

# Bubble Four

*Here are our stories...*

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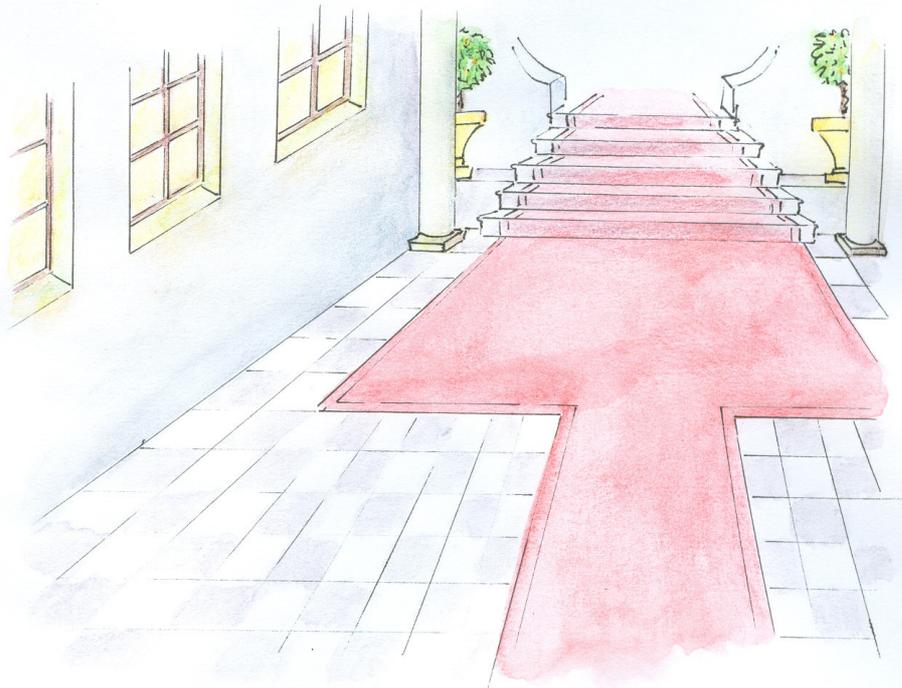
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## Bubble Four

### Here are our stories...

*And so it happened that Queen Academia sent out messengers to announce that the Reading of the Narratives would take place. Once again, all of them gathered in the King's big chamber hall. Once everyone was seated, Queen Academia nodded to Carien, and she began to speak;*

*"... These are the voices that I heard, that I listened to, and that I have recorded... Here are the stories that the children and I co-constructed... Make yourselves comfortable and listen closely to what I have to say..."*



## Prelude to the symphony of voices...

### Important notes before you read the narratives...

- The narratives presented in this chapter are presented without any referencing to the original transcripts, to allow for easier reading, as well as to establish a “clean”, uncluttered look and feel.
- The narratives with accompanying footnote-referencing to the original transcripts are included in Addendum E, which is in PDF Format on the CD-Rom. This shows what aspects of the original transcripts were used, and how it was applied in forming the narratives for each individual child.
- The original transcripts of the interviews are also available on the accompanying CD-Rom (Addendum F).
- These original transcripts of the interviews in PDF format can also be obtained from the researcher via e-mail: [carien.lubbe@up.ac.za](mailto:carien.lubbe@up.ac.za).
- Where a certain word or phrase needs clarification, the relevant footnote-indicator appears at the end of the word or phrase.
- The narratives can be read in any sequence. I presented the narratives more or less according to the sequence in which I interviewed them.
- All the names of persons and institutions have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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## Introduction

I will briefly **introduce** each child to you, after which their stories will follow without any further announcements.

Kashni has just turned 15 and she is in grade nine. Her brother, Erid, is 11 years old and in grade four. They were adopted by their two parents nine years ago. Their parents have now been together for 15 years.

Luanne is 14 years old (almost fifteen) and in grade nine. Her mother and co-mother have been together for the past 13 years.

Carl is 18 years old and currently in grade 12, his final school year. His mother and co-mother have been together for 15 years.

Tom is 14 years old, in grade eight. His sister Danielle is 12 years old, in grade five and Ryland is 9 years old, in grade three. Their mother and co-mother have been together for just over a year now (when they were interviewed).

Kim is 19 years of age, and currently a student. She has been in a same-gendered family since grade seven (12/13 years old), although her mother has only recently met her new partner.

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### **The lead role players, in order of appearance:**

- Kashni: "If they know about my family and it's not a problem for them, then there's no problem at all"
- Erid: "If they want to know, I will tell them"
- Luanne: "We don't talk about our parents"
- Carl: "It doesn't bother me..."
- Tom: "You're trying to put together your puzzle..."
- Danielle: "If she's my best friend, then I'll share my secrets with her."
- Ryland: "I'll run away"
- Kim: "I would not choose to have my mother in any other way"

*"If they know about my family and it's not a problem for them, then there's no problem at all"*

*I enter the kitchen and am greeted by the cheerful sight of a family of four having their dinner. The family consists of two adult women (both parents of the same gender or "moms", as we all refer to them), a girl of 15 and a boy of nine years old. The girl immediately moves up one chair and offers me her place so that I can be seated next to her and one of her moms.*

*The girl hands me a cold drink and sets a placement on the table in front of me. They all invite me to join them for dinner and this immediately makes me feel at home. One of the mothers, Anriëtte, introduces me to the children.*

*"This is Kashni" she says, indicating the girl, "and this is Erid", she says, indicating the boy. I greet them both with a smile.*

*"Hi, Kashni. Hi, Erid."*

*"Hallo!" they call out in unison. They both greet me with big smiles.*

*Anriëtte says to the children: "Carien is here to look at gay families, gay parents with children, and mothers who are lesbians. Is that right, Carien?"*

*I almost choke on my food as she mentions the word "lesbians" in front of the children. I was preparing myself to discuss the issue of appropriate vocabulary first alone with the parents, before I spoke to the children. But now I could see that that was not necessary. To all of them, these words – that to us may be so laden with positive and negative emotions – are to some people just a natural part of their lives and conversation, and are not in any way a problem.*

*"Yes," I answer. "I am here to focus specifically on the experiences of the children."*

*Kashni immediately responds to this by saying, "I am definitely not a lesbian." Mom Zané says softly, "Yes, we all know that, Kashni," and the family continue their conversation without so much as a flicker of ill feeling or tension. Everyone talks and laughs and teases together, and Anriëtte tells me above the hubbub what excellent cooks both Erid and Kashni are. The household consists of the humans, cats, and (rather surprisingly) one pig. I have heard in the past what excellent pets pigs make (clean, loyal and intelligent). As we eat and talk, I am intrigued by the openness and easiness that exists among them.*

*After dinner the two children go off to study for their forthcoming examinations. Anriëtte, Zané and I then talk in a general way about the experiences of gay families in South Africa. They also ask me some questions about my study. It*

*is an exciting moment for me to be able to share ideas, insights and anecdotes with “real” same-gender parents who have so generously agreed to help me by sharing their privacy for the sake of my academic research.*

*Mom Anriëtte says something that resonates strongly with me. “It would be totally unrealistic in every way for us to imagine that our children will not at various times in their lives be teased about the fact that they have two mothers as parents. If same-gender parentage is problematic for some people, then they inherited their problem from a society – many of whom judges us and regards us in a most unfavourable light. Just look at these newspaper clips, from this week alone. She reads out aloud one of the headlines: ‘Singer says: gays are going to hell’.*

*“Many people,” Anriëtte continues, “have not yet realised that their own decisions about morality are not always universally applicable. They judge from own their point of view, either without knowing the facts or without even being willing to examine the position of others in a dispassionate way. Even though all four of us live open, carefree and responsible lives, we are always aware of the possibility that we might be unconsciously sending covert messages to our children that maybe it is better to be straight.”*

*At this point, Mom Zané interjects rather heatedly, “And that is definitely not OK.” I nod in acknowledgement.*

*Anriëtte continues. “I don’t want them to believe for one second that I am not proud of who I am – whatever that is.” They both laugh. I just don’t want them to feel – even in some small place in their hearts – that we are wrong in any way.*

*“Even though they will be free to make up their own minds about these issues later on in their lives, and even though they are sometimes compelled to hide these facts in front of other people or at school for the sake of peace or expediency, I never want them to feel like that at home and in their hearts – certainly not about their own mothers.*

*“They have to accept the reality of the situation as it is,” Anriëtte continues. “This is especially important currently for Kashni, who is experiencing her teenage years. Sometimes teenagers pick fights. But I don’t want them to use the fact that we are gay against us. That would be unfair. If Zané and I had not been gay, we would doubtless have married men and had our own children. But even that is not the real issue. The fact remains that we freely chose each other out of love, and we freely chose to have them as our children through adoption. All this is about being genuinely proud of who we are – and of who they are.”*

*We talk a bit about the adoption, and I can hear a note of passionate conviction in both their voices. Anriëtte adds another important observation.*

*“Although it is difficult at times to have to deal with having two moms, the real emotional issues – of separation from the mother – occurred between them and their biological mother, and those emotional scars are grounded in their biological mother’s rejection of them. A lot of the fights that occur between them arise out of what happened to them in that context.”*

*At this point, Kashni comes back into the kitchen. Anriëtte turns to me and asks, “Ah, now perhaps you two can talk a bit – if you want to.” She looks at Kashni, who nods graciously. “Maybe the sitting room will be the best place for your talk,” Zané suggests.*

*When we have settled in the sitting room, I tell Kashni a bit about the reasons for my study and research. Then, after a few minutes of friendly small talk, I ask her, “Tell me... When you (for example) go to school in the beginning of the year, or when you go out with your friends, are there times that you feel that you are different in some way? Or don’t you think of it in that way at all? Or do you perhaps think to yourself: ‘Is someone going to ask me about my parents or think something about the fact that I have two mothers?’ Do thoughts like these ever go through your mind, or...”*

*“Yes, they do,” says Kashni, forestalling more unanswered questions.*

*“Please tell me about it,” I ask her respectfully, realising that closed questions will not get me the information I am looking for.*

*Kashni answers at some length. “Some people are just uncomfortable with it, and, yes, that can sometimes create a difficult situation. Especially, you know, when the people who are feeling awkward or embarrassed are your friends. Then I have to make a decision about my friendship with them because obviously it’s not going to work out if I have friends who are not on the same wavelength as I am. But most of them are quite okay with it. If they know about my family and it’s not a problem for them, then there’s no problem at all.”*

*Both Kashni and I consider what she has said in silence for a few moments.*

*Then I ask her another question. “How do you sense or come to realise that they are uncomfortable with the situation?”*

*“I can feel it sometimes when I talk about my parents. Or, if I invite them to my house and then sense that my invitation has made them feel uncomfortable. Or sometimes I invite them and I can see that they would prefer not to come.... Yes, that’s how it happens.”*

*“So who, in that situation, makes the first move to resolve the situation?”*

*“Me,” Kashni answers without hesitation. “I just say to them upfront: ‘Listen, I have two mothers, okay.’ And then, it’s like, ‘Oh, alright then,’ and then there’re no problems after that.”*

*The dogs suddenly come rushing through the sitting room, barking loudly. When they have subsided, I ask Kashni, “Can you think of a time when it was actually a pleasure to tell someone?”*

*“Most times it’s cool,” she responds. “It was really great in Rodcrest College because most of the people there are very open-minded and that was nice. But now, in Festive School, it’s a bit more difficult, difficult because many of the people are more conservative.”*

*I agree with her observation. She continues, “Like, on this one particular day we were all standing at the bus stop, and a guy comes walking past, with his arm around a girl. One could see that they were, like, together. Maybe even married or something like that. Then some of the girls started making spiteful comments and noises. Why? Because the guy was black and the girl was white. Then I remembered my previous school where we white girls dated black guys and it didn’t matter at all.*

*“So I stood there thinking to myself, ‘If race is such a big issue for you guys, and you can’t handle that, then how on earth will I be able to tell you that my parents are gay?’*

*“I looked at them,” Kashni continues, “and I thought to myself: ‘Do I really want to be friends with any of you?’*

*“So I pick my friends very carefully, and I don’t hang out with children who are like that. If I have to be with them, I just keep quiet and I say nothing. It’s better that way. This new school is far more conservative. They’re “freaking” conservative and religious. I don’t mind all that stuff. But they’re racist as well. Even when I’m with them, I sometimes find that I just can’t keep quiet about their racism. So, one day, I just said to them: ‘When I’m around you, don’t say things like that’.*

*“But I think that it comes from their parents. Rodcrest College is not racist at all. There are Muslims there, and Jews and blacks. Schools really make a big difference. In Rodcrest College everyone was, like, tolerant and open-minded because there were children from different religions like Islam, and there were also a lot of children from overseas. It is also a private school. It was really nice.*

*“But Festive School is more difficult. You know, I also believe in God and I think that I’m more spiritual. But Festive School is, like, Christian. You have to be a Christian, pray three times a day and so on, and every morning the school opens with readings from the Bible. I don’t mind that kind of thing, but they are, like,*

*heavy about it and they are not tolerant about other religions. They only believe in Christian, um, values, and that's also what makes it so much more difficult there, because the Bible says that it's wrong and everything."*

*Kashni is making some really major disclosures, and so I encourage her to continue by listening in an open, sympathetic and attentive way.*

*"But, um, yes, I mean, I think the children are okay about it. But their parents.... Like there was one friend of mine who – at first – was fine with everything. Then she went and told her parents about my parents, and suddenly she couldn't come for sleepovers anymore. You know, I could still go to her house for sleepovers. But she never came to me anymore."* Kashni remains silent and thoughtful.

*After a while, I ask her, "What did she actually say to you?"*

*"Nothing specific. But I could just sense it. She always had excuses. There was always some or other reason why she couldn't come. Then I knew. You suddenly realise what is really happening."*

*I listen to her in awe, as her story pours out. She is giving me so much, that my head is spinning with all the detail. But this is her story, and so I let her continue talking for as long as she wishes.*

*"What is the worst experience you've had – the one in which you felt most uncomfortable?"*

*"I liked this one guy," Kashni answers. "We got on very well, but I didn't know how he felt about me. So I decided there and then that I just had to tell him because it simply couldn't work if he didn't know and accept it. I knew that if I were straightforward with him and told him the truth, then it would be okay. I was very worried," she laughs. "But he was fine with it."*

*I sense that it had not been easy for her, and I begin to wonder how long she hesitated before she told him. So I say. "So you kept quiet about your parents in the beginning of your relationship?"*

*"Yes, I did," Kashni replies. "Sometimes one just doesn't know. Sometimes an opportunity comes up and then you can tell them about the situation. And sometimes you can just tell another person about it all immediately."*

*"How do you decide that? I know that this might be a difficult question for you to answer, but when is it easier to speak out? Do you have to sense the right moment?"*

*"If a friend of yours is, like, very open and tolerant," Kashni replies, "then you can speak out without any problems at all. Or if you can see where a person is coming from, and they are not hostile, you can talk to them openly. But some people*

are not easy to “read”, especially (for me) if it’s a boy and I don’t know him very well. I first have to take some time to get to know him and to understand him – what he is like and what kind of person he is – before I can explain our family situation.

“If he is, like, heavy conservative,” she continues, “then I don’t tell him because it simply won’t work out. So then I have to leave him. But in other cases, where they are open, you just tell him or her straight away.”

“What do you mean by ‘open’?” I ask Kashni. Although I don’t want to interrupt her train of thought, I would also like to hear more about this ability of hers to observe and sense other people’s feelings, behaviour and thoughts. I am intrigued by her ability (in some cases) to anticipate what the reactions of others will be after what is only a short acquaintance.

“By ‘open’,” she answers, “I mean open-minded, tolerant. They are not judgemental about things and they are comfortable with most situations.”

“How are things in the beginning of the year?” I ask Kashni, “when you walk into a new class – especially now that you are in Festive School?”

“Um, well, you know what it’s like. It’s the whole Grade Eight scene! Everyone is new. So you get to know certain people and you make your own close friends. But then I have other friends, certain friends I’m not really close to. I mean, I am friendly with them, but I don’t talk to them the whole day and they don’t come to my home. Which doesn’t bother me,” she adds. “If they hear about my parents it’s fine. They’re usually fine with it as well. But in the case of my best friends, those friends I talk to every day, then I must tell them.”

“Do you feel like you have to share, and that you cannot just leave it?” I ask.

“Yes,” she answers, “otherwise I just feel uncomfortable. If they come to my home and they don’t understand the situation before the time, then it could be very uncomfortable for them, especially if they have come for a sleep-over.”

“What do your friends say when they come to sleep over?”

“Nothing. They’re just fine with it”, she replies. “They just call my moms ‘Aunty Anriëtte’ and ‘Aunty Zané’. No, they’re quite happy with it.”

“Has anyone ever made, you know, some special comments about your parents, like, ‘I think it’s so cool!’ or ‘I think it’s so weird!’?”

“Hmm. Yes. Some people say it’s cool, it’s just got to be cool – having two mothers as parents. But,” and here Kashni takes a deep breath before continuing, “I have had a few problems.”

She then begins to describe a major incident.

*“One day these boys were having a go at me and they just went too far and they said things like ‘You are a lesbian’ and ‘There’s something funny about your mother.’*

*“So I told my mother, and – can you believe it? – she (it was mom Anriëtte), went to school and she talked first to the principal, and then to my teacher, and then she came and spoke to the whole class. Then she called those boys to the front of the class and said, ‘Okay, if I ever hear that you have called my daughter a lesbian, I will phone your parents, and then I will lay charges against you for libel. And your parents will have to pay all the legal fees of the court action.’ “*

*Kashni pauses and then adds, “And then she said, ‘And – by the way – it’s not Kashni who is a lesbian. It’s us! If you ever have a problem with that, then you come and tell us.’ Of course it never was a problem again.”*

*Kashni laughs at the memory. But I wonder to myself how she felt inside about Anriëtte’s brave handling of the situation, and about how much of an impact it made on the children and the culture of education at that school.*

*So I ask Kashni how she felt when one of her moms walked into that room.*

*Kashni’s facial expression tells it all. But she answers and says, “It was ‘heavy’ embarrassing. I had my arms over my head during the whole thing. I felt very uncomfortable. I don’t really know how to explain it. I felt kind of sad. Tearful, and emotional. But I also felt very quiet and silent inside.*

*“Now I’m definitely not a quiet person. I’m actually a very loud person. I talk a lot in classes and give my opinions and sometimes the teachers don’t like it. I interrupt their classes with jokes and all that kind of thing. But I’m always the first one they get to know. But when that happened, I was just very quiet, and I didn’t say anything to anybody.”*

*“Did any of them ever risk saying anything like that to you afterwards?”*

*“Oh, no.”*

*“So that was probably the first time that something so serious happened?”*

*“Yes, and the last. In Grades Three and Four, nothing happened. It was fine. You just tell the whole class and they have no problems with it. I had lots of parties and everyone was at my home and both my moms were always there. So of course there were no problems. But as they get older, things begin to change.”*

*To relieve the tension that has built up as a result of this major disclosure, I change tack and ask Kashni, “So, then, what’s nice about having two mothers instead of a mother and father?”*

*Kashni laughs. “I guess one gets more attention. It’s usually the mother in a family that gives more attention to the children, and so you get a lot of attention in*

*your family. But sometimes you get more attention than you want because mothers can also be very overprotective. If there is one parent who is overprotective, it will usually be the mother.”*

*We both laugh and continue to chat about Kashni’s love for horses, and for her love for her art. She invites me into her room and she shows me some of the paintings that she did at school. Kashni’s trust and openness, and her willingness to share so many areas of her personal life with me in such a short space of time, have impressed me enormously.*

*Then Erid, fresh from his bath, joins us and he begins talking about the Christmas present that he got from his cousin. Kashni and I realise that he also needs an opportunity to talk, so I walk back into the sitting room with him to talk.*

*“If they want to know, I will tell them”*

*Erid walks into the sitting room. Standing in front of me is the most endearing nine-year-old boy, clean and fresh after his evening bath. He begins our conversation by giving me a detailed account of his new DVD, a Christmas present from his cousin. He had earlier bought his cousin exactly the same DVD for his birthday, so for him, this is a point of interest. He then tells me about the history examination that he will shortly be writing, and the new pens he has acquired that will help him to summarise his work.*

*I am pleasantly surprised at how easily he engages me in conversation. As he talks, it occurs to me that this might be a good moment to begin to direct the conversation towards my focus of research. So I ask, “What is it like being in this family?”*

*Erid seems eager to tell me. “It’s nice,” he replies, and in answer to my probing about what he means by “nice”, he avoids the central issue by pointing out that it’s pleasant to receive presents at Christmas time. In answer to further questions from me, he adds: “Oh, and I love getting money!”*

*Erid then shares with me and with Kashni, his fifteen-year-old sister, who is sitting with us, a story of something that had happened at school.*

*“A friend of mine at school offered me two hundred and fifty rand – for nothing, with no strings attached.” He turns to his sister. “Would you have taken it, Kashni, if you had been in my place?”*

*Kashni looks uncompromising and shakes her head. “No,” she answers without hesitation.*

*“Why not?” Erid asks.*

*“You just don’t,” she says.*

*Erid tries to undermine her certainty by saying, “But he offered it to me for nothing, with no strings attached!”*

*I suggest quietly that nothing is ever given for free and likewise never comes without some strings attached.*

*“Why is that?” asks Erid, refusing to let the point rest.*

*“Nothing is ever given for nothing,” Kashni agrees, using what I had said to justify her point of view.*

*But Erid is dissatisfied with such an unsubstantiated opinion, and challenges her again by asking, “Why would you not have taken it?”*

*Kashni firmly terminates this exchange by stating, “You just don’t.”*

*Kashni then looks at me and asks, “Would you like to talk to him now?” I sense that she also realises that Erid has things of importance that he could tell me, and I tell her gently, “Thank you, Kashni. Yes. I’ll talk to you again a bit later – if that’s OK.” Kashni nods and leaves the room.*

*I look into Erid’s large brown eyes and pursue a lead that he gave me at dinner. It involved an incident in which he hit another boy.*

