

Birth Parents Profile: My Secret Life

by Michelle Cabrera

Throughout my entire life, my parents have always told me that I could trust them and talk to them whenever I needed help. They were my best friends. I knew I could always count on them for advice. We trusted each other. I am closer to them than are any of my brothers or sisters (there are six of us). I was the favorite; I was "daddy's little girl." My dad would brag to everyone that I was the greatest daughter. He made it sound as if I were a saint.

When I moved away from home, at seventeen years old, he was heart-broken. I moved to San Francisco to go to college, but nothing worked out for me. I dropped out of school and got a low-paying job. My parents were very disappointed. Shortly afterwards, I became pregnant. I felt so ashamed. The birth father didn't want anything to do with the baby. I was left on my own. I was confused. It was then, more than any other time, that I needed my best friends: my mom and dad. But I didn't tell them. All I could think of was that I was letting them down.

I decided to turn to my sister for help. She was also pregnant (my parents knew about her child). I stayed with my sister in San Diego for two weeks. She advised me to get an abortion. There was no way I could raise this baby: I was single and had no stable place to live. I made an appointment for an abortion, yet when the day came, I couldn't do it. I longed to see my first child grow up. My sister knew she couldn't push me, but she reminded me that I had one more choice: adoption.

I was scared of adoption. I couldn't imagine giving birth to a baby and then never seeing it again. I would never know anything, if he or she was in a good home or if the adoptive parents were treating the baby OK. I was worried that my child would be lied to about my existence. What bothered me the most was the thought of my child calling another woman "mom." I cringed to think of it. But my sister urged me to consider adoption and I did.

I left San Diego and went to visit my parents. I didn't want them to get suspicious later and ask questions about why they hadn't seen me for so long. I stayed for a few weeks, during which I was very uncomfortable. My dad would go on and on about how wonderful I was, and I wanted to tell him that I wasn't so wonderful. I so badly wanted to tell my mom. My body was changing; I had many questions. With six kids, she was sure to know everything. I was very lonely. More than anything, I was afraid. I feared that I would lose their love. While I was there, I received a letter from a friend, telling me

she was sorry about my situation and asking if she could do anything to help me. When I went back to San Francisco after a couple of weeks, I made the mistake of leaving my letter behind.

I didn't yet have a place to live in San Francisco, so I stayed with my boyfriend till I could find one. I got my old job back and tried to live my life as usual. Hardly anyone knew about me, and I didn't wish to tell them. I wanted to keep it that way, so once again I began to plan on abortion. This time I got as far as the clinic. The nurse was very friendly, and we talked a little as she examined me. I had a few more days when an abortion would still be OK, so the decision was now or never. I was confused and angry at myself. When I started to cry, the nurse held my hand and comforted me. She told me to stop pushing myself to do something I didn't really want. That was exactly what I had been doing, and I thanked her. On my way out, she handed me a brochure on adoption.

That brochure saved me from insanity. From it, I learned about open adoption. According to the brochure, it was possible to stay in contact with the adoptive family, if they agreed to it. I was still pessimistic about it. I feared the family would lie to me and promise to allow contact just to get my baby, but would then run away so that I would never see them again. Of course, I was still confused and a little undecided, but I made adoption my decision.

I told my social worker at the hospital where I got my prenatal care what I had decided to do, but still deep in my heart I wanted to keep the baby. She helped make a list of how I had to change my life to be a parent. I was living with a friend, so I would have to move out of there and move in with my parents (which was definitely not going to happen) or find a homeless shelter, since I didn't have money for an apartment. I would have to quit my job and collect welfare or work three jobs just to be able to afford day care. This life did not hold no appeal to me. I could barely take care of myself, let alone a baby. I didn't have it in my heart to deprive my baby of a good home and all the necessities of life that I wouldn't be able to supply. My decision for adoption got stronger.

Around the sixth month of pregnancy, I started feeling the baby move. I had a feeling it was going to be a boy. His kicks were strong. I would talk to him while I was alone, telling him that no matter what happened I would always love him and that while he was in my tummy I would take good care of him. My promise meant nothing. Sometimes I felt too sick to eat.

I was very underweight for my stage of pregnancy. I was very self-conscious about gaining weight; I was so ashamed to be pregnant that I wanted to keep it from everyone.

