

Baby Zoey

OUR SEARCH FOR LIFE AND FAMILY



OLIVIA CHIONG

co-founder of Singapore's only same-sex parenting support group,
Rainbow Parents SG and blogger at olivia.thechionsg.com

BABY ZOEY

Baby Zoey

OUR SEARCH FOR LIFE AND FAMILY

OLIVIA CHIONG



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

Copyright © 2016 by Olivia Chiong

All rights reserved
Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigrambooks.sg

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Chiong, Olivia, 1980-
Title: Baby Zoey : our search for life and family / Olivia Chiong.
Description: First edition. | Singapore : Epigram Books, [2016]
Identifiers: OCN 944013009 | ISBN 978-981-4655-87-3 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Parenting--Singapore. | Same-sex parents--Singapore. | Same-sex marriage--Singapore. | Families--Singapore.
Classification: LCC HQ755.8 | DDC 649.108664--dc23

First Edition: May 2016
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my wife, Irene who is both my toughest critic
and greatest co-conspirator and our daughter,
Zoey who inspires me to make a bigger dent
in the universe.*

CONTENTS

Night Train to San Francisco	1
The Beginning	5
Where Do We Start?	40
Pregnancy	85
The First Year	121
Epilogue	159

1

NIGHT TRAIN TO SAN FRANCISCO

I STARED AT the letter 'X' next to the signal bars on my phone, willing it to disappear.

It was 24 hours before our wedding in San Francisco and my wife-to-be, Irene, and I were stuck on a train somewhere in Northern California. The biggest storm to hit the area in almost a decade hap-

pened that day, 11 December 2014, when we were on the Coast Starlight train travelling from Seattle to San Francisco. The storm knocked out power lines and unleashed flash floods and land slides. We had chosen the Coast Starlight especially, because it is the only AMTRAK train in the USA that features a special lounge for first class passengers, named the “Pacific Parlour Car.” It included a full bar, wine tasting sessions, a movie theatre and concierge who explained more to us about the lovely lands we were travelling through.

Before our wedding ceremony, we also had to pick up our marriage licence from San Francisco’s City Hall. Our appointment was at 3pm that day. It would have taken us four hours to reach there under normal circumstances but we were nowhere near San Francisco. And even if the San Francisco county clerk’s office tried to call us back when we didn’t turn up, they wouldn’t have been able to get through.

The train was supposed to arrive at San Francisco that morning at 8am. But when we woke at 7am for breakfast, we found that the storm had slowed us

down significantly in the night. We were four hours behind schedule and the estimate was that we would only arrive at San Francisco at noon.

At 11am, we received another update. We were still four hours away from San Francisco, which meant that even if we arrived at the train station within that time, it would still take us another hour to get to San Francisco City Hall and we would miss our appointment by at least an hour.

Some of our friends—we had all met in Seattle to visit a friend who had recently moved there for work—had opted to take a two-hour flight from Seattle to San Francisco instead. Not that we would have been better off if we had chosen to fly. The storm had caused over 200 flights to and from the San Francisco airport to be cancelled, our friends’ flight among them. They were frantically trying to get booked onto another flight, while we were trying to figure out how to get our marriage licence. There was no way we were going to get to San Francisco City Hall in time for our appointment at 3pm. Our best hope was to get there before

they closed for the day.

If I were a pessimist, I would have said the storm was a sign from the universe that our wedding was not meant to happen. After all, we couldn't get married in Singapore, so we had to travel some 9000 miles to United States just to get a piece of paper that would mean nothing back home. Fortunately, I'm more of an optimist, so I decided we would just keep our fingers crossed and modify our plans, and perhaps come up with some new ideas along the way.

That's also pretty much what it's like trying to have a baby while being in a same-sex relationship in Singapore—you will meet with obstacles and sometimes even nature will conspire against you. However, instead of giving up, you work with the resources you have and do your best to make it happen.