*“So tell me about that boy you hit. Why did you hit him?”*

*“He said things about my mom, so I became angry,” Erid says defiantly.*

*“Did he tease you?”, I ask.*

*Erid reacts strongly. “No. He didn’t tease me. He said things about my mom.”*

*“Oh”, I reply. “He said things about your mom.” I reflect his words back to him. “How is that different from teasing you? Or is it the same?”*

*Erid looks thoughtful. “It’s the same, and it is different,” he replies.*

*“Okay, that makes sense. It wasn’t about you, but about someone who belongs to you. How many times has this happened?”*

*“Only a few times in this school, but lots of times in the other school.”*

*“What do you think would have happened at that other school if you had stayed there?”*

*“They would have stopped, or else I would have kept on hitting them until they did stop.”*

*I am angry with myself for having missed a cue to explore the children’s concepts of sameness and difference. It is my anxiety that is causing me to miss opportunities to probe crucial areas. Even though this is my first interview, I am not at all satisfied with the way in which I am handling it. I cast around for something else to ask Erid.*

*Eventually I say, “Can you remember what you said to this boy?” Then I add, “You don’t have to answer that question if you don’t want to.”*

*Erid closes that avenue by saying, “I don’t want to say.” I let it rest.*

*I am beginning to feel that the interview is not going well. Although my questions and remarks are apposite and appropriate, I do not want him to feel that I am putting pressure on him. So instead of pursuing the matter further, I offer him confirmation for his refusal by saying: “It’s quite OK if you don’t want to talk about that.”*

*I find it interesting that Erid prefers not to elaborate or give me a fuller version of the incident because one of his parents has already done so. But I now realise that that won’t be happening at this time.*

*After dinner, while Erid was taking his bath, one of his moms, Zané, had told me about the incident. She said: “A few weeks ago a boy in school said to him, ‘Your mother wants to be a man,’ and so he beat the boy up.*

*“As soon as he got into the car when we picked him up after school, he confessed to us what he had done because he knows that I don’t approve of him doing that kind of thing. But Anriëtte [Erid’s other mom] contradicted what I said by saying that, in her opinion, it is indeed necessary to act in that way under certain circumstances. Erid then told us that he couldn’t have let such a situation pass without doing something. He said that he had to defend his mom’s honour.”*

*Back in the interview, I pick up Erid’s cue about the differences between the two schools, and I begin once again to probe.*

*“Why do you think the two schools are so different?”*

*He looks at me and just says, “I don’t know.”*

*Inwardly, I warn myself to take it slowly and remind myself that he is only a nine-year-old boy. So, for a while, we continue to chat about this and that. Then another opportunity for probing arises. We happen to be talking about what happens when the children have to move to a new school.*

*“Let’s say that you have moved to a new school. What would go through your mind if your teacher were to say, ‘Today we are going to talk about our families?’”*

*Erid looks down and begins to play with his hands. “Um... I have never really thought about it. I would only say that we have moved. I wouldn’t say much.”*

*“Okay, so you prefer to say less rather than too much in that situation, and then they have to ask you if they want to know more?”*

*Erid agrees emphatically. “Yes.”*

*At that point, we are interrupted by friends of Erid and Kashni’s parents who have come to say goodbye.*

*Later, when we are alone again, I continue with questions about school life.*

*“Do the teachers – in the first week or so after school has started – ask you what you did during the holidays and other questions about your family?”*

*“They just ask you what you did during the holidays,” Erid replies.*

*Although Erid is clearly not exactly delighted with my repeated questions, I need to get a clear picture of how he copes at school, especially since he will soon be entering a new school yet again.*

*“Once you’ve moved to a new school and everyone gets a chance to stand up in class and tell the class about themselves, would you tell the class that you have two moms?”*

*Erid answers with great determination: "I would not say that. I would just tell them that we have moved."*

*I signify my agreement with his statement by nodding. I think to myself that it is almost like a strategy of minimal disclosure, of answering only what is being asked. What incentive does he need for elaborating further? In an attempt to create some basis for consensus, I suggest: "I think you are absolutely right. Of course the other kids would never say, 'Oh, I've got a mom or dad'. It would not be necessary. It wouldn't make sense, would it?"*

*Erid agrees wholeheartedly. "Ja. They have to find out if they want to know."*

*These last words of his make a strong impression on me. I sense that secrecy, or at least an avoidance of spontaneous self-revelation is a necessary part of his defences. So I ask, "Do you sometimes feel that you just can't tell?"*

*Erid looks confused. "Tell?" he asks inquiringly.*

*"Yes. Tell them that you have two moms. Do you feel that you must keep that a secret?"*

*Erid answers quite dispassionately. "If they want to know, I will tell them."*

*I then realise that the actual telling or disclosing is not a vital issue for him, but it is also not information that he will casually tell or share. It makes perfect sense that he will not carry this "interesting" information on his sleeve, and there is certainly no need to do so. I marvel at the insight of this great little man with a big soul.*

*"But would you not be a bit scared to share this information in a new school? This is something that I am curious about."*

*Erid answers, "Well, yes and no."*

*I am now intrigued by the fact that he seems willing to disclose something more than I have hitherto obtained. "Could you explain what you mean by that?" I ask.*

*"It's like this," he replies. "I don't... I don't talk much. But if I get to know somebody well, then, yes, I will tell them."*

*"Thank you for answering that," I say encouragingly. What he has just said does not confirm my previous conclusion that someone has to ask him specific questions before he will give specific information. I now see that he is willing to share voluntarily. I therefore ask him, "With whom would you be willing to share more information?"*

*Erid looks up. He seems slightly irritated. "I don't understand what you mean."*

So I elaborate. "Would you share this information with really close friends?" I ask.

"No, I wouldn't say anything."

I continue to probe and hope that he does not feel that I am nagging him – although it is already feeling to me as though I am more or less extracting information from him.

"Do your friends sometimes ask you questions? I mean when you first get to know them?"

Erid delivers his most powerful answer yet. "That is why they are my friends. They don't ask me questions."

I cannot help but laugh, and it seems to break the ice somewhat. It seems as though he has directed this answer straight to me. I answer by nodding my head in amusement and saying, "OK. I won't ask you any more stupid personal questions."

Erid smiles back at me. Once again I get the impression that he simply cannot see what all the fuss is about. As far as he is concerned, he has two mothers and that is that. For him there is no need to share this rather insignificant piece of information about his life with every person he meets. If they ask him, he will tell them, but he will only give them the information they want – nothing more. This is exactly what he has been doing with me up to now. I see that my closed questions are certainly not helping to elicit much information from him.

"What do you think would happen if you have a close friend whom you have not told, and he comes to visit you? Do you think that having two moms would suddenly become a problem? Or would you tell him before he came to your house?"

Again Erid answers me firmly. "No."

"What about the friends you have now? If they come to your house to sleep over, would they say something like, 'Oh, this is, like, weird...'"

"They're my friends. They don't mind. They love playing here because our place is so big."

I decide to delve more deeply into his attitudes and decide to ask him how he would handle it if one of his friends turned out to be gay.

"If one of your friends realises that he is gay, how would you feel about that?"

"It would be fine."

"Hmm. But let's say that he has a problem with being gay. Or perhaps he doesn't want to be gay, or else he struggles with being gay. What advice would you give him? How do you think you would be able to support him?"

*“I would just let him know that I am there for him because it’s okay,” he answers simply.*

*I suddenly feel tremendously excited by and appreciative of Erid’s gentle acceptance of an aspect of human nature that he clearly does not regard as a problem – even if others might.*

*“What advice,” I ask Erid, “would you give to other kids of your age who have two moms or two dads?”*

*“Advice?” he asks quizzically. “I would tell them just to be normal kids.” He is obviously surprised by my question about “giving advice”. But his answer clearly demonstrates yet again that he regards being gay as nothing out of the ordinary. His attitudes also serve to emphasise what his mom, Zané, told me about him being a “no-fuss guy”. “He just flows,” she had told me.*

*In spite of this, the critical social constructionist side of me immediately realises that Erid’s answers conceal an underlying assumption of, or at least an awareness of, the dichotomy of normality-abnormality, even if he never consciously thinks much about it. The humanist side of me analyses the situation at its face value. I see that he waits for his class mates to ask him directly before he discloses (minimal) information to them about his same-gender parents. But with his personal friends, he seems to be easy and natural. I hypothesise that as a sense of trust develops between them, a space opens up for him to disclose as and when he needs to.*

*I continue by asking him about other possible scenarios in which he might find himself. “Okay, if someone asks about your family... If they ask you how many brothers and sisters you have...”.*

*Erid quickly cuts me off. “I just tell them,” he answers in his characteristically straightforward way.*

*“People usually ask questions,” I continue, “like, ‘What does your mom do? What does your dad do?’ How do you answer those questions?”*

*“I just say ‘I don’t know.’ “*

*I wonder if such an answer would satisfy a curious child, so I elaborate on my previous question. “Okay. So you start off by saying that you don’t have a dad.”*

*“That’s what I used to say,” he replies. “But then they say, ‘But how’s it possible that you don’t have a dad?’ Then I say, ‘I’m adopted by two mummies.’ “*

*Although I am filled with admiration for his simplicity and directness, I focus narrowly on his words, “That’s what I used to say”, which raises a number of new questions in my mind. I wonder whether his original responses to other children*

*(“what I used to say”) elicited teasing from the other children or gave rise to further inappropriate or uncomfortable questions?*

*And so I ask, “Do some children ask more questions or give comments – like ‘How does it work?’ or ‘That’s impossible?’ “*

*Erid answers: “Yes. I don’t always answer questions like that. But sometimes they do ask me, and I just say to them, ‘I don’t feel like telling you now.’“*

*I am filled with admiration for how well Erid manages to navigate his way around people’s curiosity, even mine, with a few direct, honest and open answers, and with how he gives just enough information that contains no unnecessary detail.*

*I am also curious about the adoption and how it affected him.*

*“Okay. Do children sometimes ask you questions about your adoption, and about where you were before you were adopted?”*

*Erid nods. “Yes.”*

*“Does that sometimes bring up hurtful memories?”*

*“Yes, sometimes. But it’s OK. I just don’t tell them.” While Erid begins to play with his Tazzos,<sup>1</sup> I wonder how all of this affected him and how the children with whom he interacted reacted to his information about his adoption and him having two mommies. Is it the content of the disclosure or is it the way in which I am prying into his “private affairs” that dictates the way in which he answers questions? Perhaps he is just irritated by all the questions, most of which must seem ridiculous to him. I remember what his mom, Zané, observed about him: that he is carefree and his motto could be “Just be who you are.”*

*I continue by asking about the reactions of other children.*

*“How do other kids react when you tell them about your two mommies?”*

*Erid answers: “Most people act normally. Some are nice. Others are not. They are the bad ones.”*

*I remained focused on his answer. “What do they do?” I ask.*

*“They tease you – like that other one boy did – and so I hit him,” Erid replies with a flash of anger. He is recalling the incident about the boy who made derogatory remarks about his mother, and I realise that this is the only time when he reacted violently.*

*“Do you think it will get worse as you get older? I mean the teasing. From those bad kids that you just mentioned?”*

*Erid responds in a much calmer voice. “It gets better,” he says quietly, and then remains silent.*

*“Okay, I see. Why do you think that it will get better?”*

*“I don’t know. Maybe they will get more sense. Maybe they will not be so stupid when they get older.” Then Erid proceeds to show me how to play Tazzos, and we begin to talk about other more general issues. I decide to leave it at that for this session.*

*Later on, while I am talking to both parents in the kitchen, mom Anriëtte remarks that it would be unrealistic to imagine that their children would not be teased at one stage or the other.*

*“I know that it is a big irony, but because we decided to be open, we also opened up ourselves to be discriminated against. One still encounters a stigma in society, and that is where the problem lies. Think about that incident at school. That ten-year-old boy must have heard something negative about gays and lesbians somewhere. Perhaps from his own parents or from some other adult. Okay, it also depends on the context. You find healthy and unhealthy families... Obviously people in positions of leadership in their community won’t say anything stereotypical, hateful or discriminatory because they know that it’s not acceptable or tolerated in terms of official policy. But the ‘ordinary’ man-in-the-street does not normally have to be careful about what he says in private.”*

*As I leave them later that evening, Erid gives me a big hug. I sense that he is growing up in a very special and safe home where he and his sister are surrounded by love, acceptance and wisdom, and that these two mothers are raising exceptional children who will make a big difference in the future.*

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<sup>1</sup> Game played with plastic and metal discs.

*“We don’t talk about our parents”*

*I am seeing Luanne again today. As I drive to her house, I recall the many conversations we have had thus far, about the varied topics that interest her. In past sessions, we have discussed yoga, music of various kinds, thrillers (films), netball, subject choices, teachers, Christmas presents and cards, calligraphy, how one writes in Chinese, school grades, and many more besides. Apart from one occasion, she has always been in a good mood, cheerful and excited about what life has to offer when I have met her. When I met her family for the first time, she was especially happy. I remember how she enthusiastically jumped up and fetched her photograph album and immediately began to share a lot of her childhood memories with me.*

*I clearly remember our first formal contact session. We sat on couches opposite each other in their sitting room. I began with a few questions in the hope that the direction in which she wanted to take the conversation would soon become apparent. This then is how this session developed.*

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*“So, then, what do you call your two mothers, Luanne? ‘Mom and Hannah’? Or what?”*

*“Yes,” Luanne answers politely. “Mother and Hannah. The children that live around here also say, ‘Where are your two moms?’ ”*

*Pleased by the fact that Luanne has immediately focused on the people who live in their neighbourhood, I ask, “It sounds as if the people around here are quite happy with you having two mothers?”*

*“Oh yes,” Luanne agrees. She then lapses back into her polite, alert but expectant silence.*

*I am rather taken aback by her response – more by the tone of her voice than by her answer. It was as though her “Yes” expressed an unspoken observation that my question might be rather naïve and obvious. But I have become accustomed to being thought to be somewhat naïve (although never in an unkind way) by my youthful respondents. They certainly do live in a world that is very unlike the world of the past. But they do it, on the whole, with panache, style and courage.*

*But I remain focused on my researcher's quest because I hope to be able to elicit from Luanne some examples of discrimination, difference or otherness, if indeed they have occurred. So I ask: "Do the kids around here sometimes talk about your two moms? Or perhaps ask you any searching questions?"*

*"No, never," Luanne replies brightly.*

*I find Luanne's response slightly incredible, and so I say, "Really? Nothing at all? Not even any spontaneous comments?"*

*Luanne seemed slightly bemused. "Hmm. Sometimes they might say, 'Where are your two moms?' or something like that. But, no. They don't actually talk about my two moms." She begins to digress by telling me about a little girl who lives nearby who has the same surname that they have, and then digresses further into observations about different surnames. She then tells me about her science teacher at school, and about all the interesting questions that the class ask him regarding religion and the creation of the universe.*

*As the intensity of her talk slowly begins to diminish, I ask myself various internal questions about my own subjectivity. Am I perhaps moving too fast with questions that probe too personally before I have given Luanne time to trust me and the process that we are both involved in? I wonder why this might be happening. I then remind myself that the two children whom I interviewed before meeting Luanne had both immediately shared their negative and positive experiences with me. I suppose that I was half expecting that Luanne would also immediately share her range of diverse experiences as well. But perhaps she is comfortable with having same-gender parents. Perhaps it is just adults who struggle to accept the concept of same-gender parents – two mothers or two fathers as parents. I decide that I will not probe too deeply at first, but that I will first allow a stronger relationship of trust to develop. So I remain focused on her in a friendly and sympathetic way and allow her to take the conversation in whichever direction she wishes to take it.*

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*I realise now that in my subsequent interviews with Luanne, I pursued this aim of allowing her to set the pace – in topics as well as in activities. In our second interview, we made collages together and drew time lines of our lives. She told me a range of interesting childhood stories such as of the time when she broke her arm. She explained what they were planning for their forthcoming Christmas holiday. We talked about her dad who lives in London and about her two stepsisters. I smile as I*

*remember how she accurately mimicked a certain kind of British accent. In fact, we had a lot of fun. Even though young, she has been great company.*

*We laughed while we ate ice cream and sucked sweets. She told me that she was the head girl in her primary school, and that she belonged to a small group of about five special friends, all girls, who have been friends since before they even went to primary school. I remember that I felt that in our second interview, we discussed everything except what my study was about. Then, in our third interview, I asked her about her friends, and we fortuitously ranged over other topics and issues as well. Here is what happened in that interview (related in the present tense).*

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*We are sitting outside, and I ask Luanne: “Please tell me something about your nursery school or primary school days. Did the children ever say anything unkind to you about your mothers? Were they perhaps curious? Did they ask you questions of any kind?”*

*Luanne answers firmly. “No, the children just carried on as usual. And it wouldn’t have bothered me if they did.”*

*“But do you think that it might bother them?”*

*“Who? My friends? No, one of my friend’s mom is also gay. But her partner died recently, and they had anyway been separated for a long time. Now, she and her mom live alone together. So, you see, I’m not the only one.”*

*She smiles.*

*“Hmm.” I nod in agreement. “This kind of arrangement is becoming more and more common.” I am hoping that my casual acceptance of the “situation” will help her to relax so that she might eventually get into a frame of mind in which she might be willing to share more. I still don’t know whether or not she completely trusts me. I am heartened however to hear that she is aware that there are other families with gay parents as well. This knowledge must provide her with some sense of belonging.*

*Luanne seems willing to elaborate. “No, we don’t actually talk about it. Well, we don’t talk about that. No one talks about their moms and dads at school. We talk*

about things like *Sewende Laan*<sup>2</sup>, music, boys, and new movies. My friends are used to the set-up.”

“Okay”, I think to myself, “perhaps I have found a case study where everything is going smoothly and where there are no problems at all – as others who know about my research have predicted I would. But I wonder about Luanne’s short, even slightly abrupt, answers when I ask her about her same-gender parents. This is in such striking contrast to her extensive elaboration on just about every other topic we touch upon. This seems to me to indicate the existence of a fairly strong defence mechanism. Or perhaps she is truly just being herself and getting on with her daily life, and quite naturally finds the topic of “parents” (of whatever kind) rather boring. Perhaps I should give her the benefit of the doubt. She is, after all, only a teenager, and it is natural for teenagers to be more interested in their friends and their own activities rather than the ramifications of their parents’ relationships – or how they impinge on their life.

“Okay, Luanne. You have already mentioned to me that you were the head girl of your school. How are things at school now? Is it something that has to be discussed? What about school functions or meetings?” I recall her parents saying that they had approached the principal of the primary school and had asked him whether their sexual orientation as co-parents would be a problem for the school, and he had firmly said “No.” It seems that both parents and Luanne had experienced the primary school as an affirming place – and a good choice from every point of view. But I am wondering if the same pleasant atmosphere has been transferred to Luanne’s high school.

“Hannah sometimes goes to school functions,” says Luanne, “and on parents’ evening, they go together as my two moms.”

“So?” I ask, urging her to say more. “Do they make any comments or have any questions afterwards?”

“I don’t go to these events with them. But no, they don’t.”

I probe further. “How would it be if anyone asked you about your two moms?”

“Well, the teachers all know. I don’t know how they know. But the principal’s wife was my netball teacher in primary school. So I guess...”.

Luanne remains silent for a moment, and then adds in a quiet voice: “But it is actually wrong to be gay. The Bible says so.”

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<sup>2</sup> One could translate this as “Seventh Avenue”. Luanne is referring to a popular South African local television soap opera.

*I remain silent, allowing the importance of what she has just disclosed to register and be appreciated. Of course, I would never dream of engaging in a religious debate with her. I just want her to have a space to share – if that is what she wants to do. My challenge, as I see it, is to provide her with a safe and containing space in which she can freely share her thoughts and emotions – if she wants to.*

*Luanne continues, unaware of my private thoughts. “I think it’s in Romans, chapter 1. A teacher once told us that if you ever do ‘it’, even once, the Lord will never forgive you because He did not create women for women or men for men. He made man and woman so that they could be together. That’s why it is supposed to be a very big sin.*

*“I actually find that very confusing,” she continues, “because – what if two people really love each other? Look at this new law that parliament has passed, it makes it legal for gay people to marry. And if one takes into account what the church said the other day. Sometimes I just don’t understand what’s going on.”*

*I wonder how Luanne must have felt in that classroom when that teacher expounded his personal, radically fundamentalist understanding of what the Bible means, perhaps (or perhaps not?) unaware that there was a child (perhaps more than one child) who might be deeply upset and alienated by his dogmatic expression of opinion.*

*I therefore respond sympathetically and carefully by saying, “It must have upset you quite a lot when he said that about gay people.”*

*Her reply is nonchalant, but I can feel a twinge of her pain. “Oh no. But it was quite a shock.”*

*Of course, I agree with her. I can just imagine what might have been going through her mind and heart at that moment, because she had already told me that the staff of the school probably all know about her same-gender parents. In any event, I am stunned by the insensitivity of the teacher’s remarks, especially in a country like South Africa which has become a world leader in pioneering gay rights in the Bill of Rights and legislation.*

*“Well, Luanne, I can barely imagine what must have been going through your mind that day. I would have been very upset. I mean, some of the children there might have been influenced by what he said. But, for you, I think that this is a very personal issue.”*

*Luanne nods her head in agreement, and whispers “Yes.”*

*“And you had to go back home after school that day, look at your mom, and perhaps think, ‘I wonder if she knows that? If she does, I wonder what she thinks about that?’ Did you tell her what happened?”*

*“No, I didn’t actually.” Luanne is beginning to sound slightly defensive, and perhaps even a bit tired.*

*“It certainly would have been upsetting for me,” I add. “I am trying to think how I would have felt if I had been in your shoes.”*

*Luanne just shrugs, and says flatly, “Well, what can you do? I just get on with my life.”*

*I wonder how she accommodates the Christian view to her personal circumstances, and ask, “I don’t know if you think about this, Luanne, but when a person realises that they are gay, and they are also a Christian, they can get caught in a terrible struggle because of what they think the Bible says and because of the negative way in which some ministers talk about being gay.*

*“What I wonder is whether the children of gay parents sometimes feel the same pain that their parents feel – even though they are not gay themselves. I wonder if the children of gay parents ever wonder if society will accept them – because of what people think the Bible says, and so on. What are your opinions about this, Luanne?”*

*Luanne frowns, looks thoughtful, and then answers slowly. “I must say that I don’t really know a lot of people who aren’t Christians. But my parents are. They believe in God. Hmm. I really don’t think about that a lot, to be honest. On that one occasion when that teacher said what he said, I did think about it quite a lot. But then I thought about it less and less, and now, I don’t think about it at all.”*

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*In the week that follows this interview, I constantly turn over in my mind what Luanne has so generously told me. I battle to find the “right way” to approach her – if such a thing as a “right way” exists. I question whether I have handled the situation appropriately by not appraising her of the opposing gay-friendly and gay-justifying views in that particular religious debate. I realise that she is also negotiating with the outside world from the point of view of her own private interior world, and that this process not only takes place from the inside to the outside. It is always a two-way process. We also construct our particular meanings, identities*

and solutions from what gets said and done “out there”. What sometimes gets said “out there” does not necessarily reach the inner sanctum of the family.

