

Regret

by Gillian J. Freney

Author's Note: *I worked as an adoption counselor for eight years. I am proud of that work. I was honored to play a small part in the complicated and courageous process that is open adoption. The details of this story have been altered to protect the identity of the people involved, but the spirit of what transpired is retained.*

Many years ago, I was an earnest new adoption counselor and Emma was one of my first clients. She was eighteen years old and six months pregnant when I knocked on her door for our first appointment. "Are you the adoption lady?" she asked, peering through the screen door. "I am. Hi." She flashed an ironic smile. She was long and lean, with straight black hair and startling blue eyes. "Huh," she said. "I thought you'd be older and, you know...more official-looking. Come in."

Emma shared a tiny apartment with her mother. There were droppings from their pet bird on the furniture, and stains dotted the rug. Their little terrier peed with fright when I came in. Emma tousled the dog's ears fondly, and ignored the spot on the rug. The living room was lit by a television. Clothes, papers, and crusted dishes lined every surface. Emma tossed a pile of laundry on the floor so we could sit on the couch and talk. I tried not to wonder about the stain I sat on. She looked incongruously lovely in the squalor, sitting with her legs crossed in the dim corner of the couch, both hands resting on her stomach. "So," she said, eyes welling with tears, "how do I go about this?"

I met with Emma almost weekly for the next few months. We had an easy rapport. We shared a sarcastic sense of humor and a shameless love of dogs. She showed me poems she wrote for the baby. She told me she wanted to go to college. She wanted a career and an apartment with a view of the city lights. She wanted her child to have two parents who loved each other. They needed to have "enough money to relax." Never having enough was all she'd ever known. Emma had a razor-sharp wit and all kinds of teenage bravado, but she was young. Her mother was in the bedroom with the door closed every time I came. Emma would knock on her door. "Mommy? The adoption lady

is here. Do you want to talk to her?" Mumbles from the other side. Shrugs and embarrassed smiles from Emma. "She'll meet you next time, I guess."

This far into her pregnancy, Emma was down to two choices: adoption or parenting. Everyone had an opinion about what she should do. Her friends, especially, pressured her to keep the baby. "I love my baby," she told me repeatedly. "Do you think I'm a bad person?" She was pragmatic. She was just out of high school, jobless and penniless. She had some friends and family, but they had struggles of their own. Emma was smart and resilient. I didn't doubt she could rise to the demands of motherhood. People do. But she was determined that adoption was the only option for her. If I challenged her decision to pursue adoption too doggedly, I risked reinforcing the "how could you give away your baby" taboo. It's a powerful cultural force that shames too many people into unwanted parenthood. Whenever I broached the perfectly plausible option of Emma raising her son, she cut me off. "I'm too young," she said. "There's just no way." So we moved forward.

Emma chose an adoptive family. They had a kind of giddy courtship. They had her over for dinner. She gave them a framed ultrasound picture and invited them to prenatal appointments. They planned an open adoption, complete with regular visits and no secrets. Emma gave birth to a baby boy. She placed her son in the arms of his adoptive parents when he was two days old. I believed Emma was making an empowered choice when she followed through on her adoption plan.

Five days later I answered my cell phone on a crowded sidewalk and heard Emma moan, "I want him back!" Wet sobs warped every word. I plugged one ear to hear better. "Emma?" I said, hoping I'd misunderstood. "I want my baby back," she wailed, clearly this time. There was no misunderstanding. It hit home like a hammer. It was too late. Her parental rights were already legally terminated. I strained to sound composed against a rising tide of panic. "I'm sorry, Emma. I'm so sorry."

How could this possibly be anyone's job, much less mine? I was out of my depth. Emma's howl of regret riddled me with doubt. Did I miss something? I pictured Emma doubled up on her stained and sagging couch, plumbing the kind of despair that only a mother who's lost a child can really fathom. I thought I had done everything right. I expected Emma to grieve, but I did not expect this. Now I feared I had made some series of rookie blunders that resulted in Emma making a decision she would regret for the rest of her life. Was I too friendly, or too motherly with her? I imagine few before me had ever shown such interest in Emma's feelings and priorities. Was she seduced by all the respect and attention? The adoptive parents were charmed and dazzled by her. Was she swayed by the flattery? Why did I place so much confidence in Emma's words? She was so young. Did she lead the adoption process, or did it lead her? By orchestrating the steps that landed her here, I felt complicit in breaking her heart.

I had some concerns along the way about Emma's resolve. She broke down when it came time to work out the details of the open adoption agreement. She was eight months pregnant. Her mother was a no-show for the meeting at the adoption agency. Emma sobbed. The adoptive parents sat wide-eyed and helpless. I called off the meeting. She was in no shape to make agreements. The next day, concerned by her hesitation, I reminded her it was not too late to reconsider. "No," she said. "I want to do this." Want. She also wanted her mother there when she signed the adoption consents, two days after she gave birth. Emma had spent those days in the hospital with her baby. Her mother was late. I whiled a couple hours away with Emma, waiting. We talked about the birth, admired the baby's curly hair and long fingers. We watched the clock as the light outside faded. I turned on a lamp and offered to come back in the morning. Emma didn't want to wait. She had me hold the baby while she signed.

Most birthparents I worked with were older than Emma. Most had grieved before. Many had children already. They were better equipped for the loss. I talked with Emma about how she would cope with her sorrow, but there's no preparing, really. Giving birth. Letting go. They're just words, before they become a tempest of blood and love.

Emma was frightened for her child. I was so green at that point that I honestly hadn't given much thought to the risks through her eyes. Mine was still a shallow perspective. The baby was better off, right? These people had money, stability, and each other. I was not yet a mother myself. I still viewed our primal protective instincts from a safe distance. Over time I learned that every birthparent accepts an icy burden of "what ifs." What if this family is not what they appear? How well can you really know someone who desperately wants what you have? What if they can't quite open

their hearts to him? What if these adoptive parents are fundamentally unhappy, unkind, or inept? Or worse? Sure, they were approved to adopt. But there is no crystal ball. You can't protect a child you've relinquished for adoption. We all make leaps of faith, but adoption is more like a toss of faith, with a defenseless baby flying from one set of possibilities to another. The fabric of that child's life is changed unalterably. The choice makes no allowances for the impossibly high stakes.

In hindsight, I think it was no accident that Emma waited until it was too late to voice her anguish. She knew the legal timeline for changing her mind, and she let it elapse. I suspect she called me not because she thought I could get her baby back (I couldn't), or because she felt betrayed by me, but because she trusted me. She needed to be heard, and she chose the shocking language of her heart to do that: "I want my baby back." Who else could she say it to? Her mother? Absent. The baby's father? Absent. The adoptive parents? It would demolish their delicate bond. Her teenage friends? They all told her not to do it.

Emma couldn't will herself to have more confidence, money, or help. Nor could she will herself not to ache intolerably for her child. But she could tell me something about her loss. Her humbling words of despair attended me through dozens of adoptions over many more years. While I was never again confronted with such stark words of regret, I'm still grateful that Emma ripped off the bandage and made me look at her wound. I continued to take birthparents at their word about their choices. They deserved and required as much. But Emma helped me see what a poor match words were for her experience.

Adoption is a fragile container for so many longings. Every adoption is underpinned by questions about the nature of choice, justice, fate, and love. I believe Emma wanted to place her child, given everything. But what does it mean to want something you can't imagine? Her decision was an abstract thing with brick-hard ramifications. The line between sorrow and regret is blurry. I think it's only natural for birthparents to step back and forth over that line sometimes. I don't regret my part in any adoption, even Emma's. But I am still so sorry.