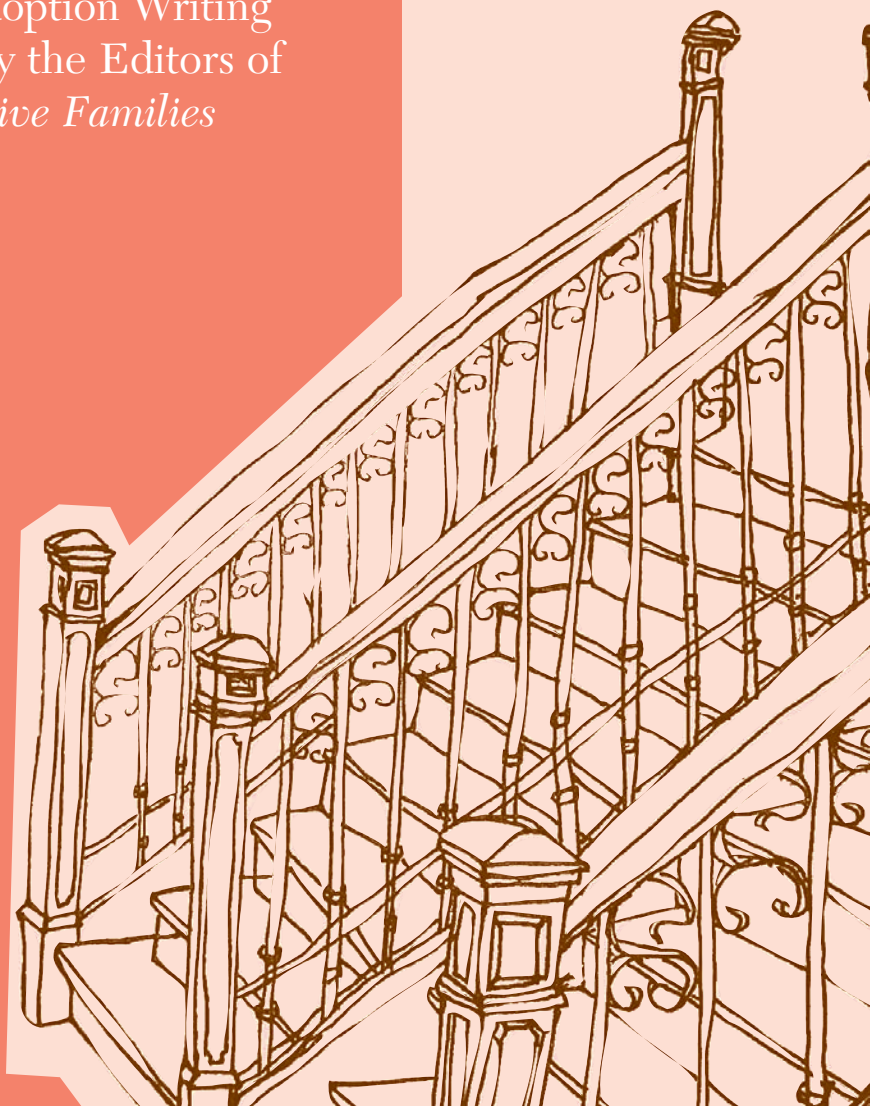


# WORDS FROM THE HEART

Great Adoption Writing  
Chosen by the Editors of  
*Adoptive Families*



# WORDS FROM THE HEART

Great Adoption Writing  
Chosen by the Editors of  
*Adoptive Families*

EVERY ADOPTIVE PARENT HAS A STORY TO TELL. Perhaps it involves the day we got the call, an expectant mother's change of heart, the elation of holding our baby for the first time, the jet lag that dogged us after miles and miles of travel, or the sense of being a family once and for all. But as much as we love to tell (and retell) our own tales, we love hearing the stories of others. Connecting with other adoptive parents allows us to nod our heads in recognition, laugh out loud, grieve a loss, or fight back tears as we reflect on this sometimes-circuitous road to parenthood.

The editors of *Adoptive Families* have done a bit of reading (and re-reading) ourselves. We've combed through pages of adoption literature and found 14 essays we'd like to share. These exceptional slices of life are funny, sad, honest, brave, smart, and always compelling. We hope you enjoy them as much as we have, and that they'll help you reminisce as they take you on a wonderful journey of the heart.

For more essays like these, visit our website: [adoptivefamilies.com](http://adoptivefamilies.com).

## AdoptiveFamilies

[www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### SECTION 1: A VISION OF FAMILY

- 3**     **The Road Home**  
BY ELIZA THOMAS
- 4**     **An Unmatched Set**  
BY JANA WOLFF
- 5**     **Helpless Love**  
BY BARBARA JONES
- 7**     **Pull Me Up**  
BY DAN BARRY

### SECTION 2: FALLING IN LOVE

- 9**     **Someone to Watch Over Me**  
BY JANIS COOKE NEWMAN
- 10**    **Falling for Jing Jing**  
BY DENNIS KNEALE
- 11**    **And Baby Makes Nine**  
BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS
- 12**    **The Open Door**  
BY MARIE HOWE

### SECTION 3: UNEXPECTED TWISTS

- 13**    **Tears of Trust**  
BY MARYBETH LAMBE
- 15**    **DJ's Homeless Mommy**  
BY DAN SAVAGE
- 16**    **Found**  
BY SARAH SAFFIAN

### SECTION 4: FOREVER JOINED

- 20**    **A Boy Like Him**  
BY DIEDRE LEVINSON
- 22**    **Visiting Suzanne**  
BY WENDY LICHTMAN
- 23**    **You Are Me, a Letter to My Son**  
BY LARRY CARLAT

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN BLOMBERG

# The Road Home

BY ELIZA THOMAS

**F**ourteen years ago, at a loss for love, I got a puppy. “It will complicate your life,” my sister objected, when I broke the news. “You won’t be able to go anywhere.”

“Dogs are a huge responsibility,” friends warned. But I did it anyway.

It was true: I had to skip lunch to get home to walk her. I had to rush home after work to walk her, and, for a while, I had to get up in the middle of the night to walk her. Lily ate my new red coat and threw up on my favorite rug. There were many places in Boston I couldn’t take her. Outside of the city, I discovered that entire mountain ranges did not allow dogs, nor did miles and miles of coastline.

Those diminished choices might have diminished my life, but in fact the opposite occurred. Because my puppy liked to swim, I found the few lakes and secluded beaches that permitted pets. Because Lily liked to climb, we went hiking everywhere. While she circled around their dogs, I held intimate, doggy conversations with total strangers. I began using the pronoun “we.” I was healthier and happier.

Several years later, when I began to think about adopting a baby, family and friends were supportive. “Responsibility is good for you,” they said. “Just look at you and Lily.”

I was in my early forties. I’d spent far too long waiting for the perfect package deal—husband, family, satisfying work—to fall into my lap. But time was running out. I could no longer suddenly decide to be a botanist, or a veterinarian, or a concert pianist. I floundered in dead-end office jobs and repeated old patterns in dead-end relationships, while my peers worked on their careers and paired off. My best friend had a baby.

I suppose it was a midlife crisis. I didn’t want to miss out on all of life’s experiences. I wanted a family, a link to the future, and a focus for the present. So I took drastic action and moved from Boston to a small cabin in rural Vermont. With help of a friend from Boston (someone I’d met walking Lily), I began enlarging my house. With much trepidation and many doubts—How would I support her when I could barely support myself?—I set the adoption process in motion. A year and a half after I signed up, I brought Amelia home.

What was my life like when I first became a mother? Tiny. It shrank down to the sight of Amelia. I couldn’t take my eyes off my undersized five-month-old—her with

the punk pineapple haircut, the long, crossed toes, the level, watchful gaze. My world shrank down to the size of her crib, to the prayer that she wouldn’t awake when I crept out of the room. My life shrank down to her needs: how, or whether, to get her to eat mashed bananas; how to change diapers and make bottles in my sleep; how to stop, or endure, her screaming in the car.

And my life opened up to hers. In the evening, Amelia would perch in her baby seat and slowly, solemnly observe the world: her hand, my hand, Lily, the lamp-light on the wall, the moon outside the window. I would hold objects up for her, naming them in turn. Cup, spoon, bottle, rattle, feather, apple. Mommy, I’d say, getting used the sound of it. Mommy loves you. My life was focused, for the first time, on the smallest of details. A button on the floor, the emergence of a tiny second tooth, the formation of the simplest words. I had never imagined that parenthood would be so absorbing.

My friend, too, fell in love with Amelia thoroughly and forever. He remains the man in her life, the father figure if not the father, and I am happy and grateful for their bond. However, and much to my surprise, I find I welcome the role not only of mother, but of single parent. Perhaps this is because I can deal only with one big relationship at a time, and my daughter takes up all the room. Or maybe I am simply unwilling to share my hard-won responsibility.

In any case, for me, it is easier doing it alone. I don’t have to argue with a partner about who will drive Amelia to school or play dates. When she misbehaves, I’m the one who sets the boundaries and calls the time-out; I don’t need to negotiate with someone whose discipline methods may differ. If we eat cornflakes for supper with jelly beans for dessert, nobody knows but us.

Over the years, Amelia and I have developed a mutual tolerance and patience, along with sophisticated negotiating techniques. I refuse to play one more game of I Spy. “Don’t make me do it! Mercy, mercy,” I cry. She gives me a level look, sees that I mean what I say. She offers three games of Sorry. “Or,” she adds, softening, “you can read me seven books at bedtime.”

She is five now, in kindergarten, and sharing with me the growing independence that will, inevitably, take her away. She comes home singing songs I did not teach her. She has a crush on a teacher I barely know. She whips off hundreds of origami hopping frogs, while I labor over the most elementary folds. I try to teach her piano, but

she waves me away. “Actually,” she says, “I am an artist.”

Of course, it is not always heaven. Child care is a hassle, and it is expensive. I miss pottery workshops, the latest movies, time to read. I miss solitude. At the times our patience breaks down, there is no one in the next room to turn to. And, of course, I worry about money.

When I became Amelia’s mother, I became legitimate, with a role in society no one could question—though it was a nonpaying position, with no time off. But once again the narrowing of options has been a good thing. In the spare time I did not have, I started writing about my house and the long journey to reach Amelia. It dawned on me: Work can be satisfying. I finished the book within a year, published it. I gave up office jobs forever.

Now I eke out a living piecemeal: writing, teaching piano, doing odd jobs to supplement my income in times of need. I have a new understanding of the plight of those who are single not by their own choice, who have more than one child to support, who must rely on help from a society that places children, and child care, so very low on its list of national priorities. But I am lucky. I can honestly say I like my jobs, all of them.

At the moment, I have a rare stretch alone. My little girl is in Boston for a visit with our old friend. She adores him. This is the first time she and I have been apart for a night, but she couldn’t wait to go.

The house is empty except for a new puppy. I don’t

have to make lunch or even dinner if I don’t want to. I don’t have to figure out how to persuade Amelia to wear her boots outside or if I should let her watch *Sleeping Beauty* yet again. I don’t have to look for the lost shoe and I don’t have to argue about candy. I can talk on the phone uninterrupted. I can even take a nap! This is nice, very nice. But I am relieved that it is just for two days. If every weekend stretched out so expansively, I wouldn’t know what to do. If I didn’t have my funny, determined, contrary, complicated daughter, I would be lost. Instead I

now have mittens to buy, values to sort out and communicate, shoes to find, a child to guide and love.



