somewhat) to motives, these explanations cannot be proved (or disproved) with the available data. That proof would require a different kind of analysis. We cannot simply assume bias on the part of any given author. Nor can we assume that every author is unbiased in the way that he or she approaches issues concerning family.

## Informal Adoption

I conducted a similar analysis of the use of the term *informal adoption* to the one I had done with the term *fictive kin*, relying on the same three data sources and again at two different time periods. Prior to 2000 I included one hundred references (which ended up numbering sixty-seven after excluding the same categories as I had for *fictive kin*); I added another one hundred after that period (which ended up numbering sixty-five after the same set of exclusions). Each time the coding was done by a recent college graduate who had majored in sociology. In all I have 132 references.

As table B.3 shows, the majority of references (58 percent for all the years combined) to informal adoption are with respect to African Americans and Black Caribbeans. These references peak in the period between 1990 and 1995, more than a decade after the 1977 publication of a standard text in the area, which is Hill's *Informal Adoption Among Black Families*.<sup>15</sup> In the twenty-first century, references to informal adoption more frequently take in other racial/ethnic groups or are more general. The data since 2000 were coded also to show whether the articles implied that informal adoption was more commonly a practice taken on by kin than non-kin; this was the case a third of the time in

**Table B.3**  
**Informal adoption in scholarship**

	White	Adoption in general	African American and Black Caribbean	Other specific racial/ ethnic groups	Other	General or various	Total percent	Total number
2010–	0%	21%	7%	21%	14%	36%	100%	14
2005–09	0%	0%	47%	9%	9%	34%	100%	32
2000–04	5%	0%	47%	5%	5%	37%	100%	19
1995–99	0%	0%	70%	4%	4%	22%	100%	23
1990–94	0%	0%	86%	0%	5%	9%	100%	22
1985–89	0%	0%	71%	0%	0%	29%	100%	7
1980–84	0%	0%	73%	0%	0%	27%	100%	11
1975–79	0%	0%	75%	0%	0%	25%	100%	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>132</b>

**Table B.4**  
**Informal adoption and assumptions in scholarship**

	Percent implying that informal adoption more common in other racial/ethnic groups than among Whites	Percent implying that informal adoption is more commonly done by kin than non-kin	Total number
2010–	21%	16%	14
2005–09	44%	25%	32
2000–04	63%	37%	19
1995–99	78%	not available	23
1990–94	73%	not available	22
1985–89	71%	not available	7
1980–84	55%	not available	11
1975–79	75%	not available	4
<b>Total</b>	58%		132

the earliest five-year period but less often in the more recent years (table B.4). Finally, these citations were also coded with reference to how often they stated explicitly or implied that informal adoption was more common among people of color than among the White population. In all, 58 percent of all the references intimated that informal adoption was a practice common among racial/ethnic minorities. This type of reference was especially common until the turn of the last century.

## Acknowledgments

I have frequently conducted interviews in the general area in which I live. Usually, those interviews have been among people with whom I do not otherwise have a social relationship. In those cases, although I remember the setting and the words, I usually forget faces almost immediately. I do not know if I run into those people in the grocery store or at the gas pumps, although, in all likelihood I do. This research was different. Many of the people I interviewed I know well as friends; others, including colleagues, students, and neighbors, I saw frequently after the interview was completed. And, each time I see them, I am grateful again for their willingness to open their hearts. I wish I could name them; I hope they feel cherished by my depictions.

Among those I interviewed, I want to acknowledge especially two people—the women I call Nicole Evans and Judith Gerber—who allowed me access to private information about their lives long after the formal interviews had ended.

I have been blessed with wonderful students throughout my years at Middlebury College; the ones named are the ones who helped me on this project: Toby Israel, Sarah Koch, Julia Shumlin, and Julia Szabo. I have also been blessed with all sorts of material support from the college. I thank Carol Rifelj and James Ralph for financial support along the way and Mari Price for being a terrific administrative assistant.

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I know I talked with lots of people over the length of this project's gestation. I list the ones I can remember as being especially helpful—in offering insights, suggesting names, listening to my talk, hosting me on my travels, and

reading parts (or all) of my early drafts. I am certain there are others and I am sorry for any omissions. The names are in alphabetical order: Emily Abel, Margaret Anderson, Dawn Braithwaite, Susan Burch, Kitty Calavita, Judy Dickson, Anita Iltis Garey, Sarah Koch, Sonja Olson, Deborah Osnowitz, Linus Owens, Burke Rochford, Robert Schine, Roberta Spalter-Roth, Carol Stack, Rebecca Tiger, Marion Wells, Maxine Baca Zinn, and Robert Zussman. My colleagues and friends, Naomi Gerstel and Karen Hansen, went well beyond the call of duty and I am enormously grateful to them for their generosity and care.

As always, I am also grateful to Bill Nelson for commenting on portions of this book and even more importantly because he endures my obsession with fictive kinship while participating in our own, long-standing formal kinship with love, grace, and humor.

## Notes

### Preface

- 1 Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson, "Intimate Care for Hire," *The American Prospect* 12 (May 21, 2001): 26–29.

### Introduction

- 1 All names are pseudonyms. I have also changed details of people's lives to conceal their identity.
- 2 Much of the literature arguing that we have abandoned the family for "personal relationships" has emerged in the United Kingdom. See, for example, the discussions by, and debates among, such authors as Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018); Shelley Budgeon and Sasha Roseneil, "Editors' Introduction: Beyond the Conventional Family," *Current Sociology* 52 (2004): 127–134; Lynn Jamieson, "Boundaries of Intimacy," in *Families in Society: Boundaries and Relationships*, ed. L. McKie and S. Cunningham-Burley (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781861346438.001.0001>; R. E. Pahl and Liz Spencer, "Family, Friends and Personal Communities: Changing Models-in-the-Mind," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 2 (September 2010): 197–210; Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon, "Cultures of Intimacy and Care beyond 'the Family': Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century," *Current Sociology* 52 (March 2004): 135–159; Karin Wall and Rita Gouveia, "Changing Meanings of Family in Personal Relationships," *Current Sociology*, January 30, 2014, 0011392113518779, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392113518779>. See also Deborah Chambers, *A Sociology of Family Life: Change and Diversity in Intimate Relations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Michael Gilding, "Reflexivity over and above Convention: The New Orthodoxy in the Sociology of Personal Life, Formerly Sociology of the Family," *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 4 (December 2010): 757–777, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01340.x>; Graham A. Allan, "Personal Relationships in Late Modernity," *Personal*



- Relationships* 8 (2001): 325–339; Graham A. Allan and Emma Head, “Changing Families: Fluidity, Partnership, and Family Structure,” *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, ed. G. Ritzer (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 333–347; Rosalind Edwards and Val Gillies, “Farewell to Family? A Reply,” *Families, Relationships and Societies* 1, no. 3 (2012): 431–434; Rosalind Edwards and Val Gillies, “Farewell to Family? Notes on an Argument for Retaining the Concept,” *Families, Relationships and Societies* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 63–69, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674312X633162>; Rosalind Edwards, Jane Ribbens McCarthy, and Val Gillies, “The Politics of Concepts: Family and Its (Putative) Replacements,” *British Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 4 (2012): 730–746; Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Vanessa May, “Are We Really Saying Farewell to Family? A Response to Edwards and Gillies’ ‘Farewell to Family?’,” *Families, Relationships and Societies* 1, no. 3 (November 1, 2012): 415–421, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674312X656310>. For research better known in the United States, see Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Judith Stacey, “Cruising to Familyland: Gay Hypergamy and Rainbow Kinship,” *Current Sociology* 52, no. 2 (March 1, 2004): 181–197, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104041807>. In the United States, much of the debate about “the family” has come from a social constructionist perspective. See James A. Holstein and Jay Gubrium, “What Is Family? Further Thoughts on a Social Constructionist Approach,” *Marriage and Family Review* 28 (1999): 3–20. For a critique of that perspective, see Wing-Chung Ho, “The Limit of the Discursive: A Critique of the Radical Constructionist Approach to Family Experience,” *Sociological Quarterly* 53 (2012): 321–340. See also Kay Cook, “The Family: What Is It, How Do We Study It and Why?,” *Journal of Family Studies*, December 17, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.2014.20.1.2>. For discussions of a “new materialist approach” to the definition of family, see Cornelia Schadler, “How to Define Situated and Ever-Transforming Family Configurations? A New Materialist Approach,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 8, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 503–514, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12167>.
- 3 Alexis Dewaele et al., “Families of Choice? Exploring the Supportive Networks of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (February 2011): 312–331, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00715.x>; Brian Heaphy, “Troubling Traditional and Conventional Families? Formalised Same-Sex Couples and ‘The Ordinary,’” *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 1 (March 2018): 160–176, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418754779>; Peter M. Nardi, *Gay Men’s Friendships: Invincible Communities*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Timothy Ortyl and Kathleen E. Hull, “Constructions of Family among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People” (paper presented at Midwest Sociological Society Annual Meeting, Minneapolis, March 31, 2012); Ramona Faith Oswald, “Resilience within the Family Networks of Lesbians and Gay Men: Intentionality and Redefinition,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (May 2002): 374–383; Jeffrey Weeks, Catherine Donovan, and Brian Heaphy, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life-Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001); Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Jennifer Wilkinson et al., “Solidarity Beyond Sexuality: The Personal Communities of Gay Men,” *Sociology* 46,

- no. 6 (December 2012): 1161–1177, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511435064>. Today, reports have it that even as some gays and lesbians are settling into what appear to be nuclear families, they are still innovative, as they (along with other people who have ventured into the new land of assisted reproduction) include surrogates, sperm donors, egg donors, and donor siblings into their understanding of kin. See Joshua Gamson, “The Belly Mommy and the Fetus Sitter,” in *Intimacies: A New World of Relational Life*, ed. Alan Frank, Patricia Ticineto Glough, and Steven Seidman (New York: Routledge, 2013), 146–161; Joshua Gamson, *Modern Families: Stories of Extraordinary Journeys to Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Joshua Gamson, “Kindred Spirits?,” *Reproductive Biomedicine & Society Online* 7 (2018): 1–3; Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson, *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Petra Nordqvist and Carol Smart, *Relative Strangers: Family Life, Genes and Donor Conception* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 4 Bonnie Thornton Dill, “A Better Life for Me and My Children: Low-Income Single Mothers’ Struggle for Self-Sufficiency in the Rural South,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 29 (Summer 1998): 419–428; Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Fictive Kin, Paper Sons, and Compadrazgo: Women of Color and the Struggle for Family Survival,” *Families in the US: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, 1998, 431–445; Yoshinori Kamo, “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family Households,” *Sociological Perspectives* 43 (Summer 2000): 211; Susan Emley Keefe, “Real and Ideal Extended Familism Among Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans: On the Meaning of ‘Close’ Family Ties,” *Human Organization* 43 (Spring 1984); Esther Chihye Kim, “‘Mama’s Family’: Fictive Kinship and Undocumented Immigrant Restaurant Workers,” *Ethnography* 105 (2009): 497–513; Esther Chihye Kim, “Call Me Mama: An Ethnographic Portrait of an Employer of Undocumented Workers,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642 (2012), 170–185; Eric K. Shaw, “Fictive Kin and Helping Behavior: A Social Psychological Exploration among Haitian Immigrants, Christian Fundamentalists, and Gang Members,” *Sociation Today* 6 (2008), unpaginated; Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Carol B. Stack and Linda M. Burton, “Kinscripts,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 24 (Summer 1993): 157–170; Maria Vivas-Romero, “More than Just ‘Friends’? Locating Migrant Domestic Workers’ Transnational Voluntary Kin Relationships,” *Journal of Family Studies*, November 27, 2017, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2017.1407251>. For good reviews see Naomi Gerstel, “Rethinking Families and Community: The Color, Class, and Centrality of Extended Kin Ties,” *Sociological Forum* 264 (March 2011): 1–21; Naomi Gerstel and Dan Clawson, “Control over Time: Employers, Workers, and Families Shaping Work Schedules,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (July 30, 2018): 77–97, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117-041400>.
  - 5 Celia Berdes and John M. Eckert, “The Language of Caring: Nurse’s Aides’ Use of Family Metaphors Conveys Affective Care,” *Gerontologist* 47, no. 3 (2007): 340–349; Shellee Colon, “‘With Respect and Feelings’: Voices of West Indian Child Care and Domestic Workers in New York City,” in *All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties That Bind*, ed. J. B. Cole (New York: Free Press, 1986), 46–70; L. Dodson and R. M. Zincavage, “‘It’s Like a Family’: Caring Labor,

