

Baby Giver

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I stood at the window with you in my arms, looking out into the parking lot from our fourth-floor room searching. I was desperate. Where was it? This strength everyone told me I possessed all those months leading up to that day? I kept looking. Maybe it would somehow appear, looming over the top of one of the cars parked out there. One of those minivans, probably owned by one of the other new moms down the hall or next door. A brand-new minivan, purchased especially to take their brand-new baby home in. I cringed with envy; damn minivans. I wondered what it would be like to take a baby home from this place. What it would be like to be one of those “happy” moms with her new minivan. I looked back to you; the tears were coming down my cheeks. I was not one of those happy moms; my strength was failing me. Our time together was fleeting. My new focus was on trying to memorize every single thing about you, every feature, every sound, every smell. My concentration was abruptly broken by a knock on the door.

“Who the hell is it?” I screamed in my head. I gave the nurses specific instructions. “No visitors today!” This was our day, just the two of us. I needed this time. Why was somebody here trying to rob me of it? Reluctantly, I invited the unwanted visitors in. It was a friend with her mom. She was a good friend; I couldn’t be mad at her for wanting to support me. This was the hardest thing I had ever done, and she had come to comfort me. Although her intentions for being there were sweet, the interaction with her and her mom proved awkward. It was as awkward as every conversation I had with every person over those last eight months about the decision that haunted me day and night. It played like a record over and over.

Everyone: “Oh, you’re pregnant, congratulations!”

Me: “I’m giving the baby up for adoption.”

Everyone: “Oh.”

I heard the same reaction each time. It was usually followed with an uncomfortable, “That’s such a brave decision. You’re so strong.” Again, this

bravery and strength were so hard to find in that moment while I stood there engaging in agonizing small talk with the last people that visited before that big, dreaded moment.

In a very short amount of time they would come. The adoptive parents, the counselor, the ex-boyfriend, the lawyer, the papers; none of which I was ready for. I just needed more time. I knew it was the right decision for you, for me, for the parents; it was what everybody expected to happen. I just wasn't ready. No one said it was going to be that hard. No one told me the past two days would pass in seconds rather than hours. And to look at you, you were just so perfect, so beautiful. Your raven-colored hair, rosy complexion, perfectly round little head, just the right amount of fingers and toes. And why was that new baby smell so intoxicating? I had never smelled a person's head so much in my life! What was worse? You did not cry. You were the most composed little lady, so calm and peaceful. It was as if you knew. You felt my sadness, and you didn't want to make it any harder for me than it already was. I knew those moments were precious, and I was not going to forget a single one.

The breakup went as so many do. He wanted space; that's code for "I'm already seeing somebody else, so this isn't going to work anymore." I wasn't dealing well with the breakup. I had obviously invested more in the past three years than he had. There were a lot of emotions, typical post-breakup stuff, but why was I feeling physically ill? Why was I letting him get to me that much? I kept trying to convince myself he wasn't worth it. Eventually, I sought counseling; maybe I was physically depressed. I went to a session or two.

One day I was on a lunch break from work, and something came over me. Not so much a revelation or an epiphany, but more of a nagging need to eliminate a possibility. So off to the drugstore I went and came home with that little box. A few minutes later a positive affirmation of just why I was getting sick in the mornings was revealed. I wasn't sick over him; I was sick from nausea caused by being pregnant! Wait, what? My mind reeled. "This is not good. We're not together anymore, it's been a month since we've even talked. I have to go back to work soon; what am I going to do? Okay. I'll pick up the phone and spread this shock-wave; I'm not the only one involved

here.” So, I called him at his work.

There was no preparation for presenting the news; I just kind of blurted it out. “I’m pregnant and don’t even ask me if you’re the father.” I don’t know why I felt it was necessary to add the second part of that sentence. I suppose I wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to piss me off by insinuating something along those lines so, I beat him to it. Shockingly, he was not overjoyed at the news. Not much else was discussed as we both needed a little time to process the weight of the situation. I went back to work in a daze and didn’t say anything about it to anyone else that day. My next step was to get it verified by first, another home test (different brand, just to be sure), and second, I made an appointment with my doctor. The inevitable confirmation followed, and the maelstrom began.

