

Feelings of Love, Feelings of Pain

by Kim Malcolm

Not long ago, Beth Hall from Pact called me at work to say a mother-to-be had chosen me as the adoptive family for her baby. The baby was due any day: was I interested? I felt a thrill I'd never felt before and at a frantic pace began preparing myself for the days ahead. That night, I spoke at length with the mother-to-be (whom I'll call Melissa), purchased and assembled a baby crib, packed a diaper bag, and made excited calls to family and friends.

Melissa went into labor the following day. I hopped a plane to Seattle and arrived at the hospital shortly after Melissa had given birth to a beautiful baby boy I named Brady. I spent the day running between the nursery window, Melissa's room and the phone. Every moment felt new. I juggled feelings of joy, sorrow, fear, love. Would I be a good parent? Was Brady as healthy as he seemed? What would the future be like for Melissa and Brady and me?

As the day passed, however, I had to face harder questions. I sensed that Melissa's natural feelings of loss and sorrow were overtaking her commitment to finish high school and pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer. My excitement turned to fear. I spent the following day in the hospital awkwardly trying to take care of Melissa's feelings and my own. And I flew back to Oakland that night alone.

A friend of mine later told me that the trauma of pregnancy is physical and the trauma of adoption is emotional. Adoption is risky business, sometimes. Although most carefully-planned adoptions are successful, most prospective adoptive parents experience uncertainties and losses that are unknown to parents who go through pregnancy. We wait to be chosen, wondering what is wrong with us and the image we present to birth parents. We wonder if birth parents will change their minds after we have fallen in love. We worry that the adoption

bureaucracy will impose an anonymous, painful process upon our most cherished dream. And for some of us, our deepest fears come true.

I still cry sometimes for the child I thought would be part of my family forever. But if I had the choice, I would choose my painful experience over no experience at all. I learned too much to surrender the lessons. I learned that my decision to adopt was a commitment that lived in my heart as well as my mind. I learned about feeling compassion for a young, scared mother. I learned that I could love a baby whom I held only once.

More important, I felt a lot. All of those feelings can be described in two words: love and pain. Since the day of Brady's birth, I realize those two feelings are inseparable and that both of them are the prerequisites to joy.

I'm not a mother yet, and sometimes motherhood feels a million miles away. During those times, I think about Brady - he's still a part of my life.

Kim Malcolm is an Administrative Law Judge and a single adoptive mom. Gabriel, her new baby boy, joined her family in September, 1992.