*I cannot banish the thought that even if Luanne manages to forget about this ugly and unfortunate incident altogether, it could nevertheless remain in her subconscious and therefore negatively affect the way that she will relate to her mother for the rest of her life. What I can see however is that she has adopted an efficient strategy to manage the situation – at least for the present. To forget about it and not to dwell on this perennially virulent debate between religious fundamentalists and those who subscribe to a more compassionate view of how gay people might be accommodated in their spiritual beliefs, is essentially a practical approach to a problem that will not easily go away.*

*I am encouraged by the fact that Luanne seems to be able to distance herself from negative comments. I also sense that she can see and is aware of her parents’ happiness. In previous interviews, she mentioned many of the positive elements in her relationship with her parents. So I have come to realise that – on a certain level, at least – she successfully manages not to let cruel religious opinions about gayness to overwhelm her confidence in herself and her parents. This ability enables her to manage and continue with her ordinary day-to-day life. In our first meeting, she said: “My moms always tease me by saying, ‘Love will be enough for Christmas!’ But then they always spoil me so much. I don’t think they always realise how much I appreciate it.”*

*At one stage, I specifically ask Luanne: “What do you like about having two mothers?”*

*Luanne laughed rather self-consciously when I asked this question. Then she said: “I like it because a mother is always protective, and because of that, I can see that it is not always easy for them to say “yes”. We are also so close. I think that the times I enjoy most are when we go out and have picnics together, and do fun things like that.*

*“Of course, it’s easier, I suppose, to get past them than it would be to get past a father – except that Hannah always asks me why I want to do something before she will say “Okay”. I can see that that is a good thing. The truth always gets out anyway in the long run. Sometimes I feel that they are handling some matter unfairly. Yes, they are both strict with me. But I can see that they are like that because they want to protect me and because they love me.”*

*Today will be our last session before I return for member checking. I view this session as a formality in which I will establish some closure and just spend some time with her. Some weeks have passed since I last saw Luanne. In the first few weeks, I interviewed her every week so that we would both have opportunities to establish trust and rapport. But I know that she has been busy with her netball trials and various matches, and with examinations as well. I am almost at their house, and I review in my mind our conversation of the previous session so that I will be prepared to pick up the connections. I had used that session to probe her about her friends and her relationships with her peers at school for the last time, as I sensed her frustration with my repeated probes regarding this theme. Today I brought a video with me and I am merely aiming to informally spend some time with her. I began our previous session together by saying:*

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*“We are nearing the end of our process together, Luanne. I have been going through the notes that I made during our sessions and everything that we discussed.*

*“What I am still wondering about is how you manage to cope so well with having two lesbian mothers. Most of the other young people I have interviewed have described incidents such as people asking questions...”*

*Luanne interrupts me by saying, “When we meet someone that we don’t know and whose attitudes are unknown to us, we just say that Hannah is my aunt, so no one actually knows.”*

*“Is that right?” I reply. “That sounds to me like a decision that you all made together, like an ‘unwritten rule’ – although I don’t want to use the word ‘rule’.”*

*“Yes, it is,” says Luanne.*

*I ask whether any discussions ever take place at school about the different kinds of families that one finds in modern life, and whether the children talk about that independently of what is discussed in the classroom.*

*“Children don’t tease each other any more about their parents being divorced – because just about everybody comes from a divorced family,” Luanne replies in a matter-of-fact way.*

*I realise that Luanne also comes from a divorced family, and I wonder if she reveals her own family identity at school.*

*But Luanne says very firmly: “But I am not going to say that my mother has a girlfriend. I just keep quiet.”*

*In my researcher’s role as “devil’s advocate”, I ask: “What then do you say if someone asks you who Hannah is? Would you say that she’s your aunt, or a friend of your mom’s, or what?”*

*“I would just tell them that she is my aunt because I never know whether they will reject me or not because of that, or perhaps become judgemental or unpleasant. It is not necessary for everyone to know these details. But if they ask me directly, I will tell them.”*

*The clarity of Luanne’s reply provides an excellent answer to my desire to know how she handles meeting new people and whether her having two mothers would become an issue on such occasions. In order merely to confirm what I have learned, I ask her about how she would handle her new boyfriend in the same situation. “What – if anything – would you tell him about your moms being together as a couple?”*

*Luanne laughs. “I didn’t think that he even realised at first. But when he spent the night at our house, I think that he probably did realise it.”*

*It seems therefore that Luanne and her same-gender parents live with a comfortable degree of openness and acceptance, although they are wisely cautious when they come into contact with strangers whose attitudes are unknown to them. The acceptance, love and relative openness in this family seem to indicate to me that gay families are perhaps finally becoming more settled in themselves and in the communities in which they live.*

*Another possibility is that families with what would once have been regarded as families with atypical structures (single parents, same-gender parents, grandparent(s) acting as parents, and so on) are now so common as not to attract notice or attention – except perhaps from religious bigots and others with hostile agendas of their own.*

*Because Luanne and nearly all modern children grow up in families that would have been regarded as highly “irregular” a hundred or even fifty years ago, perhaps it is thus the case that Luanne and her friends no longer consciously think about family structures anymore, and that they just carry on with their lives and regard themselves as normal.*

*I arrive at the gate and park my car in the driveway. I am looking forward – as I always do – to this session because Luanne never fails to make me feel most welcome. It is certainly pleasant to be back once again in their now familiar surroundings. I remember during my first conversation with Hannah, Hannah mentioned that the parents of one friend had forbidden their daughter to visit their house for sleepovers. But, interestingly, since they have both been in high school, those same parents now allow their daughter to visit the house again – but only if their daughters are busy with school-related assignments. I wonder whether Luanne will be willing to share something about this experience with me, or whether she has forgotten about it.*

*In any case, I have brought a video with me that shows a selection of American children talking about their gay mothers and their experiences, and we watch it together. When the videotape reaches its end, Luanne turns around to me and says, “Carie, last time we talked about me how I tell people that Hannah is my aunt. Do you know what happened this week? Well, there is this little girl who lives nearby us. She went and said to her mother that she also wants two mothers like me, and she asked Hannah, ‘Are you Luanne’s second mom? Or her other mom?’ “ But Hannah said, ‘No, I am Luanne’s aunt’. But the little girl refused to believe her, and she insisted, ‘No! You are Luanne’s other mommy’ until Hannah eventually had to say, ‘Okay, okay, I am her other mom.’ Then this little kid said, ‘Oh, that’s so cool!’” Both Luanne and I laugh appreciatively.*

*I suddenly become aware of the considerable impact that our conversations are having on Luanne’s thinking. In a previous session she had merely mentioned that she tells people that Hannah is her aunt – when there seems to be no reason for more accurate disclosure. But now she has progressed to a point where she is able to reflect on how Hannah herself handles similar situations. I feel a bit concerned.*

*As if reading my thoughts, Luanne says: “But she easily says at work that I am her child, and there might be other times when she might say that she is my mom. Everyone that knows us, knows.”*

*“I am wondering,” I ask Luanne, “how you guys decide when to say that Hannah is not your mom but your aunt. When would you all do that? And what would influence your decision? Is it because of the pressures of society? Or is it just more convenient to say that Hannah is your aunt rather than your mother?”*

*Luanne answers with what seems to be a slight flash of irritation and/or defiance. “We just don’t want to advertise that my parents are gay. We all just want*

*to get on with our everyday lives, and we hardly ever bring up questions like this when we are alone. In the case of this girl, I guess Hannah said “aunt” out of respect for her age. She’s so young! Not everyone is open and okay with this kind of situation. She might think it’s ‘so cool’. But how can we know what her parents will say?”*

*I ponder the good sense inherent in her reply as I wrap up our conversation. I wish her good luck with her studies and with the remainder of the week’s activities. I conclude that Luanne is happy and contented with her situation. She is surrounded by friends whom she has grown up with and by teachers who know her situation, and she has no need to constantly explain or protect herself or to process other people’s discomfort, prejudice or scruples. Luanne’s face radiates happiness as she waves goodbye to me as I drive off.*

*“It doesn’t bother me...”*

**Penny:**

*Start at the beginning.*

**Susan:**

*No! That’s too far back.*

**Penny:**

*Well, then, what about the first time  
we met?*

**Susan:**

*This session is supposed to be about  
Carl, remember?*

**Carl:**

*When you had that “afro” hairstyle!*

**Penny:**

*Carl, don’t you start! [She smiles at  
him and then begins her story.] We  
had real problems in the beginning  
and they caused big fights. If Carl  
wanted to do something and Susan  
had said “No”, he would come and  
ask me and I would say “Yes”.  
As time went by, the situation  
improved. But in the beginning! It  
really used to make me very angry  
indeed. I used to feel that Carl is my  
child – and I felt that no one – not  
even Susan – had a right to interfere  
with the way in which I brought up  
my own child. So obviously I resented  
Susan for that. In one way and  
another, we have all walked a long,  
hard road together.*

**Susan:**

*Straight people should understand that our relationship is just like any other relationship. We have all had our difficult times, but they have brought us all closer together, and God was with us during all those times.*

*It was fifteen years ago that I first prayed for something to happen, and my prayers were answered. I didn't want a husband, you see, but I did want children – although I didn't want to bring them into the world myself.*

*So, one night, as I was sitting in the bath, I prayed to God. I asked Him, "Please send me either a man, or a woman with a child." And Penny walked in the next week!*

*But she quickly made me understand that Carl was her child. She used to say things like, "Leave the child alone. He's my child!" So I told her, "I don't want to take him from you, Penny. I just want to have a part in his upbringing."*

**Penny:**

*We really endured some hard times together. But things have got better in a way that we could never have imagined.*

**Susan:**

*Now we are one, happy family. Of course we are not immune to pain, sadness and difficulties. But I would say that – as a family and as individuals – we are very stable. I personally think that Penny and I have brought Carl up very well. Certainly, to the best of our ability. Penny and I, for example, would never dream of holding each other affectionately in public places such as his school or shopping centres. We understand boundaries and the limits of public toleration. We've certainly never embarrassed Carl. And we're now talking about over ten years – since Carl was in primary school. We would also never hold hands if we were walking down a road, and we never get involved in confrontations. No, there is never anything like that, and our families appreciate that. For example, my brother and his wife privately thanked us for not holding one another affectionately, especially in front of their grandchildren, although they totally support our relationship.*

**Penny:**

*I agree. We are very careful in front of other people, especially when Carl's friends come to visit. Sometimes we might slip up and call each other something like "my angel" or some*

*other term of endearment. But we are constantly vigilant about the ways in which we interact, and about the possible consequences of our behaviour in places where it might cause offence to others.*

**Susan:**

*Sometimes we do slip up.*

**Penny:**

*But we try not to give anyone any reason to tease Carl.*

**Carien:**

*Carl, would it bother you if one of your mothers were to say “my angel” to the other in the presence of your friends?*

**Carl:**

*Of course not, it would never bother me. But it might bother them.*

**Carien:**

*Carl, what would happen if Penny and Susan decided to “come out” about their sexual orientation – and show it publicly in their behaviour? Like in front of the*

*pupils at your  
school?*

**Carl:**

*They would never do that! They keep  
to the rules. Of course, here at home,  
as far as I am concerned, they can do  
whatever they want.*

**Penny:**

*Don't worry, Carl, we would never do  
anything like that.*

**Susan:**

*It's all about  
respect really.*

**Penny:**

*In fact, Carl himself was the one who  
came out about our relationship. It  
happened at his high school!*

**Susan:**

*We were both completely astounded  
when he got into the car one day and  
said, "Okay! Now everybody knows."  
So, of course, we both shrieked,  
"Knows what?"  
And he replied, "Knows that you are  
gay!"  
[Everyone smiles.] Can you believe it?*

**Carien:**

*Please tell me the  
story.*

**Carl:**

*It happened last year, at our inauguration as school  
prefects for the new year. Susan was standing quietly  
there near the door because she didn't want to be part of  
the group photograph. Penny, my birth mother, was  
already standing in the group for the photograph. So I*

*called over to Susan, and said, "Come on, Susan!" So she came over.*

*After the photos had been taken, a few of us were standing around in a group. Then one of the guys (they were not exactly afraid, but you could see the apprehension in their eyes), asked me "Do you have two mothers, Carl? Or is the one lady your mother and the other lady your step-mother?" Something like that. I can't really remember their exact words now.*

*So I said, "No, Penny is my mother, and Susan is my dad."*

*When they had recovered from that shock, they said, "But she's a woman!"*

*And so I said, "So?"*

*After that, they never again asked me any other questions about my parents. You see, they don't think it's any big deal. And they still come to our house for sleepovers and so on. My mothers behave, you see. [We all laugh.]*

**Carien:**

*Have you always been allowed to have friends sleep over at the house?*

**Carl:**

*Yes. I suppose they must have had questions that they wanted to ask me. But they never asked! Except this one friend who asked a few questions. They obviously all know the set-up by now, but they don't ask me. They are too scared!*

*But, I mean, it's must be totally.*

*obvious to anyone who knows us well enough because my moms sleep together.*

*But if they want to know, they must ask me the questions – if they have any – and then I will answer them. Why should I lie to them? If someone doesn't want to accept me because my parents are gay, then that's okay. I've got lots of friends. I don't need people like that.*

**Carl:**

*My parents were away for the weekend, and I was alone at home with him. I think he had his suspicions about the situation. But he said nothing to me about them. Then a friend of my mom's came over, and she introduced herself to him by saying, "Hi, I'm Estelle, and I'm a lesbian."  
He didn't respond to the way in which she described herself. But when she had left, I said to him: "So, ask now what you want to know?" He replied that he had obviously suspected it, but that he had been too scared to ask me. But now he knows.*

**Carien:**

*Tell me about your friend?*

**Carien:**

*So how did you feel after that experience? Did you feel the*

*same? Or better?*

*Or a bit weird?*

**Carl:**

*I didn't feel any different. They obviously all have their suspicions.*

**Penny:**

*And then sometimes I slip up – and call Susan “my angel” in front of visitors.*

**Carl:**

*And my friends have seen that there is only one double bed in that room.*

**Susan:**

*Yes, and they know that Penny and I sleep in one bedroom – and that we share the house.*

**Carl:**

*Oh, and my ex-girlfriend also knew.*

**Carien:**

*Did you tell her?*

**Carl:**

*Yes. We were lying on the bed chatting, and I told her that I wanted to share my biggest secret with her. Then I told her, and all she said was, “Oh.”*

**Susan:**

*She also said, “Well, as long as they don't interfere with me.”*

**Carl:**

*Oh, yes. She also said that. But she didn't have a problem with it. I also have a friend who lives near here. Her parents are also gay. They recently broke up, but I've heard that*

*they're back together again. We used to visit each other quite a lot. But her new boyfriend doesn't like me, so I don't go around there anymore.*

*But one day I asked her: "Are your mothers gay?" and she replied "Yes." Then she asked me whether my parents were gay, and I said "Yes." This created a strong bond between us and we were able to go to the gay church together with our parents. They gave her an excellent upbringing – just as my parents gave me. Her birthday falls in the week after mine, and we share the same interests. Her friends also accept it. I suppose that some of her friends might have gossiped about it, although I don't know all of her friends.*

**Carien:**

*I think that everyone accepts it in the end. If there's a problem, it's usually just in the beginning because some people are uncertain about how to react. And then they say nothing and leave it.*

**Carl:**

*I agree. Most of my friends never even raise the question. If any of them have a problem with my mothers' orientation, then it is their problem. Not mine.*

**Penny:**

*But none of his friends have changed at all. They remain as friendly and relaxed as they ever were. They certainly haven't written him off because of us. They still visit us a lot.*

**Carl:**

*If anything, they visit us even more now because no one here hassles them – as many of their parents do.*

**Penny:**

*If anyone acts in a way that we don't like, we will just kick them out. [We all laugh.]*

**Susan:**

*Yes, Carl's friends are great! They always greet us both most respectfully – including, of course, the ones who know our set-up.*

**Carl:**

*Oh, I need to tell you. Tiaan has found out that you are partners.*

**Susan:**

*What? How?*

**Carien:**

*Tell us what happened, Carl.*

**Carl:**

*We were here one day and Tiaan asked me whether my moms were still attending that church, because they attended the same church for a while, and I said, "No, they are going to a gay church now." He looked at me in amazement, and said, "To a gay church?" So I said "Didn't you know that my moms were gay?"*

*And he said, "Oh, don't talk nonsense!" And he kept on denying that it was possible until I went and got some family photographs to show him.*

**Susan:**

*One would think that Tiaan would have realised long ago that Penny and I are in a relationship.*

**Carl:**

*Yes. Even I was quite surprised by his reaction. But, in the end, he just said, "Okay", and that was that.*

**Carien:**

*Do you feel that you should "come out" to other people about your mothers' relationship, Carl?*

**Carl:**

*I only tell people that I can trust. I'm certainly not going to shout about it from the rooftops. But I'll tell my friends.*

**Carien:**

*Do you feel that you must tell them, Carl? Or do you leave it unsaid because it does not have to be said?*

**Carl:**

*No, I don't feel compelled to tell them.  
And, no, it doesn't bother me  
anymore. Not much, anyway. No, in  
fact, it doesn't bother me at all.*

**Carien:**

*It sounds to me  
as though it  
might have  
bothered you at  
some stage?*

**Penny:**

*Yes, I was also going to bring that  
up...*

**Carl:**

*Yes. When I was young, I was afraid  
of confrontations.*

**Carien:**

*I see. How old  
were you at that  
stage, Carl?*

**Carl:**

*Hmm. Let me see. That was in  
primary school. In Grade 3. But in  
Grades 4 and 5, I began to outgrow  
the other kids and became the tallest  
in the class. So they began to be a bit  
afraid of me, and they would back off.*

**Susan:**

*But you were  
never teased  
about us, were  
you, Carl?*

**Carl:**

*No. Except once. In Grade 1. But I  
can't remember the details.*

**Penny:**

*But I don't think that they were teasing you about us.*

**Carien:**

*Could you tell me about that?*

**Penny:**

*Yes, the kids teased him because they said that he didn't have a dad. I mean, Grade 1 kids don't even know what "gay" means. But they were giving him a hard time. So Susan and I went to the school and sorted things out. We explained the circumstances and from then on things were much better.*

**Carien:**

*How did you both find out that Carl was having problems at school?*

**Susan:**

*Didn't he cry that day?*

**Penny:**

*Yes, he seemed very sad that afternoon when he came home from school. He went to the bathroom to take his bath. When I asked him what the matter was, he started to cry. He was still very young at that stage. So I sat on the toilet seat next to the bath and began to talk to him very gently. Then he began to cry most bitterly, and said that the kids at school were teasing him. So I asked him, "What do they say to you?" And he replied, "They say that I don't have a father."*

*So then I said to him: “You might not have a dad, but you are very lucky because you have two mothers.”*

*Then Susan and I went to visit his teacher. She was very nice and accommodating. I explained the circumstances and told her that Carl does have a father, but that we were divorced. And that, under the circumstances, the kids should please not tease him because it could have a negative impact on his life.*

*She must have told them to lay off because, after that, he never once again came home looking sad – from that day to this.*

*A lot of people said that he would never make it, but look at him now. He has done well academically. He has been selected as a prefect. He has been awarded provincial colours for cricket. So he has showed everyone that he can do it.*

**Susan:**

*And, in addition,  
he is straight!*

**Penny:**

*Yes, please, for heaven’s sake, he is straight. You know, so many people think that if two gay parents raise a child, the child will turn out to be gay.*

**Carl:**

*Actually, I am a lesbian. So who said that I wouldn’t make it? [All laugh.]*

**Penny:**

*Just after Susan and I had got together, someone close to me said that my child would be a disaster – just because I am a lesbian. So I said to him, “Susan and I together are going to bring this child up in a proper manner. So, if you have a problem with me being gay, please don’t make your problem mine.” But, yes, Grade 1 was quite an experience for all of us. I was rather nervous at first, to be honest.*

**Susan:**

*Carl used to refer to me as his “step-father”. I said to Penny that we had better put a stop to it because it could create problems.*

*When I used to pick him up in the afternoons after school, he would come running up to me and shout, “Hi, step-father!” I used to try to duck behind the steering wheel...*

*Now that he’s in high school, he’s taken to calling me “Dad”. Not often. But...*

**Carl:**

*Only at home, and in front of friends.*

**Susan:**

*Of course he would never say that in front of the extended family. But only when we’re at home. Or at the gay church. Then he calls me “Dad”. But now, I enjoy it.*

**Carl:**

*We’re close, you see. Susan is like my “male” figure, if you want to call it that. She and I go fishing together. When Penny’s dad was alive, he used to show me things and teach me stuff, like mechanical things. He had his own workshop and company.*

**Susan:**

*My dad was a real gentleman. If I wanted to drill a hole in a wall, I would ask him to show me how, but he would never let me do it.*