So, bananas were a no go. Saltines were placed on the nightstand and eaten before my feet would even touch the floor in the morning, or my face would be in the toilet first thing. You had a strong aversion to bananas, which I was slow to learn, however, to this day I still can’t finish a whole one due to reminiscing. I was not a healthy eater, but I made an effort. I got the prenatal vitamins; I stayed away from people who were smoking; I tried to get plenty of rest. Aside from the morning sickness early on, you didn’t cause too much trouble in there. The real problem, it was the middle of summer, and my car didn’t have air conditioning! I had to drive around with towels stuffed inside my shirt, so I didn’t show up places with sweat stains all over. Gross, I know.

We were greeted by a glowing neon stork hanging on the wall. A slightly kitschy choice for a law office I thought, but also a humorous touch. I felt like I’d made a good choice. After all, I had no friends who would know about adoption lawyer referrals, and the ex was completely absent during the search. I think he was only there out of legal obligations, not emotional. It was a strange process, like being interviewed by the FBI or something. They wanted to know everything about us, our lives, our health, education, and our family’s health history too. It was all in an effort to ensure we’d be providing them with a normal, healthy baby for a well-paying set of adoptive parents. I left the office that day with a manila envelope full of potential parents’ mini-bios, which they’d prepared for birth mothers like

myself. The bio was a couple of pages that included their story, why they wanted to adopt, and pictures that were meant to show them in what they hoped was their best light.

How surreal of an experience it was to sit sifting through an envelope of profiles for people that I didn't know, but they all wanted my baby. How would I choose? How would I know if they were the right ones? What if I was making a mistake? There was a juxtaposition there that didn't escape me. I wondered how hard it would be to think of the perfect way to "sell" yourself as a potential parent to a stranger's child? I was holding someone's hopes and dreams in my hands. A manila envelope filled with couples' devastation, anguish, yearning for something only I could give them. We needed each other equally. As crass as it may have sounded, I just had to find the one couple whose desperation spoke to me the most. Find it I did, and sooner than expected. The very first profile I pulled from the envelope, the first one I read, the one I still have saved away in a lock-box, that was it. Why exactly those people felt right to me was hard to explain. The profiles that followed theirs seemed just as sincere and lovely. But that one, that very first one, it was somehow THE one, the couple I knew was meant to be your parents.

What do you say to the people you've just chosen to raise your unborn child? Well, there was a bit of protocol as decided by the adoption lawyer. An 800 telephone number was set up for the adoptive parents. Even though I would be meeting them and it was a semi-open adoption, they were still afforded a certain amount of anonymity. I dialed the number. They knew the call was coming, but they didn't really know what I was going to say. I compiled a list of interview questions if you will. I had to know a little more before I committed 100%. I asked about their family; there were no other kids. He was a doctor; she ran a little gift shop.

This, unfortunately, wasn't their first time going through this process. They were chosen before by another birth mother. Then, why no baby? The birth mother was a little younger than me and after she delivered she changed her mind while still in the hospital. The adoptive parents received this news while waiting down the hall in the hospital to meet their new baby. It almost made me want to give them my baby even more. How horrible of

a thing to have happened. Their expectations of bringing a new baby home with them, finally having the family they'd been dreaming of, ripped away and there was nothing they could do to change it. I think that part of my strength throughout my pregnancy had derived from my desire to make it right for that couple. I would help them; I would give them their family. The gravity of that decision, however, would not fully reveal itself until that day in the hospital holding you in my arms, looking out that fourth-floor window.

