

Notes on Parenthood

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Barbara and her adopted baby girl.

I'm downloading photos of a baby from Facebook to email my mom and dad when I begin to cry.

I know why I'm weepy even though, to be honest, babies give me the heebie-jeebies with their tiny, fragile bodies and late-night cries. It's because this baby is special. Already, even though we haven't met, I love this baby in some instinctual way.

It's because this baby is adopted. And because I'm adopted, too.

There is a woman. A woman with a womb. A womb that once held me. Her baby. Stretching and breathing and squirming with a heart beating in a balloon under her belly. A woman. With a womb.

I do not know her.

I am a little girl, sitting on top of the counter in my parents' blue bathroom. I swing my legs and watch my mother at the mirror in her bra and panties squeeze her eyelashes and pat them into shape.

Adoption. I've always known the word. Somehow, as if whispered to me during my sleep. *Uh. Dah. Puh. Shun.* But now, here in the blue bathroom, I want my mother to tell me what it means.

It means God and destiny and some other woman. A woman. With a womb. It means I am wanted, I was chosen, I am divine. Literally an answer to prayers sent up to heaven like smoke signals.

Adopted. I wrap my tiny mouth around the word. I feel the way it creates a hollow space in the curve of my tongue.



Little Kristen, spoiled rotten.

I have a playroom. My parents had it built on the back of their tri-level house in the suburbs on Pine Knott drive. To hold my dollhouses, crayons and paints, even a '50s-style jukebox. The carpet is yellow, orange and brown. I transform its grid-like pattern into avenues for my Barbie vacation van. The playroom cabinets are filled with stacks of MAD magazines, old textbooks I use to play school and boxes of supplies for craft projects.

While I play, my mother sets up a TV tray, pushing the legs into the shag carpet in the living room. She brings down my lunch and a glass of milk. I sit, eat. Watch *Three's Company*. On school days, my mom makes my lunch and puts stickers on the baggie that holds my sandwich: ghosts and pumpkins in the fall, bunnies and tulips in the spring.

I am spoiled. Divine, wanted, loved.

So how is it, after all this, I turn on my parents? Betray the two people who sat up late at night, frantically praying for a baby to pop into their lives?

It happened when I was 13, riding home from school, staring at the C on my report card. In health, of all classes. I am a straight-A student. I don't make Cs.

But this is back when report cards were hand-written, and my health teacher had even used a pencil to write in this disastrous grade. I look around the bus to see if anyone is watching. I erase the C. I write in: A.

My mother finds out. She confronts me two days later when I get home from school. I watch words fly like bullets out of her mouth, ringed in red lipstick. I create an elaborate lie in which I am innocent. But she knows.



High school: When the angel baby transforms into a vile teenager who thinks it's fun to scare people at the Dayton Mall during the holiday shopping season.

I am 17 and I hate my mother. I have hated her for awhile now. We have been in fights — big fights with scissors and heavy textbooks hurled through the air, fights my kid sister has had to break up, sticking her skinny body between the two demons we've become.

I run away from home. I get in my red Chevette with a plastic shopping bag full of cassette tapes by bands with names like Suicidal Tendencies and a gym bag full of polyester thrift store clothes, black tights and ripped T-shirts. My mother will not see me for three months.

She will have time to think about this woman. The woman with the womb and half my DNA, the man who also contributed his DNA. My mother will tell herself it is them, the mystery, that keeps me away. My mother will search for them, try to capture something about them and hold it in a jar, like fireflies, keep it to show me when I finally turn up again.

I am back home, and my mother wants to *discuss* why I left. I'm sitting at the counter in her blue kitchen. I swing my legs and listen to her tell me what she discovered. They were young, in college. She worked as a waitress. The Womb. He was studying architecture. The DNA.

My mother reaches in the pantry and takes out a roll of beige paper. She unrolls it across the counter as I reluctantly move the bowl of homemade minestrone I've been eating out of the way. The paper is filled with drawings I made as a child — crude blueprints of an entire city: houses, schools, streets, libraries.

"See? Remember?" My mother draws in close. I can see the flecks in her red lipstick. "You drew all this. And *he* is an architect."

Can I feel who I am now? Do I see it, written in pencil, on this paper?



Holding my baby at my Grandpa Wicker's house, standing in front of framed photos of me and my parents when I was a baby.

I can feel when it happens. Like a pinch.

I know it as we hike the Grand Canyon, up steep trails carved in sheathes of limestone, across the Tapeats plateau peppered with brush and cacti. We stop for a break and eat crumbled Oreos, some of our last food from the backpacking trip for which we packed too lightly.

