

Thinking Straight

by [Joshua C. Frank](#) (March 2024)



The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil, Édouard Manet, 1874

Based on a true story.

Jack and Jess sat in the gazebo, the small outline of her house barely visible in the night. The Milky Way dimly shining on his left and Jess beaming at his right, crickets chirping slowly in the cool night, he cuddled and cooed at their baby Emma. He longed for this moment never to end. Everything he was told him she was his, yet at the same time, his mind knew she wasn't, a no-man's-land between his and not his. She had his eyes, hair, lips, and chin, but by law, she belonged to Jess and Sam. *Sam may be more macho than any guy I know, Jack*

thought, *but there's no way she can be a father to this little girl*. Love for her washed over him like an entire sea, all but forcing him to hold her in his strong arms, lean her head against his chest, and kiss its fuzzy top as she babbled contentedly.

Jess leaned her head on Jack's right shoulder and her hand on his left. Her long, polished fingernails dug just a little into his shoulder as she squeezed it. "It makes me so happy to see how much you love Emma," she said. "She needs a father, and I remember what it was like to grow up without a mother. That's why we said you could be as involved as you wanted, if you wanted to at all."

"I didn't expect this," he said, running his hands up and down Emma's little body. "I always thought giving sperm was a simple thing, like giving blood ... then I saw Emma for the first time. Now I'd give up everything for her, like she's my entire purpose. And how can I not love you, the mother of my child?"

"I feel the same way." Jess petted Emma's head with her other hand. "I thought having a baby would be like getting a dog. They never tell you how your entire self changes around the baby and her needs."

"Best kept secret there is." He lowered Emma onto his leg, ran his hand along Jess's shoulder, breathed in her scent deeply, and leaned his lips into her curly, blond hair. *Emma has Jess's head shape*, he thought. "I love you both more than I can even say. More than anything, I want to marry you and have more children with you."

"Me too." Several minutes went by, the three of them silently, contentedly enjoying the moment. Jess finally broke the silence. "This makes no sense when I stop and think about it. I'm a lesbian, or at least I thought I was. I'll always love Sam. But now I love you, in a deeper way, and you and I fit

together in a way Sam and I never could. You're like dry land after years at sea. It started during the pregnancy and got stronger after Emma was born. Does this mean I changed from gay to straight, or was I never gay in the first place?" She sighed. "I don't even know if it's all just my love for Emma messing with my head."

"Does it matter? The only question is, what's best for Emma?"

Jess stared off into the darkness. "There was a time when I thought I knew what was right. Now all I know is, I love Emma, and you, and Sam."

Jack thought for a moment. "Maybe I could move in, sleep in one of the sheds? I can wire it up, no problem."

Jess shook her head. "As it is, I think Sam's already suspicious. Just show up tomorrow after work as usual. Remember, don't even look at me like you love me in front of her."

That was Jack's cue to go home. He reluctantly handed Emma back to Jess. "I know the drill. I'll be there."

After his last job of the day, fixing a wiring short, Jack drove his pickup out to the country house where Jess and Sam lived, down the driveway off the uphill county road, if the piles of asphalt filling in old potholes like olives in Swiss cheese could be called a road. Traces of red sunlight shone from behind the hill at the end of the main country road.

When he knocked on the door, Sam, a small woman in her forties with a man's haircut, loose, gray T-shirt, jeans, and a stoic expression, opened the door. "Come on in," she said in her deep, monotone voice.

Jack entered, looking for Jess and Emma. *What do you say to someone whose wife and daughter you're planning to run off*

with? he wondered. Then he corrected himself. *It's not a real marriage. Sam's just Jess's roommate, she can't be her husband or Emma's father. I'm not doing wrong, I'm setting things right. Emma needs to be raised by both biological parents. All children do.* Jack sighed inwardly. *To think I was a hardcore liberal before Emma was born. The me of then would hate the me of now. Maybe he'd be right.* It was strange how just the understanding that he, not the woman who lived with Jess, was Emma's father crumbled everything he had once believed and gotten into fights to defend.

Jess came to the living room with Emma. Jack always found it difficult not to admire her prominent curves accentuated by a dark blue dress, her blond curls, sky-blue eyes, small, narrow face, and full lips ... Jack cut off the thought so he could keep his feelings hidden, at least until Jess gave him Emma. "Here you go," she said, handing Emma to Jack. "I've had Emma all day, I can use a rest." He burst into a wide grin at the sight of Emma. He sat down on the sofa, bounced her on his knee, and spoke baby talk as Jess sat down on Sam's other side. Emma laughed.

Sam smiled. "I'm glad we've got you for this," she said. "Jess needs a break, and I'm not into all that baby stuff."

"Pleasure's all mine," Jack said. He continued playing with Emma as Jess sat on Sam's other side.

"So, Jack," Sam said, "You planning on marrying and starting a family of your own? I mean, you're welcome here, but it's got to be hard going home to an empty house every night."

Jack hadn't expected this, but now that Sam had asked, he wondered why she hadn't asked sooner. "I'm seeing someone, it looks promising." Hopefully that would be all. Jess looked as uncomfortable as Jack felt, but Sam didn't seem to notice.

"Does she know about me and Jess?"

"She's cool with it. I'm surprised you're interested in my love life, you've never asked before."

"Well, you've been coming here and helping out a lot since Jess was pregnant with Emma. I'm just concerned about whether you have a life outside of this. I mean, you can't just go sleep in that empty bed in your downtown apartment for the rest of your life. Someday you'll have to get a wife and have kids of your own."

"Believe me," Jack said. "You don't have to worry about that."

Jess changed the subject. "I've got a crazy idea. Jack goes home to a lonely apartment every night, and Emma wakes us every two hours. What if Jack were to move into one of the sheds? We could set up an intercom and wake him for burping and diaper changes."