The puppy sniffs the carpet under the piano where Lily gasped out her last days this past fall. I burst into tears. Then I look at the walls, papered with my daughter’s artwork. Flowers she drew and cut out and then re-fastened onto a

fresh sheet of paper, using up half a box of staples. A complicated origami lantern. A picture of a house with eleven windows and a butterfly as big as a tree. A fat penguin with a yellow-and-black striped scarf. And our family: two stick figures and a small black dog, carefully labeled MOMMY, AMELIA, LILY. We are smiling triumphantly, and we are all wearing crowns. ■

## An Unmatched Set

BY JANA WOLFF

At our wedding, friends assured my husband and me that we would create good-looking children. And we believed them. It’s that cloning fantasy: our children would be miniature versions of ourselves, inheriting only our best features. I pictured a child with my green eyes and his thick, black hair. My dreams left out our worst features: big nose, freckles, a long second toe, and a proclivity to indigestion.

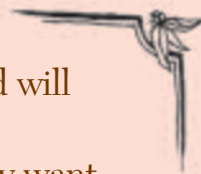
So many of our dreams (and fears) were shattered along the way: All that talk about how pretty our children would be...and it turned out we couldn’t even have any. When we started considering adoption, I wondered if I could feel like a mother to a child who didn’t resemble me or my husband.

Much as we all like to think of ourselves as consumed with thoughts more lofty than the issue of appearances, looks play into the emotional process before and after an adoption takes place. Adoption is like a blind date in some ways...a permanent one. Early in the

process, birth parent and child are faceless to potential adoptive parents. Adoptive parents worry that their child will be ugly or a dud, or both. They care about looks, not because they are hopelessly superficial, but because they want to fall in love with the stranger who will become their child.

Whether or not you like your own looks, they are familiar, and there is something safe about that. It’s almost as if looking alike will ensure a degree of cohesiveness. Look-alike families are assumed to belong together, but families like ours—who don’t match—are seen as curious groupings of individuals. A white woman holding the hand of a little black boy prompts guessing: His social worker? His baby-sitter? His black father’s white girlfriend? His mother? (No, that couldn’t be.)

Once adoptive parents decide that they can parent a child of a different race, they’ve got a more brutal decision to make—one so distasteful, it’s often avoided. They must engage in a shameless discussion about skin pig-



mentation: How dark is too dark? Many who cross the color line are willing to do so on a continuum of palatability that often reveals an unspoken (and unspeakable) preference for yellow over brown, brown over black, light over dark.

Even within a transracial adoption, it seems, we try to minimize the differences between ourselves and our children. There are many more Asian than African babies adopted by Caucasian parents, as if the yellow-white combination is less transracial than the black-white one. Some of us give ourselves high marks in the anti-discrimination department, but we demonstrate our colorism by preferring brown children (whether Latino, African-American, or mixed race) with European features over black children who share none of our physical attributes. Bizarre as it sounds, white parents of non-white kids remain wishful about family resemblance.

The attraction of opposites seems to apply more to personality than to appearance. Often, couples not only share some physical attributes, they even look alike. Blondes gravitate to blondes, and brunettes gravitate to brunettes. Does the wish for transracial matching follow a similar dynamic—like seeking like—or is it outright racism?

I felt like a bigot when I first laid eyes on my son. “He’s so dark,” I thought, and felt ashamed for thinking it. My gut reaction was fueled by gut fear. I was pretty sure I had taken on more than I could handle. Adoption of a white kid would have been enough of a stretch, but we had to go for a baby that came not only out of someone else’s body, but out of someone else’s culture. What kind of pseudo-Peace Corps types were we pretending to be? All I could think was that we were too white to be the parents of someone this black.

Since that rocky start, our lives, as a transracial family, have grown to feel exactly right. Though no one will mistake the boy sitting next to me for my offspring, he certainly feels like my son. A brown child has become famil-

Adoptive parents worry that their child will be ugly or a dud, not because they are hopelessly superficial, but because they want to fall in love with the stranger who will become their child.

ial, so brown children are now familiar. Pink kids look bland to me in comparison to the beautiful mixtures we see in children of color, adopted and not. Is it possible that mixed-race children, like our son, are more beautiful than the population at large? Or does it just seem that way? Perhaps a kind of reverse preference evolves in transracial families, but it is not very different from the old idea of brunettes liking brunettes. If we perceive our family as a beautiful blend, we see the beauty in others’ blends. Put more simply, we are attracted to ourselves.

In the first stages of being a family created by transracial adoption, we were aware of how different from our son we looked. As time has progressed and the emotional cement of family has hardened, we feel unified (even though the world does not always see us as belonging together). Looking nothing like my child causes questions and looks, but it holds no charge as a threat. We are family. Having said that, it is also true that we take great delight in discovering the ways we resemble one another. When people say that my son and I have the same smile, my smile gets even bigger.

Even though I was a closet pro-cloner when I first married, custom-designing the image of my offspring, I ended up with a child who is more beautiful than the one his father and I would have made. When I think back to my pre-adoption fear—“Could I love a kid who doesn’t look like me?”—I know the answer now. I know that you can love a child who doesn’t match and that that child will be nothing short of beautiful to you. I also know that you will sometimes forget that you don’t look alike. ■

## Helpless Love BY BARBARA JONES

This is a story that never changes. I’ve told it over business lunches and at cocktail parties, even in my gynecologist’s office. Every time I tell this story, my listeners’ eyes brighten—it is a happy story—and this brightness in their eyes eggs me on. But each listener also looks at me as if I’m speaking of something odd—happy, but odd. This is a true story

about my life. To me, it is commonplace, a story about ordinary love.

I was 34 years old, divorced, happy. I lived in a two-bedroom New York apartment with a nice roommate. I jogged in Central Park, went to afternoon movies with friends, hung out in bookstores. I went on dates; I liked dating. I made my living as a freelance writer and had



\$20,000 in the bank. On the telephone I told my brother, "If I get hit by a bus or anything, please know that I'm happy. Whatever happens from now on, it's all right with me, because I have known happiness."

Then one Sunday morning, I happened to be alone in my apartment reading *The New York Times Magazine*. The cover story was about an adoption. The article mentioned that the Chinese government allowed single women to adopt Chinese infants. As soon as I read the article, I was done for.

Why?

That's what everyone wanted to know.

Was something wrong with my reproductive system? Didn't I want a biological child? Didn't I want to wait for a partner?

Why wasn't I waiting until I was a more established writer? Why a Chinese baby? (Was I a racist—why not an African-American baby, a Mexican baby?) Some friends, some dates, even some gossip acquaintances had questions for me. But my own question was asked by a gleeful voice in my mind: "You're going to do *what*?" From the day I read that story, I never had a doubt.

I contacted one of the adoption agencies mentioned in the article. I went to the agency's required introductory meeting. After the meeting, I signed up for an "intake interview." After the interview, a committee at the agency decided to take my case. Shortly afterward, I fell in love with my friend, Steve. Two weeks later, Steve moved in.

Why would a woman who was with a man and who could bear a child want to adopt? At the agency, I said, "I'm seeing a man I might marry. Do you want to know about this?" The agency said, "If you were in a permanent relationship, we would recommend that you pursue biological parenthood first." "Okay," I said. I didn't tell them about Steve.

I went through a physical examination, a fingerprinting session at my neighborhood police station, a social worker's visit. I collected my birth certificate, divorce decree, tax forms, a financial statement from my accountant. I filled out dozens of government forms—immigration forms for the baby, forms testifying to the expertise of my social worker, a paper swearing that I would love the child forever and that I would put her through college.

Steve started seeing a therapist. He loved me, and he liked the idea of my adopting a baby. But he was worried because he just wasn't picturing a baby in his daydreams about our future.

By August my papers were in order. In September the social worker phoned to say she had received a photograph of a three-month-old baby girl. Briefly, in the hour

before I saw the picture, I imagined this infant as a delicate flower, exotic and wan. In fact, she looked like a Chinese Winston Churchill, deeply skeptical about the merits of the photo session, powerfully irritated—as if someone had just taken away her cigar.



Oh, I hear the other mothers talk about Maria now. They call her a "buster," a "pistol," they say she's "like a boy." One mother greets her at a kiddie birthday, "Hey, girlfriend," as if Maria were 35 years old.

Another mother, pregnant with her second child, leans toward me and says out of the corner of her mouth, "For your second child, you deserve an easy one." In the same week, two friends, independently, tell me that I look at Maria with "a look of helpless love." It's interesting that two people say the exact same thing, so I consider what they've said. But I do not love her with a helpless love; I have help.

Once, when Maria was eight months old, Steve and I walked with her along the river on iced-over sidewalks in subzero winds. We were going six blocks and it seemed silly to find a taxi for such a short distance. So we pushed along on foot, against the kind of wind that makes your eyes tear, in the kind of cold that freezes those tears to your face. Steve had Maria against his chest, inside his coat. Four blocks from our building, on an overpass, crosswinds began to slam us from the side. Later, Steve told me Maria screamed a desperate scream then that he'd never heard before and could never have imagined. I was less than a yard behind him, but I didn't hear a thing because of the winds. I struggled to stand, to inch forward, to not slide into the street. In the street a car spun around. Suddenly, Steve took off. He squiggled. He shimmed. All of the great effort he'd summoned looked, from behind, as if he were merely doing a little dance. Still, he had sped up; he departed from me. He and Maria moved up the hill and around the corner, out of sight. In our lobby, panting, our cheeks aflame, Steve said, "Well, I hate to say this, but I've made my choice." If it were between me and Maria, he'd have to save Maria now, he meant, because she was his daughter.

The irrevocable moment in which you become a parent is not the moment you conceive a child; it's the moment you conceive of her. Maybe in your mind she looks partly like you and partly like your husband. Or maybe partly like you and partly like some handsome,

genius sperm-bank stranger. Maybe she is coffee-brown and Peruvian; you are albumen-white and Swedish. Maybe she is a he. But whatever your idea of your child, once you have it, once you have thought of her as yours (which may happen years before she's born, or four months into your pregnancy, or six weeks after you meet her), nothing can stop you from wanting her. And only some terrible force outside of your control will prevent you from having her. You will run through icy winds for her. You will leave your spouse for her. You will quit your job for her, take two jobs for her. You will lie slant, almost upside down, for forty-eight hours so she can be born two fewer days premature. You will let your bones crack apart for her. If the adoption agency says you are too old to adopt her, you will find another agency. If the first in vitro insemination fails to produce her, you will shoot up hormones for another month. And if you miscarry, your child has died.

If the birth mother changes her mind, your child has been torn from you.