- Exploitation, and Race in Nursing Homes,” *Gender & Society* 21, no. 6 (December 1, 2007): 905–928, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207309899>; Lucy Takesue Fisher and Margaret I. Wallhagen, “Day-to-Day Care: The Interplay of CNAs’ Views of Residents and Nursing Home Environments,” *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 34, no. 11 (2008): 26–33; Colleen L. Johnson, “Fictive Kin Among Oldest Old African Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area,” *Journal of Gerontology* 54B (November 1999): S368–S375; Maryalice Jordan-Marsh and J. Taylor Harden, “Fictive Kin: Friends as Family Supporting Older Adults as They Age,” *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 31 (February 2005): 24–31; Tracy X. Karner, “Professional Caring: Homecare Workers as Fictive Kin,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 12 (1998): 69–82; Hazel MacRae, “Fictive Kin as a Component of the Social Networks of Older People,” *Research on Aging* 14 (June 1992): 226–427; Hazel MacRae, “Strong and Enduring Ties: Older Women and Their Friends,” *Canadian Journal on Aging (La Revue Canadienne du Vieillessement)* 15 (Fall 1996): 374–392; Anna Muraco and Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, “‘That’s What Friends Do’: Informal Caregiving for Chronically Ill Midlife and Older Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28, no. 8 (December 2011): 1073–1092, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511402419>; Anna Muraco, Allen J. LeBlanc, and Stephen T. Russell, “Conceptualizations of Family by Older Gay Men,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 20 (2008): 69–90; Andrew Nocon and Maggie Pearson, “The Roles of Friends and Neighbours in Providing Support for Older People,” *Ageing & Society* 20, no. 3 (2000): 341–367; Kathleen W. Piercy, “When It Is More than a Job: Close Relationships Between Home Health Aides and Older Clients,” *Journal of Aging Health* 12 (2000): 362–387; Marieke Voorpostel and R. Blieszner, “The Importance of Discretionary and Fictive Kin Relationships for Older Adults,” in *Handbook of Families and Aging*, ed. R. Blieszner and V. H. Bedford (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 243–259.
- 6 Bella DePaulo, *How We Live Now: Redefining Home and Family in the 21st Century* (New York: Atria Books/Beyond Words, 2015); Bella DePaulo, *Single, No Children: Who Is Your Family?* (Charleston, SC: DoubleDoor Books, 2016); Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (New York: Penguin, 2013); Elisabeth Sheff, “Polyamorous Families, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Slippery Slope,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 40, no. 5 (October 2011): 487–520, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10891241611413578>; E. Kay Trimmer, *Friendship Networks and Care*, (working paper no. 31, Berkeley: Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley, March 2002, <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4128>; work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries). See also Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, “Whatever Happened to Non-monogamies? Critical Reflections on Recent Research and Theory,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 6 (2010): 748–772; Mark Goldfeder and Elisabeth Sheff, “Children of Polyamorous Families: A First Empirical Look,” *Journal of Law and Social Deviance* 5 (2013): 150.
- 7 See the discussions in Gerstel, “Rethinking Families and Community”; Gerstel and Clawson, “Control over Time.” For a couple of exceptions, see Sally Bould, “Caring Neighborhoods: Bringing Up the Kids Together,” *Journal of Family Issues* 24, no. 4 (May 1, 2003): 427–447, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X02250830>; Sara Eldén, “An Ordinary Complexity of Care: Moving beyond ‘the Family’ in Research with Children,” *Families, Relationships and Societies* 5, no. 2 (July 2016): 175–192; Karen V. Hansen, *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender and Networks*

- of Care* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004). See also the discussion in Eric Widmer and Riitta Jallinoja, *Beyond the Nuclear Family: Families in a Configurational Perspective* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008); Eric D. Widmer and Linda-Ann La Farga, “Family Networks: A Sociometric Method to Study Relationships in Families,” *Field Methods* 12 (2000): 108–128.
- 8 Stack, *All Our Kin*. For encyclopedia reviews, see Katherine R. Allen, “Fictive Kin,” *The Encyclopedia of Adulthood and Aging*, ed. S. K. Whitbourne (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1–4; Margaret K. Nelson, “Fictive Kin,” in *Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, ed. Constance L. Shehan (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 1–3, <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1002/9781119085621.wbefs003>.
  - 9 John A. Ballweg, “Extensions of Meaning and Use for Kinship Terms,” *American Anthropologist, New Series* 71 (February 1969): 84–85; Colleen L. Johnson, “Perspectives on American Kinship in the Later 1990s,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62 (August 2000): 200. For a full discussion of this issue, see Margaret K. Nelson, “Whither Fictive Kin? Or, What’s in a Name?,” *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 2 (January 1, 2014): 201–222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12470621>. In appendix B I show that although many scholars look for, find, and analyze evidence of fictive kinship within some groups, they *rarely* look for or even discuss something that might be thought of as fictive kinship among a White population. The only exceptions occur when that White population includes the elderly (and their caregivers) or some other “marginal” group (e.g., gays and lesbians; single mothers; people at risk; rural folk).
  - 10 I would note, however, that fictive kin are frequently described in all types of literature and on television sitcoms. See, for a couple of examples, Gail Caldwell, *Let’s Take the Long Way Home* (New York: Random House, 2008); John Casey, *Compass Rose* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Michael Lewis, *The Blind Side* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009); Kate Maloy, *Every Last Cuckoo* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2009); Ann Patchett, *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship* (New York: Harper, 2004); Jillian Sandell, “I’ll Be There For You: Friends and the Fantasy of Alternative Families,” *American Studies* 39 (1998): 141–155; Elizabeth Taylor, *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont*, (London, U.K.: Virago, 2011). For a wonderful depiction of an entire fictive-kin family, see the Japanese film *Shoplifters*, directed, written, and edited by Hirokazu Kore-eda (2018) (for a description, see “Shoplifters,” *Wikipedia*, March 21, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shoplifters&oldid=888869819>).
  - 11 D. O. Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family: A Typology of Voluntary Kin,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 3 (April 22, 2010): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361615>. Although Braithwaite and colleagues chose *not* to use the term *fictive kin*, clearly their findings are similar to those of many other studies that used a different term.
  - 12 Robert Joseph Taylor et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks,” *Family Relations* 62, no. 4 (2013): 619, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12030>.
  - 13 The National Survey of American Life (NSAL): Coping with Stress in the 21st Century was collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research, Research Center for Group Dynamics, 2019, <https://rcgd.isr.umich.edu/>. For further analysis, see appendix B. Taylor and colleagues conclude that “these findings indicate that, *across race and ethnic groups*, fictive kin are a common feature of family networks and their role as

- sources of support is more nuanced than previously thought.” As discussed further in appendix B, the subsequent references to this research largely draw on evidence about fictive kinship among African Americans and Blacks of Caribbean descent. See also Konstantinos Alexakos, Jayson K. Jones, and Victor H. Rodriguez, “Fictive Kinship as It Mediates Learning, Resiliency, Perseverance, and Social Learning of Inner-City High School Students of Color in a College Physics Class,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 6, no. 4 (March 1, 2011): 847–870, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-011-9317-7>; Robin L. Jarrett, Stephanie R. Jefferson, and Jenell N. Kelly, “Finding Community in Family: Neighborhood Effects and African American Kin Networks,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41 (2010); Pearl Stewart, “Who Is Kin? Family Definition and African American Families,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 15 (2007): 163–181, for relatively recent discussions of fictive kinship within Black communities.
- 14 One respondent was not White. She was recommended to me by another respondent. Her story is of a kind of created kinship that she believes to be different from the cultural pattern of fictive kinship she learned from her family. See the discussion of Brenda Washington in chapter 6.
  - 15 I received institutional review board approval for this study from Middlebury College.
  - 16 For an interesting discussion on how to obtain information about what the authors call “critical associations,” see Katherine Davies and Brian Heaphy, “Interactions That Matter: Researching Critical Associations,” *Methodological Innovations Online* 6, no. 3 (October 2011): 5–16, <https://doi.org/10.4256/mio.2011.002>.
  - 17 I interviewed no one living on any form of public assistance; among those who were out of college, most had professional or semiprofessional careers. Nine respondents self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Among these respondents, two women were married to each other, one woman had previously been married to a woman, and one woman was still married to a woman. The relationships my lesbian respondents described as being like family were not constructed within an explicitly lesbian community, and the majority of them were with heterosexual people.
  - 18 More specifically, 21 percent were in their twenties, 8 percent in their thirties, 23 percent in their forties, 19 percent in their fifties, 28 percent in their sixties, and 1 percent in her eighties.
  - 19 See appendix A for more details about the respondents and their organization into kinds of fictive kin relationships.
  - 20 Graham A. Allan, “Flexibility, Friendship, and Family,” *Personal Relationships* 15 (2008): 10. See also his references here to Margaret K. Nelson, “Single Mothers ‘Do’ Family,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 4 (2006): 781–795; Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” in *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change*, ed. Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–25.
  - 21 I discuss this issue more fully in chapter 3.
  - 22 Margaret K. Nelson, “Fictive Kin, Families We Choose, and Voluntary Kin: What Does the Discourse Tell Us?,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 5, no. 4 (December 2013): 259–281, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jfttr.12019>.
  - 23 See, for example, Elijah Anderson, “Jelly’s Place: An Ethnographic Memoir,”

- International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 19, no. 1/2 (2005): 35–52; Bill McCarthy, John Hagan, and Monica J. Martin, “In and Out of Harm’s Way: Violent Victimization and the Social Capital of Fictive Street Families,” *Criminology* 40 (November 2002): 831–866.
- 24 See, for example, Kevin C. Heslin et al., “Alternative Families in Recovery: Fictive Kin Relationships among Residents of Sober Living Homes,” *Qualitative Health Research* 21 (2011): 477–488.
  - 25 The fictive kin relationships I study thus have different characteristics from those that emerge in associations like the Posse groups on liberal arts campuses (Posse Foundation, “About Posse,” 2019, <https://www.possefoundation.org/about-posse>). One of my respondents had a relationship with peers created in this way, and two of my respondents served as mentors to groups like these (see appendix A). Indeed, some of these types of organizations—like fraternities, sororities, labor unions, political movements, and the church—have long relied on kin language to signify and create closeness and loyalty; Scott Fabius Kiesling, “Homosocial Desire in Men’s Talk: Balancing and Re-creating Cultural Discourses of Masculinity,” *Language in Society* 34 (2005): 695–726; Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
  - 26 I was offered several accounts of how family caregivers felt like family; I also pursued an account of how caregiving transformed into a sense of being like family for the caregiver. With a couple of exceptions, I chose not to include these accounts, although I count those who gave these accounts among my respondents and used the accounts for comparative purposes and to inform my understanding (see appendix B). For discussions of how the like-family designation can be exploitative, see Dodson and Zinbavage, “It’s Like a Family”; Margaret K. Nelson, *Negotiated Care: The Experience of Family Day Care Providers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Mary Romero, *The Maid’s Daughter: Living Inside and Outside the American Dream* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
  - 27 For a marvelous discussion of how children identify such people as kin, see Jennifer Mason and Becky Tipper, “Being Related: How Children Define and Create Kinship,” *Childhood* 15, no. 4 (November 2008): 441–460, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568208097201>.
  - 28 My analysis relied on careful listening to the interviews themselves and then reading and rereading written transcripts. I coded most of the interviews myself, using a conceptual scheme that emerged as I began to analyze the varieties of fictive kinship and the varieties of interactions and attitudes that emerged within them. I also hired an advanced undergraduate at Middlebury College, Sarah Koch, to code some of the transcripts. My discussions with her helped me understand better how a single piece of data could be interpreted in more than one way.
  - 29 Relying on the “native talk” of their respondents, Braithwaite and colleagues (2010) have introduced a complex typology of what they call “voluntary” kinship. They delineate four types of voluntary families, distinguished by their function: substitute family, supplemental family, convenience family, and extended family. Their typology makes significant distinctions among types of fictive kin relations. However, it assumes that any given relationship will fill only one “function” and treats adults, adolescents, and children as interchangeable even though they