**Carl:**

*My uncle also teaches me. During my holidays, I go and work for him. I am going to make a success of my life. I want to show the world that I can do anything. I will be the first of the nephews that finishes the final year of school.*

**Susan:**

*And he's doing so well!*

**Penny:**

*Last year Carl got a bit of a fright.*

**Carien:**

*What happened?*

**Carl:**

*I had begun to fall behind with my school work because I wasn't working hard enough. And my marks reflected this. So of course I started to worry. I tried to talk to my mom, but it just started a fight. So I said to her, "Okay then. Just leave it."*

**Penny:**

*Carl can open up to Susan about anything. But he can't do that with me. I guess we are too close in many ways. So he doesn't share his stuff with me. He shares it all with Susan. But I really appreciate it – the fact that he has someone in the family to share it with.*

**Carl:**

*My mom's too, how can I say...?*

**Carien:**

*Too close,  
perhaps? Too  
emotionally  
involved?*

**Susan:**

*I think that because Penny and I are so different, we have different ways of handling problems. Fortunately, Carl and I tend to share the same opinions about most things. He seems somehow to have internalised my character. For example, I have an ability to listen more calmly. Penny gets worked up very quickly, and once that happens, they can no longer talk calmly and rationally.*

*When I hear her voice getting more and more shrill, I just know that she is becoming more and more emotionally entangled. But I just remain calm and listen.*

**Carl:**

*Anyway, I phoned Susan and told her that I needed to talk to her. And she immediately said, "Come." So I took the bus and went to her office. We talked right there, in front of everybody else.*

*But I didn't mind. I got everything off my chest. Then she just said, "Everything will be fine. We just all need to pray" – and stuff like that.*

*We all prayed, and things came right.  
I did pass eventually. I was  
extremely anxious, but I made it.*

**Susan:**

*I could sense that something was wrong. He was moody the whole time. And then I got a text message from Penny saying, "Please talk to your child". And at the same time, I got a text message from Carl saying, "Dad, can I come and talk to you because I can't talk to Mom?" So he came to my work, as he said, and we talked it through. He cried a lot, and kept saying how he was going to disappoint everybody. But in the end he didn't do too badly.*

**Penny:**

*At times like that, I don't bother him. I know that he can talk things over with Susan. He told me the other day that if Susan and I ever broke up, he wouldn't come with me. Can you believe it? When he's away, he will never send me a text message saying, "Mom, I miss you and I love you." No. But there will be one for Susan.*

**Carl:**

*But she can tell  
you.*

**Penny:**

*It's not the same, Carl. You should send me one as well.*

**Carl:**

*Sometimes, while I'm just sitting here quietly, Penny will come and sit next to me and say, "Oh, please, Carl, just hold me for a minute." I'm her son, for heaven's sake! And here is her husband, large as life, sitting with both of us on the couch.*

**Penny:**

*What's wrong with you just holding me a bit, Carl? Look, Susan's holding you now. Sometimes I just ask him to hold me a bit. People can think what they want! After all, we are mother and son.*

**Carl:**

*Then you should see her in the shopping malls. Then she wants to hold my hand. What if a pretty girl walks by? She will think that Penny's my girlfriend!*

**Susan:**

*Oh, she just wants a bit of love from her son, Carl. A hug from her son.*

**Carien:**

*Why do you enjoy calling Susan "dad", Carl?*

**Carl:**

*Because she's my father figure.*

**Carien:**

*And how does that work for you, Susan?*

**Susan:**

*Well, I mean, since I'm the "butch" partner in this relationship, I naturally tend to think of myself as the father figure – as "dad". I certainly try to be!*

**Carien:**

*What does the concept "father figure" mean to you, Carl?*

**Carl:**

*Let me see. A "father figure" is someone with whom you can share everything. So, because I'm the son, I share everything with Susan. Of course, I talk to my mom as well. But mostly, I talk to Susan.*

**Susan:**

*Let's put it this way. I can talk to him about things that a young man would want to know about or discuss, and if I don't know the answer, I will go and find the answer by talking to his Granddad or one of his uncles or cousins. Mostly, I can help him with whatever he wants to know.*

**Carien:**

*Would it make any difference if Carl were gay – and not straight?*

**Penny:**

*None at all. We both just accept him exactly the way he is. I told him just the other day that each of us has the right to make our own choices in life, and that we will never put any kind of pressure on him.*

**Carien:**

*It seems to me that there is quite a lot of pressure on gay parents in this regard. It's as though society is sometimes saying, "Do you think that their children will also be gay?"*

**Penny:**

*Yes, it's as though people assume, 'your child will definitely be gay'.*

**Susan:**

*But it seems to me that there are quite a lot of children from gay relationships that turn out to be gay. Well, I've heard of some. I don't know. Perhaps this is something that we all do unconsciously – we put pressure on our children. Perhaps we put pressure on Carl to be straight. I've sometimes wondered about it. There have been so many times when I've said to him: "Check out*

*that lady!” or “Look at that pretty girl!”*

*I’ve always made comments about pretty girls in Carl’s presence, and I draw his attention to them because I notice them. Why? I don’t really know. Perhaps because I play the father role?*

*I suppose that when a straight father and son walk together down a street, the father would say things like, “Look at that girl!” or “Isn’t that a pretty girl?” Things like that. I guess I just saw that as my role.*

**Carien:**

*Carl, what advice would you give to a boy who is just entering Grade 1 and who might be afraid that some of the classmates will tease him?*

**Carl:**

*At that age? First of all, he won’t be seeing them again in seven years’ time because they will all be moving on to high school. So he doesn’t need to say anything. He should just say nothing. In any case, people (in my experience) really have nothing worthwhile to say anyway. And, in the long run, they themselves will drop the topic. Why? Because it’s*

*boring! It's of no interest. Well, it might be for a week or so.*

**Susan:**

*It's far better just to ignore it. Once they see that they're not going to get any reaction out of a guy, then they themselves forget about it.*

**Carl:**

*I certainly don't worry about it.*

**Penny:**

*Carl would never lift his hand to hit anyone...*

**Susan:**

*He certainly would if he needed to!*

**Carien:**

*A lot of people who are gay say that they have to "come out" – go through the "coming out" process. Have you, Carl, ever felt that you needed to come out about the fact that your parents are both gay women?*

**Carl:**

*When one's older, yes. When you're younger and children tease you because of it, that can really get to you. But now they wouldn't risk calling me names. And I think that I am now at the right age for "coming out" about my gay parents. Next year, in any case, you don't see them anymore.*

**Carien:**

*When you speak of younger, Carl, how much younger do you mean?*

**Carl:**

*I would say about Grade 9. Not in Grade 8 because then one is still too young and inexperienced. About in Grade 9 or 10 is okay. I only came out about my gay moms last year. And then not to everyone, but only to my friends. On the night of the the inauguration.*

**Carien:**

*And did you decide beforehand that you were going to do so?*

**Carl:**

*No. It just happened.*

**Carien:**

*You mentioned earlier, Carl, that some children in primary school called you names. Did they call you names to your face – or did you just happen to hear about it?*

**Carl:**

*When I was younger, yes, they used to say these things to my face. My moms mentioned earlier that I used to come home crying a lot. But as I grew up, I don't know... I think maybe they became scared of me because I was the biggest boy in the primary school. Even now, I am still one of the biggest guys in high school. I suppose they're scared of me because of that. Yes, maybe they think that I will react violently and beat them or something like that.*

**Carien:**

*What are the children's perceptions or beliefs about having gay parents, Carl?*

**Carl:**

*I'm not really sure. I think it varies. They can see that I have advantages that they don't have.*

**Carien:**

*Like what for instance?*

**Carl:**

*Well, I don't get hidings like they do. Their dads beat them with canes and with their fists, and so on. A lot of their dads also drink a lot. My moms don't do that! And my moms allow me to do things that their dads don't normally allow them to do.*

**Carien:**

*Like what?*

**Carl:**

*Like, my moms allow me to take the car and go to school functions. Their dads... Well, some dads don't even allow that. I have this one friend, for example. The other day he accidentally let something fall onto his dad's car. And so his dad punched him in the face with his fists. His dad is very strict.*

*My moms are certainly strict, especially when it concerns school matters, but they're calm. And I'm conscientious! Well, sometimes I'm a bit lazy about with my household chores. But I'm well mannered and friendly. And I keep things light with jokes. I make a lot of jokes. Of course I have my bad days too. But then, everyone has their bad days.*

**Carien:**

*Are there children at school who have already realised that they are gay and who have come out to others?*

**Carl:**

*None of them have come out to me personally. But I know that Michelle and Ruan are gay. I know that there were also some gays among the matrics who have finished school. Then there was also this red-headed girl in our church. But she has left.*

**Carl:**

*No, everyone knows about Michelle. The girls hug each other. Our school doesn't have a problem.*

**Penny:**

*Young people are much more open these days – much more open.*

**Penny:**

*The advice I would give is: "Just be open."*

**Carien:**

*How are they coping at school? Are they being teased? Do people gossip about them?*

**Carien:**

*Yes, for sure. Now, what advice would you give other families? For other children who also have two gay moms or two gay dads as parents?*

**Susan:**

*Be yourself!*

**Penny:**

*Yes, be yourself. Love your child. Don't even try to hide it from him or her. Just be open with him or her, and when problems arise, sort them out in a reasonable and sensible way. But I also want to add that we should all face it, and be open with one another. We've all been through this. Hiding one's gayness may not affect the adult's relationship, but, in the end, it will tear the child apart. Hiding one's orientation will only damage the child in the end. We need to trust each other, and our child needs to trust us. He should be able to rely on us.*

**Carl:**

*But just don't make an issue out of things!*

*If it is an issue for other people, then let that be their problem.*

*I have received many benefits from having same-gender parents, we are a close-knit family.*

*“You’re trying to put together your puzzle...”*

*Tom walks in, juggling a rugby ball, and then, with one leap, he jumps over the back of the couch and onto the seat next to me. “Hmm,” I think, “here is someone filled with self-confidence.” He is probably a bit annoyed by the fact that he has had to leave an informal game of rugby with his neighbourhood pals to talk to this “researcher”.*

*We begin by chatting informally about rugby trials and what pseudonym we will use for him. He has the same name as his father and grandfather, and he is proud of his family legacy. This is the second time that I am interviewing Tom. On the first occasion, I interviewed him, his sister and brother. So now, to get the conversation rolling, I refer back to something that he had told me on the first occasion.*

*“You told me last time that, basically, all your friends know about your mom and your Aunt Sandy... That, it’s like general knowledge among them. How did that come about?”*

*“Oh yes. I don’t know, to be honest. I think that I told about half of them. The others, they just seemed to know. Some, like, just ask me. When they hear about the set-up, they’re fine. They’re cool with it. It’s fine. It’s normal. It’s nothing.”*

*He emanates that same nonchalant and unconcerned vibe that I remember in him from our previous interview. I remember that when I had asked him then about what he thought about my research topic, he had replied in that cool, matter-of-fact voice: “Hmm. It’s okay. It’s fine. Interesting – because I guess you won’t find many researchers who write about that.” Now he is using the same vocabulary of approval: ‘It’s nothing. It’s fine. It’s normal.’*

*“I see,” I say as I collect my thoughts. “But, do they actually ever ask? I mean, they wouldn’t come here for some time and say nothing surely... So, at some stage...”*

*Tom cuts me off with a flicker of a grin: “Yes, they ask – but only to confirm what they already see.”*

*“They confirm. They are making sure.” I reflect his statements back to him. I am really trying to reach him at some deeper level so that I will be able to understand him as sympathetically and accurately as possible.*

*Tom, undeterred, continues: “Half of my friends who come here think it’s... You know... That it’s supposed to be like that.”*

*I find this very interesting. I am surprised and excited by my breakthrough. This is the first time that Tom has come up with something really valuable on a deeper level.*

*“Is that right?” I ask.*

*“Yes. Because most of my friends never knew me when my dad lived here. My dad just wouldn’t allow anyone to come and visit us.*

*So, when my mom and my dad still lived here together, I just never had any friends at all because, well, no-one came over, and we never did anything that involved other people. I was friends with the next door neighbour’s daughter,” he says with a smile. “But I never even brought her around. I suppose I was what you might call your neighbourhood nerd.*

*“So, naturally, my friends from school – they are all totally in love with this new arrangement.”*

*What a way with words he has. Tom, starts to laugh, and I laugh too. “This new arrangement. What is it? Having two mothers?” (I bite my tongue. I know that I should never lead with a ready-made answer like that. I lecture myself briefly in silence.) Tom just nods pleasantly in agreement.*

*“Okay. So how do you handle the situation when your friends come over here and find two women who are both your parents?”*

*“It’s no problem because my mom told me that she would behave normally – and she does.”*

*“Normal”, It is a word that I constantly hear and is so easy to use. But in the gay world it can have a radically different meaning. What I find the most moving and enriching of all is that, to gay people, and to those families who have adapted to their orientation, which many in the “world” might regard as abnormal, deviant and sinfully exotic, is to them the normal fabric of everyday reality. Indeed, it is a reality that they hardly ever even think about. It just is. It is just here. And now, if they have to think about it, they think, “It is our reality, and it is none of anyone else’s business.”*

*Nevertheless, continuing to probe, as I must, I ask, “What does ‘behave normally’ mean to you, Tom?”*

*He smiles. “It’s, like, they’re friends.”*

*“Okay. But, now, what do you tell your friends? Do you say something like, ‘Hmm. I just want to tell you that I have two moms, and they are both gay,’ or what?”*

*Now I am really probing – and I hope that he rises to the bait.*

*“I just say that my mom lives with another woman – and if they have a problem with that, then they must just tell me. My mothers won’t do anything, like anything funny, they are just normal people. But of course, they don’t have a problem, and they never react negatively. If I do happen to tell someone who hasn’t been here before, he will just say something like ‘Ja, I see. It’s okay’ – or something like that. But it’s a matter of no real interest to them. We don’t sit around and talk about it. It’s just like something that happened a long time ago.”*

*Tom is oblivious to my inner conversations with myself, and – to my great relief – seems to have no problem with answering my probing research questions in some detail.*

*I try to sum it up by saying, “So, if you do have to tell someone, it’s just a once-off event. They confirm. They make sure, and then they...”.*

*“Move on,” Tom interjects, completing my sentence.*

*I get the impression that in those relatively few cases where he needs to disclose, it is a one-off event – which, it seems, is a matter of no great importance to either him or to his friends. Popular youth culture, especially the world of music and DJs, it seems, has made young people accustomed to alternative sexual orientations.*

*But, just to confirm that it is indeed so, I continue to ask further questions. “Okay, Tom, so you know your own friends and what kind of people they are. They, of course, don’t ask questions like ‘What’s going on?’ or ‘How does it work?’ – or any such-like questions. So I guess that must make it easier for you?”*

*“Well, it’s not a problem if they need to ask. I really don’t mind. It’s normal.” As in our past discussions, he remains cool and unflustered by my relentless questioning.*

*So I take a different line. “If it’s so normal, then why do you bother to tell them?”*

*“As I said, I would only mention it if someone were unfamiliar with the set-up in my house. When I invite my friends to my house, I want them to feel comfortable. So then, if they don’t know about my two mothers, I tell them. It doesn’t help if I keep secrets from them and then they have to wonder what is going on. But then they understand. I put them in the picture. My friends and I are all very straightforward with each other. It’s our big thing,” he says with some pride.*

*“So at what point would you tell someone who has not been to your house before? Before they arrive at your house, when you are arranging the visit, or at which stage?”*

*“No. I would tell them if I see that they are uncomfortable. Sometimes, a new friend arrives. They see my two moms. I don’t know what they are thinking, but it feels funny. It is as though they suspect something. They’re like, ‘I’m not supposed to be here, it’s not the right place to be’.” He smiles, but continues.*

*“When they look a bit suspicious, I just tell them quietly what the set-up is.”*

*Tom laughs again. Perhaps it is a nervous laugh.*

*“So you might see that they are feeling awkward?”*

*“Yes. And then I just explain what is going on. As soon I detect that they are feeling uncomfortable and not acting normal, then I tell them. I ask them what is wrong and when they withdraw a little, I ask them gently if they have a problem, if it’s OK for them, and if I can explain how it works. Basically, I want them to feel okay. So if they feel unable to explain how we live to their parents, I tell them that my mom could contact their parents and tell them about our household – if that’s what they would prefer.”*

*“What do you think makes them feel awkward?” I ask.*

*“Well, it’s an unusual situation. Let’s say they are staying over here,” Tom continues. “They might be staying here with me, and during the weekend, they might go round a corner and see my moms, like, holding hands. And then, because they’re not used to it, they might think, ‘Wow! That’s weird! Two women holding hands...’.”*

*This is the first time that Tom has been so open with me, so I cannot help but ask, “Okay. So have you asked your moms not to hold hands?”*

*“No!” Tom seems astounded that I should even ask such a question. But he explains nevertheless.*

*“After I explain to them what the family structure is, we all just carry on living our lives, enjoying ourselves like we always do. We relax, and go on playing – just like other kids do. We’re not any different from other kids. We go into each others cupboards and stuff like that.”*

*We both laugh at this, and I say, “I think I begin to understand. You help them if they don’t understand... If they seem uncomfortable. And when you start playing again and everything has settled down, you have this sense of confirmation that you were right in sensing that they felt awkward.”*

*“Exactly,” replies Tom.*

*“Okay, that’s interesting.”*

*Tom continues to expand in response to my interest.*

*“The mother of one of my friend’s left his father. My parents were already divorced, and his parents were in the process of getting divorced when his mom had*

*this big nervous breakdown. His mom was having a really bad time, so she came to speak to my mom to ask her about her experiences and how she had coped.*

*“This lady thought that she might be gay, or thought that she might be ‘becoming’ gay, but she wasn’t sure. Her feelings told her that she was gay, but her head couldn’t go there. She was in denial and conflict.*

*“So she talked to my mom about her difficulties. I could see that she was trying to find where and how she fitted into the world – and where she had lost her way. But she and her husband are together again, and they are happy now.”*

*“So the son of this lady – the one I’m telling you about – was the first friend I ever told. I felt that he needed to understand the whole concept and to be at ease with it. We still see each other every single day. He lives about two blocks away. Now he knows that it is no big deal, and he’s okay.”*

*I think appreciatively of this young man’s beautiful way with words. What a valuable support system for him – to have a friend who has been through almost the same experiences as he has, and, it seems, almost at the same time.*

*“But what about your other friends’ parents? Do you know how they react or feel?” I wonder whether other parents are quite so accepting.*

*“Oh, I don’t know. I suppose that they don’t even talk about it or know anything about it. My friends wouldn’t tell them because it’s certainly not important to them. They know everything is all right.”*

*“Okay.”*

*“We know everything about each other.”*

*“It’s actually nice to have everything in the open and no secrets,” I add. “To be – like you say – straightforward. It sounds as though it creates a really good support system.*

*“But how was it before? Please just fill me in, if you don’t mind, Tom. Could you tell me how you coped with the divorce, when your mom met this new person in her life, a new partner, and how and what you told your friends?*

*“What was it like before your lives settled down? Because now I can see that you are in a very happy space. I can see that clearly, and that’s good. It’s wonderful, in fact. As you have said, ‘it’s normal, it’s okay, it’s fine.’ But somehow I sense that it wasn’t always like that.”*

*“You want to know about the beginning?” Tom asks.*

*“Yes please. If you can tell me about that stage... .”*

*“From when?”*

*“You decide, Tom.”*

*“Okay, it was like this. When my mom and my dad were together, they constantly fought and quarrelled. It was, like, hell. My mom would be standing there, then my dad would get into a rage and punch a hole in a door. Oddly enough, my dad never hit my mom. He never ever touched her. But he would hit everything around her. There were holes in various doors – and smashed objects littered all around the house.*

*“So when my dad was here, it was absolutely awful. We couldn’t even talk to one another like civilised human beings. And when my brother or sister did something naughty, it was always me that got punished. I always got blamed for everything.*

*“But after my dad left, his new fiancée brought about one hell of a change in him. I don’t know what she said to him, or how she did it, but he really changed quite radically. So now he gives us pocket money – whereas before we were never given pocket money like other kids.*

*“Now, it’s, like, you only get into trouble for the really big things. Now my dad is a much nicer person. You wouldn’t even believe it’s the same person. Now we go out with them together whereas before none of us ever even went out of the house. She’s an amazing woman, his new fiancée. The extraordinary thing is that they’ve been together for six months now – and I have yet to see her ugly side.”*

*I am astounded at how well they have all coped with the divorce, and I say, “It’s really nice to hear that, Tom, because a lot of kids that go through divorce find it’s very traumatic for them. Especially when either the mother or the father or both start meeting and dating new people. There can be a lot of tension and unhappiness. But you guys are like... It’s just great.”*

*Tom looks sad, and qualifies my assessment of their experiences. “Actually, when they got divorced, I was very angry. I was so angry that, a week later, I went and bought myself a punch bag because I had so much anger in me and I wanted to get it out.*

*“I was also having problems at school... Children would come to me and I would suddenly – without any warning – have an urge to kill them.”*

*Tom’s whole body and tone of voice have suddenly changed, and anger and grief are etched on his face.*

*“Why do you think that was?” I ask.*

*“Because somehow it seemed as though every kid in that school had found out about my parents’ divorce. Then some kids started mocking me. Some in a subtle way, but others were not quite so subtle about it.”*

*“Who mocked you? Your friends? Or your classmates?”*

*“No. It was those kids who had never liked me anyway. But I just hung loose.”*

*I find it interesting that he should be teased about his parents’ divorce. I wonder to myself how these same children would react if they were to find out all the details about his mother and her new partner. But it doesn’t sound to me as though he has been teased about his mother’s new partner. I wait for him to continue... .*

*“When my mom eventually divorced my dad, that was another big event. But then I also started to get more friends because I was more upset and so I ended up talking to more people.”*

*“Okay, so you started to make friends?”*

*“Yes. But in reality, I wanted to be somewhere else,” he continues.*

*“Some place other than home?” I ask.*

*“Yes. Because I felt so dead lonely at that time. So, kind of, rejected. More lost than anyone here. But then I started making great new friends and stuff like that.*

*“Even when they were splitting, I still thought, hoped, that they might get back together again. But then my mom ended up with somebody else, with this other lady. My new friends were coming round a lot. And my mom didn’t even tell me! Nothing. For the whole year I had my private suspicions about what was really going on behind the scenes, and I kept trying to figure it all out.”*

*“I can just imagine. If you can look at how other people behave and wonder about them, you must have been looking at your mother and wondering exactly how it all added up.”*

*We both laugh, and I interject with: “Okay! So for the whole year you were...”.*

*Tom finishes my sentence by adding, “...busy investigating. Yep. I was looking on cell phones. I would get hold of my mom’s cell phone and read her text messages. And sometimes I would creep silently around so that I could spy on them when they were alone together. It was wrong of me, I suppose. But I was trying to put all the pieces together.”*

*“You were looking for answers. So what did you find out?”*

*“Well, basically, I found out that my mother was having an affair with this other woman.”*

*“How did you find that out?”*

*“Like I said, I would read most of my mom’s text messages. And there were other things. Like sometimes she would say that she was going out for a pizza or something. Then she would seem nervous, almost, like, guilty. I figured out that whenever she said that she was going out to eat, she wasn’t really doing that at all, because whenever she goes out to eat, she always brings back a doggy bag. It doesn’t matter where she goes – she always brings one back with her. So when there was never any doggy bag, I figured that she had been some place else.”*

*“Okay.”*

*“And she was always actually visiting that one place, the lady we call Aunt Theresa.”*

*“How do you know that?”*

*“Because we always used to be taken there, every single day, and that was not our house.”*

*“Okay, so she took you with her?”*

*“Yes.”*

*I am intrigued by the detail that he is now sharing with me, so I continue by asking, “How did you feel when you read the text messages and picked up that your mother was having an affair?”*

*“I used to get all nervous and feel all like... like, I needed to know what was going on.”*

*“Were you curious? Did you ask her? Did you ever confront her? Or...”*

*Tom interrupts, “No. I just wanted to know for myself. But, it’s strange, the moment I knew what was going on, my mom told me. But, by then, it was, like, old news.”*

*What I sense is that it was not necessarily his mother’s new partner that was making him feel insecure, but that his feelings of being left out, of not getting a normal amount of attention, that were making him feel unsettled. I note the meticulous way in which he traced and observed his mother’s behaviour. I wonder whether that changed their relationship. “So how did she react to that? To the fact that you already knew?”*

*“Oh, you know, okay.”*

*“How did you feel about your mom falling in love with another lady?”*

*“I didn’t mind that. I just wanted her to tell me what was happening. Then I wouldn’t have felt so... so... like, lost.*

*“You must understand that my mom was not giving us enough attention. She was always out there. We were like, ‘Hello’, ‘Hello’, ‘How are you?’, ‘Okay’, ‘And you?’, ‘Okay’, ‘There’s food for you there’, and then she would say, ‘Alright, dear.*

Bye!'. And then she would go to her room and cry. All three of us were so lost. So then we started doing our own things, like playing 'donkerkamertjie'<sup>3</sup> and all those stupid things."