I traveled to China with my mother and seven other adopting families. Only an hour after we checked in to the hotel, our guide told us to go to our rooms: The babies were coming. Before I knew it, a stocky woman was showing me a fat-cheeked five-month-old in a pale blue sweat suit. The baby fixed a long serious look on me, frowned, and started to bawl. My mother started to bawl too. And eight days later, when I carried Maria out of international customs and through the revolving doors at Kennedy Airport in New York City, there was my father, holding a huge sign that read "Welcome Maria," and sniveling. And there was Steve, weeping—I had never seen him cry before. But as I first lifted my daughter from the stocky arms of the woman who had been her night nurse and looked into her furious face, I did not cry. ■

## Pull Me Up BY DAN BARRY

There was that stultifying afternoon in late June of 1997 when encouraging word of a possible adoption arrived at the most awkward, wrenching time. Mary and her family had just returned from the cemetery after having buried her mother, and the Trinity house in Maplewood brimmed with friends and relatives, all waiting to have a drink to remember lovely Mary Hanlon Trinity, dead of lung cancer, just sixty-two. People in clutches repeated her many funny sayings, as if to commit them to memory while the sound of her voice was still fresh: the way she refused to leave the house until every appliance had been unplugged ("Off, off, off"), the way that every minor crisis was equated with the ever-threatening Susquehanna River of her Wilkes-Barre childhood ("My god the river!"), the way that even the clumsiest phrases flowed so naturally from her lips ("The Lord save Ireland and all that's holy").

In the midst of all the Need another beer? and Thanks so much for coming, we received word that the adoption agency had left an urgent message for us. Mary, aching to be as giving a mother as hers had been, returned the call. She hung up the phone and turned to me.

Dan, an expectant mother in Texas had chosen us, she said, and I could see that my Mary was struggling to rein in all the conflicted emotions she was feeling. I took her in my arms and whispered, Your mother works fast.

Suddenly, a Pamela from Wichita Falls became an

intimate part of our lives. She was 20 years old, married, the mother of a three-year-old boy, and pregnant again. She did not want a second child—she was too young, she said—and had contacted a local adoption agency despite the ambivalence of her husband and the opposition of her in-laws.

After choosing the Mary-and-Dan profile from dozens of others that the agency kept on file, she and Mary had established a sweet but hesitant bond, sharing their disappointments and hopes during several long conversations. Pamela wanted a safe, loving environment for the child she planned to place, and Mary's voice

An adoptive couple meeting a birth mother in the hospital just before inducement might be among the more awkward of life's moments.

cracked while assuring the young woman from Wichita Falls that this would be done, and so much more.

But Pamela, who was nearly eight months pregnant, had a request. Would Mary and I fly to Wichita Falls so that she could get to know us a little better before she gave birth? Of course, Mary said. Anything.

Two weeks after the funeral of Mary's mother, we flew to Dallas and rented a car for the three-hour drive to Wichita Falls, a city with a university on one side of town and boarded-up storefronts on the other, a city alternately thriving and wilting in the heat. When we arrived at the hotel where we had arranged to meet Pamela, a clerk

handed us a note scribbled on the back of hotel scrap paper. "I am not feeling well so I am going to have to cancel. I hope I didn't ruin your weekend.... I will be home all day tomorrow if you would like to call, maybe I will be feeling better."

The note did not upset me; I figured that we had three more nights in the small city of Wichita Falls, plenty of time for Pamela to feel better. Mary, though, did not share my Pollyanna view of the situation. Pamela's family was pressuring her to keep the baby, she said, and that was obviously their right. It also meant that we had no choice but to wander the streets of a strange city, while a family unknown to us debated whether we were nothing more than Yankee baby snatchers.

Mary was right, of course. Whenever we swallowed our pride and summoned the nerve to telephone Pamela's home, someone would tell us that she was sleeping, or out, or not feeling well. Our hopes were raised once when a relative said that Pamela would meet us at the local mall for lunch, but we wound up skulking about the food court for hours, in vain. One night we stopped at a Dairy Queen for sweet consolation, but our ice cream cones practically exploded in the Texas heat. That told us all we needed to know; the next morning was Tuesday, time to go.

We understood what had happened, of course, but we would have preferred to suffer at home, not in Wichita Falls. While Mary sat sobbing in our rented car, I stood at a payphone outside a Winn-Dixie supermarket and, one last time, dialed a phone number that we had come to know as well as our own.

She's not available? Oh. Well, do me a favor: Just tell her that Dan and Mary wish her well. Okay? Dan and Mary really do wish her well. Take care.

And back we went to nurse the absence.

By late August, Mary and I could barely function outside of work. She was now the director of the New York City Coalition of Battered Women's Advocates. I was a general-assignment reporter based in New York. After spending our days immersed in the horrible and grotesque, we would return to the Carroll Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn, where we now lived, to find distraction in the wacky people parade along Court and Smith Streets. When we had finally exhausted ourselves beyond

the point of reflection, we would call it a night and collapse in the barrenness of our apartment.

Then came word from San Antonio. Another expectant mother had chosen us as adoptive parents for her child. Sarah was 31, single, taking care of a chronically ill mother, and just not ready to start a family alone. What's more, she was nearly due.

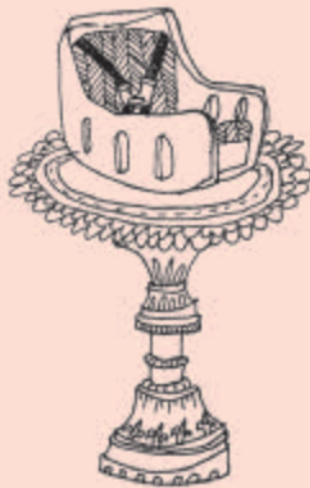
We waited for the discouraging update that always seemed to follow these encouraging reports: that the expectant mother has chosen another couple, that the expectant mother has decided to keep the baby, that the expectant mother has disappeared. But two weeks passed with no bad news, and suddenly we were on another plane bound for Texas, not sure that we could weather even one more bump of turbulence.

Early on a Tuesday morning, we met Sarah in the maternity ward of a San Antonio hospital, where her labor was being induced. Her long brown hair was offset by a touch of whimsy—a pair of Winnie the Pooh earrings—and she was sitting upright in her bed, listening with a girlfriend named Kelly to a radio blaring country-western music.

An adoptive couple meeting an expectant mother in the hospital just before inducement might be among the more awkward of life's moments. But Sarah made the moment seem quite normal, which was another of her gifts to us. Attached to an intravenous tube and in clear discomfort, she nevertheless became our gracious hostess. You simply have to go to the Alamo while you're in San Antonio, she said, and a visit to the Riverwalk is an absolute must. Also, this process could take a while, so you might want to go down to the Wal-Mart—just down the street—for the car seat and stroller you'll soon be needing. In a way, Sarah became our mother as well.

Two hours later, while we sat in a Burger King just outside the Wal-Mart, our cellphone rang: Time. Rushing back to the hospital, we headed to our assigned posts: Mary to the delivery room, to witness a miracle; Dan to the lobby, to stare without comprehension at that day's *Times*. Less than an hour later, Sarah's friend Kelly—a perfect stranger, truly perfect—appeared beside me to tell me that I was the father of a healthy baby girl.

A father? Mary as a mother, this I could see: her nurturing of the children at the soup kitchens and domestic violence shelters she managed, her interactions with our many nieces and nephews, her infinite patience with my puerile moments. Mary as a mother—of course. But me as a father? I had no particular insight to impart, other than





to avoid splitting infinitives and to use active verb tense whenever possible. As I stumbled after Kelly toward the maternity ward, doubt, not joy, filled my mind.

It turned out that the counselors at the adoption agency were right. The moment I held that infant in my arms, my mind cleared, my fears lifted. I forgot about Wichita Falls and Pamela and fertility drugs and alco-

holism and UFOs and migraine headaches and baseball and Brother Noel and jump shots and journalism. I forgot, because there was nothing else but this: Mary, me, and a squirming little thing in swaddling clothes, announcing herself in belches and cries.

Nora Mary Trinity Barry. The worst is over. Now, my girls. Now we're set. ■

## SECTION 2: FALLING IN LOVE

# Someone to Watch Over Me

BY JANIS COOKE NEWMAN

**A**t fifteen months, Alex didn't talk. None of the children in the orphanage did. I never heard any of them try out a sound or string together a sentence of purposeful babble. When they played together in the big playpen, they were silent. Watching them was like watching television with the sound turned off.

Some days, when she had time, a caregiver, Irina stepped out of her slippers and climbed into the playpen with them. Sitting on the floor, she held up an inflatable dog and pointed to its ears, its nose, its eyes, pronouncing the word for each. The children crowded around her, Olya holding onto her sleeve, Maxim crawling over to suck on her calf, the way he tried to suck on the arms and legs of the other children; all more interested in finding a place they could touch her, than in the word for tail or teeth. Once Irina had named all the body parts on the inflatable dog, she clapped her hands and sang what I thought must be a Russian song for children. The children never clapped along. They just clung to her more tightly, perhaps aware that when the song was over, she'd step out of the playpen, put on her slippers, and walk away.

Ken and I knew that Alex could understand Russian. Once, when he was pushing the blue and yellow lawn mower around the room, he'd stopped at the chair where Irina was bottle-feeding the boy with no palate. Reaching up, he'd placed his hand on Irina's hip, and she'd looked down and said something that made him smile. Watching him touch the side of her hip, I'd felt like an outsider, excluded from some private communication.

Ken and I talked to Alex constantly, jabbering on about the mangy cats that prowled the wall outside the orphanage window, the whale that was embroidered on the bib of his overalls. Sometimes I'd tell him long stories

about camping near the ocean, or shopping for live crabs in Chinatown, things we would do once he came to live with us; stories I told as much for myself as to accustom his ears to the sound of English.

At the start of the second week, Ken began singing to Alex, carrying him around the room and sending his smooth voice into Alex's ear. Ken didn't know any children's songs, so he sang standards: "The Way You Look Tonight" and "My Funny Valentine," "They Can't Take That Away from Me" and "I Get a Kick Out of You." I'd follow him from the row of cribs to the deep sink over which Irina suspended whichever child she was changing, keeping my hand on Alex's back.

One day, stopping near the crib where the little girl whose mouth was too wide was playing with a Mickey mouse mobile, Ken sang, "Someone to Watch over Me"—our wedding song. I leaned against his back and put my face near Alex's, so I could breathe in both their scents at one time. The little girl in the crib tugged Mickey's leg, smiling with the perfect side of her mouth.

Ken sang the song twice through, and when he stopped, I could hear a soft, high voice continuing on. The words were unrecognizable, but enough of the melody was there.

"Can you hear that?" Ken whispered.

Alex was singing our wedding song.

.....

Today, Alex is almost three. His fine motor skills are so well developed he can open a childproof lock faster than I can. Not only does he run and jump and climb with no problem, he can also do a pretty impressive flip over the headboard of our bed. And his language skills are so strong he can ask a theoretical question in the future tense, such as, "When you get bigger, Mommy, will you have a penis?"

I find this question very comforting. After we had brought Alex home, I read about infants' playing with rattles that developed coordination, newborns' being given teddy bears that stimulated their sense of touch, and parents who spoke French to their babies while they were

still in the womb. I was afraid that Alex's time in the orphanage would mean he'd have to go through life with one hand tied behind his back. But this question brings me back down to earth and reminds me that children are incredibly resilient. ■

## Falling for Jing Jing BY DENNIS KNEALE

**A**fter almost nine years of marriage, five years of infertility struggle, and two years of emotional anguish, our odyssey to parenthood has come to this. We wait nervously in a hotel room, ready to meet the sweet-faced, 12-month-old daughter we are about to adopt: Jing Jing.