- occupy very different positions in our social lives. In fact, not only did I find that the relationships I studied could not be identified by a single function (e.g., as only supplemental), but also that it was important to separate those occurring between peers from those that involved people in different generations.
- 30 For discussions of the “host family program” with the Fresh Air Fund, see Fresh Air Fund, “Host Family Program,” accessed September 18, 2018, <http://www.freshair.org/host-family-program-learn-more>.
- 31 AFS-USA, “AFS Intercultural Programs USA,” accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.afsusa.org/>. See also <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/future-leaders-exchange>.
- 32 These issues are discussed at length in chapters 5 and 6 and in the conclusion to this book.
- 33 For the use of the term *fictive kin* among African Americans, see Linda M. Chatters, Robert Joseph Taylor, and Rukmalie Jayakody, “Fictive Kinship Relations in Black Extended Families,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies or Journal of Marriage and the Family* 25 (Autumn 1994): 297–312; Stack, *All Our Kin*; Taylor et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks.” For *compadrazgo* specifically, see Sandra L. Barnes, “An Intra-Ethnic Analysis of Social Affiliations Among Latinos in the United States,” *Journal of Poverty* 11, no. 1 (April 12, 2007): 107–134, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J134V11N01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J134V11N01_05); Kathy Gill-Hopple and Diane Brage-Hudson, “Compadrazgo: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 23 (2012): 117–123.
- 34 Weston, *Families We Choose*. Some of the other terms in use are associated with specific populations: *urban tribes* for college-educated urban youth (Ethan Watters, *Urban Tribes: Are Friends the New Family?* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2003]); *othermothers* among African Americans (Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meanings of Motherhood in Black Culture: Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks,” in *Women: Images and Realities: A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. A. Kesselman, L. D. McNair, and N. Schniedewind [Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1995], 201–204); *paper sons* for people of Chinese descent (Dill, “Fictive Kin, Paper Sons, and Compadrazgo”). Still other terms—like *ritual kin* (John R. Gillis, “Our Virtual Families: Toward a Cultural Understanding of Modern Family Life” [working paper no. 2, Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, 2000]), *friend-keepers* (S. K. Gallagher and N. Gerstel, “Kinkeeping and Friend Keeping among Older Women: The Effect of Marriage,” *Gerontologist* 33, no. 5 [October 1, 1993]: 675–681, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/33.5.675>); *kin-keepers* (M. A. Leach and D. O. Braithwaite, “A Binding Tie: Supportive Communication of Family Kinkeepers,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 24 [1996]: 200–216); *incorporative relationships* (Judith C. Barker, “Neighbors, Friends, and Other Nonkin Caregivers of Community-Living Dependent Elders,” *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 57, no. 3 [2002]: S158–S167), and *non-kin conversion* (Katherine R. Allen, Rosemary Blieszner, and Karen A. Roberto, “Perspectives on Extended Family and Fictive Kin in the Later Years: Strategies and Meanings of Kin Reinterpretation,” *Journal of Family Issues* 32, no. 9 [September 1, 2011]: 1156–1177, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X11404335>)—have emerged in the study of particular groups but need not be so closely identified with those populations.
- 35 Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family,” 390. For a different interpretation of

- “fictive,” focusing on the social process of forming, see Ulka Anjaria, “‘Relationships Which Have No Name’: Family and Sexuality in 1970s Popular Film,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 10, no. 1 (April 2012): 28–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2012.655103>.
- 36 Taylor et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks,” 611.
- 37 Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family,” 396.
- 38 See the discussion in Jane Ribbens McCarthy, “The Powerful Relational Language of ‘Family’: Togetherness, Belonging and Personhood,” *Sociological Review* 60, no. 1 (2012): 68–90, concerning the powerful language of “family.”
- 39 Maria Abou-Abdallah, Yoshihisa Kashima, and Charles Harb, “‘Brothers’ in Arms: Does Metaphorizing Kinship Increase Approval of Parochial Altruism?,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 16, no. 1–2 (2016): 37–49; Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar, “‘We Are a Family’: A Critical Organizational Discourse Analysis,” *International Journal of Business and Management* 1, no. 1 (2009): 10; Celeste M. Botheridge and Raymond T. Lee, “We Are Family: Congruity Between Organizational and Family Functioning Constructs,” *Human Relations* 59 (2006): 141–161; Hector N. Qirko, “Fictive Kinship and Induced Altruism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. Catherine A. Salmon and Todd K. Shackelford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 310–328.
- 40 Even more complex is the use of the terms *brothers* and *sisters*, especially within the Black community (and church) and by activists in LGBTQ movements; see H. Carr and C. Hunter, “Unravelling Law’s Kinning Practices: Feminism, Fictive Families and the Albert Kennedy Trust,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 20, no. 2 (August 2012): 105–120, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-012-9200-2>.
- 41 Sister Sledge, “We Are Family (Official Music Video),” Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyGY2NfYpeE>.
- 42 Donald W. Ball, “The ‘Family’ as a Sociological Problem: Conceptualization of the Taken-for-Granted as Prologue to Social Problems Analysis,” *Social Problems* 19 (Winter 1972): 295–307.
- 43 For a network analysis of this kind of relationship, calling the bonds “family,” see Amy N. Bush, Alicia M. Walker, and Brea L. Perry, “‘The Family Plan’: Characteristics of Ties Described as Both ‘Friend’ and ‘Family’ in Personal Networks,” *Network Science* 5, no. 1 (2017): 92–107.
- 44 Pahl and Spencer, “Family, Friends and Personal Communities,” 203.
- 45 Collins, “The Meanings of Motherhood in Black Culture”; Dill, “Fictive Kin, Paper Sons, and Compadrazgo.” See also Rebecca A. Lopez, “Las Comadres as a Social Support System,” *Affilia* 14 (Spring 1999): 24–42, for a description of a similar phenomenon within a Hispanic setting.
- 46 While these relationships might also exist in White communities, they are not the focus of my research.
- 47 This definition is from Robert Hill as cited in Michael J. Higdon, “When Informal Adoption Meets Intestate Succession: The Cultural Myopia of the Equitable Adoption Doctrine,” *Wake Forest Law Review* 43 (2008): 223–281. For a long discussion, see Robert B. Hill, *Informal Adoption among Black Families* (Washington, DC: National Urban League, 1977). For statistics, see Kathy S. Stolley, “Statistics on Adoption in the United States,” *Future of Children* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 26–42. For a comparison of legal and informal adoption by relatives, see Laura F. Radcliff, Matthew D. Bramlett, and Annette Waters, “Legal



and Informal Adoption by Relatives in the U.S.: Comparative Characteristics and Well-Being from a Nationally Representative Sample,” *Adoption Quarterly* 13 (2010): 168–191. When informal adoption confronts the law, it is called “equitable adoption”; Celia Guzaldo Gamrath, “Equitable Adoption: A New Breed of Children,” *American Journal of Family Law* 13 (1999): 195–200; Higdon, “When Informal Adoption Meets Intestate Succession: The Cultural Myopia of the Equitable Adoption Doctrine”; J. C. J., Jr., “Equitable Adoption: They Took Him into Their Home and Called Him Fred,” *Virginia Law Review* 58, no. 4 (April 1972): 727, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1071990>; Christopher Petri, “What’s In a Name? Not Much for Equitable Adoption in Missouri,” *Missouri Law Review* 63 (Winter 1998): 195–224; Lindsay Ayn Warner, “Bending the Bow of Equity: Three Ways Florida Can Improve Its Equitable Adoption Policy,” *Stetson Law Review* 38 (2009): 577–618.

- 48 In chapter 5, I also distinguish the pattern of relationships of informal parents with unofficial children from that of stepparenting.
- 49 For analyses of foster care, see references in chapter 3, note 11. In that chapter I draw a distinction between the guest children and foster children.

## Chapter 1 The Texture and Dynamics of Like-Sibling Bonds

- 1 Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 2 D. O. Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family: A Typology of Voluntary Kin,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 3 (April 22, 2010): 388–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361615>.
- 3 I explore the issue of motivations again (and more fully) in chapter 4.
- 4 Signe Howell, “Kinning: The Creation of Life Trajectories in Transnational Adoptive Families,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 3 (September 2003): 465–484, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00159>.
- 5 Helena Ragoné, “Chasing the Blood Tie: Surrogate Mothers, Adoptive Mothers and Fathers,” *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996): 352–365.
- 6 For other uses of the concept of “origin stories” in family creation involving reliance on assisted reproductive technologies, see Charis Thompson, *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Sarah Franklin, “Origin Stories Revisited: IVF as an Anthropological Project,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 30, no. 4 (2006): 547–555. On the use of origin stories in stepfamilies, see Jody Koenig Kellas et al., “Telling the Story of Stepfamily Beginnings: The Relationship between Young-Adult Stepchildren’s Stepfamily Origin Stories and Their Satisfaction with the Stepfamily,” *Journal of Family Communication* 14, no. 2 (2014): 149–166. For other discussions that define kinship as a special form of relatedness, see Sebastian Mohr, “Living Kinship Trouble: Danish Sperm Donors’ Narratives of Relatedness,” *Medical Anthropology* 34, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 470–484, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1008632>; Linda Stone, *Kinship and Gender: An Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014); Janet Carsten, *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For discussions illustrating how “kinning” creates obligations, see Kevin Roy and Linda Burton, “Mothering Through Recruitment: Kinscription of Nonresidential Fathers and Father Figures in Low-Income

Families,” *Family Relations* 56 (January 2007): 24–39; Carol B. Stack and Linda M. Burton, “Kinscripts,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 24 (Summer 1993): 157–170.

- 7 I am not calling this relationship “kinning” because I do not believe what is being created here is kinship in the sense that the same expectations prevailed as in nuclear and extended families. This issue is discussed at length toward the end of chapter 2.
- 8 Pets figured in other relationships too. Entrusting another with one’s pet was an indicator of a special bond. Another respondent spoke of the origin of her relationship with her like-family affiliate Amy, this way: “When we started becoming pretty close friends I house- and dog-sat for her a couple of times, and so that was definitely one of those things that, like, pushed us beyond just work acquaintances into something special. She felt like obviously she could trust me. . . . I really fell in love with this tiny little mutt dog. I don’t actually like little dogs but this was the gateway dog.” Perhaps this is not so surprising given that many people consider their pets to be kin. Nickie Charles and Charlotte Aull Davies, “My Family and Other Animals: Pets as Kin,” in *Human and Other Animals*, ed. Bob Carter and Nickie Charles (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 9 For a discussion of relationships between straight women and gay men, see Eric M. Russell, William Ickes, and Vivian P. Ta, “Women Interact More Comfortably and Intimately with Gay Men—but Not Straight Men—After Learning Their Sexual Orientation,” *Psychological Science* 29, no. 2 (February 2018): 288–303, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617733803>. See also Anna Muraco, “Intentional Families: Fictive Kin Ties between Cross-Gender, Different Sexual Orientation Friends,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68 (December 2006): 1313–1325; Anna Muraco, *Odd Couples: Friendships at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395119>. Muraco describes relationships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men and calls them “intersectional relationships.” Muraco also demonstrates some of the differences between these two sets of relationships as well as their similarities and she suggests that with respect to gender the relationships have both “normative” and “transformative” dimensions.
- 10 For a discussion on how important physical similarities are for the creation of a sense of kinship among what are called donor siblings, see Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson, *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 11 Because romance is included within “family,” most scholars would suggest that those relationships are based not on balanced, but on generalized, reciprocity. On this issue see Graham A. Allan, “Flexibility, Friendship, and Family,” *Personal Relationships* 15 (2008): 1–16. For an excellent discussion of reciprocity, see Karen V. Hansen, “The Asking Rules of Reciprocity: Negotiating Need and Obligation in Networks of Care for Children,” *Qualitative Sociology* 27, no. 4 (2004): 421–437. I discuss the issue of reciprocity further below.
- 12 Liz was rejecting the notion of “friends with benefits” here. See, Melissa A. Bisson and Timothy R. Levine, “Negotiating a Friends with Benefits Relationship,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 38, no. 1 (2008): 66–73; Laura A. Rosenbury, “Friends with Benefits?,” *Michigan Law Review* 106 (2007): 189–242. I discuss the concepts of “doing” later; see chapter 3.

