

Too Close For Comfort?



I never realized how warm this tile floor gets. Must be from the kitchen lights downstairs. Why did we make this bathroom as cavernous and stark as a roman bath? Why didn't we install towel bars - or better yet: towel warmers! Why didn't we put in the steam in the shower? I'd use that much more than this Jacuzzi tub I'm sitting against, which takes 20 minutes to fill up for a 9 minute bath for our 1-year old daughter, Cricket. I love the nickname Cricket, but it just hasn't stuck. She is a Grace, without a doubt, but I still like to call her Cricket every now and then. Bill and I got the name from a cell-phone commercial, when we were sitting in our musty efficiency suite in Charlotte, after an exhausting day at the hospital, feeding our little preemie every three hours, wondering when she'd be discharged, and praying that the relinquishment papers would be signed, so we could end our adoption journey and begin our lives as a family. But, why on earth I am thinking of these things now? My doorbell rang seven minutes ago, and everyone is surely wondering where I am. My family is here to celebrate Grace's first birthday, and I - the host, the mom who waited forever to be a mom - am hiding away in our bathroom. And when had I started this sobbing?

I guess I should have seen this breakdown coming. For five weeks my two sisters had been asking me what I was planning for Grace's first birthday. I found their questions odd and foreign. What was I supposed to do for a one year birthday? Balloons, clowns, pony-rides? I knew in the back of my mind that I really should start planning, but I just didn't feel like it and didn't really know why.

One month before Grace's birthday, the morning mail brought a magazine dedicated to decorations for birthday #1. (How did they know Grace was turning one anyway? Scary.) Looking at the pictures of babies in princess chairs and tiaras brought a wave of disgust and incredulity. When I finished the magazine (like a driver gawking at the twisted metal of a car wreck, I just had to view the whole thing) I plopped down on my couch and sobbed. As a 45-year old, first time/full-time mom of an adopted preemie, I realized quickly that there are as many different ways a mom can cry as Eskimos have words for snow. At the end of each day during my first year as a mom, I would reflect on my crying spells to determine what had triggered my tears. I started a game of it called, *Name Those Tears*. So, in the middle of my magazine-induced fit, I tried to figure out what was gnawing at me this time. Adoption issues? Infertility leftovers? Lack of sleep? Lack of youth? I settled on lack of sleep caused by Grace's impatient lateral incisors, and I called my family to plan an intimate dinner to celebrate Grace's birthday.

Two weeks before Grace's first birthday, I sat down to compose the agency-required "one year letter" to Elizabeth, Grace's birthmother. My mind wandered back to the moment we met. I don't remember all that was said, in the cavernous, colorful lobby of Levine's Children's Hospital, but I do remember the air between us, filled with beauty, hope and longing; confidence and fear. She did not look like how I imagined her - I realize now that there is no "typical birthmother" look. She had on a pretty black sweater and tan pants, with simple gold loop earrings and a scalloped brown wooden bracelet. I remember thinking how lovely and becoming Elizabeth's hairstyle

was: soft brown chin-length waves, with bangs swept over her left eye. I thought to myself - the first of many irrational, groundless thoughts - *She's so pretty; she accessorizes and wears nice clothes. Why is she making an adoption plan? Will she back out?*

At dinner that evening, Elizabeth took out a tattered prayer card and told us that she had fervently prayed to St Anthony to help her find loving parents to raise Grace. She told us that when she saw our picture sent to her from the adoption agency, she thought her prayers had been answered, and, when she met us, she *knew* her prayers had been answered. Over the next eleven days, while we waited for Grace to be discharged from the hospital, I came to trust Elizabeth completely and we became friends. Her friend Andy said that when we got together we laughed and talked like sisters, and that despite our opposite hair color, we even looked like sisters.

I tiptoe out of the bathroom and make my way to our bedroom. Kneeling on the floor, I pull out a pink paisley box from under our bed, and I return to my comfortable spot on the bathroom floor. This is my *Leave it up to God* box; it's where I've placed scrap pieces of paper with problems I can't solve and decisions I don't want to make on my own. It contains prayers as simple as a solution to my lower back pain and as tantamount as should I marry Bill. I know exactly what I'm looking for, and I find it scribbled on the back of a quiz on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, from my former life as a high school English teacher. It's dated May 6, 2007, one month after starting adoption paperwork and only six months after being told that we couldn't conceive a child. It's entitled, *Why I Don't Want to Adopt*. I scan the long list, and I find it sandwiched between *it's so expensive* and *I want my child to look like me and Bill*. Number 6 on my list is *I want to be the only mother my child has*.

"ALL OF A SUDDEN I FEEL SELFISH, SILLY, AND GUILTY."

But I'm not. Grace has two mothers and she's turning one, and only one mother is able to watch her try to blow out her candle. This thought angers and saddens me. And then it hits me, sitting on the bathroom floor, when the party has already started; I realize that I have been grieving - suffering Elizabeth's loss, what I assume she must be going through, along side of her, for her. It's really that simple. I've avoided planning Grace's first birthday celebration because I don't feel like celebrating. I miss Elizabeth. All of a sudden I feel

selfish, silly, and guilty. Elizabeth made a decision. She wanted Grace to celebrate life and be celebrated. Despite how hard it has been for me, I know that my closeness to Elizabeth will ease the inevitable feelings of loss that await Grace through her own adoption journey.

My epiphany couldn't be more poorly timed, and now I hear the timer on the lasagna. Pulling myself together to join my guests, I marvel at how far I've come in the two years since I wrote my *Why I Don't Want to Adopt* rant. I had wanted my daughter to have only one mother, and now I can't imagine our lives any other way.

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