My wife, Kathy, wanted this desperately. I didn't. For two years, we waged war over whether to do it at all, pitting my ambivalence, apprehension, and self-absorption against her arsenal of persuasion, intimidation, and unyielding will to love.

A year after we met her, Jing Jing is our joy. Thirty-three inches tall and larger than life, she is luminous, whip-smart, and hilarious. She has me wrapped around her little finger. ("Where did she learn to ask for cookies for breakfast?" Kathy demanded the other morning.) When Jing Jing ambushes me with a hug, it makes me thankful to be alive. When she works the crowd—playing "boing" on our bed or pratfalling and declaring, "I fall down!"—it fills my heart. The question is, why couldn't I have wanted this from the start?

My own father didn't know best. Discharged from the Marines with a drinking problem, he married at 19, had two sons by 21, and was divorced from my mother by age 35. A year later, he was out late one night and was hit by a car. He died on impact. It happened at 5:00 A.M. on my 14th birthday. My brother, one year older, offset this loss by marrying at 23 and raising three terrific sons. I veered the other way, vowing never to marry or have children. By my twenties, the anti-kid bent had become party schtick: "Kids, they give so much back—drool, poop, 20 years of ingratITUDE."

Then came Kathy. We met in 1989 when we were newspaper reporters, sitting four desks apart and feigning disinterest in each other. We had our first date over Memorial Day weekend in 1991. Sixteen months later we married;

she was 32, I was 35. She warned that if we wanted to have children, we had better start "trying" soon. We waited two or three years before starting. That brilliant idea was mine—I wanted some time for the two of us.

Cut to 1997: We have been "trying" for three years and now are deep into the medical crapshoot of fertility treatment. Kathy is one of 400 women undergoing an in-vitro cycle this month at New York-Cornell Hospital. But the process fails. Soon it becomes clear we will never have our own children. Even in my ambivalence, I had always wanted the choice.

Then, in mid-1998, Kathy awakes one morning looking hollow and haunted. "If we can't have children, why be married at all?" she says. To Kathy it is as simple as Plan B: If we can't have a baby, of course we should adopt. To me it is as simple as Never Mind: If we can't have our own, why bother? Let's just have an epic romance instead.

We go into marriage counseling, but soon it becomes an inquisition into why Dennis is afraid to adopt, so I quit. I dwell on darkness. What if the baby has medical problems? What if she has attachment disorder? My deepest fear: What if she just doesn't love me?

The fertility struggle left me drained and in retreat. Kathy reacts to our tragedy with resolve instead of resignation: Let's make this right. One morning I tell her maybe we should give up—let's just enjoy each other and dote on our nieces and nephews. Kathy, in tears, says, "But I want a family with you." In the ensuing weeks, Kathy comes to fear that the real reason for my reluctance is a lack of love for her. I begin to suspect that Kathy's quest isn't driven by love for me at all—she wants a baby, with or without me.

Late that same year, Kathy gets a new ally in this fight: my mother. Mom sends me a letter adorned with a photo of me at age six. "If you choose never to be a father out of

When Jing Jing  
ambushes me with a  
hug, it makes me  
thankful to be alive.  
The question is, why  
couldn't I have wanted  
this from the start?



fear," she writes, "you'll be missing an experience that will add great joy and excitement to your life." Enclosed is a Father's Day card I made at about the same age, addressed "To the best father of all." Even this doesn't work.

Weeks later, the kid chasm explodes into a fight so furious, it frightens me. We are on a drive; she's at the wheel and I'm talking, again, in vaguely negative tones about adoption. She screeches to the side of the road and goes nuclear. "GET OUT! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!" She screams so loudly a blood vessel bursts in her right eye.

And in that moment, it finally becomes clear that there is no way out of this. My mind runs the cold calculus. Refuse to adopt and break up now. Refuse and stay with her for 30 years—and in our seventies, try to explain why I deprived the love of my life of the one thing she needed most. Adopt and end up getting divorced anyway. (But at least we'd have done something good that links us forever. Score.) Adopt and live happily ever after. (I like that one best.) For all my foreboding, I felt afraid not to adopt, fearful of missing out on something wonderful. "Dennis, just open your heart," a friend tells me one night. This tears me up. Maybe I need this more than I know.

Still uncertain, we enter the labyrinth of adoption paperwork in 1999, and by year-end our documents are stacked a foot high and growing. Our application clocks in on May 12, 2000. Seventeen days later, unbeknownst to us, our daughter is born.

During the wait, I plunge into my work and stay out late, drinking too much. I waver between worrying about the enormous responsibility if the adoption goes through—and dreading the devastation to Kathy if it doesn't.

Then, one day in May 2001, my phone rings at work. Kathy excitedly announces: "Her name is Jing Jing. She's 12 months old and we just got her picture. She's beautiful!" We both choke up, sharing happiness for the first time in months.

Weeks later we leave to bring Jing Jing home. Her name means "brilliance," and we immediately decide to keep it. Her name, given to her by the orphanage, is all she has, and it will be the only word she can comprehend when she finally meets us. We check in at the aptly named Grand New World Hotel and wait for what comes next.

Knock, knock! We open the door to see a woman holding a staring, tiny tyke. It jolts me: Wow, she's so cute, and she's ours. Jing Jing has arrived cranky, dirty, and disoriented after the bus ride with the stranger who is now handing her into Kathy's arms. The escort leaves all too quickly, and Jing Jing erupts into heartbreaking cries of abandonment. We tackle the first goal of parenting: Get the kid to stop crying.

Kathy tries to distract her with a parade of plush toys. Jing Jing only cries harder. Panicking, we turn to a gift from a friend: a wee backpack filled with knick-knacks. Inside we discover a box of Cheerios. Kathy feeds one to Jing Jing, then another, and suddenly our new daughter is smiling sweetly.

Then Jing Jing steals my heart. Tired and hungry and a stranger only half an hour before, this delightful little girl—this culmination of years of struggle and hope and heartache—looks me in the eye and smiles shyly. She picks out a Cheerio, holds it up to my lips, and feeds it to me. My heart swells with tenderness, and I tell her, "Oh, my Jing Jing. I will love you for the rest of my life." ■

## And Baby Makes Nine

BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS

**N**o presents!" Nancy says. "But please stop over and celebrate. We have been waiting for this moment for so long."

I wouldn't miss it for the world. It's the day Nancy and Jack's son becomes, officially, Nancy and Jack's son. It's Baby Benjamin's Adoption Day. He's almost a year old now; he was placed in Nancy's arms just minutes after birth. For adoptive parents, especially those who adopt domestically, there is always this holding-of-the-breath period. There is paperwork. There are parental rights to terminate. There are lawyers and there are clerks and there are forms and there are fees.

Depending on the level of cooperation of all the people involved, the limbo can carry you well beyond the limits of your own personal sanity zone.

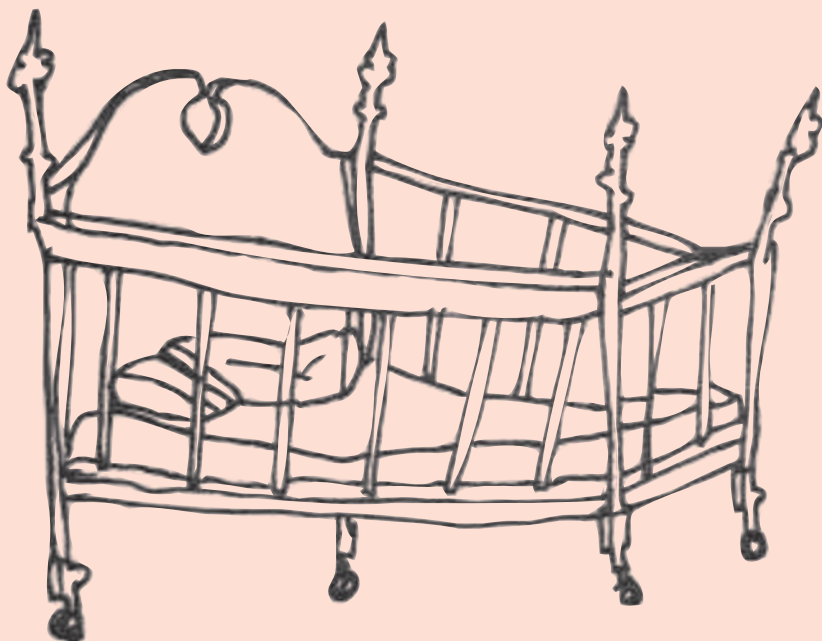
We never worried that this day wouldn't come for Nancy and Jack and Benjamin. Not really, anyway. It's not something you allow yourself to think, let alone say. The more we got to know Benjamin, and the more we got used to the sight of him occupying his rightful spot on Nancy's left hip, the more each of us knew, privately, that there was nothing we wouldn't do to keep this family intact. Look out, lawyers. Look out, judges. Don't mess with us. Oh, we were prepared to take bullets.

Nancy tells me that Beth has offered to bring her signature lasagna. The same lasagna she made when we gathered to paint the nursery awaiting Benjamin. The same lasagna she made, as a matter of fact, when we all painted the nursery awaiting my daughter. Mind you, Beth's repertoire extends several light-years beyond lasagna, but somehow she has made this dish our traditional meal of baby welcoming.

I tell Nancy I'll bring the salad. She says B.K. has offered to bring champagne, and that Ellen plans to stop at a bakery to pick up a fancy dessert.

When we arrive at Nancy's, we all marvel, yet again, at how huge Baby Benjamin has gotten. My Lord! Has he grown since last week? He's an 11-month-old baby in size 2T clothes. He's the jolliest little boy you're likely to see. He's here on Nancy's hip, and Jack is one step behind, and the two of them are going on and on about what happened this morning in family court, about what the judge said, about the way the cop in the courtroom stepped out from behind his serious cop-face, actually got teary-eyed and said, "Congratulations!" as he handed Benjamin a toy sheriff's star.

It's choking us all up, hearing this story. It's just exactly as we imagined it, only better. And Benjamin, he's wriggled down from Nancy's hip and crawled into the adjoining room, where my daughter has hold of his toy lawn mower.



Pretty soon we settle into chairs, and Jack and my husband head off to another part of the house to play with the toy lawn mower, or maybe something else, and the subject of conversation switches away from Benjamin and onto more mundane matters of movies to see and vacations to take and even, quietly, whispers of boyfriend possibilities for B.K.

"Hey," says Nancy, looking around. "This is like a Girls Night Out, except with kids and men in the background."

She's right. And that isn't right. This is supposed to be Baby Benjamin's Adoption Day!

Then again, maybe it's exactly right. The anticlimax is as fitting as it is magnificent. Baby Benjamin's Adoption Day, as it turns out, is just another day. Because he's one of us. Just another one of us. We don't need a judge to proclaim it. I mean, it's nice that he did. But this child has been one of us since the day he was born.

"So let's eat," says Beth. She's heated up the lasagna and is now standing before us with the pan, her hands protected by thick, cheerful potholders. It's funny to see how Beth, the one among us who has stated that she never wants children, has become our group's mom. How did that happen? It's funny, too, to see how Nancy and I, the only moms of our group, remain the somewhat scatterbrained children. And B.K., always observing, is the wise middle child with a philosophy brewing in her head. And Ellen, flitting in and flitting out, leaving us for 18 months at a time, is like the big sister off at college, always out there, always exploring, and always coming home.