- 13 For a discussion of how this kind of imagining is a common element in friendships between gay men and straight women and lesbians and straight men, see Muraco, “Intentional Families: Fictive Kin Ties Between Cross-Gender, Different Sexual Orientation Friends”; Muraco, *Odd Couples*.
- 14 For discussion of legal issues and how they might be relevant to friendships, see Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, “Some Argue It’s Time to Legally Recognize the Bond of Friendship,” *Boston Globe*, June 8, 2008; Ethan J. Leib, “Friendship and the Law,” *UCLA Law Review* 54 (2007): 631.
- 15 Weston, *Families We Choose*.
- 16 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart: A Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).
- 17 For general discussions of friendship, see Rebecca G. Adams and Graham A. Allan, *Placing Friendship in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Graham A. Allan, “Review Essay: Research on Friendship,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 1 (December 2009): 223–236; Graham A. Allan, “Friendship, Sociology and Social Structure,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 15, no. 5 (October 1998): 685–702, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407598155007>; Graham A. Allan, “Boundaries of Friendship,” in *Families in Society: Boundaries and Relationships*, ed. Linda McKie and Sarah Cunningham-Bailey, 227–240 (Bristol, UK: Policy Press); Beverly Fehr, *Friendship Processes* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1996); Mary Holmes and Silvana Greco, “Introduction: Friendship and Emotions,” *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 1 (2011): 16; Graham A. Allan, “Commentary: Friendships and Emotions,” *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 1 (2011): 15; Graham A. Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1979). For a discussion of friendship as adults and in later life, see Rosemary Blieszner, “A Lifetime of Caring: Dimensions and Dynamics of Late-Life Close Relationships,” *Personal Relationships* 13 (2006): 1–18; Rosemary Blieszner and Rebecca G. Adams, *Adult Friendship* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1992), <http://doi.apa.org/psycinfo/1992-98047-000>. For an anthropological discussion of friendship, see Bettina Beer and Don Gardner, “Friendship, Anthropology Of,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright, 425–431 (New York: Elsevier, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.12076-8>. In chapter 2, I consider more fully how like-family relationships can be distinguished from friendship. On this point, also see Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship*; Allan, “Flexibility, Friendship, and Family”; Graham A. Allan, “Personal Relationships in Late Modernity,” *Personal Relationships* 8 (2001): 325–339.
- 18 Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 114; see also R. E. Pahl and Liz Spencer, “Personal Communities: Not Simply Families of ‘Fate’ or ‘Choice,’” *Current Sociology* 529 (2004): 199–221; Ray Pahl and David J. Pevalin, “Between Family and Friends: A Longitudinal Study of Friendship Choice,” *British Journal of Sociology* 561 (2005): 433–450.
- 19 The literature on family ambivalence touches on some of that issue of density. See, for example Ingrid Arnet Connidis, “Exploring Ambivalence in Family Ties: Progress and Prospects,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 1 (2015): 77–95; Ingrid Arnet Connidis, “Life Transitions and the Adult Sibling Tie: A Qualitative Study,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54, no. 4 (November 1992): 972, <https://doi.org/10.2307/353176>; Ingrid Arnet Connidis and Julie Ann McMullin,

- “Sociological Ambivalence and Family Ties: A Critical Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (August 2004): 558–567; Natalia Sarkisian, “‘Doing Family Ambivalence’: Nuclear and Extended Families in Single Mothers’ Lives,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 2 (2006): 804–811; Karen L. Fingerman, Elizabeth L. Hay, and Kira S. Birditt, “The Best of Ties, the Worst of Ties: Close, Problematic and Ambivalent Social Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66 (August 2004): 792–808.
- 20 Lillian Rubin, *Just Friends: The Role of Friendship in Our Lives* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 22. See the repetition of this point in Muraco, *Odd Couples*.
- 21 Spencer and Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship*, 114.
- 22 In chapter 6 I suggest that different “plane” is created by the notion of “falling in love” with an unrelated child.
- 23 In their analysis of like-family relationships, which they call voluntary kin relationships, Braithwaite and colleagues (“Communication Structures of Supplemental Voluntary Kin Relationships,” *Family Relations* 65, no. 4 [October 1, 2016]: 616–630, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12215>) describe four different kinds of interactions/relationships between voluntary kin and blood/legal kin: Intertwined (blood/legal kin and voluntary kin know each other well and interact regularly), Limited (blood/legal kin and voluntary kin know each other but have limited contact), Separate (blood/legal kin and voluntary kin are not in contact with and may not know each other at all) and Hostile (a member of one’s blood/legal kin—in the cases these scholars studied, this was a husband—is hostile toward a voluntary kin—in these cases, the wife’s friend).
- 24 For a discussion of friendship across gender lines, see Harry Blatterer, *Everyday Friendships: Intimacy as Freedom in a Complex World* (New York: Springer, 2014); Harry Blatterer, “Friendship’s Freedom and Gendered Limits,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 4 (April 16, 2013): 435–456, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431013484000>.

## Chapter 2 The Limits of Like-Sibling Bonds

- 1 Note that I am not saying that family cannot be both attenuated and ruptured. For a review of the growing literature on estrangement in families, see Lucy Blake, “Parents and Children Who Are Estranged in Adulthood: A Review and Discussion of the Literature: Review and Discussion of the Estrangement Literature,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 9, no. 4 (December 2017): 521–536, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12216>. See also Kylie Agllias (“No Longer on Speaking Terms: The Losses Associated with Family Estrangement at the End of Life,” *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 92, no. 1 [2011]: 107–113), for a discussion of the pain of family rupture late in life; Kristina M. Scharp and Lindsey J. Thomas (“Family ‘Bonds’: Making Meaning of Parent–Child Relationships in Estrangement Narratives,” *Journal of Family Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 32–50), for a discussion of how meaning is made of family estrangement; Joshua Coleman (*When Parents Hurt: Compassionate Strategies When You and Your Grown Child Don’t Get Along* [New York: William Morrow, 2008]), for strategies of dealing with family estrangement; and Richard P. Conti (“Family Estrangement: Establishing a Prevalence Rate,” *Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Science* 3, no. 2 [2015]: 28–35), for a discussion of the frequency of estrangement.

- 2 For books about broken friendships, see Maria Paul, *The Friendship Crisis: Finding, Making, and Keeping Friends When You're Not a Kid Anymore* (New York: Rodale Books, 2005); Liz Pryor, *What Did I Do Wrong?: When Women Don't Tell Each Other the Friendship Is Over*. (New York: Atria Books/Beyond Words, 2011); Jessica Smock and Stephanie Sprenger, *My Other Ex: Women's True Stories of Losing and Leaving Friends* (HerStories Project Press, 2014); Jan Yager, *When Friendship Hurts: How to Deal with Friends Who Betray, Abandon, or Wound You*. (New York: Touchstone, 2010). For paired discussions of the painful loss of a close friendship, see Heather Abel, "Emily Chenowith," and Emily Chenowith, "Heather Abel," in *The Friend Who Got Away: Twenty Women's True Life Tales of Friendships that Blew Up, Burned Out or Faded Away*, ed. Jenny O'ffill and Elissa Schappell, 135–150 and 151–167, respectively (New York: Doubleday, 2005).
- 3 For a discussion that acknowledges how "suffused" friendships can be troubling as well as rewarding, see Brian Heaphy and Katherine Davies, "Critical Friendships," *Families, Relationships and Societies; Bristol* 1, no. 3 (November 2012): 311–326.
- 4 Interestingly, kin "created" through shared DNA have also been described as existing even when the individuals are not known to each other. In writing about these assumptions, Jenny Gunnarsson Payne ("Grammars of Kinship: Biological Motherhood and Assisted Reproduction in the Age of Epigenetics," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 3 (March 2016): 493, <https://doi.org/10.1086/684233>) refers to a grammar of genes in which she says the "underlying rule is the idea that biological kinship in itself has little or nothing to do with our actual relations with or affective ties to each other (even if, indeed, it can trigger such ties); in fact, following this grammar, [she says], *I do not even have to know of the existence of our kin to be related to them* [emphasis added]." That is, if genes alone can create kinship, that kinship could exist without any form of sociality. On this issue see also K. Daniels, "Is Blood Really Thicker than Water? Assisted Reproduction and Its Impact on Our Thinking about Family," *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology* 26, no. 4 (December 2005): 265–270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01674820500109180>; Jeanette Edwards, "Donor Siblings: Participating in Each Other's Conception," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 2 (2013): 285–292; Kaja Finkler, "The Kin in the Gene," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (2001): 235–263; Kaja Finkler, Cécile Skrzynia, and James P. Evans, "The New Genetics and Its Consequences for Family, Kinship, Medicine and Medical Genetics," *Social Science & Medicine* 57, no. 3 (August 2003): 403–412, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(02\)00365-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(02)00365-9).
- 5 The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) does not acknowledge many of our significant kin relationships; we can be covered if we are caring for parents or children, but not siblings or cousins. See U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, "Fact Sheet #28F: Qualifying Reasons for Leave Under the Family and Medical Leave Act" (July 2015), <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs28f.pdf>.
- 6 See Elizabeth Young, Clive Seale, and Michael Bury ("It's Not like Family Going Is It?: Negotiating Friendship Boundaries Towards the End of Life," *Mortality* 3 [1998]: 27–42), who discuss how friends are often edged out or disenfranchised both before death and during the grieving process.
- 7 As noted in the preface, it was my own experience of providing care to a peer that set me on this journey of exploring friendship and caregiving. My essays on this

- topic include Margaret K. Nelson, “Caring for Anna,” *Contexts* 5 (Fall 2006): 78–79; Margaret K. Nelson, “Listening to Anna,” *Health Affairs* (May 2007): 836–840; Margaret K. Nelson, “Between Family and Friendship: The Right to Care for Anna,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 3 (December 2011): 241–255.
- 8 By way of contrast with significant holidays, vacations were often spent with friends.
- 9 For a classic treatment of the importance of rituals, see Emile Durkheim, “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, 34–49 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002). For the importance of holidays in families, see Micaela Di Leonardo, “The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families and the Work of Kinship,” *Signs* 12 (1987): 440–453; John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 220–226.
- 10 For a discussion of expectations that families inherit, see Michael Gilding, “Reflexivity over and Above Convention: The New Orthodoxy in the Sociology of Personal Life, Formerly Sociology of the Family: Reflexivity over and above Convention,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 4 (December 2010): 757–777, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01340.x>. Gilding argues that whatever “shifts and tensions” there might be in claims upon estates, they “pale beside the trajectory of inheritance law and the norm of equal inheritance among children” (760). Gilding thus rejects Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason’s (*Passing On: Kinship and Inheritance in England* [Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2013], <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315072340>) argument that “contemporary inheritance is grounded in a ‘reflexive relationism.’” The emphasis on reflexivity, Gilding suggests, cannot explain how “most individuals remarkably arrive at much the same decision.” See also, on inheritance, the extensive writing of Janet Finch, *Family Obligations and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), and Janet Finch and Lynn Hayes, “Inheritance, Death and the Concept of the Home,” *Sociology* 28, no. 2 (May 1, 1994): 417–433, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028002004>. See also John C. Henretta, Matthew F. Van Voorhis, and Beth J. Soldo, “Parental Money Help to Children and Stepchildren,” *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 9 (July 2014): 1131–1153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13485077>. These authors argue that although there is a great deal of difference among families (i.e., some families give and others do not), in general, parents are more likely to give to their biological children than to their stepchildren, and stepchildren from the wife are especially disadvantaged. Research by T. P. Schwartz (“Durkheim’s Prediction About the Declining Importance of the Family and Inheritance,” *Sociological Quarterly* 37, no. 3 [1996]: 503–519, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1996.tb00751.x>) reports that in Rhode Island, families and kin were the beneficiaries in more than 90 percent of the sole beneficiary wills and in more than 80 percent of the combined beneficiary wills. Spouses, children, and grandchildren remain the most frequent beneficiaries. For a history of wills, trusts, and inheritance law, see Lawrence Friedman, *Dead Hands: A Social History of Wills, Trusts, and Inheritance Law* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Law Books, 2009). For a discussion of variations in cultures of intergenerational transmission, see Julia Brannen, “Cultures of Intergenerational Transmission in Four-Generation Families,” *Sociological Review* 54, no. 1 (2006): 133–154.
- 11 Finch, *Family Obligations and Social Change*. For a discussion of guardianship that makes a similar point, see Ezra Hasson, “Navigating Family and Personal

