



## My New Kentucky Baby

A gay couple, a surrogate mother and some surprising Southern hospitality.

By JOSHUA GAMSON

We came to Bowling Green, Ky., home of our good-humored surrogate, Gail, with a court order from California designating me and Richard — my husband in some states, though not in Kentucky — as the future baby's legal parents. I'd been hoping to avoid Kentucky. Its laws make it seem unwelcoming to gay people and ambivalent about surrogacy. I figured that culturally it would be red-statey, too, full of homophobia, guns and fatty foods. The coasts seemed safer, especially for a black man, a Jew and their black-Jewish daughter. We invited Gail to come to Massachusetts, where we were married and our first kid was born, or to California, where she went for the in vitro fertilization. She was usually up for adventure — after all, she was carrying a baby for two men made with another woman's egg. But she wanted to keep her schedule as a clerk at an amusement park and a single mother of three.

I arrived after Richard, and there wasn't much there to allay my fears. Our hotel was next to a Cracker Barrel, and the main strip contained churches and fast-food joints. Our

daughter, Reba, an impressionable preschooler, had already begun to say things like "Do y'all want to go to the pool?" Richard went with Gail to meet the obstetrician, who, when faced with the requirements of our surrogacy plan, turned hostile and scheduled her labor to be induced on his off-day.

Not long after my arrival, while Richard and I were in a matinee of "Zombieland," our lawyer called to report that the local family court had refused to domesticate the California court order, leaving things in legal limbo. She said she would threaten to sue Kentucky for violating the Full Faith and Credit clause of the Constitution and instructed us to get out of there as soon as the baby was born.

I felt vaguely unsafe and out of sorts. People seemed to stare at us. One night I dreamed that the baby was born healthy, and then stolen.

But when Madeleine Blanche came along a few days later (full head of black hair, long eyelashes), the women at the Bowling Green medical center couldn't have been nicer. Our presence seemed to send their Southern hospitality into overdrive: they dispensed diapers,

advice and coffeecake. We chatted about 4-year-olds, work and the costs of preschool. Nurse Christie brought a button for Reba that said, "I'm a big sister!" Unfamiliar heads popped in and out. Not homophobia but a kind of homophilic curiosity was swirling around us, turning us into objects of gossip but also of generosity. Anxieties about discrimination were one thing, but my assumptions about homophobia now seemed glib and snobbish.

The problem was getting out of there. One sympathetic young clerk had been instructed by hospital lawyers not to put our names down on the birth forms as parents, but Gail had declined to sign anything that gave her legal or financial responsibility for our baby. The clerk tried the form with just Richard's name as father, but the computer spit it back, saying it required a mother. So she sent the forms, along with a copy of the California court order, to the Kentucky Office of Vital Statistics with neither Father nor Mother listed. Her small act of administrative disobedience was, to me, quite touching. The hospital

released us and our legally parentless baby.

Months later, we still had no birth certificate. Smelling discrimination again, I indulged in self-righteous daydreams of lawsuits, but my suspicions proved unreliable again. For Kentucky officials the problem turned out to be much more mundane than sexual taboo: they didn't want California telling them what to put on their forms. In the end, they issued a birth certificate saying that Gail was the mother, then sealed it and issued an amended one listing Richard and me as the parents.

Finally one day the birth certificate arrived. Somehow, with all the lawyering and money that preceded it, I was surprised that it was just a piece of paper. Then I noticed something: the California judge had directed Kentucky to list one of us as Mother and the other as Father, but Kentucky officials refused. Instead they labeled us Parent and Parent. Kentucky out-liberalized California.

We picked up Reba from preschool. She was uninterested in the news, but happy for the celebratory dinner, through which the baby slept, eyelashes fluttering. "To Kentucky, y'all," I said, and I meant it. ♦

*Joshua Gamson is an author and a professor at the University of San Francisco. He is working on a book about unconventional family making.*

ILLUSTRATION BY HOLLY WALES

✉ E-MAIL submissions for Lives to [lives@nytimes.com](mailto:lives@nytimes.com). Because of the volume of e-mail, the magazine cannot respond to every submission. Share comments on this essay at [nytimes.com/magazine](http://nytimes.com/magazine).