In a few weeks, I will pee on a plastic stick. I already know what the double pink line means. I also know I will keep this baby. This baby is mine.

What I don't know is how hopelessly unprepared I am to be a mother. I also don't know that the experience of motherhood will finally darn the frayed quilt that has become my relationship with my parents.

My father had circled the ad for summer jobs in Grand Canyon in the *Dayton Daily News*. I'd gone for an interview at the Holiday Inn on Wagner Ford Road, was immediately hired as a housekeeper. Drove West. Decided to stay.

Now, it is fall. I am back in Dayton for a visit. And I need to tell my mother.

I sit on the white antique bed in my old bedroom. I'd had a mattress on the floor and painted the room a dark purple. Now the walls are covered in blue wallpaper. Stuffed teddy bears sit on a shelf above the bed.

My mother sits beside me. I chew my nails. She wants to know about my life thousands of miles away. I tell her about my job. I tell her I'm pregnant. I tell her I'm getting married. She can come to the wedding if she wants.

The next day, we go shopping. My mother buys me a white dress.

She drives me to the airport a few days later. In the car, we talk. She apologizes for the flying objects, the punches, the big, big fights. I nod. I tell her — and I really mean it — I am sorry, too. On the plane, I look out the oval window at flat, green Ohio and cry.

When I get back to Arizona, I get a letter from my father. My mother has told him. He tells me he's disappointed. He expected more. I am too smart. But we are a family. His love for me is what I see when I look up at the sparkling, never-ending Western sky. He will love his grandbaby fully in just the same way.



Hiking with my baby in the Grand Canyon.

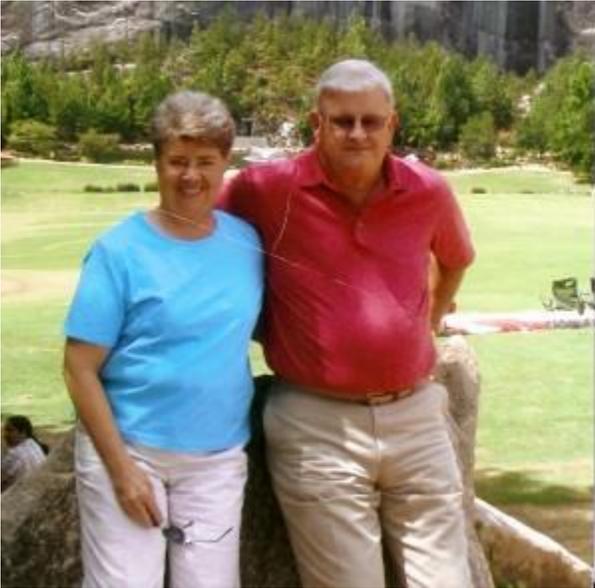
I am filling out a medical form at Planned Parenthood. At the top of the “family history” section, there’s a small box. A box you check if you’re adopted.

I’m surprised. By now, I’m nearly 40 with my own baby grown up, graduated from high school — and I’ve never seen this before. Usually, I write the following: “Adopted: Don’t know family medical history.” Instead, I check the box. How nice that I don’t have to explain!

Next to me is a stack of magazines. Red lettering on the cover of one reads, “Adventures With My Adopted Daughter.” I pick it up, turn to that page. The nurse calls my name. I cough and tear out the magazine pages. I must finish reading. I stuff the pages in my purse.

When I see the doctor, she asks about my family medical history. I tell her about the box I checked with a thick, black line.

She apologizes. She is embarrassed. Tells me she’s not used to looking at the box. Not many women check it. Later, I will not be able to find the pages I ripped from the glossy magazine discovered in the office lobby. It’s as if they dissolved into the lining of my purse.



My parents. Mom and Dad.

I am holding the special baby. Her mother glows like the moon and almost sizzles she is so happy. This special baby has a pacifier with her name embroidered on it and little tights with a Mary Jane shoe design sewn in the feet.

She already is spoiled. And loved, madly, just like my parents love me — as deep and vast and intense as the Arizona sky. I hope it doesn't take this little girl as long as it took me to realize how special she is.

Recently, my mother told me about a friend, also adopted, who searched out his birth parents. She thinks it's strange, and I know she's really asking if I'd ever do the same. I have parents, I tell her. The womb, the DNA: They are only those two words. They are not the ones who helped raise my son, taught me to cook and sew and ride a bike, sent me cards with notes of encouragement when I was distressed.

I imagine my parents, 40 years ago, as happy as my friend is while she holds her special baby. Then my friend says something that sticks to me like paste: "We don't say, 'Our daughter is adopted.' It's, 'We adopted her.'"

What a beautiful way to arrange those words.