- Relationships: The Appointment of Testamentary Guardians,” *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 34, no. 3 (2012): 279–294.
- 12 Like-sibling relationships are often egalitarian and in this way differ from those within the family, which often involve structured hierarchy. On this issue, see Graham A. Allan, “Personal Relationships in Late Modernity,” *Personal Relationships* 8 (2001): 325–339. Like-sibling relationships did, however, sometimes develop the inequality of dependence on one side and care on the other. For discussions of caregiving between friends, see Rosemary Blieszner, “A Lifetime of Caring: Dimensions and Dynamics of Late-Life Close Relationships,” *Personal Relationships* 13 (2006): 1–18; Rosemary Blieszner and Rebecca G. Adams, *Adult Friendship*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1992), <http://doi.apa.org/psycinfo/1992-98047-000>.
  - 13 Paul Bloom, “Family, Community, Trolley Problems, and the Crisis in Moral Psychology,” *Yale Review* 99, no. 2 (2011): 26–43. On a critique of the individualization thesis from the perspective of family obligations to care, see Sophia Ashleigh Manuel Brock, “The Individualization Thesis and Mothering Children with Disabilities,” *Journal of Family Studies* 21, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 261–281, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2015.1086404>.
  - 14 Julia Hahmann, “Friendship Repertoires and Care Arrangement: A Praxeological Approach,” *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 84, no. 2 (January 2017): 180–206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091415016668353>. Hahmann suggests that the elderly do not always wish to receive care from friends. See also Judith C. Barker, “Neighbors, Friends, and Other Nonkin Caregivers of Community-Living Dependent Elders,” *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 57, no. 3 (2002): S158–S167; Tracey A. Lapierre and Norah Keating, “Characteristics and Contributions of Non-kin Carers of Older People: A Closer Look at Friends and Neighbours,” *Ageing and Society* 33, no. 8 (July 25, 2012): 1442–1468, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X12000736>; Anna Muraco and Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, “‘That’s What Friends Do’: Informal Caregiving for Chronically Ill Midlife and Older Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28, no. 8 (December 2011): 1073–1092, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511402419>; Andrew Nocon and Maggie Pearson, “The Roles of Friends and Neighbours in Providing Support for Older People,” *Ageing & Society* 20, no. 3 (2000): 341–367; Kathleen W. Piercy, “‘We Couldn’t Do Without Them’: The Value of Close Relationships Between Older Adults and Their Nonfamily Caregivers,” *Generations* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 41–47.
  - 15 For these demographics, see Barker, “Neighbors, Friends, and Other Nonkin Caregivers of Community-Living Dependent Elders”; Nocon and Pearson, “The Roles of Friends and Neighbours in Providing Support for Older People.”
  - 16 Interestingly, Angela is not concerned that Dorothy’s son will disapprove of her involvement; non-kin caregivers do often express that kind of concern (Nocon and Pearson, “The Roles of Friends and Neighbours in Providing Support for Older People,” 239).
  - 17 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Nelson, “Between Family and Friendship.”
  - 18 Young, Seale, and Bury, “‘It’s Not like Family Going Is It?’” 36. Deborah Carr and Dmitry Kohdyakov (“Health Care Proxies: Whom Do Young Old Adults Choose and Why?,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 48 [June 2007]: 180–194)

reported that only 4 percent of people who appoint a durable power of attorney for health care (DPAHC) appoint someone outside of the family, and only 1.5 percent appoint a friend, coworker, or roommate. Among those who are unmarried and childless, still only 26 percent appoint a DPAHC outside of their own family and only 16.4 percent (two-thirds of those appointing outside the family) appoint within the “friend, coworker, or roommate” category; the vast majority of people in that situation, if they choose at all (and 53 percent don’t choose), opt either for a sibling or sibling-in-law or for some other relative. It is interesting to speculate whether the legalization of same-sex marriage would have changed these statistics, with perhaps even fewer people appointing someone outside the family.

- 19 For evidence that family is often not preferred for hands-on care, see Emily K. Abel, *Who Cares for the Elderly? Public Policy and the Experiences of Adult Daughters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).
- 20 I discuss this concept of “doing” further in chapter 3. See also Graham A. Allan, “Flexibility, Friendship, and Family,” *Personal Relationships* 15 (2008): 1–16; Nancy Naples, “A Member of the Funeral: An Introspective Ethnography,” in *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State*, ed. Mary Berstein and Renate Reimann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 21–43; Margaret K. Nelson, “Single Mothers ‘Do’ Family,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 4 (2006): 781–795.
- 21 Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 114. For another discussion that examines the characteristics of ties described as both friend and family, see Amy N. Bush, Alicia M. Walker, and Brea L. Perry, “‘The Family Plan’: Characteristics of Ties Described as Both ‘Friend’ and ‘Family’ in Personal Networks,” *Network Science* 5, no. 1 (2017): 92–107.
- 22 Note that I am *not* saying that friendship is trivial or unimportant. See the following for discussions of the significance of friendship: Graham A. Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1979); Karen Lindsey, *Friends as Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982); Karen Majors, “Friendships: The Power of Positive Alliance,” in *Positive Relationships*, ed. Sue Roffey, 127–143 (New York: Springer, 2012), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2147-0\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2147-0_8); Mark Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Moreover, I might note that some scholars are uncomfortable with the notion of suffusion because they want to preserve special place for friendship as a significant relationship in its own right. On this point see E. Kay Trimmerger, “Friendship Networks and Care” (working paper no. 31, Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley, March 2002, <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4128>). On the issue of legalizing friendship relations, see Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, “Some Argue It’s Time to Legally Recognize the Bond of Friendship,” *Boston Globe*, June 8, 2008; Ethan J. Leib, “Friendship & (and) the Law,” *UCLA Law Review* 54 (2007): 631; Judith Stacey, “Toward Equal Regard for Marriages and Other Imperfect Intimate Affiliations,” *Hofstra Law Review* 32 (2003): 19.
- 23 Allan, “Personal Relationships in Late Modernity,” 10. On this point see also Naples, “A Member of the Funeral”; Nelson, “Single Mothers ‘Do’ Family.” For another discussion about whether the family is unique, see Anca Gheaus, “Is the Family Uniquely Valuable?,” *Ethics and Social Welfare* 6, no. 2 (2012): 120–131.



- 24 Allan, "Flexibility, Friendship, and Family," 11.
- 25 For an argument that, in fact, parents and stepparents believe that their assistance to children is more a choice than an obligation, responsibility, or duty, see Ashton Chapman et al., "What's in a Word? Naming Obligations," *Journal of Family Issues* 39, no. 12 (August 2018): 3276–3297, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18777843>, and Allan, "Flexibility, Friendship, and Family."
- 26 Allan, "Flexibility, Friendship, and Family," 11.
- 27 For discussions of reciprocity, see Alvin W. Gouldner, "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement," *American Sociological Review* 25 (April 1960): 161–178; Karen V. Hansen, "Staging Reciprocity and Mobilizing Networks in Working Families" (working paper no. 33, Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley, April 2002, <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4097>); Karen V. Hansen, *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender and Networks of Care* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Aafke Elisabeth Komter, "Reciprocity as a Principle of Exclusion: Gift Giving in the Netherlands," *Sociology: The Journal of the British Sociological Association* 30 (1996): 299–316; Aafke Komter and Djamila Schans, "Reciprocity Revisited," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 279–298; Margaret K. Nelson, "Single Mothers and Social Support: The Commitment to, and Retreat from, Reciprocity," *Qualitative Sociology* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 2000): 291–317, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005567910606>; Margaret K. Nelson, "Reciprocity and Romance," *Qualitative Sociology* 27, no. 4 (2004): 439–459, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QUAS.0000049242.21417.d8>; Frederic L. Pryor and Nelson H.H. Graburn, "The Myth of Reciprocity," in *Social Exchange: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. J. Gergen Kenneth et al., 199–225 (New York: Plenum Press, 1980); Edwina S. Uehara, "Reciprocity Reconsidered: Gouldner's 'Moral Norm of Reciprocity' and Social Support," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 12 (1995): 483–502.
- 28 Allan, "Flexibility, Friendship, and Family."
- 29 In making these arguments, Allan joins forces with a host of scholars who approach these issues less from concern with the difference between family and friendship than from an effort to identify what is distinctive to kinship. Hence, Jetse Sprey ("Studying Adult Children and Their Parents," *Marriage and Family Review* 16 [1991]: 229), for example, insisted that significance of family extends beyond mere "feelings and attitudes" to include a "culturally ascribed and socially recognized status" that requires engagement:

Personal feelings and attitudes at best may account for necessary conditions of family coherence and solidarity. It does not make sense to attach any explanatory power to individual intentions or motivations. . . . Family systems in particular, because of their culturally ascribed and socially recognized status, implicate or entangle their members in a form of involuntary membership. . . . [I]ndividuals, because of their joint membership, and regardless of their personal feelings may be expected to engage in supportive behavior when such is deemed necessary. Refusal to participate will be seen as a violation of both familial and social obligations.

Similarly, Elizabeth B. Silva and Carol Smart ("The 'New' Practices and Politics of Family Life," in *The New Family?*, ed. Elizabeth B. Silva and Carol Smart [London: Sage Publications, 1999], 7) suggested that, in spite of considerable change in the definitions of families, "people still define particular aspects of their lives as 'family life' and feel committed to families . . . [and thus] a basic core

remains which refers to the sharing of resources, caring, responsibilities and obligations.” And in reference to the scholarship of David H.J. Morgan (*Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies* [Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996]; David H.J. Morgan, “Risk and Family Practices: Accounting for Change and Fluidity in Family Life,” in *The New Family?*, ed. Elizabeth B. Silva and Carol Smart [London: Sage Publications, 1999]), Silva and Smart wrote about cultural and social “resistance to giving up the qualities associated with the idea of ‘family’ such as caring, responsibility, intimacy, and loving” (7). A related insistence of the difference between family and friendship emerges in the work of other scholars, especially (as already suggested) among those focusing on the issue of reciprocity. See also Gabriele Plickert, Barry Wellman, and Rochelle Cote, “It’s Not Who You Know, It’s How You Know Them: Who Exchanges What with Whom?,” in *Social Capital on the Ground*, ed. Talja Blokland and Mike Savage (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005); Eleanor Palo Stoller, “Exchange Patterns in the Informal Support Networks of the Elderly: The Impact of Reciprocity on Morale,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (May 1985): 335–342. And these distinctions are drawn especially around issues of caregiving about which expectations are both obligatory and legally permitted. This is one of the places where Finch would say not doing what was expected would require a “legitimate excuse”; Finch, *Family Obligations and Social Change*).

- 30 Interestingly, in Spencer and Pahl’s schema, “confiding” is considered characteristic of friendship, not family because, they suggest, “confiding in family can be problematic”; Spencer and Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship*, 121.
- 31 Howard M. Bahr and Kathleen Slaugh Bahr, “A Paradigm of Family Transcendence,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58, no. 3 (1996): 541–555.
- 32 D. O. Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family: A Typology of Voluntary Kin,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 3 (April 22, 2010): 388–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361615>.
- 33 Lillian Rubin, *Just Friends: The Role of Friendship in Our Lives* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). Of course, relationships with fictive kin are not all the same any more than relationships with blood/legal kin are all the same.

### Chapter 3 Guest Teens

- 1 Although the term *guest teenager* evokes an obvious comparison to guest workers—foreign nationals who are invited to temporarily reside and work in a host country—the analogy is inappropriate. One obvious way in which that analogy fails for the four cases introduced here is that the guest children and the members of the host families were all of the same race/ethnicity; in all but one case, the guest children and members of the host families were also all of the same religion. (Ana Reiter and the Baumans are the exception here.) Moreover, the teens are invited to live with another family; they are not required to work.
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu, “On the Family as a Realized Category,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 13, no. 3 (August 1, 1996): 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013003002>; Erving Goffman, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (New York: Anchor Books), 1959.
- 3 Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” in *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change*, ed. Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13. For a discussion of

- some of these debates, see Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Barrie Thorne, "Symposium on West and Fenstermaker's 'Doing Difference,'" in *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change*, ed. Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West (New York: Routledge, 2002), 87–89.
- 4 Elizabeth B. Silva and Carol Smart, "The 'New' Practices and Politics of Family Life," in *The New Family?*, ed. Elizabeth B. Silva and Carol Smart (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 7–9. See also, as primary sources for this perspective, Dana Berkowitz, "Doing Families: Gay and Lesbian Family Practices," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 113–116, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12130>; Julia Brannen, "Approaches to the Study of Family Life: Practices, Context, and Narrative," in *Family Continuity and Change*, ed. Vida Česnuiytė, Detlev Lück, and Eric D. Widmer, 9–31 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Jessica L. Collett and Ellen Childs, "Meaningful Performances: Considering the Contributions of the Dramaturgical Approach to Studying Family," *Sociology Compass* 3, no. 10 (2009); Esther Dermott and Julie Seymour, *Displaying Families: A New Concept for the Sociology of Family Life* (New York: Springer, 2011); Janet Finch, "Displaying Families," *Sociology* 41 (2007), 65–81; Sarah Marie Hall and Clare Holdsworth, "Family Practices, Holiday and the Everyday," *Mobilities* 11, no. 2 (March 14, 2016): 284–302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.970374>; Chris Jones and Simon Hackett, "The Role of 'Family Practices' and 'Displays of Family' in the Creation of Adoptive Kinship," *British Journal of Social Work* 41, no. 1 (2010): 40–56; David H.J. Morgan, *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); David Morgan, *Rethinking Family Practices* (New York: Springer, 2011); Carol Smart, *Personal Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
  - 5 Christopher Carrington, *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life Among Lesbians and Gay Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5–6.
  - 6 Nancy Naples, "A Member of the Funeral: An Introspective Ethnography," in *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State*, ed. Mary Berstein and Renate Reimann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 33.
  - 7 Graham A. Allan, "Flexibility, Friendship, and Family," *Personal Relationships* 15 (2008): 4. See also, as cited by Allan, Naples, "A Member of the Funeral: An Introspective Ethnography"; Margaret K. Nelson, "Single Mothers 'Do' Family," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 4 (2006): 781–795; for other discussions that use this concept, see Karen Aronsson, "Commentary 1: Doing Family: An Interactive Accomplishment," *Test & Talk* 26 (2006): 619–626; Linda Laidlaw, "Learning to 'Do Family' Differently: Towards More Complex Notions of Family, Culture, and Schooling," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 4 (Winter 2006): 41–54. For a discussion of race and ethnic variation in norms, see, for one example, Jeffrey A. Burr and Jan E. Mutchler, "Race and Ethnic Variation in Norms of Filial Responsibility Among Older Persons," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 3 (1999): 674–687.
  - 8 For discussion of the importance of communication for creating a sense of family, see Leslie A. Baxter, Dawn O. Braithwaite, and Leah E. Bryant, "Types of Communication Triads Perceived by Young-Adult Stepchildren in Established Stepfamilies," *Communication Studies* 57, no. 4 (December 2006): 381–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970600945923>; Kathleen M. Galvin and Dawn O.