Sam's jaw fell. "Absolutely not. Nothing against you, Jack, but I don't want a man living with me. Had enough of that growing up to last a lifetime. We manage just fine." She eyed Jess warily. "You're not going bi on me, are you? I'm not gonna share you with a man, even if it is Jack!"

"Well, he's already a big part of our lives. I just thought..." Her voice trailed off. "I mean, I'm a lesbian. It's not like I'm sleeping with him or anything." That last part was true, more for fear of getting caught than anything else.

Emma cried at that moment, and Jess took her into another room. "Emma's hungry," Jess explained. Obviously the one thing Jack couldn't help with.

Sam started up her wary gaze again, but this time at Jack. "So why does a young man with a girlfriend spend his time here? When a man spends a lot of time with a woman, he's only after one thing. I've never seen an exception."

Jack shrugged. "I guess you can't say that anymore now that

you know me.”

Sam shook her head. “Something’s not quite kosher here. Jess has really taken a shine to you over how you are with Emma, but unlike her, I’m not blinded by mothering hormones. What’s in it for you?”

“I don’t get it. Just a few minutes ago you were thanking me.”

“First, you mentioned a girlfriend, and yet you spend your time here instead of with her. When Jess asked if you could move in, something clicked. She wouldn’t have done that for any other man, and I think it’s because of how you act around Emma. You know how it is with birth mothers, they’ll take the side of anyone who’ll help their children. I need you to back off from Emma.” The words fell like an axe. “Keep helping us if you like, and we hope you do, but I don’t want Jess’s judgment clouded any more than it already is.”

Jack’s heart sank, but he still kept a poker face. He wanted to say yes to keep the peace, but the words wouldn’t come out. He couldn’t dam up his love for his daughter; if he could, he wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place. Before, all he had to do was pretend not to have feelings for Jess or think of Emma as his. Now, Sam had gone too far.

“Well?” Sam said. “Say something!”

Jack heard Jess’s voice behind him. “What’s going on?” She put Emma in her playpen.

“I was just explaining to Jack,” Sam said, “that I think he’s trying to worm his way into your heart by being so loving with Emma, and I want him to stop it.”

Jack looked over at Jess. Her eyes narrowed at Sam. “I’m thirty years old. I can make my own decisions for myself and my daughter. Emma needs all the love she can get. You know I didn’t have a mother growing up; you’re the only woman who’s

ever loved me. I don't want Emma not to have a man in her life who loves her."

Sam stood up. Her face turned red, almost purple. "Oh, *now* you spring this on me? You used to agree that a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle. Now we have to have a man around the house all the time because you think Emma needs one? You femmes can't be trusted, you change your minds at the drop of a hat, especially after a baby! Why does some *man* get more of a say than your own wife?"

Jess looked downward and hunched her shoulders in shame, which only fanned Jack's anger at Sam. He knew he was finished there no matter what he did. If Jess didn't leave Sam for him, he would lose both her and Emma right there and then. He had nothing to lose now. Jack stood up and looked Sam in the eye like an angry dog. "Because I'm Emma's father. I have a right to a relationship with my own daughter."

Sam's face contorted into a hateful expression he had only seen in cartoons. "You don't have a right! She's not your daughter, she's mine! You're just a sperm donor! You're nobody! We don't need you! Get out!"

Jack stood his ground. He would only leave if Jess asked him to, which he knew she wouldn't.

"Now *I* don't get a say?" Jess shouted.

"I'm not gonna upend my whole life because *you* think Emma needs a man. No woman needs a man!"

Jess walked over to Jack and put her right arm around him. "I do."

Jack put his left arm around Jess.

"I love him," Jess continued. "I ... I might as well come out of the closet now. I'm straight. Jack is Emma's father, and he has the right to raise his daughter. I want a divorce."

Sam's expression went blank. Jess had told Jack about other times when Sam had been like this; it meant Sam had gone beyond merely angry to cold, white rage. She stared at the two of them and finally threw her hands in the air. "All right," she finally said. The artificially calm tone scared Jack more than the outright yelling. "I should have known when you started being less excited when you and I were ... well, I can't say it in front of a man. I don't want a traitor like you around anyway. You've made up your mind, not a damn thing I can do about it. Go sleep at Jack's house tonight and come back for your stuff in the morning." Sam walked away, then stopped and turned toward Jack. "Jack, listen carefully to someone who knows the woman you're about to marry better than you do. The woman I called my wife for five years is taking our daughter and running off with you. I thought we'd be a family forever when we started, just like you think now. If she can leave me for you, she can leave you for someone else."

"That's enough," Jack said. "You can't change my mind. Jess and I have a child together, and I'm committed to both of them. Emma's my daughter, not yours."

Sam shook her head. "You're young and naive. Take it from someone who has actual experience with marriage. The birth mother can fire and replace the other parent on a whim, as you're seeing this very moment. You'd better enjoy it while it lasts." She turned back and walked away.

Jack felt the room spin like a tornado. He stood in shock, dizzy and nauseous as the weight of Sam's words rammed him in the gut. Of course he'd marry Jess no matter what; he'd always love her, and Emma needed her father.

Yet, was Sam right? Would Jack one day be thrown out of his own home for no crime at all and replaced by another man, or possibly a woman if Jess went back to being a lesbian?

The joy of victory after all that effort to win Jess and Emma

had quickly flown away. But what else could he have done? Left them both? Never conceived Emma in the first place? No matter how much suffering Jess might cause him down the road, if he had that time to live over, his love for both her and Emma wouldn't allow him any option but the one he already chose.

As the two walked out the door with Emma, Jack concluded: Like anyone else, all he could do was love them both with all his heart and go forward hoping for the best.

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