I am caught up in his story. I used to love playing 'donkerkamertjie' when I was a child. I react immediately, "Gee, that's great. But why do you call them 'stupid things?' "

"Well, it seems stupid now."

"Okay, it's childish. Agreed, but then you were all feeling angry and lost."

"And very weird," Tom adds.

"So what happened next?"

"My mom caught me with her cell phone and everything."

"Can you tell me about that?"

"I was reading through her messages and then – whoops! – I accidentally deleted half of them. So she asked me what I was doing, and I told her. And that is why I was not surprised when she told me. I already knew."

"How did she react to your snooping on her phone?"

"She was very angry."

"Okay, and then?" He is on a "roll", and I would like to get as much as I can out of him while he is willing to talk.

"Ugh," he makes a despairing sound. "Then Aunt Theresa, she was mom's first partner, she came over and began to live here. Then we all moved in. I've never liked Aunt Theresa, not ever, not from the very first moment that I met her.

"When I realised for the first time that my mother was like that, I didn't mind. But when I met her... that shocked me, and then I became very angry."

"I see."

"I felt like running away and never coming back."

"Why was that, Tom? What didn't you like about her? Can you describe it?"

"Not really. I don't know... It's just...". He hesitates, but I can see that he is thinking hard.

I give him time to think and then say, "If you think back...?" I am not sure if Tom is wondering whether he can actually tell me – or whether he just doesn't know where to begin.

"First of all, I've just never liked her at any stage in my life. She never made any effort whatsoever to be pleasant to me. She always... I never... I didn't expect

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<sup>3</sup> Afrikaans name for game similar to hide and seek, played at night, indoors.

*anything from her, and I have never.... But she always tried to make me do stupid things – things that I hate.”*

*To me this sounds like early-teenager trouble, and I try to elicit his version of the story. “Things like what, Tom?”*

*“Well, things like looking after her children, and all that stuff. And her twins! You can see how they have broken these chairs.”*

*I look round at the chairs near us and I can see that they have had their fair share of wear and tear, and I comment, “Okay. So they did that, they had no respect for your mother’s furniture.”*

*But Tom’s thoughts have already moved on, and he adds in an angry voice, “I also never had any privacy. I couldn’t go to the bathroom. I couldn’t do anything. It simply wasn’t my house anymore.”*

*I wonder how his distress influenced his relationship with his mother, and so I ask, “Were you able to talk to your mother about that?”*

*“Hmm. I did tell her, and all she said was some stuff like... ‘They are still small, you know,’ referring to the twins. She didn’t even know what I was talking about. I think she thought I was a bit mad or something. It was really tough.” He remains quiet for a while. Then he sighs deeply and continues, “And it’s still like that today, it’s still going on, you can’t even put a sweet under your pillow.”*

*“How often do you see them?” I ask.*

*“A lot. Too much! Like about three times a week. But once you see them, the moment you’re with them for, like, five minutes, they begin to irritate you.*

*“Just the things she did. I don’t know. She was always trying to challenge me in some way or another.” He sits quietly for a while, thinking, and then continues, “Or she’ll occasionally do something nice – just to get my mom on her side.”*

*“Hmm. I see. So, do you feel that she came between you and your mother?”*

*Tom answers instantly, “She will push in between us, and then back out again.”*

*I do not want to collect too much information about Tom’s mother’s first partner, and, in any case, I see that the thought of her and her children still upsets him. To me it feels like an intensely personal issue, and I would rather focus, if I can, on how he perceived his mother. So I ask, “You were obviously deeply aware that your mother was no longer together with your dad, but that she had moved on to being with Theresa. How did you feel about that? What did you think about your mother at that time?”*

*“To be honest, I was trying very hard not to think of anything at all and I just concentrated on hanging out with these new friends of mine. That was such a pleasure. My new friends were just too – Kung! Pow! – amazing!” he exclaims. His boyish sound effects make him look young and happy again. I have realised that he has a real talent for making and keeping friends.*

*“Great, okay.” Even though he is so excited, I am concerned that he might be evading my questions by turning the topic towards his friends. So I probe further, seeking clarification.*

*“Some kids go through a phase where they feel, hey, this is not right, it’s the wrong thing to do. Like the moral things that they are taught at home. Or what they are taught at school might be different from what they are taught at home. Did that ever happen to you?”*

*“No. You see, I always had my friends with me, and we always discuss things that are important to us amongst ourselves. Okay, one or two of my friends’ dads are also, like, gay as well, and they would tell me about that.”*

*This is potentially useful research information. So I say, “Okay, please tell me about that, if you don’t mind?”*

*“Agh, no!” He begins to bounce about. “They just said that they prefer that to how it used to be before, and they love it. And then I began to understand everything, to get a new view, and, well, then, you know, you feel like aliens communicating.”*

*I start to laugh at Tom’s antics, but I am not sure what he is trying to say, and so I ask for some clarification. “Please just tell me all that again in a way that I can understand.”*

*“You know what they’re talking about,” he says. “But it doesn’t make any sense in terms of everything you’ve ever learned.”*

*“Okay, I’ve lost you somewhere. Please tell me that again.” I still don’t understand, but I am hoping that he will be patient with me because this sounds as though it may be extremely important.*

*“Look, it’s like this,” he says sweetly as though explaining something complex to a fairly dim child. “It’s, like, their parents are gay, and they were trying to tell me how much easier life is for them because I was thinking that it would all be so much harder. I mean, they are really much happier now than they ever were before. They told me that having gay parents actually puts you in a better position. I could hear what they were saying but somehow it didn’t make sense to me at that time. It was like ‘you’re trying to build your puzzle, you’re trying to flip over the pieces and trying to put together your puzzle.’ I couldn’t quite get it. But now I do.”*

*I am deeply impressed by how much insight, support and affirmation Tom received from his peers, and I remember his remark about how being open and honest with one another was the most important thing in their lives.*

*I respond to his explanation by saying, “Thank you. I think I see what you mean. They were trying to tell you that their lives are much happier now with their gay parents than they were before with their original parents. But, at that stage, you had not yet reached that point.”*

*“Yes, yes.”*

*“But at that time you were still somewhat puzzled and confused? In what way were you confused, Tom? Could you try to explain that to me?”*

*“Sure. I was wondering how they are going to do everything, like, divide the household tasks. But my mother, she never used to work in the house. She just never did anything. Certainly no heavy housework. She wasn’t used to anything like that. It was my dad who did everything in and about the house.”*

*“So you were concerned when they separated?”*

*“Oh yes. Because I thought to myself, ‘What’s going to happen now? Who will fix toys and things when they break?’”*

*“So you felt, ‘Goodness! My mother will never be able to manage.’ “*

*“Exactly. But then, to my amazement, she started to do things by herself. She and I actually began to fix small motors and things like that. I was totally amazed.”*

*“Hmm. That’s very interesting. Was there anything else you were confused about?”*

*“Yes, there were other things too. My mom and dad, at a later stage, they used to get me alone and tell me about marriage, and what marriage is all about. They would tell me that marriage must be between a man and a woman. So, of course, that made me wonder how they would ever get married.”*

*Now Tom is sharing really deep and personal stuff, and I sense some tension in the room. I certainly don’t want to lose him now, so I try my best to reflect his feelings, “Mmm. So you were worried, Tom, about that aspect?”*

*“I sure was.”*

*“I’m so glad that you thought of that because that’s a very important question that I think every child has to face. Okay, and so who answered those questions for you? Or do you still have them?”*

*“Yes, I still sometimes wonder about it. But I’ve gradually figured it out. Like my mom told me that gay people never get married, but that they will make promises to each other if they are really serious.”*

*“Yes, people have different names for that process.”*

*“Hmm. I don’t exactly know what they call it.”*

*“Yes. I think it is called ‘life partners’.”*

*“That’s what I’ve heard. You see, Aunt Sandy, my mom’s partner, is more understanding. But my mom has a completely different kind of personality – and I don’t know where she gets it from.” He starts to laugh, and once more he looks so much more relaxed. “Yes, but it’s so great. When she comes over here, she always puts on this loud ‘doef-doef’<sup>4</sup> kind of music, and I think, ‘Wow! What good music!’ Of course, I wasn’t used to it at that stage, but I really liked it, and when she came, it was, like, ‘Wow! There’s that music again!’*

*“In our house, we were always used to this, like, slow ‘classical’ music. But Aunt Sandy, she’s wild! She always puts on all this party music, and then she dances with us and goes crazy. She joins in! She is so much fun.” Tom makes dancing movements as he talks and it sounds as though he has really developed a good relationship with Sandy.*

*“Okay, so how do you think you can help your younger brother and sister to reach a place where they are also comfortable?” As the oldest, he has reached such a successful accommodation. Perhaps now he could help his siblings – almost in the same way that his friends helped him.*

*“To be honest,” says Tom thoughtfully, “I don’t want to lead them because I think it’s better if one rather finds out for oneself than if other people help you. I’ve figured out the best and easiest way for me to exist in this situation.”*

*“But what do you think Ryland<sup>5</sup> thinks about all this? Do you think he understands what’s going on?”*

*“As far as the sexual side goes, no. But with regard to their relationship and their love for each other, yes, more or less.”*

*I am rather relieved that he thinks Ryland is okay. “Alright, and what about Danielle?”<sup>6</sup>*

*“No, I think she understands everything. She was, like, my big buddy back then. She used to tell me everything. I was amazed at how much she knew. I used to think, ‘Hey! How the heck did you find out all this stuff?’ ”*

*This sounds interesting, and I cannot help being pleased at the way they support each other. “What did she tell you?”*

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<sup>4</sup> An expression of the beating sound of music.

<sup>5</sup> Ryland is Tom’s only younger brother.

<sup>6</sup> Danielle is Tom’s only younger sister.

*Tom seems a bit embarrassed, but then he says, "That just like a boyfriend and girlfriend can hold hands, so a girlfriend and a girlfriend can also hold hands. They hug, you know... Just little things like that."*

*"Okay, all right."*

*We both look at each other and smile in appreciation. He has really opened up and shared so much with me. "Have you any questions that you would like to ask me, Tom? Is there anything that I can help you with?"*

*He just shakes his head and says, "Um, not really. But thanks anyway, Carien."*

*"Okay, and thank you! You were just great! I really appreciate how much you shared with me. And I think you might still have ten or fifteen minutes of daylight left if you still want to go and play rugby."*

*Tom answers gently, "No. It's alright." Outside the darkness is gathering fast and he continues to talk about this and that, about his sore foot, his soccer and karate. His mom brings us both some cool drink, and eventually the whole family joins us. We continue making pleasant small talk, and a little while later I make my way home. As they all wave goodbye to me at the gate, I imprint the memory in my mind: two mothers, surrounded by three smiling children.*

*“If she’s my best friend, then I’ll share my secrets with her.”*

*Danielle sits next to me on the couch, and eagerly begins to talk about her day. I am getting used to this. We have met twice before and from the beginning she has talked easily and freely about her friends, birthdays, the burglary of her bedroom, prospects for the coming holidays, the fake nails that they are now allowed to wear to school, the current fights that she and her friends are having with the boys and with each other.*

*We talked for quite a while about mathematics, about her grades and how she likes group work, her secret scrapbook, and many other topics. It is sometimes hard for me to interrupt her flow or to interpose a definite question that relates to my research. She seems oblivious of the primary reason why I am there. As she continues telling me about her day, I remember her description of her reaction to her parents’ divorce in our first session.*

*She said: “It’s weird. For over two years I was, like, everybody could torture me and make me very unhappy – but now I am the biggest torturer in the class. I, like, give out this vibe of “Just don’t even think of touching me!”. They used to pick on me and I used to get so angry. But I knew that I just couldn’t let them stress me. So I started to get angry and say stuff like, ‘Stop that!’ or ‘I’ll hit you!’ Now nobody picks on me.” Danielle smiles.*

*Danielle confirms what her brother, Tom, had said about the divorce. She also mentions that there was a feeling of relief in the family home after the parental divorce and their father’s movement to other accommodation. “I will be honest with you. I only found out that my father had moved out because suddenly all his things were gone! So I thought to myself, ‘Wow! Now we are going to be much happier! No fights!’*

*“When my parents fought, we used to hear my mom crying, and then me and Tom used to sit in the kitchen. So I was very happy when my dad left. When the new lady – my mother’s friend – moved in, my mother said that they’re “together”. Then we all talked about it in a nice and soft way, and I said, ‘I understand, mommy! It really is much better now than it was when you were with dad.’ I think that made her very happy, and we all cried a little. But we were crying with happiness.”*

*As I listen to Danielle’s almost compulsive talking, I realise that I will have to begin to provide coherent structure for our sessions together. I therefore say to*

*Danielle: “So please tell me, Danielle, more about what it is like to live with two moms?”*

*She instantly corrects me. “I now have three moms!” she exclaims.*

*“Okay,” I am very intrigued by the information that she is offering about having three mothers. But I want to verify my conclusion, and so I say: “Who are your three mothers, Danielle, because you haven’t mentioned that to me before?”*

*“My mom, Aunt Sandy and Auntie Thea.”*

*“So you feel that Auntie Thea is also your mom?” I ask.*

*“Yes, she is actually my Auntie. But my dad can be a very different person with Auntie Thea. It’s, like, an amazing difference. Now they are engaged. They will be married as soon as they have saved enough money. They say they are going to have “a perfect wedding”. She says she is going to make me... They’re going to make me... Make me wear a dress.”*

*I am suddenly intrigued because Danielle is a beautiful girl with long golden brown hair. I can plausibly imagine her looking most alluring in a beautiful dress, especially her prospective role of bridesmaid.*

*“What do you have against dresses?” I ask suddenly.*

*Danielle answers. “I am a girl. But I don’t like wearing girl dresses. But I do sometimes because it makes my mom happy. I also make them happy when I wear a girl’s T-shirt and a boy’s pants. And I’m pleased when they’re happy because I feel comfortable in boy’s clothes.*

*“Like last weekend we went to a wedding, and for the wedding my father bought me a skirt that was so short. And so I thought, ‘I can’t wear that! I just can’t wear it. They are torturing me with this outfit.’*

*“My father also bought me a girl’s T-shirt and a pair of high-heeled shoes. But I don’t want to wear these things! They’re too girlish.”*

*Danielle shrieks with disgust. Then she continues: “If you are a girl, you are not allowed to do things that boys do. I remember once when we ate at Spur. I was wearing a dress, and I tore my dress so badly as I was climbing over a chair.”*

*“Was it then that you decided that you didn’t like dresses?” I ask.*

*“Dresses are yechhy!” she exclaims.*

*While I would love to find out a bit more about Danielle, I know that she is too young to understand any theory about the construction of her femininity and masculinity. But for me this topic is very interesting and significant in the context of the literature on gender roles. Especially when it is articulated by one who is so young.*

So, with a playful smile, I say to her: “So then, are you saying that you prefer boy’s clothes?”

“Yes,” she answers. “I like boy’s things.”

“What do you mean by that, Danielle?” I ask.

“When you are a girl, you can’t do much. So I do boy and girl things. Like, I have my boy moments, and I have my girl moments.”

“What is ‘a boy moment’?” I ask.

“Oh, I build things, and I play rugby with my brothers, and all that sort of stuff.”

“Girls like to make styles with their hair...”, I suggest.

Danielle completes my line of thought by saying, “And they paint their nails and put on make-up. I don’t like make-up,” she asserts rather defiantly.

“And your clothes? What do you wear? If you could pick all your own clothes, what would you wear?” I ask her. I want to obtain as clear a picture as possible of what she constructs as “girlish” and “boyish”.

“If I could pick my clothes, I would borrow from my brother, my big brother, because my mother won’t buy me their kind of clothes. So I sometimes borrow from my brother. And, for civvies<sup>7</sup>, I wear these long baggy things and a cool T-shirt. Then I wear ‘takkies’ or something.”

“So why would your mom have a problem with that?” I ask.

“She wants me to look like a girl. To look like a little girl.”

“How do you know that?” I ask.

“Because she, like, tells me. She says, ‘I know that you’re having these boy moments, Danielle, but I am trying to stop you because when you grow up, you will find that you will have a difficult time.’ “

“Did she explain that?” I would very much like to know what she understands by her mother’s statement.

“Yes, she did. She doesn’t like it very much. But now she is fine with it.”

“Okay,” I reply tentatively. Danielle has not really answered my question, and so I probe gently. “Do you know what your mom means when she says, ‘It’s going to be difficult for you when you grow up’?”

“She says that I will start doing all those things that normal teenagers do, all those mad things like drinking and taking drugs and all those kind of things, and I am very scared of doing that. I don’t want to do those things,” she says with some emphasis.

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<sup>7</sup> Very casual wear.

*I murmur quietly, but do not interrupt her because I hope that she will continue.*

*“I just don’t want to do that. My brother really cares about that and he doesn’t want me to do those kinds of things either. It’s like, if you’re a girl, then you won’t do those things. He says that if you’re too much of a girl, then you won’t turn out like that. But I don’t want to do all those ‘sweet’ girl things. But I really do want to make my mom happy, so I will try not to turn out like that. I won’t go like to teenage parties and all that, I will rather go to movies instead.”*

*I wonder whether these social scripts influence her friends as well, so I ask, “So what kind of clothes do your friends wear, Danielle?”*

*“Okay,” she replies, “Cherese wears girl’s pants because she doesn’t have so many boy moments.*

*“I am the only one who wears boy’s clothes when I am with all my friends. It’s so nice walking in them. It looks so cool! And they are all walking so lady-like.” Danielle imitates a very feminine way of walking.*

*“So walking is also part of it, the way you walk. So there are things that you do, and things that you wear, and then there’s the way that you walk.”*

*“Yes! And my friends are so, like, ‘Oh, I’m such a lady!’ “ Danielle now imitates their high-pitched girls’ voices, and then continues, “ I feel so, like, ‘I don’t think that I can wear lady-like clothes like that for two minutes’.*

*“Anel was in our school for one year, and we had civvies, and I wore boy clothes. She didn’t know that I had boy’s things. And she looked at me and said ‘You look like a boy.’ And so I said, ‘I am sorry. I have these boyish moments, thank you very much.’ And then she teased me and then I began to cry because...”.*

*“How did she tease you?” I ask.*

*“She said, ‘Danielle! You! I didn’t know that you were like that. I am too much of a girl to play with you anymore’.”*

*I hear these vague words – often emotionally laden but nevertheless vague – from most of the children whom I have thus far interviewed. I therefore probe to try to uncover some of the hidden meanings. “What does ‘to be like that’ mean? What was Anel trying to say?” I ask.*

*“She’s like... Okay, she is in the bathroom, then she turns around and looks at me in this funny way and says, ‘I am not going to play with you anymore’. Then I say, ‘Why?’ And she says, ‘Because you, like, wear boy’s clothes, and I can’t hang out with a boy’.*

*“Then I begin to cry and say, ‘Why do you say that, Anel? Don’t you also have boy moments? Do you have a problem with that?’ Then she says, ‘I thought*

that... I thought you... I thought that you knew that I thought you look nice.' " Danielle looks directly at me. "I can't exactly explain that," she adds.