- Braithwaite, "Theory and Research from the Communication Field: Discourses That Constitute and Reflect Families," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 6, no. 1 (2014): 97-111; Kathleen M. Galvin, Dawn O. Braithwaite, and Carma L. Bylund, *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2015).
- 9 Jessica thus draws a distinction between kinship as being, simply, a matter of biology and kinship as a special form of relatedness; on this point, see Sebastian Mohr, "Living Kinship Trouble: Danish Sperm Donors' Narratives of Relatedness," *Medical Anthropology* 34, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 470-484, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1008632>; Linda Stone, *Kinship and Gender: An Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014). See also the discussion of "kinning" in chapter 1.
  - 10 Interestingly Miriam viewed the relationship somewhat differently: she wanted to be a mother to Ana and not "just" a friend or mentor and she remains hurt by Ana's attempts at keeping a distance (see chapter 4, note 21).
  - 11 For academic studies of foster children and foster parents, see Chris Beam, *To the End of June: The Intimate Life of American Foster Care* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); Janet Boddy, "Troubling Meanings of 'Family' for Young People Who Have Been in Care: From Policy to Lived Experience" (Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth: School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, 2018); Sally Holland and Anne Crowley, "Looked-After Children and Their Birth Families: Using Sociology to Explore Changing Relationships, Hidden Histories and Nomadic Childhoods," *Child & Family Social Work* 18, no. 1 (February 2013): 57-66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12032>; Aimee E. Miller-Ott, "Developing and Maintaining Foster Family Identity Through Foster Parents' Identity Work," *Journal of Family Communication* 17, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 208-222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2017.1293061>; Theresa Toguchi Swartz, "Mothering for the State: Foster Parenting and the Challenges of Government-Contracted Carework," *Gender and Society* 18 (2004): 567-587. For memoirs of living in other people's houses, see Paula McClain, *Like Family: Growing Up in Other People's Houses; A Memoir* (reprint ed.) (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013); Lore Segal, *Other People's Houses* (London: Bodley Head Children's Books, 1974).
  - 12 For an analysis that suggests that students who spend time abroad might experience grief upon being separated from their host families, see Arnold S. Chamove and Sonja M. Soeterik, "Grief in Returning Sojourners," *Journal of Social Sciences* 13, no. 3 (November 2006): 215-220, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2006.11892552>. Other research suggests that the host group is incorporated into one's self-concept; Kai Sassenberg and Christina Matschke, "The Impact of Exchange Programs on the Integration of the Hostgroup into the Self-Concept," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 148-159, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.621>.
  - 13 For a review of boundary work in families, see Jason S. Carroll, Chad D. Olson, and Nicolle Buckmiller, "Family Boundary Ambiguity: A 30-Year Review of Theory, Research, and Measurement," *Family Relations*, April 2007, 210-230. For a discussion of boundary issues as enacted by aunts, see Vanessa May and Kinneret Lahad, "The Involved Observer: A Simmelian Analysis of the Boundary Work of Aunthood," *Sociology* 53, no. 1 (February 1, 2019), 3-18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517746051>; see also Kinneret Lahad, Galia Sabar, and Naama Sabar Ben

Yehoshua, “Doing and Displaying Gendered Boundary Work Among Blended Families in Israel,” *Sociology* 52, no. 1 (February 2018): 95–110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516677220>. For discussions of boundary work in blended families, see Susan D. Stewart, “Boundary Ambiguity in Stepfamilies,” *Journal of Family Issues* 26 (2005): 1002.

## Chapter 4 Host Families

- 1 I interviewed only one of the host families (the Baumans) of the teens I described in the previous chapter; in many ways they were atypical, having hosted only one child (Ana Reiter) rather than the many that most host parents included. In this case, it became clear that the guest teen and a host parent viewed the relationship differently: Ana wanted mentors or friends; Miriam wanted a daughter.
- 2 See the references in chapter 3, note 11, for discussions of fostering; for discussions of motives among people who provide foster care, see also Jennifer Doyle and Rose Melville, “Good Caring and Vocabularies of Motive Among Foster Carers,” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2013): 71–90.
- 3 The nannies were paid as well as given room and board.
- 4 These programs depend on families being available but relatively little research has been done on the effects on the “host” family. The research on international students living abroad through programs like AFS (AFS-USA, “AFS Intercultural Programs USA,” accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.afsusa.org/>) explore the issues confronting the students rather than the families. For a guide to host family advice, see AFS, *The Host Family Handbook*, n.d. See Arne Weidemann and Frances Blüml, “Experiences and Coping Strategies of Host Families in International Youth Exchange,” *Intercultural Education* 20, suppl. 1 (2009): S87–S102. These authors explore how to handle cultural differences with students from foreign countries.
- 5 Future Leaders Exchange, Home page, accessed September 11, 2018, <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/future-leaders-exchange>.
- 6 AFS-USA, “AFS Intercultural Programs USA.”
- 7 Graham A. Allan, “Flexibility, Friendship, and Family,” *Personal Relationships* 15 (2008): 1–16.
- 8 For the importance of family meals, see Marjorie DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- 9 For further discussions of the idea that family is created through “doing,” “display” and “family practices,” see discussion in chapter 3.
- 10 For communication and how that creates family, see references in chapter 3, note 8.
- 11 For the use of family language for paid caregivers, see L. Dodson and R. M. Zincauge, “It’s Like a Family’: Caring Labor, Exploitation, and Race in Nursing Homes,” *Gender & Society* 21, no. 6 (December 1, 2007): 905–928, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207309899>; Tracy X. Karner, “Professional Caring: Homecare Workers as Fictive Kin,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 12 (1998): 69–82; Mary Romero, “One of the Family, or Just the Mexican Maid’s Daughter?: Belonging, Identity, and Social Mobility,” in *Women’s Untold Stories*, ed. Mary Romero and Abigail J. Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1999), 142–158; Mary Romero, *The Maid’s*

- Daughter: Living Inside and Outside the American Dream* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
- 12 For other discussions that indicate how kinship represents just one kind of relatedness, see Sebastian Mohr, “Living Kinship Trouble: Danish Sperm Donors’ Narratives of Relatedness,” *Medical Anthropology* 34, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 470–484, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1008632>; Linda Stone, *Kinship and Gender: An Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014).
  - 13 Recall from the introduction that this was the case for Dana and the Kennedys.
  - 14 Again, for the importance of resemblance in making family, see Gay Becker, Anneliese Butler, and Robert D. Nachtigall, “Resemblance Talk: A Challenge for Parents Whose Children Were Conceived with Donor Gametes in the US,” *Social Science & Medicine* 61, no. 6 (September 2005): 1300–1309, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.01.018>; Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson, *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
  - 15 To be sure, individuals are also “rejected” from their families because of their actions: Aafke Komter, Marieke Voorpostel, and Trees Pels, “Not Accepted by the Family: ‘Being Difficult’ or ‘Being Different’?,” *Journal of Family Issues* 32, no. 2 (February 2011): 237–263, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10377065>; Jane Ribbens McCarthy, Val Gillies, and Carol-Ann Hooper, *Family Troubles?* (Policy Press, 2013); Jane Ribbens McCarthy, Val Gillies, and Carol-Ann Hooper, “Special Section: Troubling Families: Introduction,” *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 1 (2018), <http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.middlebury.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/1360780418757165>. However, although some effort is made to make these relationships work (and in the example of Ellen and Tom Walsh, considerable effort is made), host parents are also ready to let go those children with whom they find it difficult to live.
  - 16 Note, I do not think that Mia is thinking of herself as an “othermother” in the sense that this term is used by Patricia Hill Collins or other authors who examine this arrangement. Mia is not working within a defined community in the same way or directly supporting the mother (Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* [New York: Routledge Classics, 2008]; Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Fictive Kin, Paper Sons, and *Compadrazgo*: Women of Color and the Struggle for Family Survival,” *Families in the US: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, 1998, 431–445; N. Jane McCandless, “Othermothers,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, ed. Constance L. Shehan, 1–3 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119085621.wbefs086>.
  - 17 For a wonderful discussion of this issue, see Michael Rosen, *What Else But Home: Seven Boys and an American Journey between the Projects and the Penthouse* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2009).
  - 18 The host parents spoke little about jealousy, perhaps because in most cases the blood/legal parents had agreed that their children could live elsewhere for a period of time. As we will see in a subsequent chapter, when adults make more open-ended claims on unrelated children, the two families might experience more conflict.
  - 19 When Richard and Susan Macy say of *their* children that their son and daughter regard someone “as a sister,” they are perhaps ignoring the complexities of what it means for their children to have a sister who is not a sister.

- 20 In fact, as noted, I only interviewed one family—Miriam and Nathan Bauman, who hosted Ana Reiter for a year—in which the parents had just one, relatively short-term guest child in their home. Unlike Susan and Richard Macy, who knew their “roles” as temporary parents, Miriam (perhaps even more than Nathan) remained confused: “She considers us her American family. She considers me her friend. She often says that because her mother is here [in the United States] now. And when her mother wasn’t here, I think I maybe assumed more of that mother relationship but she has always made it clear to me that she considers us her American family, that she considers me her friend, but a family friend and her children call us Grandma and Grandpa, so we are their grandparents, but she has a mother and she has a father, and we’re not her mother and father in a sense, although we consider her our daughter.”
- 21 In addition to material discussed in chapter 3, see DeVault, *Feeding the Family*; Marjorie L. DeVault, “Producing Family Time: Practices of Leisure Activity Beyond the Home,” in *Families at Work: Expanding the Bounds*, ed. Naomi Gerstel, Dan Clawson, and Robert Zussman (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 266–284.
- 22 Pierre Bourdieu, “On the Family as a Realized Category,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 13, no. 3 (August 1, 1996): 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013003002>.
- 23 This is quite different from what we will see later, in chapter 6.
- 24 During other periods of U.S. history, adolescents were frequently moved from family to family to provide unpaid labor.

