



pact's

point of view

serving adopted children of color

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Beginnings

by Susan Ito

So many children love to hear the story of when they were born. It is something that I tell each of my own daughters on her birthday. One of them entered the world near high noon, and the other on an early summer night. I tell them about the stuffed white polar bear I wrestled with during the worst of contractions, about the warm bathtub, about not letting their father pee for hours, because I needed to look into his eyes. I tell them about how I cried and then laughed when I saw their faces for the first time.

What kind of stories do adopted children have? I was adopted when I was three months old, and I realized recently that the story of when my parents first met me was the equivalent to my birth story: it was the day that our family was born.

This is what they told me over and over, until I had memorized it the way that I had memorized Harold and the Purple Crayon. It went like this: I was wearing a pink sweater. It was in an office building on an upper floor, somewhere in Manhattan. There was a social worker whose true name was Crystal Breeding. She sat with my parents for a few minutes and then left the room. They sat still as stones in their chairs, waiting for her return. When she came back, she was carrying me. Where had I been, before then? She lay me directly in my father's arms. When he raised me up to look into my face and say hello, I vomited on his suit.

He used to tell me that story with great fondness, as if he was describing an ancient bonding ritual. "And then I gave you to Mommy," he'd say, "and I went to the rest room for a paper towel." He'd shake his head and smile. "Boy, what a mess." But it was, he said, the best mess he'd ever been in.

When I searched for and found my birthmother at twenty, I heard my birth story for the first time. She had been sitting alone on a park bench in New York when her water broke. A policeman brought her to the hospital and she gave birth to me at five minutes til midnight, still alone. Her friends, whom she'd been visiting, were told

she'd lost an appendix that night, and not a child. There were no photographs taken, no flowers. My birthmother was floating high near the ceiling; in a drugged state they called twilight sleep. She didn't wake up or wave goodbye when they took me away.

I liked the vomiting-on-my father story better.

As I moved through adulthood, I had several opportunities to attend the births of my friends' children. I was intoxicated by the immediacy I felt in those hospital rooms, the powerful and often violent beginnings of life. After the babies had been born, and the photos had been taken, I left the hospital and felt amazed that people could be walking the streets, so blasé when just inside those walls, new human beings were bursting into the world. I loved being witness to these powerful moments.

But until recently, I had never witnessed the manifestation of that other kind of story, when an adoptive family crystallizes for the first time. My job at Pact has focused on the planning and organization of family camp, and I hadn't been fully in tune with the many other aspects of what happens in and around the Pact office. I knew that Pact facilitated adoptions, but I had never dreamed of how up-close that experience might be.

One day last month, I was surprised to enter the office and see a very small, round faced infant sleeping in a car seat with a terrycloth tube curled around her head. She had been born two days earlier. Julie, Pact's social worker, explained that her new parents had been notified suddenly of her arrival, and that they were rushing across the country to meet her. The hospital had no reason to keep a healthy baby, and so she had been discharged to Pact's care, and here she was.

My heart slowed down and gave a great, deep thud as I looked at her. She had fine dark hair, full milky cheeks and a beatific expression. I felt as if I were hurtling through time and space, back to the offices of Spence-

Chapin, the place of my own adoption. Here was a baby sleeping in limbo, momentarily homeless, parentless, nameless. She had no awareness of being here. She would never remember it, just as I hadn't, and would only know her parents' stories of this rainy California afternoon. I stood and stared at her for a good long time, and then I felt as if I had better get to work, so I backed away from the car seat, down the hall to my own office.

I kept finding excuses to get up: to search for a box of paper clips, to retrieve some documents from the printer, to make a photocopy. Each time I veered towards the little girl and at last she opened her eyes and looked at me. Hello, I said to her. I wanted to say something like, I know how it is, but that seemed a little ridiculous. Instead I murmured nonsense and stroked her cheek with my finger and made funny noises until my coworker asked if I wanted to hold her.

Of course I wanted to hold her. I wanted to melt into her somehow. I spent the rest of the afternoon holding that baby, sitting with her in the odd waiting room into the rest of her life. I showed her the drawings that other adopted kids had made, of suns and flowers and their happy houses. You're going to your house soon, I said.

The time came that her parents were landing at Oakland airport. I gave her a bottle of formula and thought, her next meal will be the first meal her new mother gives her. Then it was time for them to get out of the plane and rent their car. I counted the minutes I knew it would take for them to fill out their paperwork at the Hertz trailer, and walk across the parking lot to their car. My heart was pounding like crazy underneath my shirt.

I thought of my own parents, forty-five years before, driving across the George Washington Bridge. Had there been traffic? Had he driven fast? Had he broken the speed limit on the Henry Hudson Parkway? I tried to imagine what they were thinking on that drive they had done so many times, commuting across the bridge from New Jersey to go to church, or to work, or to visit people. This time the bridge was bringing them to parenthood.

The minutes went by. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't do a bit of work. I wanted to be there. I wanted to see these people's faces when they came through the door and saw their daughter next to the file cabinet, when they saw her bright little eyes and her perfect mouth, her hair like feathers. I wanted to see this story just as I had seen babies burst, miraculously, from my friends' bodies. I wanted to see this kind of moment when a family would be born.

The parents were late. There was horrible traffic, they had trouble with the directions, and they were hours late. My own daughter, ten years old, was calling me from school. I had to go. I had to leave the office and leave the baby with my other co-worker. My cell phone vibrated in my pocket and my girl's voice, insistent, was on the other end. Where are you, where are you? I'm going to be late for guitar...

So I left the baby there. She was waking up and feeling the limbo. Feeling the parents hurtling towards her through the rain and the traffic. She was crying as I ran out the door with tears in my eyes. I got into my car and turned in the direction of my daughter's school. As I got to the corner, near the traffic light, I saw them. A young couple, hurrying down the sidewalk, their hair damp from the rain. They had no umbrella. They carried an empty car seat between them, and as I turned the corner and looked out the side window, they began to run.