How did this family happen? No two people in this room share a biological brother or aunt or even a distant cousin. And yet we've been a family for well over a decade now.

Talk about adoption. Maybe we should get a lawyer. Maybe we should fill out forms and pay fees to a nice judge who can make everything official. Then again, maybe we should just skip all of that and have some of Beth's lasagna.

"Happy Adoption Day," we say, at various times during the evening, until pretty soon we're all upstairs in Benjamin's sky-blue room. Hanging on a wall is a quilt we made. It has pockets. Before Benjamin was born, we each tucked a note into a pocket, prayers and good wishes for the life ahead of him. And how about that? So far, it appears they're working just fine. ■

# The Open Door

BY MARIE HOWE

**A**bout 10 years ago, I moved into a railroad apartment in New York City's West Village: Five flights up, it was a long, narrow space that my sisters, who live in houses, might call a hall.

When the apartment was swept and uncluttered, tulips standing on the table, it looked like a sliver of a country house. As long as you didn't move. "This place is so peaceful," friends would say, "so serene." And it was—unless the neighbors were home. I nodded to them on the stairs, but I had no desire to know the people across from me: two adults and one young daughter, living in a space too small for even one person. I'd come to New York to escape the white, affluent suburbs, to live with different kinds of people, but this was just too close. Their language, their cooking, their shouting—everything they did seemed foreign and loud. I closed the door; they came through the wall. The man's snoring woke me. "Stephanie!" I heard the mother call to her daughter so many times it was a song stuck in my head. When the family's friends came over, their conversation and laughter drove me from my desk, forcing me to walk the streets. Then the worst thing happened.

They had another baby. And that child cried for 12 to 16 hours at a stretch, day and night. I banged on their door. I called the landlord. Who were

these people? Why wouldn't they move? At that time, I was trying to conceive a child with the man I loved. Inches from my neighbor's snoring, we would be having the industrious sex that people who are paying for rounds of fertility drugs have—and then the baby would start crying. And crying. "Come on, honey," he'd say, "we have a job to do." But by then I'd be sobbing, too, curled up in a fetal position under the sheets, my hands over my ears as the baby screamed.

Then we broke up, and I was single again. As the baby next door grew to be a toddler ("Sabrina!" the mother endlessly called), I began the process of adopting from China. Finally, I received the photograph of my future daughter, a sturdy, sad-looking three-year-old named Yi-Nan, and it was time to go to get her.

Three weeks in three Chinese cities (bicycles, smog, scorpions, SARS, an appendicitis attack), Yi-Nan sobbing throughout the 15-hour flight home, and we were back in New York, slumped in a cab speeding through the rainy night. As I lugged my new daughter up my building's five

flights of stairs, I began to hear voices, and then I saw them: Stephanie and Sabrina; their mother, Maria; and their father, the snoring man, Carlos. Everyone had crowded into the stairwell to greet the little girl who pressed against my shoulder. It wasn't until the next morning that I saw the blown-up color photographs of Yi-Nan—I had no idea who had gotten them or how—pasted on the walls and doors with WELCOME HOME crayoned beneath them.

I hardly noticed, in the blur of those first weeks, how the presence of my next-door neighbors began to comfort me. Maria and Stephanie would coax Yi-Nan (whose name had morphed into Inan) up the stairs as I staggered behind. Then gifts began to appear: a child's baseball hat hanging on my doorknob; three laundered dresses, neatly folded; a large Tupperware container full of plastic action figures.

I was a 52-year-old working woman, living alone with a disoriented three-year-old who spoke only Mandarin. I was barely coping. Although my friends cheered me on, they didn't live with me; my neighbors did. One day, Stephanie stood in my doorway as I put away groceries. Another day, both Stephanie and Sabrina came in. Soon they were stopping in regularly to teach Inan numbers and letters and who Barbie

My neighbors charmed her,  
they calmed her, they helped  
her learn English.



is. When I struggled to get my stomping, crying daughter dressed in the mornings, they materialized, snapping their fingers and singing "You can do it" as they danced around. They charmed her, they calmed her; they made her laugh and helped her learn English. And they taught me to have fun.

Not only our next-door neighbors but the whole building rallied to my support. Our landlords threw a baby shower. Will and Peter, who lived below us, carried up groceries, and very often Inan as well. Soon doors were opening each morning, like little windows in an Advent calendar, as our neighbors called out "good morning" to the little girl counting "one, two, three" as she walked downstairs.

I don't remember when Maria and I began keeping the doors between our apartments open. I crossed into her kitchen one evening to see Inan sitting with the kids and eating spaghetti. "It's okay?" Maria said. "Yes," I said, "if it's okay with you." Inan looked up, smiling, her mouth smeared with sauce.



When I was sick, Maria took my daughter next door and fed her. When Inan was sick, Will took time off from work to baby-sit. And when Inan's fever reached 105, Maria showed me how to wrap her in cold towels. Back from the doctor, we found coloring books waiting for her.


Our doors were open almost all the time now. The children ran back and forth, and Maria and I walked into each other's homes with only a knock on the woodwork. Stephanie, Sabrina, and Inan decorated the little Christmas tree we'd carted home in the stroller (Peter car-

ried it up). And on Christmas Day, after Inan had been in New York for nine months, we opened presents as a group. Will and Peter brought us a breakfast of eggs and ham and blueberry muffins. It was the happiest Christmas of my life.

Children bring blessings, an old friend, a mother, once told me: Children open doors. Inan and I had come all the way from China to find the people who would make our new life possible: our generous neighbors, who had been there all along. ■

### SECTION 3: UNEXPECTED TWISTS

## Tears of Trust BY MARYBETH LAMBE

ometimes I just blow it. MeiMei is tugging at my shirt, whispering urgently, but all I notice is the loud pounding coming from the boys' room. Are they trying to dig through the floor? I pat MeiMei absently on her head.

"I'll be right back, honey," I say, barely registering her crestfallen expression.

"But, but..." She trails off sadly.

But...I am already gone, racing down the hall to investigate the ominous sounds. As I fling open the door, my three boys give me wide grins. Shen Bo flashes his smile as he catapults through the air. Up, off the bed, his trajectory carrying him perilously close to the window, he lands in a neat somersault, rolling hard into the wall. The window glass shudders and the pictures dance sideways on their nails.

John and Yuanjun must interpret my look of horror as one of excitement, because they launch themselves as well—right on top of Shen Bo. Bits of plaster flutter down from the ceiling. They are laughing madly and looking back at me for...what? Approval? Wild applause?

Instead, I shriek the time-honored phrase of all parents:

"Are you crazy? You could have gone out the window! You could have been killed!"

As I rest my face in my hands, trying to decide whether to laugh or cry, a small hand pokes me in the back. It is MeiMei, her face still serious. "We were having a talk, remember?" She glares at her brothers. MeiMei is wearing one of her big sister's nightgowns. The sleeves dangle far past her hands. She looks like a sad little waif. Clearly, something important is on her mind.

This is where I blow it again. "MeiMei," I implore. "Please get back into bed. I'll be there in a minute to tuck you in." Her brown eyes widen and she sniffs loudly.

"Please?" I beg her. "You can look at a book till I get there. See if Emma Rose can come up and read to you. OK?"

She shuffles out, and I round on the boys—already forgetting MeiMei's sad expression. Twenty minutes go by while I watch the boys make their beds and clear the anarchy of their room. When I am done putting the chastised boys to bed, it is late. Emma Rose has fallen asleep next to MeiMei. I bend to turn the lamp out, but MeiMei stirs. Her eyes are wet with tears.

"Oh, Sweetie," I whisper. "What's wrong?"

My presence opens the floodgates. Her tears turn into racking sobs. Her nose runs, and she gasps air as though she has been running for miles. Amazingly, Emma Rose, inches away, never moves. Her soft snores are in stark contrast to MeiMei's wrenching cries.

At last MeiMei can speak. I give her the time—the listening—she has been waiting for all evening. "When I get older, I get bigger, right?" She waits for my nod.

"And my feet get bigger, and my arms, and my head, and, and...well, everything, right?"

"That's right, MeiMei. You'll get taller, maybe taller than Mommy." Foolishly, I have not yet seen where this line of questioning is headed.

She pulls her hands from the long sleeves. One hand has fingernails painted bright purple; the other hand, her little hand, has mere stubs for fingers.

"Well, I thought—" She pauses and swipes at her eyes. "Well, I wanted, I thought...my little hand—" She can't go on. Finally I help her. "You thought your little hand would grow into a big hand?"

It must be a wonder that her foolish mother has caught on at last. She gives me such a look of trust, of love, of wonder at my brilliance. "Yes," she whispers. "How did you know?"

All night I have pushed her away. I don't deserve this kindness, this faithfulness. Now my tears come. MeiMei misinterprets my tears. "Did you think my little hand would get big too?"

"No." Time for honesty. "Your hand will grow some, but it will always be smaller." She holds it out and examines it. "No fingers?" She looks up at me; so much hope in those words.

How hard to dim that hope. "No, no. I don't think so." She bows her head, inhales sharply, absorbing the pain. I hold her and we rock together, comforting each other. Emma snorts in her sleep and rolls toward us both. Her long brown fingers come to rest on MeiMei's pillow. We both look sadly at those beautiful hands.

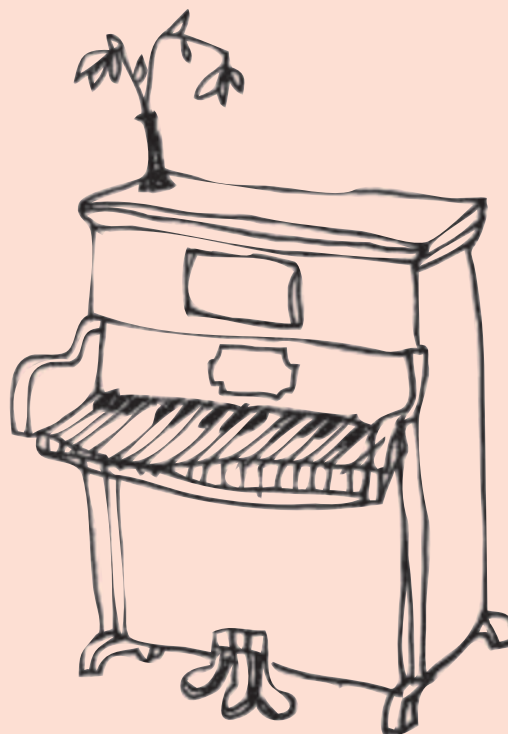
MeiMei is ready to tell me the hardest part. "I thought they would both grow, both my hands. And I would play the piano, with both hands, like Emma does."

Silly for me to assure her she can play just as well one-handed. We have already contacted the piano teacher, knowing of MeiMei's desire to learn. But I would be missing her point.

No, much as I wish, this is not time to cover her grief with my plans. How hard it is to let our children have their sorrow: MeiMei's little hand, Emma's mourning for her birth mother, Yuanjun wishing for his baby brother, left behind in Shanghai.

A child's tears are agony for a parent. We distract the pain away, we try to jolly them, and we tell them why their pain is not so bad. Because we bleed for our children—and, if we can get them to stop crying, to stop looking sad, we can pretend the grief is no longer there.