## Chapter 5 Unofficial Children

- 1 See the discussion of origin stories in chapter 1.
- 2 Jenny Diski, *In Gratitude* (Kindle edition) (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).
- 3 See the references to the term *family practices* in chapter 3.
- 4 See in the next chapter the discussion of Ricky, who made an agreement about homework with the Gimbels when he was in his mid-teens, as did Tarone with the Mayers at about the same age. By way of contrast, Ada and Emen as infants (and then as toddlers) were dropped off with Judith and Larry Gerber whenever their mother chose to do so; Kayla was only two years old when her mother brought her to live for several months in Brenda Washington’s home.
- 5 See references in the introduction, especially Michael J. Higdon, “When Informal Adoption Meets Intestate Succession: The Cultural Myopia of the Equitable Adoption Doctrine,” *Wake Forest Law Review* 43, no. 223 (2008); Robert B. Hill, *Informal Adoption Among Black Families* (Washington, DC: National Urban League, 1977); see also the discussion in appendix B.
- 6 Advokids, “DeFacto Parent Information,” *Advokids: A Legal Resource for California Foster Children and Their Advocates* (blog), accessed September 14, 2018, <https://www.advokids.org/legal-tools/information-for-caregivers/de-facto-parent-information-jv-295-to-297/>; see also Adam K. Ake, “Unequal Rights: The Fourteenth Amendment and De Facto Parentage,” *Washington Law Review* 81 (2006): 787–811; William C. Duncan, “The Legal Fiction of De Facto Parenthood,” *Journal of Legislation* 36 (2010): 263–271; Celia Guzaldo Gamrath, “Equitable Adoption: A New Breed of Children,” *American Journal of Family*

- Law* 13 (1999): 195–200; Pamela Laufer-Ukeles, “Money, Caregiving, and Kinship: Should Paid Caregivers Be Allowed to Obtain De Facto Parental Status,” *Missouri Law Review* 74, no. 1 (2009): 25; Mary Ann Mason et al., “Stepparents: De Facto Parents or Legal Strangers?,” *Journal of Family Issues* 23, no. 4 (2002): 507–522; Sarah H. Ramsey, “Constructing Parenthood from Stepparents: Parents by Estoppel and De Facto Parents Under the American Law Institute’s Principles of the Law of Family Dissolution,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 8 (2001): 285–312; Lindsay J. Rohlf, “The Psychological-Parent and De Facto-Parent Doctrines: How Should the Uniform Parentage Act Define ‘Parent’?,” *Iowa Law Review* 94 (2009): 691. The concept has become especially important in custody battles and in claims for child support (often, but not only, in regard to children born into a lesbian couple in which one parent is the biological/genetic parent and the other is not).
- 7 See the discussion of these types of occasions in Heather Jacobson, *Culture Keeping* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).
  - 8 When I correspond with Nicole seven years after our interview, she is far more willing (and able) to acknowledge the stress of those years.
  - 9 Interestingly, Nicole’s reference is to a modern day fairy tale is *The Sound of Music*: there the mean stepmother who wants to get rid of the children is, herself, banished (rather than the children); the good stepmother is released from the convent to marry the hero, with whom (along with his many children) she climbs every mountain.
  - 10 We will hear the same from the Gimbels as they talk about Ricky.
  - 11 See David Swartz, *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) for a good review of this and other concepts of Bourdieu; for a critique of the class-bound nature of the Nowaks’ style, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
  - 12 Diski, *In Gratitude*, 17–22.
  - 13 Doris Lessing responds with mute rage and walks out of the house, leaving Jenny to wonder how she is regarded. Diski, *In Gratitude*, 76–77.
  - 14 For a book that discusses the notion that gays and lesbians have been rejected from their families, see Heather Murray, *Not in This Family: Gays and the Meaning of Kinship in Postwar North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
  - 15 We might note that Nicole’s story—like so many fairy tales—includes an evil mother or stepmother (after all, Nicole’s mother left her, as did the stepmother) and a weak father; Marion Wells, personal communication.
  - 16 Diski, *In Gratitude*, 23.
  - 17 Margaret Homans, “Adoption and Essentialism,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 21, no. 2 (2002): 257, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4149233>; Liz Latty, “What We Lost: Undoing The Fairy Tale Narrative Of Adoption,” *The Rumpus*, November 17, 2016, <http://therumpus.net/2016/11/forced-into-fairy-tales-media-myths-and-adoption-fallacies/>; Phelan Homans et al., “Critical Adoption Studies: Conversation in Progress,” *Adoption & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.26818/adoptionculture.6.1.0001>.
  - 18 See the references to foster care in the previous chapter. For a wonderful memoir, see Paula McClain, *Like Family: Growing Up in Other People’s Houses; A Memoir* (reprint ed.) (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013).



- 19 Children might also be attached to former stepparents. See, for example, Marilyn Coleman et al., “Stepchildren’s Views About Former Step-Relationships Following Stepfamily Dissolution,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 3 (June 2015): 775–790, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12182>.

## Chapter 6 Informal Parents

- 1 This is very similar to the stories people tell of adoption of children. For this theme in adoption, see Margaret Homans, *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Homans et al., “Critical Adoption Studies: Conversation in Progress,” *Adoption & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.26818/adoptionculture.6.1.0001>.
- 2 I deal with this issue further in the conclusion to this chapter.
- 3 For discussions of various types of “other mother” support, see Linda M. Burton and Cecily R. Hardaway, “Low-Income Mothers as ‘Othermothers’ to Their Romantic Partners’ Children: Women’s Coparenting in Multiple Partner Fertility Relationships,” *Family Process: Rochester* 51, no. 3 (September 2012): 343–359; Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meanings of Motherhood in Black Culture: Blood-mothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks,” in *Women: Images and Realities; A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. A. Kesselman, L. D. McNair, and N. Schniedewind, 201–204 (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1995); Rebecca A. Lopez, “Las Comadres as a Social Support System,” *Affilia* 14 (Spring 1999): 24–42; N. Jane McCandless, “Othermothers,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, ed. Constance L. Shehan, 1–3 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119085621.wbefs086>.
- 4 See the same statement about being chosen as being better in the Japanese movie *Shoplifters*; Wikipedia, “Shoplifters,” accessed March 21, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shoplifters&oldid=888869819>. In the TV series *New Amsterdam* (<https://www.nbc.com/new-amsterdam>), a gay man says much the same thing to his adopted daughter.
- 5 William Marsiglio (“When Stepfathers Claim Stepchildren: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 1 [2004]: 22–39) introduced the concept of *claiming* in relation to stepfathers: “Claiming includes emotional, psychological, practical, and often symbolic aspects. In this study, it symbolizes the stepfather’s investment as a social father and represents a meaningful way for him to orient himself toward stepfamily life. Though the claiming experience often implicates friendship-like bonding strategies previously referred to as affiliating . . . , affinity-seeking, and affinity maintaining . . . , claiming encompasses a broader range of issues, including potentially negative outcomes for stepchildren” (23). Claiming might not have anything to do with closeness; see Lawrence Ganong et al., “Stepchildren Claiming Stepparents,” *Journal of Family Issues* 39, no. 6 (April 1, 2018): 1712–1736, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X17725878>. See also Marsiglio’s book on stepfathers, *Stepdads: Stories of Love, Hope, and Repair* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
- 6 Andrew Cherlin, “Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84, no. 3 (1978): 634–650. See also Graham A. Allan, Sheila Hawker, and Graham Crow, “Kinship in Stepfamilies,” in *The International Handbook of Stepfamilies: Policy and Practice in Legal, Research, and Clinical Environments*, ed.

- Jan Pryor, 322–344 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); for an interesting discussion of the attitudes of stepmothers toward belonging—and their dependence on the biological mother and father to allow connection to a child—see Minna Murtorinne-Lahtinen and Kimmo Jokinen, “Stepmothers’ Constructions and Negotiations of Belonging,” *Journal of Family Studies* (April 18, 2017), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13229400.2017.1308877>. See also Ganong et al., “Stepchildren Claiming Stepparents,” for a discussion of stepchildren claiming stepparents, and Valarie King, Lisa M. Boyd, and Maggie L. Thorsen, “Adolescents’ Perceptions of Family Belonging in Stepfamilies,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 3 (June 2015): 761–774, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12181>, for a discussion of adolescents’ perceptions of belong in stepfamilies; see Maria Schmeeckle et al., “What Makes Someone Family? Adult Children’s Perceptions of Current and Former Stepparents,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 3 (August 2006): 595–610, for a discussion of whether stepparents are considered family. For a general review of the literature on remarriage and stepfamilies and the relevance for family studies, see Megan M. Sweeney, “Remarriage and Stepfamilies: Strategic Sites for Family Scholarship in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (2010): 667–684. For a challenge to the notion of incomplete institutionalization, see William L. MacDonald and Alfred DeMaris, “Remarriage, Stepchildren, and Marital Conflict: Challenges to the Incomplete Institutionalization Hypothesis,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57, no. 2 (1995): 387–398. Charlotte Pylser, Ann Buysse, and Tom Loeys (“Stepfamilies Doing Family: A Meta-Ethnography,” *Family Process* 57, no. 2 [June 2018]: 496–509, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12293>) use a “doing” perspective to explore how stepfamilies create a sense of family.
- 7 Ganong et al., “Stepchildren Claiming Stepparents,” 1717.
  - 8 Interestingly, this younger sister was picked up in a similar way by another family. Her swim coach saw her potential, and the child spent much time with his family.
  - 9 For a more complete discussion of this example, see Margaret K. Nelson, “A Serendipitous Lesson: Or, How What We Do Shapes What We Know,” in *Open to Disruption: Time and Craft in the Practice of Slow Sociology*, ed. Anita Iltis Garey, Rosanna Hertz, and Margaret K. Nelson (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).
  - 10 Note, again, that children are given unusual power in these arrangements.
  - 11 Nicole, in fact, recalls that as the moment in her life with the Nowaks when she felt as if she was being treated the way other children are by *their* parents. Here, having adapted to the Nowaks’ way of life and attending an elite, liberal-arts college, she is relying on a middle-class model of what parents do: “Joyce took me to college and helped move me in and took me out to dinner and all that stuff that moms do when they take their kids to college. So it was fun, and it was exciting, and it was nice to have all of those things, like comforts that everyone else gets when they’re moving to college. It’s like their parents are there helping them.”
  - 12 For research on family estrangement, see chapter 2, note 1.
  - 13 The legal term for this kind of adoption relationship is “equitable adoption”; Celia Guzaldo Gamrath, “Equitable Adoption: A New Breed of Children,” *American Journal of Family Law* 13 (1999): 195–200; J.C.J., Jr., “Equitable Adoption: They Took Him into Their Home and Called Him Fred,” *Virginia Law Review* 58 (April 1972): 727–749; Christopher Petri, “What’s In a Name? Not Much for Equitable Adoption in Missouri,” *Missouri Law Review* 63 (Winter 1998): 195; the

- legal issues arise usually around issues of inheritance when an “equitably adopted” child claims rights to inherit possessions and wealth.
- 14 Interestingly, people who have “real” godparent status are much clearer about who they are and sometimes even about their rights and claims. Anne Stewart is a single woman, a college professor who has two godchildren, each the child of a mother who is deceased; each of those mothers had been a good friend of Anne’s. When I comment that I had not remained close to—nor felt responsibility for—the children of a childhood friend of my own after she died, Anne asked, “Well, were you the godparent?” When I responded negatively, she continued, stating, “I was,” and then explained that being a godparent was “not an idle thing at all.” Even if she did not fully understand what it meant at first—and acknowledges that she had to be taught—for her being a godparent is a commitment, a significant responsibility: “Their mothers designed these relationships for me. They were clear, especially—what it meant and how it was to proceed, and they guided me a bit in the beginning. . . . So [my friend] would call me up and say come over and see your godchild. . . . So I needed the invitations and gradually settled into a kind of pattern.” And Anne cannot conceive of similar relationships outside of the structure that a titled role provides: “I cannot imagine our relationship outside of the framework of godmother. You know, I have a couple of other children that I love . . . but I see them much less. I have much less contact with them. . . . I adore them, especially the one who’s in really bad shape. He’s like of all the children of my friends my favorite. But I don’t feel much responsibility to him. . . . I would think it would be a little weird to have a relationship like this with a child . . . if she weren’t my goddaughter.” But she takes her responsibility seriously: “I have to think I must teach my godson about money and the limits of it and what it’s for. I must teach him that he has to have insurance and he has to have—pay for it. I must keep tabs on menstruation and my goddaughter. That kind of thinking is part of the job and if I were just hanging out with them because I loved them and because it’s good for every kid to have someone outside the family, I know that I wouldn’t dream of thinking those things because it wouldn’t be my place to. It would be interfering.”
  - 15 For further discussion of this case and how “like” became “is” see Margaret K. Nelson, “From *Like to Is*: Narratives of Fictive Kinship,” *Family Focus* (Spring 2018). <https://www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report/focus/fictive-kin>.
  - 16 I have to believe them; I do not second-guess.
  - 17 See Pierre Bourdieu (“On the Family as a Realized Category,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 13, no. 3 (August 1, 1996): 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013003002>) for a discussion of the state’s investment in definitions of the family.
  - 18 I might note that along with the more familiar arrangements of stepfamilies, new (and not so new) reproductive technologies (even without mitochondrial exchange) create the possibility that a given child might have whole continents of different “parents,” including surrogates, egg donors, and sperm donors as well as the “intended” parent(s); Joshua Gamson, *Modern Families: Stories of Extraordinary Journeys to Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). Donor-conceived children might also have other “relatives” in the form of donor siblings (i.e., children conceived with gametes from the same donor) and their parents (whether those parents are the donors or others). See Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson, *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings*,

and the Creation of New Kin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), for further discussions of how donor-conceived children regard the donor and donor siblings, and how parents who have the same donor regard each other. Moreover, here too, while the law is scurrying to catch up, people involved in these relationships struggle on their own make decisions about meaning and responsibility as they see fit and as the situation demands. For a discussion of legal issues in reproductive technologies, see Naomi Cahn, “The Uncertain Legal Basis for the New Kinship,” *Journal of Family Issues* 36, no. 4 (March 1, 2015): 501–518, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14563797>. On the one hand, then, I would suggest that the arrangements described here between “informal parents” and “unofficial children” are not unique. Yet, on the other hand, because these arrangements have been to date mostly invisible, they have not yet become an object of scholarly fascination in the social sciences. However, the arrangements of informal parenting are of great interest to the legal profession because of the issues that arise concerning whether unofficial children can inherit. See references to equitable adoption earlier.