2

THE BEGINNING

THE MAJORITY OF my family lives overseas. Both my parents and their respective new families live in the United States. I have cousins in New York, California, Berlin and Jakarta. My only surviving grandparent—my maternal grandmother—lives in Jakarta. Given that my family is scattered around the globe, people always ask me, why do I live in Singapore?

I've lived here since I was three years old. My mother had moved here after getting a divorce from my father. A year after moving to Singapore, she married my now deceased stepfather, James with whom she has a son—my brother, Kent. Other than three years spent studying at a university in Perth, Western Australia, I've never lived anywhere else. To me, Singapore is my home and my adopted country. My passport may not reflect that because I'm still a permanent resident and have been for 90 percent of my life. However, I'm married to a Singaporean and we want to bring our children up here. Even though there are challenges, we are committed to making Singapore our home.

The obvious problem is that we are a same-sex couple in a marriage that is not recognised in the eyes of the Singapore law. This means that even if Irene wanted to, she cannot be the sponsor for my application to become a Singapore citizen. She also cannot be the sponsor for our daughter Zoey, as she has no legal connection to her. These are just some of the obstacles we face as we build our family here.

The legal and societal issues are wide-ranging and complex, without any obvious solutions.

Fortunately, we have rather supportive families.

I remember coming out to my mother over MSN 10 years ago, in 2006, because she lives in the United States and that was our common mode of communication. I basically told my then 52-year-old mother I had broken up with my boyfriend and was with a girl now. I can still remember her reaction: "What? Does that mean I'm not going to have grandchildren?" The future of her progeny was her concern. In fact, I think she kicked up more of a fuss when I got a tattoo on my shoulder that same year to cover a birthmark.

But over the years, this has changed, especially when she realised that my sexual orientation was not a phase. There are good days and bad days. I've had shouting matches with my mother over my choice of life partner. Some days, I think she truly understands and just wants me to be happy. But on other days, she gets really worked up and upset over how

“others” view her and how “others” think she has failed as a mother. I’ve tried to explain to her that my being with a woman has nothing to do with her parenting skills and everything to do with how I am someone who believes in living my life fully, and without regrets.

I’ve also tried to figure out who these “others” are. One day I would like to hunt them down and tell them to stop giving my mother grief. However, I know well enough by now that in life, we must choose our own battles, and this is hers to fight, not mine. Other than our occasional bust-ups, I enjoy a loving relationship with my mother and she adores Zoey. Irene may not be her ideal daughter-in-law, but she has developed her own strategies to handle it.

Coming out to the rest of my family has been fairly easy. My extended family have either accepted it or have simply chosen not to make a fuss about it. They take the initiative to include Irene in our family activities and for that I am grateful. I know their love for me is more than their own prejudices and that they will always be there for me. I never

really found the words to explain it to my 85-year-old grandmother, but she knows Irene lives with me, that she takes care of me and now we take care of Zoey together.

The person I really struggled with was my father. My parents divorced when I was really young and my father’s values are very traditionally Chinese. I didn’t know how to broach the topic with him and in the end, I had to rely on my aunt Lina, my mother’s younger sister, to tell him that I was pregnant, and in a relationship with a woman to boot. I am fortunate because I didn’t have to have that hard conversation with my father. He didn’t disown me or give me a difficult time about it. Since then, we’ve taken short vacations together, but he has not raised the topic. The only thing he has said is “One is enough.” He feels we are doing well now with one child and that having a second one will be an unnecessary burden on our finances.

In essence, I found the coming out to family easier than most have. I suppose it also helps that my family is global and generally more liberal. But more

importantly, I think it's because I love and trust them to love me, no matter what.

Some people have asked me: "Since you are bisexual, why don't you just marry a guy? Wouldn't it make life much simpler?"

Yes, I guess it would make life much simpler. But something I've realised about life is you don't get to choose whom you fall in love with. You can't force yourself into a relationship, or it'll just fall apart eventually. I've found happiness and it just happens to be with a woman. Sure, we have encountered obstacles along the way, but that's what life is, even in heterosexual relationships. We are on a journey where we will fall, but we have to get up and learn how to overcome whatever difficulties we encounter. I'm not about to give up my life and my happiness for a social construct about what love should be and I don't think others should be forced to either.