But, finally, at the end of that long evening, I did something right. I held her till the tears stopped, till some measure of peace crept back into her soul. I don't know what it feels like to have only one hand and to want, to desperately want, to play the piano like her big sister Emma Rose. Two hands, flying wildly over the keys;



making music to set us all dancing. To clap two hands loudly, to play the violin like sister Sara, to bang the drums like John.

I didn't say: "You can play just as well with one hand." Even if I know she can make wild, soaring music with one hand and a little bony wrist. It wasn't the time to speak such words.

Tomorrow we would discuss the piano teacher's plans, and find ways to make music on the violin. Tonight I did something I had been stumbling over all evening. I let a child cry and held her grief close to my heart. I let her be heard. MeiMei gave me a greater gift. She trusted me with her tears. ■

---

## DJ's Homeless Mommy BY DAN SAVAGE

**T**here was no guarantee that doing an open adoption would get us a baby any faster than doing a closed or foreign adoption. In fact, our agency warned us that, as a gay male couple, we might be in for a long wait. This point was driven home when both expectant mothers who spoke at the two-day open adoption seminar we were required to attend said that finding "good, Christian homes" for their babies was their first concern.

But we decided to go ahead and try to do an open adoption anyway. If we became parents, we wanted our child's biological parents to be a part of his life.

As it turns out we didn't have to wait long. A few weeks after our paperwork was done, we got a call from the agency. A 19-year-old homeless street kid—homeless by choice and seven months pregnant by accident—had selected us from the agency's pool of screened parent wannabes. The day we met her the agency suggested all

three of us go out for lunch—well, four of us if you count Wish, her German shepherd, five if you count the baby she was carrying.

We were bursting with touchy-feely questions, but she was wary, only interested in the facts: she knew *who* the father was but not *where* he was, and she couldn't bring up her baby on the streets by herself. That left adoption. And she was willing to jump through the agency's hoops—which included weekly counseling sessions and a few meetings with us—because she wanted to do an open adoption, too.

We were with her when DJ was born. And we were in her hospital room two days later when it was time for her to give him up. Before we could take DJ home we literally had to take him from his mother's arms as she sat sobbing in her bed.

I was 33 when we adopted DJ, and I thought I knew what a broken heart looked like, how it felt, but I didn't know anything. You know what a broken heart looks like? Like a sobbing teenager handing over a two-day-old infant she can't take care of to a couple she hopes can.

Ask a couple hoping to adopt what they want most in the world, and they'll tell you there's only one thing on earth they want: a healthy baby. But many couples want something more. They want their child's biological parents to disappear so there will never be any question about who their child's "real" parents are. The biological parents showing up on their doorstep, lawyers in tow, demanding their kid back is the nightmare of all adoptive parents, endlessly discussed in adoption chat rooms and during adoption seminars.

But it seemed to us that all adopted kids eventually want to know why they were adopted, and sooner or later they start asking questions. "Didn't they love me?" "Why

It seemed to us that all adopted kids eventually want to know why they were adopted, "Didn't they love me?"



did they throw me away?" In cases of closed adoptions there's not a lot the adoptive parents can say. Fact is, they don't know the answers. We did.

For the first few years after we adopted DJ his mother made a point of coming up to Seattle during the summer so we could get together. When she wasn't in Seattle she kept in touch by phone. Her calls were usually short.

She would ask how we were, we'd ask her the same, then we'd put DJ on the phone. She didn't gush. He didn't know what to say. But it was important to DJ that his mother called.

When DJ was three, his mother stopped calling regularly and visiting. When she did call, it was usually with disturbing news. One time her boyfriend died of alcohol poisoning. They were sleeping on a sidewalk in New Orleans, and when she woke up he was dead. Another time she called after her next boyfriend started using heroin again. Soon the calls stopped, and we began to worry about whether she was alive or dead. After six months with no contact I started calling hospitals. Then morgues.

When DJ's fourth birthday came and went without a phone call, I was convinced that something had happened to her on the road or in a train yard somewhere. She had to be dead.

I was tearing down the wallpaper in an extra bedroom one night shortly after DJ turned four. His best friend, a boy named Haven, had spent the night, and after Haven's mother picked him up, DJ dragged a chair into the room and watched as I pulled wallpaper down in strips.

"Haven has a mommy," he suddenly said, "and I have a mommy."

"That's right," I responded.

He went on: "I came out of my mommy's tummy. I play with my mommy in the park." Then he looked at me and asked, "When will I see my mommy again?"

"This summer," I said, hoping it wasn't a lie. It was April, and we hadn't heard from DJ's mother since September. "We'll see her in the park, just like last summer."

We didn't see her in the summer. Or in the fall or spring. I wasn't sure what to tell DJ. We knew that she hadn't thrown him away and that she loved him. We also knew that she wasn't calling and could be dead. I was convinced she was dead. But dead or alive, we weren't sure how to handle the issue with DJ. Which two-by-four to hit him with? That his mother was in all likelihood dead? Or that she was out there somewhere but didn't care enough to come by or call?

My partner and I discussed these issues late at night when DJ was in bed, thankful for each day that passed without having the issue of his missing mother come up. We knew we wouldn't be able to avoid or finesse it after another summer arrived in Seattle. As the weeks ticked away, we admitted that those closed adoptions we'd frowned upon were starting to look pretty good. Instead of being a mystery his mother was a mass of distressing specifics. And instead of dealing with his birth parents' specifics at, say, 18 or 21, as many adopted children do, he would have to deal with them at four or five.

As DJ gets older, he is getting a more accurate pic-

ture of his mother, but so far it doesn't seem to be an issue for him. He loves her. A photo of a family reunion we attended isn't complete, he insisted, because his

mother wasn't in it. He wants to see her, even if it's only a short visit. We're looking forward to seeing her again, too. But I'm tired. ■

## Found BY SARAH SAFFIAN

It is less than a month until my twenty-fourth birthday. It's Friday, and I'm looking forward to the weekend. At 9:15, after taking a last sip of orange juice and checking that I have everything I need for the day, I'm ready to go.

The telephone rings.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is Sarah Saffian there?"

"This is Sarah." I guess that it's a magazine editor, calling about work.

"Sarah, my name is Hannah. I think I'm your birth mother."

With a single phone call on an otherwise ordinary morning, my life of vague curiosity was instantly transformed.

"Oh my God," I whispered, receiver clutched in hand. Tears sprang to my eyes as I made my way to a chair. A pause. My birth mother started to speak, her voice soft and shaky, but forthright. Underneath the surface unease, I sensed a core of calmness.

"I'm sorry to startle you by calling on the phone," Hannah hesitantly began, "but I worried that if I sent a letter and got no answer, I wouldn't know if you had gotten the letter and didn't want to write back, or if you hadn't gotten the letter, because I'd written to the wrong person."

"Mm hm," I answered, reduced for a while to one-word or one-sound responses. I was so preoccupied with the fact that we were speaking at all, it was difficult to concentrate on what we were speaking about. To ground myself, I grabbed a scrap of notepaper and scribbled down key facts while we talked. Hannah told me that she had been 21 years old when she gave birth to me, and that I had weighed only five pounds.

"It was an easy pregnancy and an easy delivery, so chances are you will have easy pregnancies and deliveries, too—that is, if you want to have children."

"Oh, I definitely want to have children," I gushed automatically, surprising myself.

Hannah said that she and my birth father, Adam, had attended college together, and that I had been conceived soon after graduation. So my father had been granted his wish of college-educated birth parents after all, I thought in passing. The link between this live voice

and a preference on a form felt oddly arbitrary. What if Marvin and Nancy Saffian hadn't written that in—would I have been placed with someone else?

"I have another shock for you," she said. "I'm married to your birth father, and we have three other children." Renee, age 14, Lucy, 10, and Samuel, six—my full biological siblings.

"Oh, that's so wonderful," I heard myself saying, "then I can visit you all at once." The phone call was creating a rift in me: While one part was interacting, the other part was unaffected, on the outside looking in.

Then Hannah revealed the name she had given me, the name that appeared on my original birth certificate: Susan Morgan. I turned the strange name over in my head as if I were meeting a new person.

"Could you tell me about your family?" she asked next. In the split second before responding, I considered how to relay the most painful piece of the story. I felt oddly protective of Hannah, already, and was loath to hurt her or contribute to any regrets she had about relinquishing me. At the same time, I felt protective of my family. I didn't want to give Hannah the wrong impression, that I had grown up neglected in a broken household—I had always been cared for, loved without bounds. In answering this woman who had given me life, I had to be gentle, but also direct.

"Well, one important thing you should know," I offered, "is that my mother died when I was six."

Hannah took in a short, sharp breath. "That's one of the things birth mothers always fear, that something



happens to the adoptive parents,” she said. I reassured Hannah that I loved my family dearly: My father had been and continued to be my anchor, and Kathy, whom I considered Mom, had picked up where Nancy left off and mothered me devotedly, with strength and sensitivity.

“What do you look like?” Hannah asked later in the conversation.

“I have dark brown hair, wavy, about shoulder-length, and green eyes.”

“Yes, I think we were told that you had green eyes. All of us but Sam have green eyes.... You know, your birth father is six-foot-four.”

“Six-foot-four? I’m only five-five! What happened?”

“Well, I’m not quite five-three.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks a lot!” We shared our first laugh.

In parting, Hannah asked, “Did you ever think you would pick up the phone and it would be me?”

I paused to think, and then replied simply, “No, because I always assumed I would be the one making the call.”

I carefully returned the receiver to its cradle and fixated on it for a beat. The room was very quiet, in that palpable way that comes after there has been loud noise. Unclear of my emotions in this moment—shock? confusion? loss?—I nonetheless felt them physically, tingling through me. After several minutes, not knowing what else to do, I wiped my eyes, pulled on my backpack, and headed out into the cold bright day.

.....

It was too soon to call my birth parents back yet—I needed time to digest what had happened and to decide what I wanted to do about it. But in their eagerness, they didn’t afford me that space. On Monday evening, again as I was on my way out, the phone rang. “Hey, Sarah, this is Adam, your birth father.” My stomach leapt in panic. As the impact of both phone calls hit me at once, I felt not just startled, but invaded.

We exchanged much of the same information that Hannah and I had—what we looked like, general overviews of our lives. When I admitted my feelings of shock and self-protectiveness, Adam apologized for prompting these reactions and then stuttered, clearly moved, “I, I can’t believe I’m talking to you. I’d drive down to New York to meet you on five minutes’ notice and leave after five minutes, if that was what you wanted.”

I tried to maintain a pleasant composure, but inside I was churning. “No, please don’t do that, not yet,” I answered, drumming my fingers on the kitchen table, laughing shrilly in disbelief at the situation I was being thrust into. “I’d like to meet you someday, but right now, I’m overwhelmed even by these phone calls,” I continued, choosing my words deliberately, trying to let him down easy. “I can’t have an emotional upheaval every time the phone rings. It’s hard to be taken by surprise like that. Letters would be much more manageable for me for now. Would that be okay with you?”

He said he understood, stressing, “We want to do whatever is best for you, whatever *you* want,” but I thought I could sense his disappointment, his urgency deflated.

After we hung up, I paused long enough for it to

dawn on me that this wasn’t about a single phone call, an isolated incident, but about an ongoing process. I’d had my fantasy heritage whisked out from under me. Then, flustered, I rushed out.

.....