- 19 In this they are like the children of divorce or children conceived through surrogacy or with donated gametes.

## Conclusion

- 1 I am not claiming that this meaning is found only within the White middle class. But this was all I studied here.
- 2 As noted earlier, I do not second-guess the assertions people made about love and connection. For a discussion suggesting that parents actually invest more in adopted children than in biological children, see Laura Hamilton, Simon Cheng, and Brian Powell, “Adoptive Parents, Adaptive Parents: Evaluating the Importance of Biological Ties for Parental Investment,” *American Sociological Review* 72 (2007): 95–116.
- 3 For a thorough review of this research, see Margaret K. Nelson, “Whither Fictive Kin? Or, What’s in a Name?,” *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 2 (January 1, 2014): 201–222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12470621>.
- 4 D. O. Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family: A Typology of Voluntary Kin,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 3 (April 22, 2010): 388–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361615>.
- 5 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “compadrazgo,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compadrazgo>.
- 6 For a discussion of the “precariousness of choice,” see Mary Holmes, “The Precariousness of Choice in the New Sentimental Order: A Response to Bawin-Legroms,” *Current Sociology* 52 (2004): 251–257, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104041811>.
- 7 Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) is one of the few studies that includes the more complex effects of fictive kinship.
- 8 For some of the extensive literature on family ambivalence, see Vern Bengtson et al., “Solidarity, Conflict, and Ambivalence: Complementary or Competing Perspectives on Intergenerational Relationships?,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (August 2002): 568–576; Ingrid Arnet Connidis, “Exploring Ambivalence in Family Ties: Progress and Prospects,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 1

- (2015): 77–95; Ingrid Arnet Connidis and Julie Ann McMullin, “Sociological Ambivalence and Family Ties: A Critical Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 3 (2002): 558–567; Karen L. Fingerman, Elizabeth L. Hay, and Kira S. Birditt, “The Best of Ties, the Worst of Ties: Close, Problematic and Ambivalent Social Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66 (August 2004): 792–808; Anne Rankin Mahoney, “Review of Intergenerational Ambivalences: New Perspectives on Parent-Child Relations in Later Life,” *American Sociological Association* 34 (September 2005): 499–501; Karl Pillemer et al., “Capturing the Complexity of Intergenerational Relations: Exploring Ambivalence Within Later-Life Families,” *Journal of Social Issues* 63 (2007): 775–791; Natalia Sarkisian, “‘Doing Family Ambivalence’: Nuclear and Extended Families in Single Mothers’ Lives,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 4 (2006): 804–811.
- 9 Carol Stack, private communication.
  - 10 Naomi Gerstel, “Rethinking Families and Community: The Color, Class, and Centrality of Extended Kin Ties: Rethinking Families and Community,” *Sociological Forum* 26, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2010.01222.x>; Naomi Gerstel and Dan Clawson, “Control over Time: Employers, Workers, and Families Shaping Work Schedules,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (July 30, 2018): 77–97, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117-041400>; Natalia Sarkisian, “Street Men, Family Men: Race and Men’s Extended Family Integration,” *Social Forces* 86 (December 2007); Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, “Kin Support Among Blacks and Whites: Race and Family Organization,” *American Sociological Review* 69 (December 2004): 812–837; Jamie Sena-Rivera, “Extended Kinship in the United States: Competing Models and the Case of La Familia Chicana,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 41 (February 1979): 121–129.
  - 11 Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Fictive Kin, Paper Sons, and *Compadrazgo*: Women of Color and the Struggle for Family Survival,” *Families in the US: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, ed. Karen V. Hansen and Anita Ilta Garcey, 431–445 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
  - 12 For the most complete analysis of these issues, see Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson, *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
  - 13 To be fair, I might note that the various online services that enable these connections define them as being “family.” For example, people can sign up for the independent “Donor Sibling Registry” (home page, accessed April 17, 2016, <https://donorsiblingregistry.com/>), which by its very name introduces the concept of family into these connections.
  - 14 Rosanna Hertz, Margaret K. Nelson, and Wendy Kramer, “Donor Sibling Networks as a Vehicle for Expanding Kinship: A Replication and Extension,” *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 2 (January 2017): 248–284, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X16631018>. To explore that issue further, my co-authors (Rosanna Hertz and Wendy Kramer) and I asked our respondents—parents with donor-conceived children, donor-conceived children (over the age of eighteen), and donors themselves—about what they would expect of themselves in relation to the members of their nuclear families, the members of their extended families, and the members of those families to which they were connected through donor conception. Not surprisingly, we found that individuals were far more likely to expect to

engage in sociability with and to feel that they have incurred obligations toward members of their nuclear families than toward members of their extended families. Not surprisingly, we found as well that the expectations were considerably higher for both nuclear family and extended family than for donor relatives. Yet the latter sets of expectations were there as well: that is, although respondents in each category say they treat donor relatives differently from existing kin, respondents in each category also seem to recognize some obligation resulting from a genetic connection. And although the particular pattern of differences from “ordinary” kinship is unique to each group, and in each group contact mattered (that is, respondents were more likely to recognize these expectations when they had met their donor relatives), *even without contact*, those expectations existed, especially among offspring and donors (more so than among parents). Some of these data are included in Rosanna Hertz, Margaret K. Nelson, and Wendy Kramer, “Donor Sibling Networks as a Vehicle for Expanding Kinship: A Replication and Extension,” *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 2 (January 2017): 248–284, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X16631018>. For additional analyses, see my unpublished paper, Margaret K. Nelson, “Are Genetic Relatives Kin?” (Middlebury, VT, 2018).

- 15 Anne-Marie Kramer, “Kinship, Affinity and Connectedness: Exploring the Role of Genealogy in Personal Lives,” *Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2011): 379–95; Alyson Krueger, “Are Genetic Testing Sites the New Social Networks?,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2018, sec. Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/16/style/23-and-me-ancestry-dna.html>. To be sure, “kinship” captures attention in a way that other relations do not. See Janet Mason, “Tangible Affinities and the Real Life Fascination of Kinship,” *Sociology* 42 (2008): 29–45; Petra Nordqvist, “Genetic Thinking and Everyday Living: On Family Practices and Family Imaginaries,” *Sociological Review* 65, no. 4 (2017): 865–881. On the particular fascination of kinship in genetic ties, see Jeanette Edwards, *Born and Bred: Idioms of Kinship and New Reproductive Technologies in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jeanette Edwards, “Donor Siblings: Participating in Each Other’s Conception,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 2 (2013): 285–292; Jeanette Edwards, “Donor Conception and (Dis)Closure in the UK: Siblingship, Friendship and Kinship,” *Sociologus* 65, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 101–122, <https://doi.org/10.3790/soc.65.1.101>; Kaja Finkler, “The Kin in the Gene,” *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (2001): 235–263; Kaja Finkler, Cécile Skrzynia, and James P. Evans, “The New Genetics and Its Consequences for Family, Kinship, Medicine and Medical Genetics,” *Social Science & Medicine* 57, no. 3 (August 2003): 403–412, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(02\)00365-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(02)00365-9); Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, “Grammars of Kinship: Biological Motherhood and Assisted Reproduction in an Age of Epigenetics,” *Signs* 41, no. 3 (2016): 483–506. Although I have no data on how expectations follow the creation of family through legal means—marriage and adoption—I would assume there too the connection is quick even if imperfect. When people adopt a baby, they are eligible for family medical leave under the Family Medical Leave Act, even by our otherwise stingy government (U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, “Fact Sheet #28F: Qualifying Reasons for Leave Under the Family and Medical Leave Act” [July 2015]); when people adopt, especially if they are adopting an infant, relatives—albeit not invariably—welcome the child as a sibling, grandchild, niece, or nephew. And while we designate relatives we

acquire through marriage as being separate from those we assume are our blood kin by using the term *in-law*, we do consider them family once the formalities have been conducted. In fact, we may not even need the formalities: the young woman the nephew is dating is invited to a family wedding or a baby shower even before the couple has tied the knot. None of this would surprise David Murray Schneider (*American Kinship: A Cultural Account* [New York: Prentice-Hall, 1968]).

Although we have complicated kinship, it remains in many ways still rooted in bio-legal frameworks (and maybe even more so now that genes are so important).

- 16 Sherman Alexie's poem ("Hymn: A New Poem by Sherman Alexie," Early Bird Books, accessed August 16, 2017, <https://earlybirdbooks.com/hymn-a-new-poem-by-sherman-alexie/>) includes these lines:

Why do we measure people's capacity  
 To love by how well they love their progeny?  
 That kind of love is easy. Encoded.  
 Any lion can be devoted  
 To its cubs. Any insect, be it prey  
 Or predator, worships its own DNA.  
 Like the wolf, elephant, bear, and bees,  
 We humans are programmed to love what we conceive  
 . . .  
 To love somebody who resembles you.  
 If you want an ode then join the endless queue  
 Of people who are good to their next of kin—  
 Who somehow love people with the same chin  
 And skin and religion and accent and eyes.  
 So you love your sibling? Big fucking surprise.

I am grateful to my colleague Rebecca Tiger for alerting me to this poem.

- 17 Stack Exchange, *English Language and Usage*, <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/147902/original-meaning-of-blood-is-thicker-than-water-is-it-real>. This definition was recently discussed on (I'm embarrassed to say I know) season 15, episode 16 of the TV program *Gray's Anatomy*.
- 18 Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man," Poetry Foundation, accessed October 15, 2018 (originally published 1914), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44261/the-death-of-the-hired-man>.

## Appendix B

- 1 Robert Joseph Taylor et al., "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks," *Family Relations* 62, no. 4 (2013): 609–624, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12030>.
- 2 For a full discussion of the methodology and findings, see Margaret K. Nelson, "Whither Fictive Kin? Or, What's in a Name?," *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 2 (January 1, 2014): 201–222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12470621>.
- 3 Helen Rose Ebaugh and Mary Curry, "Fictive Kin as Social Capital in New Immigrant Communities," *Sociological Perspectives* 43, no. 2 (2000): 189–209.
- 4 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Creating a Caring Society," *Contemporary Sociology* 29 (January 2000): 84–94.

- 5 This methodology has other obvious limits beyond lumping together incidental and in-depth usages of the concept of fictive kinship. First, books are underrepresented: I included them only when articles led me there, or when they were central to the concepts under consideration. Second, databases obviously do not catch all references. Third, significant references might have shown up beyond the first ones listed in Google Scholar (five hundred for the years up to 2009, etc.). And finally, JSTOR is not completely up to date. But few references that I followed in the listed journal articles took me to other articles—or even to books—I had not yet included in the sample.
- 6 Colleen L. Johnson, “Fictive Kin Among Oldest Old African Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area,” *Journal of Gerontology* 54B (November 1999): S368–S375.
- 7 Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, “Kin Support among Blacks and Whites: Race and Family Organization,” *American Sociological Review* 69 (December 2004): 832.
- 8 Nelson, “Whither Fictive Kin?”; Taylor et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks.”
- 9 Kelsey R. Thomas and Michael Marsiske, “Age Trajectories of Everyday Cognition in African American and White Older Adults Under Prompted and Unprompted Conditions,” *Neuropsychological Rehabilitation* 27, no. 4 (June 2017): 522–539, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09602011.2015.1092453>.
- 10 Jeremiah W. Jagers et al., “Resources, Race, and Placement Frequency: An Analysis of Child Well-Being,” *Child Welfare* 94, no. 6 (2016): 105–128. See also Kristine Arjouch, Toni C. Antonucci, and Mary R. Janevic, “Social Networks Among Blacks and Whites: The Interaction Between Race and Age,” *Journal of Gerontology* 56B (March 2001): S112–S118.
- 11 Nelson, “Whither Fictive Kin?”
- 12 D. O. Braithwaite et al., “Constructing Family: A Typology of Voluntary Kin,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 3 (April 22, 2010): 388–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361615>; Taylor et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks.”
- 13 The data for this study were collected as the National Survey of American Life: Coping with Stress in the 21st Century (NSAL) by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research; James S. Jackson et al., “The National Survey of American Life: A Study of Racial, Ethnic and Cultural Influences on Mental Disorders and Mental Health,” *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research* 13, no. 4 (2004): 196–207. I downloaded the data and conducted my own analysis from the site (<https://rcgd.isr.umich.edu/prba/>).
- 14 Taylor et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin, and Congregational Informal Support Networks.”
- 15 Robert B. Hill, *Informal Adoption Among Black Families* (Washington, DC: National Urban League, 1977).





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- . “Boundaries of Friendship.” In *Families in Society: Boundaries and Relationships*, ed. Linda McKie and Sarah Cunningham-Bailey, 227–240. Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2005.
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