So if you are struggling with coming out or wondering if there is a future together with your same-sex partner, I hope my story will help. Every

family is different and we all have to fight our own battles. However, I think being able to live authentically is one of the fundamental requirements for a happy life.

Most people get married, move in together, then have a baby. In any case, that's how it's mostly done in Singapore. Irene and I did things backwards, by getting married after having lived together for almost seven years and having had a baby. Our friends like to say that we seem to enjoy doing things differently. After all, the general stereotype is that lesbians have the most dysfunctional relationships. People think that lesbians meet, have a one-night stand, immediately decide it's love, then move in together the next day. It then descends into recurring break-up-make-up cycles before they finally end it for good and move on to dating other people in the same lesbian circle.

But Irene and I didn't do any of that. There was no one-night stand, nor was it love at first sight. We did not break up and make up, and we certainly have

not ended up dating other people. Our relationship developed quite organically. It began as a tiny spark, fuelled by conversations late into the night and consistent tender loving care from each other.

I suppose I was lucky that I didn't know about these lesbian stereotypes before my first same-sex relationship. In fact, I knew nothing about the queer world. I had friends who were lesbian and gay, but we were not close. So while I knew queer people existed, I did not understand the challenges they faced or that they were discriminated against. Back in those days, I thought it had nothing to do with me.

That was until I turned 26 and fell in love with a woman who would change my life. That woman was not Irene. However, she played an important role in helping me understand life and what it means to me.

Prior to that, I had lived a fairly ordinary life. I attended convent schools for 10 years before going to junior college. During my teenage years and early adulthood, I had boyfriends, including two fairly long and serious relationships. I was even engaged to one of these boyfriends. Unfortunately, or rather,

fortunately, that didn't work out and I now know it was for the best. We would probably not have lasted if we had married. His mother is deeply religious and conservative. She once told us not to watch a *Harry Potter* movie because it featured magic and threw away a T-shirt because it had a dragon on it. I cannot imagine the amount of lying and hiding we would have had to do if we had gotten married because honestly, I love my *Harry Potter* and *Lord of The Rings*.

In hindsight, I suppose I should have realised earlier that I was bisexual. My first crush was on my camp leader when I was in Primary Five in Canossa Convent Primary School. I remember doing ridiculous things like going to school early so I could walk past her classroom to catch a glimpse of her. Looking back, I can't recall why I was attracted to her. I just remember she looked really cute, carried herself very well and happened to be a drummer in our school band, playing the instrument with such cool style. I was obsessed with her for an entire year before she left primary school, then it became my turn to be the

target of the crushes of Primary Five girls. That was a strange experience when girls would leave little notes and gifts for me on my desk and even send me photos of themselves. One of them even continued to write to me after I had left primary school, sending me pictures of herself and her family well into our secondary school years. It probably didn't help that my primary school only allowed short hair and I had the most butch haircut ever. It was a sort of poufy Aaron Kwok hairstyle that my naturally curly hair couldn't really pull off. Given the texture and volume of my hair, it's impossible to have a short haircut without looking like a boy. I still have some photos of myself with that truly terrible haircut.

Something changed in the December holidays after my PSLE. For one, I could have long hair again, now that I was out of primary school. My mother stopped dressing me in matching clothes with my brother and I switched to a more girly wardrobe, having discovered my feminine side. I also discovered boys after meeting some at the country club my parents frequented and naturally transitioned out

of my butch phase. I would meet them regularly at the country club to hang out and play games in a large group of friends. Eventually, some of us started meeting outside of the country club and I began dating one of them seriously not long after. Throughout my secondary school days at CHIJ Katong Convent, there were many of my friends in same-sex relationships, but I never did fall into one, even though there were a few girls in my school whom I found attractive. After all, I was dating a guy outside of school and the relationship was quite serious.