Six months passed, and I wrote my birth parents saying I was ready to see pictures of them. A large envelope arrived a week later.

Trembling, I slid the photographs out. I held them in my hands, and, before registering the image of the top one, I started to cry. It was not out of sadness, or shock, or recognition, because I hadn’t even looked yet. The immensity of the situation overtook me—seeing people genetically related to me for the first time. As I cried, with my hands lightly resting on the pictures, hiding them, I laughed at my own reaction.

After pausing once more, I finally began to look at the photographs. There were many of Hannah and Adam, alone and together, during various periods. One from 1971 showed the couple, still in their early twenties, posed by a white station wagon with faux-wood paneling: Adam strikingly tall in a white T-shirt and jeans, arms crossed, squinting against the sun; Hannah barely coming to his shoulder, with long hair and in shorts, standing solidly and smiling for the camera. This woman has already been pregnant and given up a child, I thought. What is going through both their minds in this instant? In 1971 I was two years old, living with my father and mother Nancy in New York City, having playdates with

With a single phone call  
on an otherwise ordinary  
morning, my life of vague  
curiosity was instantly  
transformed.





my upstairs neighbor. Our lives had intersected only at the origin of mine, and then had become parallel, existing simultaneously but separately.

There were also several pictures of their other three children. Looking at these, I felt a barely detectable twinge of being excluded. While I had appreciated the orderliness of my birth family being a single unit, it also meant that I was the lone missing piece, off to the side. I meticulously searched all their images for likenesses, scrutinizing every feature. I'd always thought myself adept at noting resemblances in others, but now, when it was me for the first time, it was more challenging. In her school portrait, Renee's green eyes, full eyebrows and forehead with its prominent widow's peak were familiar. A shot of Lucy, canoeing in a bathing suit, showed similarly square shoulders

and muscular arms. Sam, wearing a red T-shirt and smiling impishly for the camera, had my coloring.

My favorite photograph was a recent one of Adam and Hannah on the beach. He has his arm around her, and their faces are turned toward each other, both smiling warmly. They appear resplendent, genuinely content together—in spite of, or perhaps because of, what they have been through.

However, as I went through the photographs several times, the initial impact subsided. They began to seem just like pictures of people. I didn't know the people in the pictures, I didn't think I looked remarkably like any of them, not really. Maybe I had thought—hoped? feared?—that I would open them up and see myself looking back at me. ■

#### SECTION 4: FOREVER JOINED

## A Boy Like Him BY DEIRDRE LEVINSON

**H**e was 15 months old when we adopted him, and even now, I miss those first months of his life. But the agency told us that we'd best put in for a baby who, having survived his first year, wouldn't be likely to die on us. They said we couldn't afford to lose another child, could we? They sent a social worker to look at our home, and she urged us to start "Viet Namizing" the household. I had visions of water buffalo and hordes of U.S. conscripts milling around our apartment.

It was just as well that we didn't work overtime at Viet Namization, because it wasn't a Viet Nameese that we got. We got a Cambodian—one of 60 starvelings airlifted, under heavy fire, from an orphanage in Phnom Penh and flown, one wintry day early in 1975, to Montreal, where we hastened to claim him.

The airport was crowded with prospective parents. Never, the agency representative said, addressing us all, never in her experience had she encountered a batch so beautiful. Every blessed one of them a dazzler, she said.

I scanned the procession of ill-favored kids as, one by one, amid flashing press cameras, they passed down the ramp to their enraptured, evidently purblind new parents. I reminded myself that looks weren't everything. But when our name was called, I saw at a glance that this one—running sores, running nose, rotting baby teeth regardless—was not only far and away the pick of the bunch, he was a spectacular beauty by any criterion. "Beautiful?" snorted the pediatrician we rushed him to—

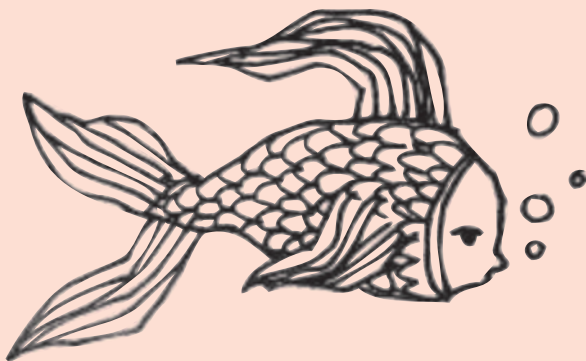
scrutinizing our scantling couched in the palm of his hand—"Then find me some beautiful flesh on his bottom to give him a shot."

We named him Malachi, after the last of the Hebrew prophets, and sent out our announcement of his adoption, inscribed with the words of his namesake: "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?" As soon as he was strong enough, we had him circumcised, making him officially as Jewish as any Jew on this earth.

Malachi himself was concerned with even more basic matters. Though of walking age when we got him, he was too weak to crawl, let alone walk. But that was all that was weak about him. He knew from scratch what he wanted, which was a family—father, mother, sibling rival, and all—and he set out single-mindedly to establish his claim. He sounded the charge against our five-year-old, Miranda, contesting her right to the merest kiss in his presence.

"I wouldn't mind so much," Miranda observed with extravagant candor the day he fell sick, "if this one died." But this one was not about to die: he had come incubating chicken pox, which he proceeded to share with his sister. They shared that, shared a room, were obliged, willy-nilly, to come to terms with sharing us, too. They developed a working relationship.

Until he could walk, Miranda dragged him around by one leg. She plaited his long, thick hair with ribbons, dressed him in one of her baby frocks and called him Debby. She rolled him up in a shawl, crooning lullabies, called him Toby after her dead little brother, familiarized



him with Toby's framed picture and with the history of her loss. "Take his picture out," Malachi demanded once he had learned to talk, "and put mine in there."

He made himself one of us fast enough, and he could occasionally pass as ours by blood. (An interested passenger looking the four of us over on a bus once observed, the girl was her father all over again, the boy the image of me.) My own mother pronounced him conclusively in the matter of character far more my child than Miranda, bless her, with her refined little ways. Malachi contrived at the same time to use his otherness to unfair advantage. "I'll go back to Cambodia," he would threaten when crossed, and when we said we'd just follow him there if he did, "You can't," he would parry triumphantly, "you don't know where it is."

It wasn't until nursery school that Malachi learned that being what he called "adocted" wasn't all beer and skittles. One summer afternoon at going-home time, I

found him on the steps there, the disconsolate subject of the speculation of three Lilliputian companions. He wasn't, they asked me, really mine, was he? I wasn't his real mother, was I? Rising to their challenge, fronting each in turn, I picked them off one by one. "Did your parents search the wide world for you? Did yours for you? And how many steps further than the hospital did yours go to get you? We searched the wide world to get this boy."

That, he and I agreed as we stalked off together, should settle their hash once and for all. But there was more to it than that. "You wanted to get me?" he took to asking unpreluded, sitting at the kitchen table, staring hard at the wall. Or in the elevator, apparently addressing the push button, "You wanted to get me?" Then at last, point-blank, "You wanted a brown boy, Dad? Ma, you wanted a boy like me?"

A boy like him? Search the corners of this earth for his like, where breathes the half-American, half-English, Jewish, Cambodian boy who can match his speed in the 100-yard dash, who can play the recorder so melodiously, throw a fishing line as dexterously, make friends as firmly, belch as resoundingly as our boy can? Show us the boy with an eye as sharp as his for finding money in the street. We should all have such a son. (Once he found 20 dollars on the sidewalk. He asked me to make special mention of that.)

From time to time he resolves to save up his *trouvailles* to finance a family trip to Cambodia. There the four of us will gaze at the marvelous temples he knows so well from the picture books. He will acquaint us with his people. We will sit by the Tonle Sap, the Great Lake, watching him land prize after prize catch of fish. ■

---

## Visiting Suzanne BY WENDY LICHTMAN

**N**ot long before I took my seven-year-old daughter, Bekah, to Colorado to visit her birth mother, I read one of those studies about twins who were separated at birth. One mother complained that her child wouldn't eat anything that didn't have cinnamon on it. When the researchers interviewed the woman who had raised the other twin, however, she said the girl was a fine eater. As long as I sprinkle a little cinnamon on her food, the second mother bragged, she'll eat anything.

There are bonds, I realized, that are beyond our understanding. It's a thought that was to cross my mind more than once when Bekah and I were in Colorado.

Bekah's birth mother, Suzanne, and I write to each other once a year around Bekah's birthday, trading photos and news, and Suzanne always sends her a present. One gift, a plate with a hand-painted picture of a girl, became a particular treasure. At first, Bekah kept it in her room, then in the kitchen, and then on the dining-room table. She was searching, it seemed, for somewhere special, but could never find quite the right place. Although Bekah hadn't seen her birth mother since she was an infant, she always cried and spoke of missing Suzanne after receiving a present.

I had always assumed that Bekah would visit her birth mother when she was a teenager or a young adult.

But one summer morning I awoke, turned to my husband, and said, "I want to take Bekah to see Suzanne." I was thinking of a close friend who was dying of cancer, leaving behind a four-year-old. I must take Bekah to see Suzanne now, I thought, before anyone else is dead.

I called Suzanne in Colorado Springs, and we had an awkward conversation. She wasn't sure she wanted us to visit. Because Bekah is deaf and primarily uses sign language, Suzanne was worried about how they would communicate. And she was scared that Bekah would ask her the hard question: Why did you give me up?

I tried to reassure her. Bekah is used to being with people who don't sign, I explained, and I would be there to interpret. If they wanted some private time, they could write notes. As for the second worry, I didn't think that question was on Bekah's mind. She tells her adoption story differently each time, but it always includes the part about Suzanne not being ready to have a family, how brave and generous Suzanne was, and how grateful and lucky we were.

Trying not to pressure Suzanne, I made up a story about having to go to a conference in Denver. If she would like us to visit, I would bring Bekah with me.

The next day, she called back and said yes.

Bekah and I spent Friday night in Denver and drove to Colorado Springs early Saturday morning. During the hour-long drive, Bekah, who usually doesn't stop talking and signing, sat silently with a coloring book in her lap.

And then, finally, Bekah stood face-to-face with her birth mother. "You are so beautiful," Suzanne whispered. She and Bekah hugged, then Suzanne and I hugged, and then in our nervous excitement, Bekah and I hugged. Suzanne gave Bekah a gift she said was from Rachelle, her two-year-old: a stuffed Pooh bear, exactly like the one Rachelle sleeps with each night, but one size larger.

The day before, Bekah had gone shopping with her father to buy Rachelle a gift, and had decided on a soft yellow panda bear, exactly like the one Bekah sleeps with, but one size smaller. I tried to pretend that I believed it was only a coincidence. But I believed nothing of the sort. I believed that Suzanne and Bekah were like the twins who wanted cinnamon on everything.

Bekah was delighted to teach Suzanne some signed words. But their private conversation happened on paper. Suzanne wrote, "Is there anything you want to ask me?"

"One question," Bekah printed. "OK?"

"Anything is OK," she answered bravely.

"What," Bekah asked, "is your middle name?"

The next day, I was standing in Suzanne's living room looking at the photos of Bekah on the mantel while the girls changed for the pool. When Bekah came out of

the bedroom carrying her sister, I gasped. Rachelle's bathing suit was the toddler version of the jungle-print suit that Bekah had insisted on buying.