My secret didn't keep too long. One morning around my seventh month, I was running to work because I was late. I tripped on the stairs of the building and fell on my stomach. I got up and started to run again, but I fell again. I started feeling contractions and had to go to the hospital. Everyone at work wondered what was wrong with me. My boss knew and told them. When I came back to work, everyone was congratulating me on the pregnancy. They all thought it was the greatest thing. They didn't know my feelings about it. Somehow the rumor got around that I was placing my baby for adoption. I was surprised to discover that many people were disgusted with me. I was getting dirty looks and comments were being made behind my back, calling me such a terrible person because I was abandoning my child. I was very close to the Latinos at work. Being Latina myself, we had a lot in common except when this issue came up. They were offering their help, but at the same time they were the ones who treated me the worst. I was told that I was wicked because I hadn't told my parents. How dare I keep their grandchild away from them?! They told me that if I wasn't willing to be responsible, I should let my mother raise him. Once again, I felt alone. Not only was I ashamed, but I hated myself too.

I was extremely depressed and not eating very much. At the beginning of my eighth month I went for my monthly check up. My doctor told me I wasn't doing so great. They were going to have to induce. I was glad. I was tired of being sick everyday and having to hide myself. My boyfriend came to the hospital as soon as I told him the news. He was by my side every minute. It hurt me to see him so concerned. It wasn't even his baby, yet throughout my pregnancy he treated me with special care as though it were. But more than anyone, I wanted my mommy there to hold my hand.

Julian was born within a few hours. It was a boy, just as I thought. He was so beautiful and looked just like me. He was in perfect health but had to be kept in the hospital anyway because he was a month early. I was out of the hospital the next day, but was back everyday to see little Julian. It was hard for me to be there. The nursery was alive with happy moms and dads laughing and taking pictures. I would sit rocking my baby quietly and cry. Unaware of my situation, nurses would ask questions that would embarrass me, questions like, "Is the baby's room at home ready? Do you have enough baby supplies? Do you need to learn how to breast feed?" I would answer with a simple yes or no and try to ignore them. Sadly enough, my visits were very short. I couldn't take it in there without wanting to scream and kick all the happy people.

Julian was finally released after a week. He went to a temporary home till I chose a permanent family for him. The days before and the days following his release were the worst

I've ever had in my entire life. For days, I could not eat or sleep. I felt so empty and alone. First I had missed the chance to have my baby with me, and then all of a sudden he was gone, not at home where he should be with me. I cannot even describe my grief. It was torture. It felt like death. Julian's "temporary mom" was wonderful. We would talk on the phone, and her comforting words helped ease my pain. We talked about her children and their relationship with their birth mothers. I guess there was a chance of a relationship.

A few weeks later, I found a family for Julian. I was very nervous when I met them. I was scared they were going to judge me and not like me, but it wasn't that way at all. They were very friendly and understood my desire to see Julian in the future. As we spent more time together, I became more satisfied. I visited with the family often. The baby was well. He was so happy, always laughing and brightening up the room.

Almost a year had gone by. Telling my parents never crossed my mind. I figured that I probably never would, until one night my secret shattered. My sister in San Diego called me, saying that my mom had found the letter my friend had sent me. She wanted to know if it was true. My sister denied it all for me. My mom didn't believe her. There was nothing I could do but call my mom myself. As soon as she answered the phone, I told her to burn the letter. She pretended that she didn't know what I was talking about. I broke down into pitiful tears and told her the story from beginning to end. She did not say one word as I talked. When I finished, she told me she still loved me. She was very sad and hurt that I had kept everything from her; after all, she was my best friend. I cried myself to sleep that night — not because I was sad but because I happy to get rid of the guilt without losing the love of my mom.

My mom and I are closer now. I send her pictures of Julian and she always asks about him. She tells me what a beautiful boy he is and that she would love to meet him someday. My father still does not know about him. I don't think he ever will. Of course, I am jealous of all the attention my sister's daughter and my brother's new baby get from my dad, and I don't know how it will be when I have kids of my own. Maybe it won't be as bad as I think if I tell him. I'm just too scared to try.

What if I had told my parents to begin with? I often wonder that. Would I be living with them and parenting? Would I have done the same thing? Yet, whatever it would have been is not important. Julian is in a good home with loving parents. They give him everything a child could possibly need. Even though I still grieve sometimes, nothing makes me happier than seeing my son playing and laughing.

Michelle is an intern at Pact, An Adoption Alliance, and has returned to college.