There was still time to change my mind. I thought, "You're still mine; I can leave with you today." But how could I? Nothing in my life had changed. I didn't have a great job, insurance, or even my own place to live. I was alone; there was no plan for bringing a baby home that day. Those amazing people were waiting down the hall in that hospital, hoping for their family to finally be complete. It was happening, no matter how hard it was going to be for me, I had to keep my word. The past two days I had taken as many pictures as I could. I held you as much as I could; I only let you leave the room for mandatory tests. I looked around the room at all the flowers sent from friends and family that adorned every available flat surface. I knew their intended purpose was to cheer me up. However, it reminded me more of a sight from a funeral home, as I knew this was most certainly going to be the death of something inside of me. The time was getting closer. I couldn't push it away; I couldn't make it stop.

A lawyer, an ex, and a counselor walked into a room. It could have been the beginning of a bad bar joke, but it was instead, the real-life scene in my hospital room. The lawyer came with his stack of legal papers, the ex came to sign his rights away, and the counselor came to support me. I held you in my arms while I signed the papers. I cried and to my surprise, so did you. My sweet little baby who had not cried in two days started crying as I signed the papers to give you away. My heart wrenched, and my hand shook. You could no longer hold it in either. The sadness you had sensed in me all along was now your own as well. We were about to say goodbye, and you weren't ready either. There was no way to turn back; we were both facing the inevitable. The papers were signed, the adoptive parents came in to meet you and see me for the last time. I looked and felt absolutely wrecked,

devastated, and weak. It was my choice to personally hand you to them. From my arms to theirs; it had to be that way. The ex managed to leave the room seconds after their arrival to avoid having to witness the exchange. He was, in predictable fashion, leaving me to do all the hard work.

There it was; I could see the anticipation in their eyes. I'll never forget the overwhelming conflict of happiness for them and sadness for myself as I handed you over, my beautiful daughter. They had a little gift for me, and we took a couple pictures together. Aside from that, the right words were hard to find. There was no proper etiquette for those types of situations. They knew I was in agony and knew they couldn't say anything to ease that for me. They, of course, thanked me and told me over and over what a wonderful gift you were for them and how grateful they would always be to me.

And then, you were gone. It was all of a half an hour, and everyone left the room. You, my daughter, became theirs; you weren't mine anymore. I liked to think of you as our baby girl rather than just theirs. Everyone had left the room except for the counselor, the woman I had been confiding in regularly throughout my pregnancy about all of my doubts and fears. She was there. Not my ex, not my friends, not my family, just her. She sat next to me on my hospital bed as I wept. Not cried; crying you can control, you can get it out and then you're fine. It was uncontrollable weeping. I could not stop. I felt powerless. Most can't imagine what a birth mother feels after giving her baby away. It can't be explained. It was an unfathomable sadness and emptiness. I was grieving for you because you were lost to me. My journey of coping with that grief is never-ending. It was not a feeling that passed with time. My brief feelings of comfort came from knowing that you were being raised by good people who loved you.

In the years that followed, I stayed connected with that counselor by working with her giving lectures as a birth mother to potential adoptive parents. Each time I would tell my story she interjected at the point where I talked about how I wept in the room with her by my side. She always stopped me at that point to really get the audience to understand what I meant by weeping. She would say that there was a phrase about someone crying a puddle of tears, but that until that day she had never actually witnessed a

person crying a literal puddle of tears as I had done. She would say she had never seen it happen since. I felt like she emphasized this part of the story, not to make the parents sad, but just to try and make them appreciate just what the birth mother goes through. We are not just giving our babies away to make our own lives easier. It is a decision that does not come easy, and it's always made with someone else's best interests in mind. It is a decision made out of love. One we make knowing that the hurt it causes us will never go away, but the joy it gives to someone else is what makes it worth it.

Eleven months after you were born, I met my future husband. We were married two years later. Four years and six months later our son, your brother, arrived. He was delivered at the same hospital as you by the same doctor. The feeling in the delivery room knowing I was taking that baby home, it was incredible. There were no awkward conversations, no visitors not knowing the right thing to say. You were on my mind and in my heart the whole time. Every part of my second pregnancy felt so different than the first because I knew, this time he was going to stay mine, no one else was taking him. I left the hospital with him in my arms. I went out to the parking lot to my brand-new minivan that I bought especially to take my brand new baby home in. We drove home together and finally, I was one of those happy moms.