"It's the same material!" I signed hysterically to Bekah, who happily signed back, "Sisters!"

Later, Suzanne and I talked while the girls played, and I wondered about our own connection—not quite friends, not quite family. There is no word for what we are to each other, I thought, as we spoke intimately about our pasts, our children, our relationships.

We all cried when we said good-bye Sunday afternoon, but it wasn't until Bekah got in the car and we pulled away that she began to wail—a guttural cry of pure grief. I pulled over to hold her, but she asked me to keep driving. Back at the hotel, I sat with my journal, trying to collect my thoughts. I wrote about the stuffed animals and the bathing suits, of course, though I knew the trip had been successful not because of the things that seemed extraordinary but because of the things that



I knew the trip had been successful not because of the things that seemed extraordinary but because of the things that seemed ordinary. Suzanne was a person now, not a fairy godmother.

seemed ordinary. Suzanne was a person now, not a fairy godmother. Bekah had gone for a swim and had eaten ice-cream with her. She had seen Suzanne's home and her daughter. "I'm so grateful," I wrote, "that I had the courage to come here."

The next morning, Bekah and I met a deaf couple in the breakfast buffet line. After she finished eating, Bekah went over to their table to visit. They had been married the day before, the woman told Bekah.

"Do you know that at Paul and Sharon's wedding," Bekah said as we left the hotel and headed out to our car, "nobody signed but them?"

"Really?" I asked sadly.

"Yep," Bekah nodded. "Paul said he and Sharon didn't really understand the service, but he thinks they're married." Bekah laughed at Paul's joke and slipped her hand into mine. She signed with the other, "They said I'm lucky you're my mother." I held her to me, resting my

cheek on the top of her head.

"Not only because you sign," Bekah told me.

"Why else?" I asked.

Bekah shrugged. "Maybe another mom wouldn't bring me here, or...let me spend eight dollars on toys for the airplane."

On the birthdays since our visit to Colorado, Bekah is always happy to receive Suzanne's gifts and cards; she doesn't cry about missing her anymore. She puts the photographs into her scrapbook and places the gifts on a special shelf in her room with the handpainted plate. Everything, it seems, is in the right place. ■

# You Are Me, a Letter to My Son

BY LARRY CARLAT

*Dear Robbie,*

*You were born a poet. Let me quote a few  
of your best lines:*

*I bet my birth mother is still crying.*

*I wish God would take the sadness off me.*

*If she kept me, I never would've known you.*

*I have a space in my heart that never closes.*



s I sit here wrestling with words that invariably elude my grasp, I wish I could write like that. But what do I expect? You are seven, and I am only forty-two.

Before you read any further, you should know that your mom doesn't want me to write this. She doesn't want me to write anything that might one day awaken any doubt in you. So I made a deal with her. I promised that if she feels the same way after I've finished, I'll punt on the whole thing. That's how intensely she feels about you, how fiercely protective she is of you. She doesn't want me to write this letter, because she loves you so much, and I love you so much that I have to write it, even if I don't show it to you until you have kids of your own.

Here are the words your mom fears: I didn't want to adopt you.

I know that sounds like powerful stuff, but to me those words are as trifling as the ants that march across the kitchen floor before you put your thumb to them. They mean nothing because I can't even remember feeling that way. I've searched my heart and can't find any trace of not wanting you. It would be like not wanting air. Still, just as I can't imagine not wanting you, there was a time when I couldn't imagine you. I didn't know that you were going to be you. I knew only that you were not going to be me.

Your mom says I was hung up on this crazy little thing called genetics, which should never be mistaken for that crazy little thing called love. It all seems so bizarre, given that my family background includes everything from cancer and heart disease to criminal behavior. Your

mom says that I was worried that you wouldn't be perfect, that we would be inheriting somebody else's problem and that nurture would be revealed as nothing more than nature's cheap consolation prize. Your mom says I can't recollect any of these gory details because sometimes I can be a stubborn bastard.

That must be where you get it from.

Because, Rob, when all is said and done, you are me—only way better looking. You are me if I looked like Brad Pitt and your mom looked like Sharon Stone. You are more like me than Zachary, who inherited torn genes from me and Mom. You and I are both the eldest son, moderately shy and exceedingly anxious. We love Michael Jordan, movies, scallion pancakes, and the occasional doody joke. We're natural-born outsiders who share the same thin skin.

And there's something else that you and I have in common: I once had a space in my heart that wouldn't close. I still remember the cause. When I was four years old, two very large men wearing very large hats came into our house and hauled my father away. He didn't come back for eight years, and even after he returned, he couldn't repair what had been ripped apart. My dad was a sad schmuck, sad in that he never tried to change himself into a dad.

For me, everything changed the moment I saw you.

After four years of infertility and a bout with cancer thrown in for good luck (if I hadn't had it, I never would have known you), I was finally ready to entertain alternatives to producing a mirror image. I tend to arrive at places in my heart long after your mom has moved in and decorated. Your mom always knew that she wanted to be a mom, while I was just beginning to understand what it meant to be a dad. You know the next part from your baby book that you keep under your pillow.

"They met a wonderful young lady who was growing a baby boy in her belly. But she wasn't able to give her baby all the good things the world had to offer, and she wanted that for him, very, very much."

Seven months later, I found myself in the hospital, scanning the blue “It’s a boy!” stickers on the bassinets until I saw your birth mother’s last name neatly printed in black ink. And at that moment, the space in my heart was filled. It was either magic or God—I’ve forgotten what I believed at the time. “You’re my son, you’re my son,” I quietly mouthed to you through the glass again and again, trying to convince myself that you were real. Then I went to your mom, and we hugged and cried while you kept sleeping, our little boy, Robbie James Carlat, unaware of how much joy you could bring two people.

And the reason I can no longer recall not wanting to adopt you is simple: That feeling completely vanished on the day you were born. “I know, I know. It was love at first sight,” you like to say, sounding like a cartoon version of me anytime I bring up the subject of your birth. But it wasn’t like that between my dad and me. I don’t remember my father ever kissing me or, for that matter, me kissing him. The thought of saying “I love you” to each other, even when he came back from prison or as he lay dying, would have cracked both of us up. In fact, the closest my father ever came to a term of endearment was calling me “kiddo” (which is the full extent of his parental legacy and why I usually answer, “Ditto, kiddo,” when you say, “I love you”).

There’s a black-and-white photograph of my dad holding me up high above his head—I must have been six months old at the time—and it’s the only time that I can recall him looking genuinely happy to be with me. I used to think of that picture in the months after you were born, when I danced you to sleep. I never dance, not even with your mom (“They’re all going to laugh at you!” from *Carrie* pretty much sums up why), but I loved dancing with you. While you sucked on your bottle, I savored the feeling of your tiny heartbeat against mine. Joni Mitchell’s *Night Ride Home* was on low enough that we wouldn’t wake up your mom, and I’d gently sing to you, “All we ever wanted was just to come in from the cold, come in, come in, come in from the cold.”

Still, the space you were coming in from was far colder than mine had ever been. It’s the original black hole, and all of our kissing and hugging are not enough. All of your incessant “I love you’s” and “I love the family”—words you repeated as if to convince yourself, the same way I did when I first set eyes on you—are not enough. All of the times that you asked me to pick you up and I happily obliged because I knew a day would come when you would stop asking are not enough. Every night when we read your baby book, which desperately tries to explain whose belly you grew in and how you got to us, is not enough.

Nothing is enough, for there’s nothing that approaches the clear and direct poetry of “I hate myself because I’m adopted” or “I’m only happy when I’m hugging and kissing you—all the other times I just make-believe.” If anything, you get the prize for coming the closest to the pin with “Being adopted is hard to understand.” And what do you win for saying the darndest things? A profound sadness. And let’s not forget its little brother, anger, which you direct at your little brother for no apparent reason other than he serves as a constant reminder that you are the one who is not like the others.

The irony is that Zachy, the prototypical little bro, only wants to be you, while you’d do anything to be him.

I hope that one day God grants your wish and takes the sadness off you, because your mom and I know how truly blessed we are to have two beautiful sons—one chosen by us and one chosen for us. It’s like we wrote at the end of your baby book: Mommy and Daddy waited a long time for a baby—a baby boy just like you. And though it might have been nice to have you grow in Mommy’s belly...always remember that you grew in our hearts!



Perhaps the only thing we neglected to consider at the time was your heart. Which reminds me of sand castles. A few summers ago, you and I built a beauty on Uncle Stephen’s beach, and you wanted to surround it with a moat, so we started to dig a hole with your big yellow bucket. We kept digging faster and faster until the hole got so deep that you jumped in. “Daddy, get the water,” you said, and I ran into the waves, filled the bucket, dragged it back and dumped it into the

hole. The sand quickly drank it up, so I kept going back and forth, trying to fill the hole with water, but it was like pouring water down a drain. After a while, we finally said the hell with it and ran into the ocean.

You are the sand, little boy, and I will always be the water.

And that was where I intended to end this letter, until you came padding into the room in your G.I. Joe pajamas. “What are you writing about?” you asked. And when I told you that it was a story about you, you asked, “Is it going to be in your big magazine?”

And I said, “Yeah. How do you feel about that?”

And you said, “Scared.”

And I said, “How come?”

And you said, “Because I’m going to be in it alone.”

And I said, “No you won’t. I’ll be in it with you.”

And you said, “I love you, Daddy.”

And that’s where I had to stop writing. ■



# Contributors

---

ELIZA THOMAS and her daughter, Amelia, live in Montpelier, Vermont.

JANA WOLFF is the author of *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*. She and her family live in Honolulu.

BARBARA JONES is a writer who lives in New York City with her husband and children.

DAN BARRY is a columnist for *The New York Times*. He lives in New Jersey, with his wife and two daughters. Excerpt from *Pull Me Up: A Memoir*. Copyright © 2004 by the author and reprinted by permission of W.W. Norton & Company.

JANIS COOKE NEWMAN lives with her family in California. Excerpt from *The Russian Word for Snow* by Janis Cooke Newman. Copyright © 2001 by the author and reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Press, LLC.

DENNIS KNEALE is father to Jing Jing and an independent journalist in New York.

JEANNE MARIE LASKAS is the author of *Fifty Acres and a Poodle* and *Growing Girls*. This article was originally published in the *Washington Post Magazine*.

MARIE HOWE teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and is the author of three volumes of poetry, including *What the Living Do*.

MARYBETH LAMBE lives on an organic dairy farm with her husband and their eight children. When she is not milking cows, Marybeth works part-time as a family physician and a writer.

DAN SAVAGE and his family live in Seattle. Excerpt from *The Commitment: Love, Sex, Marriage and My Family*. Copyright © 2005 Dan Savage and reprinted by permission of Dutton, a member of the Penguin Group (USA), Inc.

SARAH SAFFIAN is a therapist and writing coach. Excerpt is from *Ithaka: A Daughter's Memoir of Being Found*. Copyright © 1998 Sarah Saffian and reprinted with permission of BasicBooks, a member of the Perseus Books Group. All Rights Reserved.

DEIRDRE LEVINSON is a writer who lives in New York.

WENDY LICHTMAN is a writer in California. Her personal essays have appeared in many national newspapers and magazines.

LARRY CARLAT is a writer and editor who lives in New York with his wife and two sons.

