

# A Gift for Grace

It wasn't until my daughter's first birthday when it hit me: I was grieving her birthmother's loss. With that realization, I was able to celebrate as she would have wanted. **BY ANDREA FOX**



Grace, 2, with the author at home.

I could hear the guests arriving downstairs. My husband, Bill, kept them entertained, so I could pull myself together. Our family had come to celebrate my daughter's first birthday, and I—the host, the mom who waited forever to be a mom—was hiding in the bathroom, sitting on the floor and sobbing.

Reflecting on the past year, I should have seen this coming. As a 45-year-old, full-time, first-time mom of a three-pound preemie, I quickly realized that there are as many ways a mom can cry as Eskimos have words for snow. As each day drew to a close, I would try to determine what had triggered my tears. Adoption issues? Infertility leftovers? Lack of sleep? I started a game of it, called “Name Those Tears.”

Several weeks before Grace's birthday, my sisters began asking me what I was planning. Their questions confused me. I didn't feel like celebrating, but I didn't really know why. Instead, at the thought of Grace's

birthday, I plopped down on my couch and cried. Eventually I decided on an intimate birthday dinner and told my family we'd be celebrating at our house.

## Trusting Beth

When I sat down to write the agency-required “one-year letter” to Beth\*, Grace's birthmother, my mind wandered back to the moment we met at the hospital. I don't recall all that was said, but I remember that the air between us was filled with hope, longing, confidence, and fear. She looked different than I'd imagined her. I realize now that there is no typical birthmother “look.” I thought to myself—the first of many groundless thoughts—*She's so pretty; she accessorizes and wears nice clothes. Why is she making an adoption plan? Will she back out?*

Over the next 11 days, while Bill and I waited for Grace to be discharged from the hospital, we grew to trust and admire Beth. At dinner that first evening, she took out a

tattered prayer card. She told us that she had prayed to St. Anthony to help her find loving parents to raise Grace. By the time she met us, she knew that her prayers had been answered.

After dinner, we walked Beth to her car.

## BIRTHDAYS IN OPEN ADOPTION: WHAT YOU TOLD US

“We just celebrated our daughter's second birthday. Her birth siblings and grandmother traveled to visit us. It was wonderful, and we couldn't imagine it any other way. We often look back on the day Emily was born and remember how emotional it was. I also wrote a long letter to her birthmom on her birthday.”

—MESA COLE, Havana, Florida

“Our daughter is turning three, and we expect her birthmother and grandmother to come to her party at our home, as they have the last two years. It was great for our friends and family to meet them, so they could put faces to their names and chat with them. It made them more understanding of open adoption. I save every card and gift they've ever given her as a keepsake.”

—CANDICE BRODA, Takoma Park, Maryland

“My husband and I lived close to the birth family during the first two years after our daughter came home. We had a big celebration for her first birthday, and a smaller get-together for her second. Members of her birth family attended both parties. We moved away after that, but, every birthday since, we have shared either a call or an e-mail with our daughter's birthmother. It's important to us to tell our daughter her story often and to speak lovingly of her birthmother, especially on her birthday.”

—KIERSA, Arcadia, Florida

“We make it a point to have a separate birthday party for our daughter and her birth family. They choose not to be involved with the extended-family parties that we have for Julia, so we have a special time with just the birth family and us. I take pictures and make a flip book, and send copies to the birth family after each party.”

—BECKY GUDERMUTH, St. Louis, Missouri

There she presented us with a bag of baby clothes, telling us that she didn't want us to waste time shopping. She wanted us to spend all of our time with Grace while she was in the hospital. I was speechless as she handed the gift to me, and equally speechless when she brought up the topic of breastfeeding a few nights later. She'd read that it was possible for adoptive moms to breastfeed, and she wanted Grace and me to develop the special bond that comes with this intimacy. I knew then that we were blessed to have her as Grace's birthmother. Over the next few months, the last thing I could have predicted happened: Beth and I became friends, as close as sisters.

### Problem Solved

Sitting on the bathroom floor as the party went on without me, I began to see what was wrong—why I'd been crying, why I tried to forget about Grace's first birthday.

I tiptoed out of the bathroom and made my way to our bedroom. Kneeling on the floor, I pulled out a pink paisley box from under our bed. This is my "Leave It Up to

God" box. It's where I've placed scraps of paper denoting problems I can't solve and decisions I don't want to make. I reached into the box and found my list. It's dated May 6, 2007, six months after being told that we couldn't conceive a child, and a year before I was really ready to adopt. It's titled "Why I Don't Want to Adopt." I scanned the list and found the item I was looking for, scrawled between *It's so expensive* and *I want my child to look like Bill and me*. Number 6 is *I want to be the only mother my child has*.

But I'm not. Grace has two mothers: a first mom and a forever mom. And it hit me—I'd spent that first year grieving Beth's loss, and what I assumed she was going through. Beth's letters and e-mails came less often in the months leading up to Grace's birthday. I respected her need to retreat, to reflect and heal, but I missed my friend. It was really that simple. I didn't feel like celebrating if she couldn't be there with us. All of a sudden, I felt selfish, silly, and guilty. Beth made a decision. She wanted Grace to celebrate life and be celebrated; how could I doubt her faith that

this was the right decision?

In one of her letters to us, Beth wrote, "I hope that Grace will bring you all the joys a child can so easily bring into your lives." She has, many times over. My heart is twice as full as I ever thought it could be, with my love of Grace and my admiration for and love of Beth. I used to worry about becoming too close to my child's birthmother. But now I see our closeness as our gift to Grace. And, despite the diminished contact, I know Beth will come back to us when she is ready.

So, I decided I would celebrate Grace's special day as Beth would want me to. As I descended the stairs to join the party, I marveled at how far I'd come since I wrote "Why I Don't Want to Adopt." I had wanted my daughter to have only one mother, but now I can't imagine our lives without Beth. **AF**

ANDREA FOX is a former high school English teacher.

\*Name has been changed to protect privacy.

 **Every Year on His Birthday** When the birth-mother requests photos and a letter only once a year, what do you put in the box? Read one mom's story at [adoptivefamilies.com/birthdaypackage](http://adoptivefamilies.com/birthdaypackage).

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