Danielle tells this story with so much passion and emotion that it is not always comprehensible. But I certainly sense that she is quite upset. So I just answer, "Okay" so that she will feel reassured. I then decide to leave this topic, and inquire more closely into possible incidents of disclosure that have happened in her family. Possibly the children she associates with link her boy moments with her family structure. It would be most interesting and worthwhile to find out.

"What I am wondering now, Danielle, is whether your friends know about the fact that you have two moms?"

"No, they don't, and I am not going to tell them," Danielle replies promptly and directly. "I'm not going to tell anybody," she adds. "It's a secret."

"Why don't you want people at school to find out?" I ask. "Why are you afraid of that?" I wonder if I am not perhaps being too direct. I also sense that she is afraid. I have picked that up in her voice. She is defending strongly against some or other fear or fears.

"They will tease me," Danielle says. "It is difficult. There are not many people that are like that. And it's just... They will do something to me, like kill me or something. Or they would say, 'At least my parents are better than yours'." She mimics the mocking voices of the children who tease her, and enacts how they would tease her, and I can hear the anger rising in her voice.

"Okay, you said just now that there are not a lot of people like that – like your mom. What did you mean by that, Danielle?"

"She is my mom. She is a good person. I trust my mommy."

She has not answered my question satisfactorily, so I continue to probe by saying, "What do you mean when you say, 'There are not a lot of people like that?' I mean when the other kids tease you and tell you that their parents are better and all that."

"I don't know, I don't actually know," she replies with touching honesty. "I don't actually know what they're going to do. I just get a bad feeling that they're going to do something."

I smile sympathetically at her. I deeply appreciate her sensitive awareness of what various non-verbal cues might mean – not to mention her intuitive awareness that other people might indeed do something that will hurt her or her parents. Danielle's responses remind me of something that I read in the literature just a week before. It was an assertion that a minority group may fear prejudice more than the fact that the prejudice or discrimination may lead to some kind of action. But such

*fears are not unfounded, and certainly incidents do occur that reinforce the fears. Danielle continues, as always, by merging one story into another.*

*“But when, Alicia, one of my best friends, came to stay for a visit, I felt, like, I had to tell her. When someone’s my best friend, then I always share my secrets with them. Only my best friends know. Only my best friends. They are allowed to know everything about me. But I was also scared that she would tell her mom. Then I thought, ‘What will happen if her mom doesn’t ever talk to my mom again?’ That is scary. Now, if only I could tell the future, then I could...”*

*I start to laugh and add, “Then none of us would have a problem, now, would we? You would be the richest girl on earth – and the cleverest.”*

*She and I laugh together, and then Danielle begins to act out what seems to be a private satire or personal joke with the words, “Okay! Would you like to have three children? Thank you. Now that will be three hundred rand, please.”*

*I watch her in admiration for a while and then I say, “Do you sometimes have sleepovers and things like that?” I sense that she wants to share an important incident, and I am scared that she will lose the thread of her story. So I hope that I am not now distracting her from sharing whatever it is that she wanted to say about Alicia and her real need to tell her best friends her secrets.*

*“Not on school nights. Only during the weekends,” Danielle answers.*

*“Then, Danielle, what do you tell your friends when they come over? What do you say about Sandy?”*

*“I say that she’s a friend. I say she actually lives with my mom because they are best friends.”*

*“Okay, and then how do your friends react? Do they ask more questions after that?”*

*“Oh yes, like, Alicia asked me, ‘Are they together? Do they sleep together?’ Then I was, like, ‘Umm, yes. Where else would she sleep?’ Alicia really caught me with that question.”*

*I am intrigued by her reaction at this point, and I promptly ask her, “What happened then, Danielle?”*

*“I was thinking,” Danielle replies. “I was thinking that I would have to explain to her that my mom... That if I tell her, if I’ll tell her that they are together, and just keep explaining all those things, like they sleep together and just...”. She hesitates and then adds, “I’m sorry that I’m a liar. It’s just that this stuff is very personal for me, and I can’t share all my personal things’. If I could tell her, and she could understand, then I would be very happy.”*

*“To me that sounds like a good way of dealing with it,” I interject affirmatively. I am touched by her honesty, and astonished at how well prepared she is to deliver appropriate answers.*

*“Then Alicia told me that she heard my mother and Auntie Sandy talking about themselves, about the two of them together, and that she had heard everything.”*

*“Oh?” I say. “Could you tell me about that please?” It sounds now as though Danielle’s best friend has found out her secret even before she, Danielle, had an opportunity to tell her herself.*

*“Okay, I will tell you. It’s like this. I was with my brothers. We were playing together ... .”*

*“Oh, so Alicia wasn’t near you when this happened?” I am trying to obtain more clarity about this incident.*

*“No. I was playing with my brothers at the time. I was trying to sort out some problem with them. I said to her, ‘Alicia, just wait here’, but she wandered off and then heard them talking somewhere.”*

*I have difficulty following her train of thought. So I ask: “Who did she hear talking, Danielle?”*

*“It was my mom and Auntie Sandy that she heard,” Danielle answers rather abruptly.*

*“Oh, okay. So she overheard them? She was listening to what they said?”*

*“Yes! Then she came and asked me, ‘is all this true?’ So I said, ‘Yes, it is true, and it’s about time that you should hear it.’ Then I told her, ‘My mommy and Auntie Sandy are together, is that fine with you?’ And she just said, ‘Yeah, and you are still my best friend.’ She said such sweet things that I began to cry. When I told her the truth, I began to feel so heartsore.”*

*I express my deep sympathy and support in my body language, and ask, “That is a beautiful story, Danielle. How did you feel when that was happening?”*

*“Like, ah...” Danielle sighs and breathes deeply. “My friend said, ‘So you don’t have a dad. Instead, you have like three mothers.’ And I answered: ‘Yes! It’s, like, hey, cool, but that’s all I’m saying!’”*

*“And was she happy to know?”*

*“Well, obviously. But I don’t know if my mother knows.”*

*“Do you think Alicia’s mom will mind if she knows that your mom and auntie Sandy are together?” I ask.*

*“I don’t think that she will mind,” Danielle answers thoughtfully. “But her mother knows that we are best friends, and we are always staying over at each other’s place.”*

*“Did Alicia tell you what she overheard? What exactly your mom and Auntie Sandy said to one another?”*

*“Yes! She said... But now I can hardly remember what it was because I was only in Grade Three. She said something to me like, “Hmm. Now they will go to this place where other women like them go, and all stuff like that.”*

*“Okay. What do you mean, Danielle, when you say, ‘Like that’?” I ask. She is once again using these euphemisms and circumlocutions, and perhaps she needs to.*

*“But Alicia’s also very clever. So she, like, she overheard that my mother is hanging out with a couple and with two women who are “together”, who are sleeping with the other woman – and then she knew that my mother is one of them... .”*

*I am still wondering about the precise dynamics of Danielle feeling that she ‘has to tell’. She mentioned in the beginning that she felt Alicia should know. So I probe further.*

*“Danielle, do you sometimes feel you simply must tell?” I ask.*

*“Yes.” She answers with some conviction.*

*“Okay. Now, in what circumstances do you feel that you have to tell?”*

*“I get this feeling... I get this feeling that, like, pushes the words out of me. I, I don’t understand it. I often don’t know what I am saying. I just speak. It just comes out. It even happened with my teacher. I put up my hand to say something, and then it all just came out.”*

*Danielle re-enacts the whole classroom scene. She waves her hands as she tries to explain to me how it happens when she feels that she loses control over her impulses to disclose. Her mention of the teacher reminds me that it is possible that other children in her school are also talking about same-gender parents.*

*So I ask her: “Alright. Do the kids at your school talk about women like that? Women...”.*

*Danielle interrupts me quickly. “They don’t even think about it. Because it’s very dumb.” She continues with an anecdote about a boy that once hit her in class, and how that developed into a huge fight.*

*I let her continue for a while, and then gently ask: “If you find yourself speaking, and you find that you can’t control what you say, do you sometimes realise afterwards that you have actually said something about your two moms?”*

*“No,” replies Danielle. “I don’t actually share my secret. I only share that secret with my best friends, like Shirley and Alicia. But Shirley knew what was happening even before I did. That my mother and her mother were together.”*

*Now I am fascinated. “Oh, that is very interesting, Danielle. So how did that happen? Did she tell you?”*

*“No, she didn’t tell me”, Danielle replies. “She only said: ‘I know a secret that you have to ask your mom’. I thought about this, and then I said, ‘What must I ask my mom?’*

*“And Shirley replied, ‘Just ask your mom whatever comes into your mind...’. And so I did that. I asked my mom about what was on my mind. And my mother listened, and then she said ‘Yes. It is all true’.”*

*How strange that must have been, I think to myself. Imagine how she must have felt. Her friend giving her such a strange and cryptic instruction. I wonder to myself how Danielle’s mother reacted – and what must have gone through her mind when her little girl asked her this question straight out of the blue. “What exactly did you ask your mom, Danielle?” I ask so as to gain further clarity.*

*I just asked her: “Are you together?” So she replied, ‘Yes. How did you know?’*

*I remind Danielle that in another interview she had mentioned that she had spoken to her mother a bit about the whole matter.*

*Danielle interrupts, “I just asked her everything. And she told me all the women that she had been with before... .”*

*“Okay.”*

*“It’s actually hard to remember all the facts. I think that this happened last year or the year before. Or maybe even the year before that.”*

*“Okay. But how did you feel when she told you all that stuff?” I ask.*

*“I just thought, ‘Oh! Are you with Auntie Theresa now?’ And she replied, ‘Yes.’ So I said, ‘Then that’s okay by me. I’m just fine with that’. Auntie Theresa had these twins.*

*“Oh yes, I remember that you mentioned the twins before.” All three of them elaborated extensively in the first session on how terribly destructive the twins were and how they had really to struggle to adapt to accepting other strange children as a part of their family. I really do not want to hear more about that, so I try to cut that topic off.*

*But Danielle continues. “Do you want to know how Shirley found out?” she asks.*

*“Yes,” I reply, thinking that this might provide some insights, and it will also tell me about another girl’s experiences, even though the information will come to me from a third party. Although I don’t want to get stuck in trivial gossip, this story might just provide something of value.*

*Danielle seems keen to tell me. “She found this book in her mom’s room. She takes it. And then she and her brother go into the room and they lock the door. Then they read the book together. But then...! Her mother knocks on the door while they are reading. And her mother calls, ‘Wake up!’ because Shirley always locks the door when she sleeps. And so she calls, ‘Yes, mommy’.”*

*“Okay, so she was a bit naughty,” I observe mildly. “So what was in the book? Was it a photograph album?”*

*“I can’t remember exactly. No, it was not a photograph album. It only had one picture in it – and a PS chocolate wrapper.”*

*“Okay, okay.”*

*“And short poems about my mom.”*

*“Okay. So did she talk to her mom about the book? Did she ask, ‘What is this book all about?’ “*

*Danielle whispers, “No! She didn’t talk to her. She only told me about it. When her mom eventually told her, she acted like she didn’t know anything.” Secrecy again, I think to myself. How do these children manage their own process of dealing with all these events?*

*“Danielle, when did you realise that mom liked other women?” Danielle has spoken extensively about her friends, but I wonder what process she went through before she could accept the new situation.*

*“Oh, it was when she was involved with Auntie Tersia and my mom and us were at Auntie Theresa’s house, her old house. And then I asked them if they were together. It happened like this. We all went to Auntie Theresa, and Auntie Tersia came with us. So I said to my mom, ‘I don’t believe you.’ And then she said, “Well, if you don’t believe me, go and ask Auntie Tersia.’ So then I asked Auntie Tersia. I said to her, “Aren’t you going to tell Karen,” and Auntie Tersia replied, ‘No. She’s not old enough to understand yet.”*

*“So Karen is Auntie Tersia’s daughter?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Did they ask you not to tell her or...?”*

*“Yes, they asked me not to tell her.” Danielle smiles at the memory.*

*I reflect her statements by saying, “I understand. She’s too young to understand.” I remain quiet for some time, and then look at her. Danielle’s face lights up with a smile. “Why are you smiling?” I ask in a friendly way.*

*Danielle looks slightly embarrassed. “Because I did tell her,” she confesses. Then she bursts out laughing. “I couldn’t hold it back! I just had to tell her!”*

*“How old was Karen then?” I ask.*

*Danielle continues. “She’s my best friend. But not always. She is always hanging out with my brothers. But I’m beginning to like her a lot.”*

*“Okay, I see that. You are both getting older now. What did you tell her?” I am professionally curious about how she would frame the situation to another child because that knowledge might reveal some of her own process to me in managing this unusual situation.*

*“What do you mean, ‘How old was she?’ Danielle does not understand my question.*

*“How old was she when you told her? How old was she then?”*

*“Oh, alright.” She thinks for a moment. “I was eleven – and she was ten.”*

*I am a bit relieved, I thought that they had both been much younger. I ask, “Okay, and what did you say to her?”*

*Danielle whispers. “I said to her, ‘Karen, do you know that our mothers and all of them are, like... together?’ Danielle mimics Karen’s expression of shock and surprise. Then Karen said, like, ‘Ooo-oo!’” Then I told her, ‘But listen, Karen. I am not supposed to tell you what I have just said, now. Remember that. You have not heard what I have said.’ ”*

*“Do you think that Karen told her mom?” I ask. I wonder about all this secrecy, and whether or not this child will also confront her mother, as Danielle did.*

*“No, she didn’t tell. But I think that her mom told her.”*

*“What do you think that her reaction was when her mom told her?”*

*“She didn’t tell me, “ Danielle says simply.*

*“Oh, okay.”*

*“I wasn’t with her at that time. Her mom told her when her mom and my mom broke up.”*

*I begin another line of inquiry. “What I am thinking now is, ‘What does the word “mom” mean to you? What is a mother? I remember you said that you have boy moments and girl moments. So what does the word ‘mother’ mean to you?” I am trying a new line of questioning without knowing whether or not it will work. Perhaps Danielle will not understand. This might be too abstract for her.*

*“For me my mom is somebody that I just love so much. And I trust my mom. I love her. It is difficult to explain. I just love her a lot.”*

*I am quite surprised at her answer and I am really glad that I asked it. So I continue to probe. “Okay. Now your real mom, your birth mother, and Auntie Sandy, Danielle. Is there a big difference between Auntie Sandy being a mom to you, and Auntie Thea being a mom, and your own mom?”*

*“There’s no big difference,” she says.*

*““Okay. I see that, for you, they are almost, basically, the same?”*

*“I must say that my real mom feels more like my real mom to me.”*

*“In what way?” I inquire.*

*“I think that I just love my mom more than the others. She feels more like a mom to me than the others do.”*

*“Did you and your brothers ever discuss what was happening with Auntie Theresa or Auntie Sandy?” I ask.*

*“Well, we did agree that Auntie Sandy is much better than Auntie Theresa. And that her children are a big pain. You are not even safe in your room when they are around. The other weekend when I was with my dad, I heard they took my rat and put it on the pool table, and they hit the poor rat with the pool things. But Auntie Sandy... I like her a lot. Last year, we were against each other quite a lot. Now, all of a sudden, we are very nice to each other.”*

*“What was it like last year?” I ask.*

*“Last year I wasn’t used to house work. But now I am used to it. Now I know what to do, and how to clean. She asks us all to clean up. Imagine what our house would look like if she weren’t here. I like it when she says, ‘Please clean up your room.’ Then I go and clean my room. Before that I never used to clean my room much. And when you get to know her, she’s actually a very nice person. But it’s very hard to get to know her.”*

*We continue to chat for a while about her untidiness, and about how she and Sandy used to have differences about how clean and neat her room should be. Danielle explains how she used to get tired of washing the dishes. Then she wanders onto the topic of her friends and their sleepovers.*

*As I begin to wrap up the conversation, Danielle raises an important issue. She asks, “When you write that book that you are writing, could we please read it? And I want to know who will be reading that book as well because I am scared that some children might read that book and find out who my parents are. But I do really want to be in your magazine.”*

*I smile gently at her, and try to reassure her. She must be reassured that I will respect strict boundaries about disclosing their family's privacy and their anonymity.*

*"It's okay," I say. "No one will ever know who you are. I will give all of you different names, and I will change a few things so that no one will ever know that it is about you."*

*"I like the name Danielle," she says in her inimitably sweet manner.*

## *“I’ll run away”*

In the following narrative, Ryland speaks in the first person and I, the researcher, interpose my reflections. Ryland is a beautiful, soft-spoken nine-year old, somewhat shy and reserved at times, but indomitably courageous – if one reflects on his perception of his world.

*One night my mother told me that a lady would be coming to visit us. This lady (she said) is writing a book about “people who live together as parents”. I did not like that at all, and I told my mother: “No, I don’t like that. Mom and Auntie Sandy’s lives are private, and what we as a family do, has nothing to do with anyone else.”*

*But my mother went on to explain a lot of stuff about how this lady’s book can help other children and other mothers... I can’t remember all the details of what she said, but after she had explained what it was all about, it sounded more or less okay to me. But then I thought: “But why must this lady come to us? To visit our house?” I thought about how many families there are in our city. So why can’t she visit other families – instead of us?*

*I was also very worried in case other people should see our names in her book and know that it was us she was writing about. I even made sure to check with the lady when she came about whether my mother would also be given a different name – like those that she said she would use for us. She told me that we would all be given different names and that nobody would recognise us or the situations in the book.*

*Then suddenly one night – there she was. I was quite surprised. She didn’t look at all like the kind of mean lady that I thought she would be. She even brought a game with her for all of us to play together. The fact that I had arranged for all my friends to come over didn’t bother her at all. She just mixed in with our family in a very friendly way and we all had a lot of fun.*

*After a while, she asked if my friends could leave. And I was thinking to myself, “Don’t leave... Please don’t leave...”. But they did leave. That’s when I decided to keep quiet and just let my brother and sister do all the talking. But after keeping quiet for a while, I just couldn’t help myself anymore. I just had to say something. Like, I wanted to tell the lady how important the punching bag is that my*

*brother bought for himself, because, if it weren't for that bag, my brother would not be as patient and quiet as he is now... I know!*

*I also wanted to tell her about how I cried all the time after my dad left our house. I just couldn't understand how my sister could be so happy when my parents divorced. I told my sister: "You are not supposed to be happy!"*

*When the lady asked us "So what is so nice about having two moms?", I was the first one to answer. I quickly said: "There is nothing wrong with it. I don't worry about it." I had hoped that that answer would satisfy her and that she would then ask us something else. But she wanted to know more. She asked me what I meant, and because my brother and sister had kept quiet, it felt to me as though I were alone with only her and that question in that room.*

*After I had answered her, I knew that my secret was out. But it actually felt good to share it and let it come out. I said to her: "No one talks about it because no one knows about it. It's only my family that knows about it, and a few other close people like Anna. It's not wrong! There is nothing wrong with it. We don't tell the children at school – and that's how I want to keep it. Now if Danielle (for example) goes and tells everyone, 'I've got two mothers at home', then we will have big problems to deal with."*

*The lady went on with her questions in a very friendly way. She asked: "Does anyone else know that you have two moms?" I just shook my head. Then, after a while, I said, "I haven't told anyone. Only my teacher knows about my other mother. We had to tell the teacher about her. But I didn't tell her about Auntie Sandy. "*

*The lady went on with her questions. She asked: "How do you describe your own family when you all talk about 'family lessons' in school?" I got a bit angry at that point, and I said: "I don't talk about it. If I say anything, I talk only about my mom and my dad because it is none of anyone's business!" It's like, if other children ask questions, I just keep quiet, or I say "I don't want to talk about it."*

*The lady looked at me and asked, "Why would that be a problem, do you think, Ryland?". So I said, "I don't want to tell the other kids because they will come and wara-wara me with questions like, 'Ryland, tell us about your two mothers.' I know that if I told them about my mothers, they would just keep on pestering me and talking about it all the time, and I wouldn't even be able to go and play like rugby with my friends. If I told them, they would never stop saying, like, Ryland, this, and Ryland, that. No! They, I know, would never stop asking me stupid questions – and teasing me. You don't know what those kids are like! I know that it*

would be very, very bad for us if the kids at that school ever found out because they would never stop hassling me – just like they do with other kids at the school.”

I then tried to explain to the lady how bad it is at our school. I told her, “The blacks are horrible to me and to my friends. The girls hurt us and tell us to carry their suitcases. The older boys... If you bring something like a tennis ball or anything like that to school, you have to hand it over and give it to them forever.”

I was so upset at that stage. I remember that I was almost crying, and that my voice had become very, very soft. It is really bad at our school. So when she asked, “What do you think your friends will do if they find out that you have two moms?”, I told her: “They will push me around and tease me. They will laugh at me and never stop saying what a little wimp I am, and stuff like that.”

In fact, I could not tell her all the stuff that they would say to me. I also said to her: “I have seen it happen to other kids at our school! Like, we were talking about stuff. Then some other kid would hear. Then he would go and tell the others, and then everyone would tell everyone else. That’s why I have to keep it a secret, so that people don’t tease me.” I even said to the lady, “If anyone finds out, I will run away!”

The lady also asked me how much I worry about someone finding out that I have two moms. “Well”, I told her, “I worry about it everyday.” Which I do! I also told her, “I don’t even want to think about it... When I start to think about it, I just go out running or something like that. We also all play rugby in the square. And I’ve got other stuff to keep me busy. I’ve also got my work to think about. And other stuff. Yes, that helps me to forget.”

The lady also asked me about other situations, like when there are activities at school. Like, in the beginning of the year, there is a parents evening. She asked me if Auntie Sandy goes with my mom. I nearly went into a frenzy when she asked that! I said, “Oh no! No! Only one of them goes to those school meetings. I definitely don’t want both of them to go. If Auntie Sandy decides to go with my mom, I will run away from that school.”

Then she asked me if Auntie Sandy and mom held hands in the shopping mall. Well, of course, they don’t! Auntie Sandy loves to shop, and so she goes off shopping on her own. She enjoys shopping so much that she almost, like, runs around to look at the stuff.