I remember thinking that the butch girls in our school were picked on a lot. There was even a time when there was a rule that we were not allowed to wear shorts under our pinafores and had to wear petticoats instead. Who wears petticoats in this day and age? Students in my girls' school, whose hairstyles were deemed too short, such as those with crew cuts, were told to wear wigs. Girls who did not conform to these rules received detention. I didn't know it then, but I now realise how much these girls were discriminated against. However, that wasn't something I

was concerned about. Instead, I explored the world with boys in it and this continued through my years in Raffles Junior College, the University of Western Australia and beyond.

I fell for a girl again when I was 26—pretty late by some standards. You could say I was a little surprised when I found myself falling in love with my co-worker. It had been many years since I had felt this way about a female and in the beginning, I wasn't sure how to handle it. She was caring, charming and exuded a mature confidence. She was also six years older, something I found to be rather attractive given that I had always dated men who were around the same age as I was. But when I started a relationship with her, I had no idea the kind of hell ride I would be in for.

I've never been someone who sees gender as an issue in a relationship, probably because I've had so many girl crushes in my younger days. It never even occurred to me that society might view my relationship as something out of the ordinary because I have many lesbian friends and I'm pretty comfortable

with both my feminine and masculine sides. I did not view letting my friends know about my new girlfriend as coming out. It was very matter-of-fact and I did not even worry about getting acceptance from them. I simply felt if they were true friends, they would understand that this was the person I loved and welcome her accordingly. Even telling my mother was not a big deal because I felt she would be able to handle it. The only person I resisted telling was my father as I have never lived with him and we have not been close over the years. Knowing he is very traditional and has certain conservative prejudices meant I held off telling him for a number of years.

However, that relationship was probably the worst one I had been in in my life and it almost killed me when it crashed and burned.

The idealist in me did not understand why lesbians could not get married and have a family, and that became a huge source of contention in this disaster relationship. While I wanted to look towards a future with a family, my then girlfriend wanted to stay closeted and low-key. She enjoyed playing with

her niece and nephew but had zero interest in having children with me. In fact, she did not seem to think we had a future together and dismissed all my efforts to discuss where our relationship was going. She grew tired of my need for assurance and that accelerated the demise of our relationship. The sex was still enjoyable, but its frequency began to dwindle as we grew apart.

We began to break up on a regular basis, with me sometimes running out of the house and staying in a hotel, before heading back to her home again. It was the most dysfunctional relationship I had ever been in, ending with me becoming so depressed I ended up in hospital due to an overdose. Fortunately, I had only taken five codeine tablets instead of the contents of the entire bottle. I had tried to kill myself because of this woman and we had only been dating for a year. I shudder to think what might have happened if we had been involved for longer. I am thankful and fortunate that I managed to move on from her rather quickly.

Yet I have no regrets. As it has been said, what

doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. When I realised that I was in over my head, I reached out to an old friend of mine, Sharon, whom I knew to be a lesbian. In turn, she directed me to Sayoni, an online portal for queer women in Asia, and Oogachaga, a counselling and support service for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons in Singapore. During my tumultuous time with my first girlfriend, I had gone on the Sayoni forums to better understand how to "fix" my relationship.

I met Irene while I was recovering from this disaster.

In the days after I had been discharged from the hospital, Irene was my constant online companion. As I recovered from depression, she was there each day, chatting with me and helping me to view my life more positively. Many people on the Sayoni forum were supportive and consistently reached out to check on me during this very dark period of my life. However, Irene stood out in her willingness to just listen to me. A week after I had ended up in the hospital, I met her in person for the first time.

Sharon had convinced me that I should get out a bit more, even though I was recovering and still weak. One day, after attending a workshop held by Oogachaga, I accompanied Sharon to a small restaurant in the Arab Street area where I met many of the women who had been cheering me on virtually for the past week. It was comforting to be surrounded by a group of such dynamic and diverse women. Even people whom I had not spoken to on the forum came up to me and expressed their support. I am ever grateful to all these women who made those early days much brighter.

I remember clearly when Irene came up to introduce herself to me. She was wearing a white sleeveless top that had a triangle cut out from behind to show off her lower back. I would later find out that Kelly, one of the ladies on Sayoni, had gone with her to buy the top in hopes that it would impress some girl. I guess I ended up being that girl. The top still hangs in our closet today.

Irene, in person, was not what I had expected. For starters, she spoke with a rather thick lisp, which I

later discovered was due to her hearing loss. She also looked much younger than her 24 years and was obviously quite comfortable dressing at the crossroads of androgyny. Although I was not looking to date someone new at that point, she did not check any of the boxes that were now on my “ideal date” list. So, I wasn’t attracted to her at all, but saw her as just a friend.

At first, as we spent time together, I did not realise I was falling for her, nor did I ever imagine we would one day be married. For those initial few weeks, we were just friends and she was a surprising source of comfort during a time when I was lost in the darkness of depression. In hindsight, our relationship is truly strong because of this stable foundation of friendship, trust and concern.

After meeting Irene and the rest of the Sayoni women in person, I began to attend more gatherings. I was on a hiatus from work, so I had plenty of free time. The fear of being alone was real as my mind would always wander back into the depths of depression, so I occupied myself with going out and having

fun with my newfound friends. I began to organise outings, mixing it up between dinners, clubbing and even game nights. Irene made an effort to attend as many of these events as possible, often making sure that I got home safely afterwards.

This period of partying was liberating for me. It was the first time I had been truly single in over 10 years. This meant I had the freedom to meet people and go on multiple dates with no strings attached. Even though I had a sort of silent checklist at the back of my mind about the type of partner I was looking for, I kept my options open by going on dates with different people.

Irene remained a constant in my life as she continued to be my personal cheerleader. I found myself sharing more and more about my life with her and we began to meet more frequently. I often teased her about her obsession with going to the gym and how she was more like a gay boy than a lesbian woman. In fact, I even bought her a T-shirt that said “gym bunny.”

Eventually, I found myself falling for her. I can

clearly remember the evening it happened. We had spent the evening having dinner at VivoCity with some friends. As it was a weekday, they all headed home before we did. We sat on the boardwalk watching cars drive into Sentosa. It was only when it started to drizzle that we realised it was almost midnight and time for us to head home. We walked to the bus stop, planning to get a cab from the main road instead of queuing at the taxi stand.

When we got there, there was a guy sitting at the corner of the bus stop so we moved slightly towards the other end. I impulsively walked out into the rain to feel the light drizzle on my face. She followed me, and reached for my hand. Somehow, we both spontaneously leaned in, and before I realised what was happening, our lips met. At that moment, the cold from the rain was vanquished by the soft warmth within me. My tongue reached out to meet hers and I was surprised by how agile it was.

Just as I moved to pull her closer, our first kiss was broken by the sounds of a car driving up to the bus stop and the guy getting into it. A cab came along

shortly, which we took to our separate homes.

The next morning, I woke up and wrote this poem in memory of the night.

Bus Stop

Stranger in the corner,

Fresh breeze across faces,

Light drizzle of midnight rain.

Skin on skin,

Tentative connections,

Warm heat that spreads within.

Eyes slowly shut,

Tongues tentatively dip,

A subtle memory, oh so sweet.

Sudden sounds,

Intruding car drives up,

Startled eyes fly wide open.

Wordless ride,

Quiet understanding,

Silent longing within each heart.

We began dating exclusively after that night. A

number of people were surprised as she didn't quite seem like the "type" I was typically attracted to. But given that even I wasn't sure of what my type was any more, this relationship was a refreshing change. On her part, she made every effort to make me feel wooed—meeting me almost daily, sending me flowers when she was overseas during my birthday and buying me little thoughtful gifts whenever she saw something she thought I might need or like.