The lady’s next question was about me. We were able to speak about why I say that I am untruthful. Well, the answer is simple. It’s because I have to be! Then the lady asked me, “Alright! But if a friend sees you in a shopping mall with your

mom and Auntie Sandy, and afterwards asks you who they both are, what will you say?”

I told her: “I will just say that Sandy is my auntie.” Then I told her what I said to my friend, the one who gets asthma. I told her: “I just say – if they ask – that Sandy is my auntie.” I remember once, my friend asked, the friend who gets the asthma attack.

Then the lady asked me: “Are your friends satisfied with that answer, Ryland?” I nodded, and said, “Yes, because they think that it is true.” Then the lady seemed to understand, and I was so relieved! So she said, “And that is why you say you’re untruthful.” I think that I smiled at her.

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## *Annotation*

### *Pre-interpretive thoughts...*

Ryland’s narrative clearly indicates that he does not feel safe talking about his family structure, or talking about having two mothers who are involved in a same-gender parental partnership. He feels very strongly that it is a fact that needs to be kept secret at all times. He also imagines that the only way out for him personally, if anyone should ever find out the truth, would be to run away from his school. He feels that he would not be able to face up to his peers, his teachers, or even his friends. He doesn’t even begin to imagine what the girls or older boys or blacks would say if they were to confront him with this knowledge. This is the reason why he says “Nothing’s wrong... I don’t really worry about that... No one talks about it because no one knows about it.” He feels that, as long as no one knows about it, no one will talk about him having two mothers. He therefore feels that he does not need to worry about having two same-gender parents – so long as nobody knows. But he has no guarantee that no one inside (or outside) his circle will ever find out.

Ryland tries to guarantee the integrity of his personal narrative in relation to the attitudes of the broader community by simply keeping silent. He does not tell anyone, and he even tries to avoid thinking about it. The information about his family that he offers is limited to the divorce and the lady who might become his

*new stepmother. But surely his teacher (if she is a person of integrity) should know about his mother's partner?*

*He also tells his friends that Sandy is an aunt. It was sad for me to hear him describing himself in our first session as being untruthful. When he told me that his friend had believed him when he had described Sandy as his "auntie", I could feel in him a degree of guilt and shyness.*

*Ryland's coping mechanism is not to tell the whole "truth" – and also to cosmeticize some of the factual details of his life if he cannot avoid talking. The tension I feel in him as he tries to balance keeping his secret and being truthful is almost unbearable. I sense it in his voice and in the atmosphere that surrounds him when he speaks. Ryland also tries to escape any contemplation of his secret by playing rugby and keeping himself occupied with his schoolwork. This defence against reality seems to me less than effective because he says he nevertheless thinks about it almost every day.*

*For me, this felt very much like the situation of a person of gay orientation locked in the proverbial closet. S/he obsesses constantly about it and worries about whether anyone will ever find out, or whether their secret will ever slip out. Even before I came, and his co-parents were preparing the children, Ryland consistently reacted with resistance and hostility to the news of my possible arrival. This confirms his level of anxiety and concern about privacy and nondisclosure.*

*Ryland perceives his school community as being full of racism, sexism, bullying, discrimination and hostility. He has spoken a few times about the racial conflicts at school, mentioning that the blacks calls them "whities", "boertjies" and "caramel boys". The incidents with the girls, that hurt them, as well the older boys who bully them, support his perception that the environment that he perceives around him is indeed hostile and discriminatory. His observation that children gossip compulsively ("every person tells everyone else") indicates his sensitivity and fear about what children might say about him if his "secret" slips out. He gives the impression that anyone in that environment who is even slightly different will be gossiped about and/or teased.*

*My engagement with Ryland left me with feelings of great sadness, compassion and an urge to protect him from all his fears. The image of a scared young boy, bitterly afraid of other's reactions, extremely sensitive to what others might think of him... In fact, a desperate child exhausted from hiding his secret, remains firmly in my mind.*

*“I would not choose to have my mother in any other way”*

*I sit down with my coffee and wonder how this interview with Kim will go. To break the ice, we begin to chat about all kinds of things: the December holiday with her mom, about her mom’s work in England, about the openness that exists between Kim and her mother, about how Kim’s mom told me how proud she is of her “student” daughter. Finally, the conversation veers towards Kim’s brother and the contrast between her and her brother that has so embittered Kim, about how he is caught up in drug addiction, and about how he neither works nor studies – despite everything Kim’s mother had done to give him the opportunity to join her in England, arrangements that cost her more British pounds than she cares to remember.*

*My reference to the experiences of children sets Kim off.*

*“I find it incredible,” says Kim, “that we are both children of the same mother because my brother is still extremely angry about everything that happened. He still cannot accept my mother as she is. He constantly blames my mother for the way in which he has turned out. He constantly maintains that she is totally to blame for everything that he has become. I, on the other hand, would not choose to have my mother in any other way. Well, that’s my point of view anyway, but my brother sees it completely differently.”*

*What I notice immediately is the anger in Kim’s voice, and how frustrated and angry she is with her brother. She even admits that she would like to hit him.*

*But I also hear in Kim’s talk the great care and concern that she feels for her mother. She confirms these conclusions by telling me that her brother never telephones their mother, and how sad their mother becomes when the brother does not phone her. Then Kim tells me how she chews his head off because he never phones their mother, and he merely replies, “I don’t want to phone her.” And this makes their mother terribly sad.*

*“But my brother always implies that his problems are far worse than anyone else’s, and he blames everything, every little thing, on someone else. And, of course, he imagines that every bad experience that he has is because of what she is.”*

*There is deep frustration, resentment and anger in Kim’s voice. “I mean, honestly, to blame everything that he does on my mother just because she happens to be gay.... Any person who believes nonsense like that deserves a damn good slap!”*

*“Look, it certainly was difficult at a stage,” Kim continues with a sigh. “Mom, I remember once overhearing you say that we children didn’t know anything about*

*you before the matter became public. But I can tell you that children know almost everything about their parents.” She laughs, embarrassed by the profound truth of what she has just revealed. Translated, it means that when children see the truth that lurks behind parental façades and deceptions, they have a certain hold over their parents. “Parents think that their children do not know about certain things – when they do,” says Kim defiantly. “I was very angry with you,” Kim tells her mother, “when that newspaper story came out.” Then Kim falls silent, perhaps stunned by the rawness of the wounds that she is once again bringing out into the light of day.*

*As I watch and listen, creating as best I can, a sympathetic, containing and completely non-judgemental space for interaction, I begin to recall the details of the story that appeared when the “secret” of Elina’s<sup>8</sup> lesbianism came to light and subsequently made headlines on the front page of a Sunday morning newspaper. I also begin to feel, as far as I can, the anxiety, pain, stress, anger, hurt and bewilderment that accompanied this cruel public revelation of what should have remained a very private affair. These are events and situations that should definitely never have been placed under the harsh glare of public scrutiny. But public cruelty is alive and well, and will continue to be so long after we have gone.*

*Kim rallies to her point. “When that newspaper story became public, I got one hell of a lot of negative feedback. But my brother got none because naturally he’s a boy, and no one would pick a fight with him. But that is the reason why I had to enrol in Festive School, because of public antagonism.”*

*Elina says quietly, “I don’t think your brother got any flak. If he did, he never said anything about it to me.”*

*“Of course he didn’t,” Kim snaps irritably, as though such a fact should be blindingly obvious to any but the most obtuse.*

*“I was with him in Grade Seven and Grade Eight. In fact, we were good friends until he was in Grade Eleven and began to smoke too much “dagga” [marijuana] and... I won’t say what else.*

*“It was then that I decided, ‘Oh no. Let me get all these dreadful things out of my life. Well, as far as I can anyway.’*

*“But he was already in Festive School when the sh\*t hit the fan... Now I am really feeling sorry for myself... It was in all the newspapers.”*

*Kim’s mother interrupts. “I think that your brother had problems as well, Kim. He just never talked about them.”*

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<sup>8</sup> Elina is Kim’s mother.

*I am amazed at the honesty and frankness of Kim's self-revelation under such painful circumstances. I feel a deep empathy for the loneliness and anguish that she must have experienced.*

*"Everything was in the newspapers," she repeats, "everything! And everyone... There was poor Alene. She's my best friend, Carien, and she is the most honest person I know. Even two months after the story broke, she still didn't know that anything out of the ordinary had happened. Then, two months after the newspaper reports, Lilly, another girl who was in our class, came to her and said, 'Listen, aren't you scared to visit Kim's home?' Then Alene asked, 'Why should I be?' And Lilly said, 'Because, you know, Kim's mother is like that.'*

*"Again Alene said, 'You are lying.' Then Alene came and asked me what was going on, and I said, 'I am not going to lie to you, what Lilly says is true.'*

*"Then do you know what? Alene didn't change at all, not one bit. She is one of the most endearing people I know. She knows everything about me – absolutely everything."*

*I am amazed at how spontaneously and honestly Kim shares her memories about the painful events of her family's first collective "coming out" experience. I note also the contrast between the two children's reactions to these events. I sense how painful it must have been for Kim to have been ostracised by some of her peers – and how grateful she must have been to have been supported by those who simply – and without any fuss – accepted her and her family for what they are.*

*I gently probe a bit further because I want to know more about the differences in the reactions of her peers to her revelation of her mother's sexual orientation.*

*"Kim, did anyone at school know about your mother's sexual orientation?" I ask.*

*Kim replies with some emphasis: "No! No one, no one, no one. My brother and I kept it completely to ourselves. At that time, I was in Grade Seven, and my brother was already in high school. Then the newspaper hit us with their story. Oh, my goodness!" She sighs at the memory of their pain and shock. "When my mother saw the effect that it was having on me, she said, 'Would you like me to take you out of that school?'*

*"I thought about that for a moment, then I thought to myself, 'It's the middle of the year, and I am really not prepared just to go and leave my own school now because of this whole drama'. You see, I honestly didn't think that it would attract so much attention. But you know what young kids are like! There's nothing they*

love more than something sensational to gossip and snigger about. And I was, of course, still in primary school. But, yes, some of the children were saying things like 'You are going to become like your mother' and 'This girl is a sinful child of Satan.' But that's OK. I survived."

"Did they start to make trouble for you because your name was in the paper? Or did they know about your mother?" I ask.

"Everything was there," Kim answers laconically. "Name, photo, address."

"Can you still remember any specific reactions when you arrived at the school after the story broke?" I ask.

"To be honest, all I can really remember clearly is this one guy in the history class. He said to me: 'Your mother is gay, she is like this and does this-and-that and so on, you are going to become like your mother, and maybe you should not talk to other people because you will make friends...'. "

"I can't remember exactly what I said to him. But I picked up a chair with great force and was about to hit him with it. But then I stopped myself with the chair in mid-air. Instead, I just kicked him on the leg, and screamed at him: 'Leave me alone! Leave me alone!'"

"After that I was very, very angry with my mother because then everybody knew. I said things to her like, 'How could you do that to me? How could you? You've always had boyfriends. You married dad! If you're gay you should not have had children.'"

Kim's raises her voice angrily as she speaks, but then just as quickly she quietens herself down again. Then she adds calmly: "Well, in any event, that was my opinion. I was extremely angry with you, mom, for a long time. But, Carien, I never let her see my anger. No! That's not the way I am. Certainly not with my close family.

"Until Grade Ten. Then I went to this seminar. Before that I just thought, 'Why me? Why? Why? Why? It's my mother! Why did it happen to me?' But then I resolved it."

"What kind of seminar was it?" I ask.

"It was a Christian seminar for children of different ages who have problems. It was actually very nice. There were people there ready to help those who had problems. So I had to try to face forgiving my mother and that ... that woman. Linda. Yes, that was certainly difficult.

"But it happened! From that time on, I can tell you, it was as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Now I can actually talk to my mother when I

want to and I don't have to hide anything. So it was good. What I learned on that camp is: forgive and forget, and go on as if nothing has happened."

Kim sighs heavily. "But that woman, Linda..".

Elina, Kim's mother, clarifies this point. "She was the one who contacted the newspaper and gave them the story. It was nightmarish."

"It sure was," Kim agrees sadly.

Because neither of them offers any more information or comment about that incident, I decide to leave it for the moment and return to it later. We continue the conversation about Kim's friend, Alene, who has been very supportive all along.

At this point, Kim shares her views about the issue of disclosure.

"I still wouldn't tell just anyone. Let's say that Mary comes for a visit, Mary is my mom's partner, and while Mary is here, Ann comes to pick me up. If Ann then asks me who Mary is, I would not tell her that Mary is my moms' girlfriend. I would just say, 'She's a friend of my mother's.'

"You see, I don't know how my mother feels about the situation – whether or not she wants everyone to know. Quite frankly, I do not want everyone to know, because then it's like, 'Oh, now this is happening to me.' No. As far as I am concerned, disclosure is a personal matter – and should be dealt with by the person concerned."

Elina nods in support. "Yes, I agree. It should be a purely personal decision."

Kim continues, "Not everyone needs to know. And even if they do get to know, then it is, like, 'So what's the big deal?'

"It's like in the case of Jo, one of my friends at the Technikon. I can see that it's incredibly difficult for him to come out to others as a gay man. But the weird thing is that anyone can see at a glance that he is gay." At this point Kim gives us an amusing but kindly demonstration of how Jo unconsciously gestures all the time in that loose-wrist way that a very small number of gay men affect without being able to prevent themselves.

"But he is adorable!" Kim continues. "So, just to give him an opportunity at disclosure and to help him to feel more at ease, I said to him, 'Listen, Jo, my own mother is gay, so I just want you to know that I won't ever betray you or tell people in the church.'

"So I told him, and there were also two other friends I told. But the telling always took place naturally and in the context of friendly conversations."

Elina interjects: "What about that other guy – the one who is so 'femme' [effeminate in manner] – but who is not gay?"

*Now I am interested because studies have shown that some heterosexual boys in school are often cruelly persecuted for being gay when they are not at all. I ask Kim if she would care to share this story with us.*

*“We were all sitting in Barchello’s,”<sup>9</sup> she says, “and we were all just talking about families. One of the guys is gay, and so is his sister, so we were all listening to their stories about family visits, and we were also discussing the whole issue in a more general way. Then, at one point in the conversation, I said to all of them, ‘I am also a little bit used to that situation.’ “*

*Kim imparts this last sentence in a whisper. This leaves me wondering what the significance of her whispering these words is – and also why she is now openly using the word “gay” when before she has habitually used rather arch euphemisms such as “like this” or ‘it’ or ‘like that’. But she continues nevertheless.*

*“So yes, those are about the only people I have told. Jane doesn’t know and she doesn’t need to know.” Then Kim raises her voice and continues in an almost aggressive tone, “If people come to me in an open and straightforward way and say, ‘Listen here, is your mother gay?’ “*

*Kim pauses for a while, silent. Then, in a quiet voice, she says: “You know, if people attack me in that kind of way, first, I will smack them, then I will say, ‘Yes.’*

*“In any case I don’t mind if people that I don’t care about know or not. If some crazy stranger came up to me in the street and asked, ‘Is your mom gay?’, then, yes, I might say, ‘Yes. Now go away.’*

*But people in our closest circle, those people who matter to us, our friends and family – not all these people need to know because this is a personal matter. It’s our own small world – and they must just accept it or lump it.”*

*Kim suddenly announces that she has to terminate the interview because she has to get ready to leave for her part-time job as a waitress. So we quickly make arrangements for another interview. I also tactfully inquire whether it would be possible for me to see Kim alone next time. What I am keen to find out is whether she will report her experiences differently if her mother is not present and listening. For the time being, in any case, my plan is to focus more on Kim’s story and less on her brother’s. But even as I speak, I am wondering whether I should involve the brother as well. It could be a revealing exchange. On the other hand, I sense that I have a sufficient number of research partners for the time being, and Kim’s mother is manifesting some resistance to me contacting him – which is obviously meaningful*

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<sup>9</sup> Restaurant.

*in itself. But if that proves to be important in any way for my research, I can always follow it up later.*

*As I realise that my thoughts have wandered off on a tangent, I feel Kim's stare resting on me. I say my goodbyes and express my gratitude, and as I walk out, I feel a sense of satisfaction at what has been achieved. Both Kim and her mom have welcomed me most warmly and sincerely, and Kim has a real ability to share spontaneously regarding her and her family. So I leave, looking forward with anticipation to our next meeting.*

*When Kim and I meet up again, about two or three weeks later, she seems quite relaxed and also unconcerned about the tape recorder. She asks me a few questions about the process of writing and, then, after some general polite conversation, we begin to discuss her parents' divorce. She shares her anger about the fact that her mom ever got married at all.*

*"You know, I'm not sure, but I think that my dad is extremely hurt. I'm not even sure if I should tell you this, but just the other day my mom told me that my father knew that she was gay even before they got married. From what I can gather, she had a sexual experience – and then promised herself in remorse that she would never ever become involved in such evil and satanic things again. Then she married my dad. I think that's just terrible."*

*I immediately pick up on her last remark in spite of the crucial information she has just given me. "Why terrible?" I ask.*

*"My mother knew that she was never attracted to men," she asserts with some vehemence. "She told me that my father knew that she was gay even before they got married," she repeats.*

*We continue to discuss the various reasons that people have for getting married. In retrospect I realised that perhaps I was trying to reframe her feelings of the "terrible-ness" of what her parents had done in a way that would make it a more positive way for her.*

*Then she herself offers me this compassionate insight about the reasons why gay people might marry. "I am glad that my parents are divorced because everyday one hears stories about people who everyone knows are gay, but who remain married. These people are ruining their own lives! I mean, come on, just get divorced," she proclaims in her "no-nonsense" voice. Then she becomes more muted and adds: "You should not do it. It is just so unfair! It is unbelievably unfair – to the other person, and to the children, and what a dreadful example! Of course, the children know everything. Children always know everything about their parents."*

*I remember that she made this assertion in our previous meeting as well. This assertion must therefore be deeply significant for her. Why is she so keen to make me understand that children “know” and that parents cannot hide or pretend? She becomes quite adamant on this point. “Even a one-year-old baby can sense, listen, and feel that something is not right in such situations. You cannot pretend because there is just so much that is wrong... You can’t put a good face on it. It just doesn’t work. It really is terrible.”*

*Here is her “terrible-ness” again. But perhaps this insistence is Kim’s way of expressing her anger, confusion and her longing to be heard. But Kim is not yet finished with her “the-children-always-know” theme, and she elaborates.*

*“Last time when you were here, I heard my mother say that we did not know anything before that story got into the newspapers. Can you believe it? As if we didn’t know!*

*“If Linda were staying over for a weekend and they were taking (say) an afternoon nap, my brother and I used to crouch in front of their bedroom door... and we would peep through the keyhole. We were utterly intrigued. What was all this? Of course it was something completely new to us, and neither of us really understood completely what it all meant. But what we did know was that it was not the same as it used to be between my parents...”*

*“So, yes, we knew what was going on. But of course we never said anything at all.” As I listen, I think to myself, “Hmm, so even though children might not know the details, you can never fool them.”*

*Kim then elaborates on her first encounter with her mom’s first real relationship with a woman and her feelings and thoughts about how it was different. I sense the aura of secrecy that surrounded these events, the difficulty they had as they tried to clarify for themselves exactly what was happening, and adjust their lives and feelings to their new circumstances.*

*“It was so damned confusing,” Kim says, “because my mom had two or three boyfriends. And then they would go and eat out, and not take us along. Or if we were visiting friends, then they would go out. But after Linda arrived, we never had my mother to ourselves again. Never! Linda got all the attention – and her child, Rhyno. He was the naughtiest brat you could imagine. When he got up to mischief, which he did a lot, then we would always get into trouble. Always.*

*“There was one time when I had a bad stomach ache, and my mother didn’t even open the door. All these little things. I think that she failed us there. She never rejected us. No, ‘reject’ is too strong a word. But we were completely uninformed.*

*“She would just always tell us that her friend was staying over or whatever. We never knew when Linda would come or when she would leave. Sometimes she would stay for up to a month. But then, quite suddenly, she was staying with us permanently, and, of course, it’s my mother’s house – so we couldn’t say a word. My mom was very low-key about it. But she never explained anything to us until it reached the newspapers. I think that really affected my brother because he likes to be in control of things.”*

*I am interested in their concepts of knowing and not-knowing, of their intuition that something was new and different from what it was before, so I probe as to whether she and her brother ever talked to each other about it.*

*“Did you ever get into deep conversations about these events with your brother?” I ask.*

*“Not at all,” Kim replies. “We knew of course what was happening, but we never put it into words. Never. I just couldn’t find it in myself to say to him, ‘You know what? This is actually what is happening.’”*

*Kim also elaborates on how she found out for the first time, and how she did not know how to handle it.*

*“The very first time I found out, I simply didn’t know how to handle it,” she confides. “It happened when I was in Grade Six, and we had all gone on holiday to Franschoek. My brother and I were relaxing on the beach, and I decided to go back to the house to surprise them... You know, to give them a fright, to scare them. It was really just a practical joke.*

*“So I tip-toed in very, very quietly. As I came to the door of the lounge, I saw them both lying on the couch, and, well, I will leave what I saw to your imagination... I just stood there for a moment, absolutely silent, unable to move, just to take in what the hell was going on – because I had never actually seen anything like that in my entire life. And, of course, one of the people involved was my own mother.”*

*Kim starts to giggle, probably because she is embarrassed by the memory. But her laughter comes as quite a relief for me too because this is such extremely personal information. “Once I had got my head together, I tip-toed back very, very quietly, and went back to the front door. From there, I turned around, stood still, and shouted very loudly, ‘I’m back!’*

*“It was a shock. But that’s how I found out. Obviously, after that, I knew – or at least, I had some idea – about what this whole scene was about. I didn’t even tell my brother until I was in Grade Ten or Eleven. Fortunately he had not followed me*

*into the house, or else who knows how it may have ended? I kept very quiet about it, and I don't really want to tell my mom because it will obviously upset her. In any case, she still feels guilty about her orientation. We know that. My feeling is that she should just let go of her guilt. She can't feel guilty for the rest of her life! But it seems as though she can't forgive herself. It's terrible. It's really very, very hard on her."*

*Kim continues her narrative. "My mother and this Linda woman had real bitch-fights. My mom's other girlfriends were really nice, and I liked them all a lot. But Linda! So when I read in the newspaper that she had denied that they ever had fights, I became very angry.*

*"Apparently on the night when they broke up, she smashed our glass door. And then she went to the newspaper because my mother had told her that it was not working out."*

*"I cannot believe," I say to Kim, "that a newspaper would actually be interested in printing such a story."*

*But Kim is quick to put me in the picture. "Things were very different in those days. It was like, 'Do such people exist? Stone them to death!' It wasn't like it is today. It was terrible."*

*"What about the time when your mother had to tell you about their relationship because of the newspaper story? She must obviously have thought that it was the first time that you were being given this information?" I steer the conversation back towards the themes of secrecy and disclosure that are such an integral part of all of these events.*

*"Yes. But I just acted as though it was the first time we were finding out anything that we had not known before."*

*I am more or less satisfied with the information she has given me about the newspaper story and her own process of finding out that her mother is attracted to women. I see her acceptance of her mother's sexual orientation, and how strongly she desires her mother simply to accept what has happened and not to feel guilty anymore. I recall to myself how crucial that seminar was for her in Grade 10 or 11 when she came to accept her mother and the events that involved Linda and her mother. But I sense a lot of anger and frustration in how and what she says, even though she tries to hide it. I would now like to know something about what happened in the years in between. So I ask, "Please tell me about that period before the Grade Ten camp when you were not able to accept and forgive your mom."*

*Kim begins once again to reminisce, and once again I am astounded at the richness of what she is telling me. Although I am quite aware that I am deviating somewhat from the main line of my inquiry, I feel for the first time in my interviewing*

*process that I am obtaining material that resonates with the narrative literature that I have been reading. Kim, in any event, is unaware of the theoretical dimensions of my research.*

*“Look,” she says, “I have always been pleasant to my mother. As I said last time, I simply cannot be unkind to my closest family. So my mother never knew that I was angry with her. Never. Never. Never.” She pauses, and I wonder at her emphasis.*

*“In those four years after I first found out – from between Grade Six and Grade Ten – I didn’t once pray, I didn’t once read the Bible because I was talking to God in my heart and saying, ‘You have harmed me! Why are you doing this to me? Why me? Why me?’ “*

*My heart goes out to her. The shock and denial that culminated in her anger is so painfully evident. So I say, “And so you were not only angry with you’re your mother, but also with God?”*

*“Oh yes,” Kim agrees, “extremely angry. Bitterly angry. Then I decided to go on this camp. That was in Grade Ten. Yes, I went once in Grade Ten and once in Grade Eleven. It was at about that time, more or less. I went the first time because I wanted to be able to forgive these people. I was in a mess! I just wanted to get to a place where I would be able to forgive God, to forgive Linda, and to forgive my mother – because it was all just getting too much for me. And it was there that I found someone to whom I could talk to and with whom I could work through all this stuff.”*

*What Kim has disclosed has given me a much clearer understanding of what she was going through before she went to the camp. But I need to know more about how she managed to cope under such unbearable strain for so long without any help from anyone.*

*So I say, “Kim, I’m sorry to interrupt your flow of thought, but could you tell me how you came to realise that what was happening inside you was becoming too much for you?” If Kim can answer this question coherently, I will have some invaluable research information. I just hope that Kim will take this cue and not side-step the question as she sometimes does. My luck holds, and she elaborates as requested.*

*“It was, like, I couldn’t even look my mother straight in the eye because, you know, every time I made a real connection with my mother, I would just crack up. I would think, ‘This is my mother and I hate her.’ That was actually what was tearing*

me apart. The fact of the matter is that, at heart, I am deeply Christian in my attitudes.

*“So I continued to attend Sunday school, and I would sit there listening to the sermon, and think to myself, ‘Mr Minister, everything you are saying is a lie. I mean, how can a person as wonderful as my mother do that to me? You are lying.’ I got into the habit of being cynical about everything that I came into contact with. I was a terrible... I was so incredibly mad at the world.”* The recollection of her pain is making Kim incoherent, and she makes a tightly clenched fist with her hand. It is indeed an apt and powerful symbol of what she feels.

*As happened in our first meeting, I sense the incredible underlying anger that Kim allows to surface in the safe, containing conditions of our interviews. “I really was very destructive. I had so much hatred inside. Then one day I took some time off to be alone and think about the situation. I spoke to myself in more or less these words: ‘Now listen here, Kim. You just have to stop this, because your mother is going to be with you forever, and you cannot go on hating Linda for the rest of your life. In any case, she is out of your life now. It’s just high time that you made a change in your life. Forget and forgive. Forgive that woman. Just let it go. That is all in the past. And once you’ve done all that, you should straighten out your relationship with the Lord. Okay? So now, get ready to go on this camp.’ “*

*I continue to be deeply moved by the quality of Kim’s self-talk and the remarkable way in which she regulates her thoughts and feelings as she attempts to rationalise and make some sense of the events of those deeply stressful times and situations. I am also struck by her willingness to be independent, to accept responsibility for herself, and to take control over her life – and to stop casting herself in the role of victim.*

*Kim interrupts my thoughts as she begins to talk again with a mixture of amazement and excitement. “That camp was really great! It just helped me so much – in a way that I didn’t dream were possible. I can still remember that when I got back from the seminar, I immediately ‘phoned my mom. I started crying and said to her, ‘Mom, I have forgiven Linda!’ So she said to me, ‘What?’ ‘Mom, I said that I have forgiven Linda! It is just so amazing.’ I think she must have been collecting her thoughts (it must have been quite something for her to take in so quickly), but she eventually said, ‘Okay! That is just great...’ and a whole lot of other things that I can’t precisely remember now.*

*“But the best thing of all was that, since I went on that camp, all kinds of people began to say to me, ‘You know, Kim, since you went on that camp, you have become a much friendlier person.’ “*

*“Kim, could you please tell me more about how you actually managed to forgive those people, especially your mother?” I am very interested in the fact that she was able to forgive, and in the phenomenon of forgiveness generally because this is something that so many people (even sincerely religious people) struggle to achieve and establish at a deep level – and not only in relation to matters that concern sexual orientation and sexual acts.*

*What Kim tells me certainly is revealing. “You know what, after thinking about it more clearly, I realised that being gay is not a disease. It is not like HIV or AIDS or something that could have destroyed my mother’s life. It is just the way my mother is. Sure, it is something different from what the majority of people do, but it is totally “normal” for her and for people like her. That’s just how they are.*

*“Once I got clear about that, I could think about my mother and Linda more clearly. I realised then that my mom is still the same wonderful person who, on her own and without help, baked lasagne for the whole congregation of people who attended the gathering after my grandfather’s funeral.*

*“I realised that my mom was still the same lovable mom that she had always been before...”.*

*Kim stays silent for a while, before she continues. “She is just bisexual. Some people are just like that. Okay, it may be different from what most other people are, but no two things in this world are alike.*

*“So then I thought, ‘So why shouldn’t she just go for it? Why should she fake it, and pretend, and lie – like so many other people do just because they are too frightened to be who they really are?’ If that is your preference, you should have the courage to go with it.*

*“So then I decided: My mom is my mom. She is the one who has pulled me through when the going was tough. She is the one who has always stood beside me, no matter what. So why should her sexual preferences destroy my love for her now? Why should it matter? Is this thing going to change our lives?*

*“I can remember one night... It was after that seminar. We were just sitting and talking about this and that. And as she spoke, I realised that my mom still behaves in exactly the same way towards me now as she did when she was still married to my father. My mom even looks exactly the same, and she still dresses in the same way.” Kim smiles. “She is still an incredibly efficient and well organised person. It was then that I came to the conclusion: My mother is my mother. Why shouldn’t I continue to love her in exactly the same way that I always used to do when she and my dad were still together?”*

*“It was such a strong realisation. My mother is my mother, end of story. That, I think, is what my brother should also realise.*

*“And that is why I actually admire gay people. They say, ‘F\*\*\* you’ to the unwritten laws of society. Of course everyone knows that a man and woman should establish a relationship and everything. People just stampede into marriage and other-sex relations without even thinking. But gay people (if they are honest enough to face what they really feel) will rather follow their hearts. They think for themselves, and they will turn to that kind of relationship which their heart tells them is true for them.*

*“Most people suffer from a kind of tunnel vision, and they will simply go where society expects them to go. It can cause a tremendous amount of sorrow and heartache. I suppose people are afraid of...”*

*“Labels”, I add.*

*But it sounds as if Kim has found her vision of reality and continues with passion. “I have great respect for people who have enough courage to walk on a road that is different from the road that everyone else seems to be walking along.”*

*She pauses a moment, and then adds, “But the world has its own rules, and people should be aware of how those rules work. Do you understand what I mean?”*

*Silently, within myself, I answer, “No, I don’t understand, Kim. Where are you coming from now? Just a moment ago, you were telling me about how you accept your mother, and how you hold this enlightened view that gay people should be true to themselves. You’ve managed to accept that your mother is bisexual, but now you seem to be approving of secrecy and of hiding one’s true nature. So now we are back to what the Americans call ‘the closet’. But keep quiet, Carien. This is Kim’s story, and whether or not you approve of what she reveals, what is important here is to give Kim the freedom of disclosing her own views without interference.”*

*Kim looks at me thoughtfully before elaborating on what she is trying to get across. “I don’t like it,” she says quietly, “when two women walk hand-in-hand down the road. I don’t think that gay people should do things like that because society is not yet ready for that kind of freedom and openness. There are places, I suppose, in cities like Amsterdam, where one can do that kind of thing. But not here. Not yet anyway. So I think that gay people should try to behave as discreetly as possible. They can’t just behave as they would like to in public. We are all bound by the rules and expectations of our society. Gay people too. They can’t just behave as they want to in public. They should appreciate that.”*

*“Okay”, I say, “what would you do if you were walking with your mother and her lover in a shopping mall – and they were holding hands?”*

*“I would just tell them not to do it,” Kim replies firmly. “Not now. That’s just how life is,” Kim continues. “You have to have respect for other people’s feelings and conventions. That’s what this whole thing is about – respect for other people’s expectations, and a shopping mall is a public place, you see. There are always limits on what we as individuals and groups can do.*

*“Take another example. Let’s say that you were to place a photograph of a naked woman in a pharmacy in order to sell suntan lotion. You just wouldn’t do it! One has to have some respect for what other people might be exposed to against their will. That is what it is all about. If there are people around, you have to use your judgement and common sense. It might be something that they don’t want to see. Not necessarily because it is wrong, but because people are just accustomed to certain public norms of behaviour. They have certain expectations, and we all abide by them. In any shopping centre, there will certainly always be people who would not want to see two women holding hands. So, then, we should just not do it. It’s about respect for others. So, yes, rather don’t do it in public until the society has reached that point where it will be something that will not offend anyone. Until we reach that stage, it is better to be discreet.”*

*This time I utter my thoughts aloud – not with the intent of challenging Kim personally, but with the hope that she might define her ideas even more clearly.*

*“And so,” I say, “how do you think that society will ever get to that ‘that stage’? Also, who defines what society is? Who has the right to say that a husband, wife and children constitute an ideal towards which everyone else in society should strive?”*

*“You know,” answers Kim, “I just don’t know. I think that what happens is that one courageous person may come, then perhaps another, and then another, and then perhaps eventually all these people find each other, and make places where they can meet other people. The benefit that comes from this process is that people realise, ‘Now I know that I’m not the only one in the world.’*

*“Then other people gradually start to become more and more relaxed about it because people write books about their experiences and that gives others like them courage and hope. There are so many books now on this topic, and even magazines.*

*“Look at Elton John, he is a role model for so many people, and he is gay. I think that because of this kind of thing, and the publicity that these people receive in the media, more and more people come round to accepting gay behaviour and gay relationships.*

*“The cumulative effect of all these things, great and small, is that people begin slowly, slowly to accept it because they become so used to it. I mean, gay*

*people are simply everywhere. You see them on television, in magazines, in clubs, everywhere. People are far more relaxed about this whole topic nowadays. They realise that gay people are real – and that they will not be going away. Take, for example, that article about my mom's relationship that was printed in the newspaper. Such an article will never make the headlines today. That is why I say that a time will definitely come...".*

*I complete her sentence in a humorous way by saying, "...when you will see two women lovingly holding hands in the street – and it will be perfectly normal."*

*For a moment Kim looks surprised, and then we both laugh together. Kim comments, "Yes! You may even walk with your children. But how you got them, I wouldn't know. But that too is coming."*

*"But you wouldn't want your mother to be one of them?" I suggest. Kim and I both laugh at this.*

*"Well..." she says, and then she becomes serious again. "But I still think that people should be discreet. They should do whatever they want to do – but at the right time and in the right place.*

*"Take another example. If you had shown people a computer in the 1910s, and what it could do, most people would have thought that you were an alien. But the times were not ready for it. Everything happens at the right time and in the right place, and everything evolves in its own time. Like, some people ask now: 'Why are many modern parents less strict with their children?' Who decided that that should happen? Well, no one decided it. It just happened because of the changes that took place in society over long periods of time. I personally think that our society is getting too permissive. Many people have become too lazy to decide for themselves whether something is right or wrong. We seem to accept that almost anything is right. But everything finds its own level. Goodness knows, my brother is not on the right road. There are basically three roads. There is a straight road, a detour road, and another road that twists and turns. Eventually all these roads lead to the same destination, and there is only one destination. There are not seventy destinations but only one, and that destination is the one at which we will all eventually arrive."*

*"What incredibly wise words for one so young," I think to myself. "They encapsulate a whole world view." I ask her whether she came to this realisation on the seminar. Kim responds enthusiastically to my question.*

*"You know, the first day of the seminar's programme was devoted to the topic of forgiveness. When I heard that, I just went up to people at random and told them the story about my mother, and do you know how much that helped me?"*

*She starts to giggle and imitate a certain kind of voice. “ ‘Come here please! Did you know that my mother is so-and-so...?’, and ‘Hi, please listen to me! My name is Kim, and do you know what...?’. I did it, I suppose, just to get it off my chest. I suppose, also, that I realised I would never see any of them again.”*

*“It was also a safe thing to do in that particular context?” I suggest.*

*She nods. “They could go and repeat it to someone else, but the person they told wouldn’t know me, and so it would make no difference. But I couldn’t go to my school friends and just pour my heart out to them because I would never know who they would tell. Do you see what I was doing? So that was really great. I had opportunities to talk to ministers and others, and eventually everything started to fall into place. Eventually I got to the place where I could forgive. So I did forgive my mother and others, and I did it sincerely – because I wanted to.*

*“Another thing: forgiveness does not mean that one has to forget and to act as if nothing has ever happened. Understanding that was very necessary for me. We received little cards on the camp with sayings on, and all of my little cards basically carried the message of, ‘just accept it, you are not going to be answered, live with it, everything is okay’.”*

*I ask Kim about the role that language played in the process.*

*“Okay, Kim, I would like to ask you now about how you framed your experience in words. Did you say that your mother is ‘so and so’, or did you say, ‘My mother is in love with another woman?’ “*

*“I said, ‘My mother really dislikes men. My mother only loves women!’“*

*“Oh, okay”, I reply, somewhat stunned by her directness.*

*She picks up on my silence. “It was most effective.”*

*“So what were the reactions?” I ask, wondering how the other children had reacted to her frankness.*

*“You know, the reactions of those people were not as vehement as they were when I told people back home – because my problems are minimal compared to the problems of these people. But, even so, there was one night when we were all sharing around the campfire and I found that I simply could not stand up and share what I wanted to say in front of everyone there. So I just said something like, ‘Listen, my mother is... a bit different’. Then I added that I had forgiven my mother and left it at that.”*

*I hear a tone of deep disappointment in her voice, as well as enormous empathy and compassion as she shares the life story of one of the other participants.*

*“But now,” I ask, “when you think back on that camp, why do you think that you couldn’t share it in front of everyone else? At that time, why was it okay or not okay to share, or would you have wanted it to have happened differently if that had been possible?”*

*Kim responds immediately, “Oh, in those days, it was such a totally alien topic. In fact, I was extremely scared because people used to assume that I was going to turn out like my mother, and then everyone started to treat me rather cautiously – except for Alene. Like, no one wanted to come for sleep overs anymore, just after the newspaper incident. I became very frightened because I began to think to myself that the people here at the camp would also begin to treat me in the same way like the people back home.*

*“I made some really great friends on that camp, people with whom I am still friendly today. But I was also scared that they would also begin to react oddly towards me. So I never told the people that I knew really well. I told them nothing! But when strangers came walking past – people I didn’t know at all – I would grab them by their coats, even if they just greeted me, and would say, ‘Come here, please. You must listen to me! I’m not giving you a choice.’ ”*

*I sense the relief in the theatrical violence of her acts. “You are going to listen now! You don’t have any choice in this matter!” (She must have been confronted by a few shocked faces.) I also sense the relief that she must have felt when she was at last able to break the silence and share what had burdened her for so long and talk to others about her mother.*

*At this point, I want to explore in more depth the different reactions that Kim had to deal with from her friends and peers at school.*

*“How did you experience the change from primary to high school? I mean, everyone in your primary school knew about your domestic situation. But then you had to face a whole new set of people in high school.”*

*“Well, that’s the reason why I went to Festive School. No one from my primary school was going there. I also went to stay in the hostel, and so I only saw the friends that I wanted to see on weekends. I didn’t bump into people by accident. And hostel life also changed me a lot. I was a bit overweight in Grade Seven, no, let’s face it – I was fat. I lost a lot of weight in Grades Eight and Nine, and I even began to model. So my life changed.*

*“You should have seen Peter, the guy in the history class that mocked me and told me that I was going to be like my mother, when he saw me again for the*

*first time in Grade Nine. I thought he was going to pass out! He was as quiet as a mouse.*

*“I went to ABC High School for Grade 11 and then to Witbank for Grade 12. But by then, I was no longer so bothered about my family background and I could cope without fear or shame with anything that arose.*

*“The people in ABC High School that I had known in primary school and that had caused trouble for me, were now all silent. None of them made any waves. In fact, my friends and I were the most respected pupils in the whole school and they all knew that. Alene and I used to talk openly about my situation and we did not regard it as weird in any way.*

*“In addition, all my friends in ABC were very open-minded about it, and no one thought anything about it.*

*“But there was this one occasion that I want to tell you about. As I was walking past one of my brother’s best friends, he said: ‘Look! She’s a lesbian’.*

*“I thought that they were talking about me, and, obviously, that was a topic about which I was most sensitive. I was so hurt that I started to cry. When my brother saw me crying, he came over and asked me what the matter was.*

*“I told him that people just could not stop making remarks about my mother’s situation.*

*“He just said, ‘Who said something?’ and I replied, ‘Max’.*

*“Even though Max was one of his best friends, he grabbed him by his lapels and threw him down onto the grass. ‘What do you think you’re doing to my sister?’ he yelled at Max. Kim imitates the way in which her brother shouted.*

*“So, you see, Carien, even at that stage, before his problems started and before I had even accepted it and we were both still very confused, my brother was still very protective of me. I really appreciated that.*

*“In Witbank, there was this one guy in our group that everyone thought was gay. We used to say to him, ‘Everyone thinks that you’re gay. When are you going to get a girlfriend?’ But it was really just a joke, and there was nothing nasty about it. When you reach Grade 11 and 12, everyone becomes far more relaxed about this topic.”*

*“So what did you tell the people in Witbank?” I ask.*

*“Nothing of interest, really. I would just talk about how my mother was working in London at that time, and about my dad and his new girlfriend. No one knew in Festive School either. Until today no one from that school knows the story. Because it is a single-gender school, I was scared that the children would gossip if they found out. But no one mentioned it. But there are some real bigots there – the*

crowd who would, like, to stone gay people to death. There were a few girls who were like that, you know, gay, and I was very careful not to get involved with them. Like, if someone wanted to give me a hug when they were greeting me, I would move away. It's not that there's anything wrong with hugs. It's not wrong. But I just wanted them to stay away from me."

"So what are the attitudes these days?" I ask.

Kim replies, "I have seen so many different situations. Like, one of my friends, he's straight. But he hangs out with a group of guys who are gay. I mean, one of those guys is much more of a woman than I am. Obviously, he and his friends all know. But my friend, Jane, for example. She doesn't know, and I don't discuss it with her. Different people have different attitudes, and you can never be sure...".

At this point, Kim begins to talk about her brother again. I sense that she is really concerned about him, and would like to see him get better for his own and for his mother's sake, and, of course, for her own peace of mind as well. I let her talk freely while I listen attentively and my attitude demonstrates that I am supportive of her. It is hard for me to keep my distance as a researcher and not slide unconsciously into the therapeutic role. It is as though she is expressing some of her own unresolved anger by talking about him. I can see that this information will be too sensitive and too personal to include in my research.

At one stage, Kim pauses in her narrative and looks at me in earnest and says, "You know, I still don't know exactly what you're doing with all this information."

Then, even though I have explained my research process and aims to her, I think to myself that she might be feeling that perhaps she has shared too much. We continue chatting about what pseudonym we will use for her, and a few other details.

As I take my leave of her, I cannot help feeling a deep compassion for Kim, for her mother, and for her brother. At times things seem to go well and they get the acceptance they long for. Then, at other times, they become the unwilling victims of society's stereotypical thinking and prejudice. But in spite of their difficulties, they show a lot of love, compassion and concern for each other, and that, I believe, is what really matters. As Kim said, "some times things happen in your life, and then you overcome it".

*As the last story came to an end, a deep silence fell on all those that had gathered in the Great Hall to listen to the Reading of the Narratives. Thus Carien completed her reading. Looking up at all those who had assembled, she said, "These are the representations of the reported experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families. These are the stories that the children that I met shared with me."*

*Then the King stood up. Everyone looked at him and wondered what his reaction would be. This is what happened:*