She also has a gift of being able to make me laugh. Her unique brand of humour is one of the things that I love most about her. She makes the most ridiculous jokes about the silliest things such as the shape of her poop and while I would have found it juvenile coming from someone else, when it comes from her, it's so endearing. My attachment to her grew as we spent more time together.

We had many conversations about our lives and experiences. One of the things Irene told me was that birthdays were not a big deal for her and she didn't really celebrate them. She had grown up in a lower income family and her parents had never really made

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MY SINCERE GRATITUDE to a number of people, without whom this book would not have been possible.

My wife, Irene Chiong, for agreeing to let me tell this story. My grandmother, who always told me she wanted to write a book about her life. It made me believe I could write one about mine. My mother, who has stood by me all my life and helped me understand that happiness is in your own hands. That you

can only achieve what you want if you go for it. My family, especially the Yaos and the Wongs, who have been like my surrogate parents, and their children, who are more like my siblings than cousins.

My best friend Denny Pruitt who read the initial drafts and assured me they didn't suck. My OILE girls, Irene Kan, Liz Tan and Emily Tan, who encouraged me during the writing process and provided such huge support. Especially Liz, who read the first chapter I wrote for this book and told me I had to finish writing it.

My editor, Sheri Goh, who approached me about writing a book and made it happen. My second editor, Melissa De Silva, who took over when Sheri went on maternity leave. My publisher, Edmund Wee, for taking a chance on me and on this rather controversial topic.

The LGBTQ community, especially the wonderfully supportive ladies at Sayoni (www.sayoni.com) and my fellow parents at Rainbow Parents SG (www.rainbowparents.sg). You gave me the courage to tell our story.

Jean Chong, Sam Ho, Ivan Heng, Benjamin Lee, Adlina Moulad, Miak Siew and Sylvia Tan who took time to read the book before it was published and provided such encouraging and lovely comments.

Finally, to everyone who reads my blog. Thank you for your support. It is because of you readers that this story is told.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OLIVIA CHIONG BLOGS about her life with her wife Irene and daughter Zoey at olivia.thechiongs.com, where she shares her insights on same-sex parenting, relationships and life hacks. A long-time volunteer with queer women's activist platform Sayoni, she co-founded Singapore's only same-sex parenting support group Rainbow Parents SG with her wife. She believes in living life authentically and is absolutely unafraid to talk about the good, bad and the ugly.

HOW DO YOU CONCEIVE A BABY WITHOUT SPERM?

So begins the quest of Olivia Chiong and her partner Irene to get pregnant. From difficulties in getting the right sperm donor to the red tape challenges of shipping frozen sperm to Singapore, they face one obstacle after another in pursuing their dream of having a biological child. And Zoey's birth doesn't mean the end of the family's challenges either. But one thing is clear: if you never give up, almost anything is possible.

"A compelling account of an otherwise ordinary couple's struggle to gain acceptance and build a family...we should take a good look at the Singapore we love, and ask if we're really serious about being inclusive when we're making it so hard for some people to start families."

—Benjamin 'Mr Miyagi' Lee, blogger at miyagi.sg

"Candid, humorous and heartwarming...One cannot help but be moved by her courage, creativity and persistence in challenging traditional mindsets and overcoming the odds; proving that all we need to make and be a happy family, is love."

—Ivan Heng, actor and founding artistic director of W!ld Rice

"The book is an easy read, full of useful and interesting information, moving, insightful and at times really funny."

—Neo Swee Lin, actor (*The Blue Mansion, Anna and the King*)

"An authentic, heartfelt look into the lives of Irene and Olivia in their struggle for their right to family life and their inherent right to be treated as human beings by the state."

—Jean Chong, founder of Sayoni, an online portal for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in Asia

"A wonderful and inspiring tale of love and family, and how they conquer adversity."

—Sam Ho, co-founder of the Singapore Queer-Straight Alliance

ISBN-13: 978-981-4655-87-3



9 789814 655873

WWW.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG