

What Matters

by Nina Dunlap

He comes to you like a dream.

You'd gone to classes, yes, to become a foster mother, but never actually accepted the reality that you would be one. There is a difference.

And while they prepare you for temper tantrums and baggage brought by children too old for their years, so jaded that redemption seems improbable...they don't prepare you for the baby. The beautiful red headed baby swathed in a blue blanket and strapped to wires and machines. The tiny cuddle-ball who only wants to be held. He's almost two months old and you've known him for only a moment and you are already in love. They certainly don't prepare you for that.

They teach you in foster care classes that the goal of fostering is to reunite the child with his birth parents. But how do you reconcile that with your soul when it's the birth parent that put this child in the NICU? Who created this drug-addicted child? Who lied when she gave birth and didn't tell anyone of her addiction and his subsequent addiction? Who caused this child three days of withdrawal and agony before sharp-eyed nurses begged the doctors to recheck him. The doctors then confronted the birth mother who finally admitted narcotic pain pill addiction. Three days later. The child is immediately put on morphine but what agony he suffered.

And the surgery at four-weeks of age from the hernias that he screamed into being during his three days of withdrawal. How do you rest your soul and try to create this reunion? How do you become okay with this?

You meet him when he is a week shy of two months of age. He is still on morphine. You can't bring him home until he is weaned. You worry for his potential agony but my Lord he feels so right in your arms!

He is exactly two months old when you take him home. He is still on medication, however, for seizures. No one knows what the effects of his former addiction will be.

What pure joy he is! His reddish blond hair and green eyes and lashes that last forever; that smile while he sleeps, rocked gently in your arms. And he fits, like he was molded there, in the space between your shoulder and hip, to sleep and hopefully have good dreams.

Remember that they teach you in foster class that the point is to reunite the child with his birth family. In this case, the birth mother. You remind yourself of this each weekend when you have to drive him to the house she shares with her mother and other son. You have to remind yourself of this when you can't even see as you drive away because the tears blur everything in your sight. You have to remind yourself of this as you wait impatiently for the two hours to be over with so that you can bring your baby home again.

By the time he is four-months old he no longer needs any medication. He's drug-free and beginning to really evolve into who he is. His hair is getting longer and starting to curl. You sit for hours and just watch him. Enjoying while he eats, while he sleeps. Enjoying his beginning laugh, his big hands as they explore what's around him; your face, the doggie's fur, his big soft yellow stuffed duck. His baths.

You hold him through the pain of teething. Through the discomfort in his eyes; his tear ducts are blocked and as a result he always kind of looks like he has pink eye. And the skin around his eyes is red and raw. And you kiss him tenderly as you gently clean his eyes everyday trying to be careful and not pull his lashes.

And now there is a frightening hope on the horizon. The birth mother has given up her rights. Even though you still have to bring him for a visit she cannot take him back now. She signed over her rights in court. For the first time you voice your actual hope that this baby, this beautiful boy, can be yours forever. Could it really be true?

The paternal grandmother steps in. She has a long reach; all the way from Florida. She feels that he should be with "blood". She will fight for custody even though her son doesn't care at all about this boy. He's met him twice. Once, the day he got out of jail and one other time. Only one other time. He doesn't care and yet his mother is stepping in to ruin everything!

There is nothing you can do but wait and pray and hope. And of course, continue to fall in love with your baby as he learns and grows and explores his world.

And your guardian angels come through then. The grandmother is deemed unfit. She cannot claim custody of this child. Ever.

Now the beginning.

The court wants to do this right. They want to give the biological father every chance in the world. They want each I dotted and every T crossed. The judge explains that he doesn't want the father to be able to come back in ten years and say, hey wait a minute!

So you suffer through the waiting. And you enjoy each and every moment. You worry through the surgery he has on his eyes for the blocked tear ducts. He comes through the surgery without any problem. But you worry. And you kiss him when it's all over.

And you're marking each milestone. And remember, you are taking care of this baby as he grows. And you've never had a baby shower. And there are people in your family who are afraid to get close. Afraid to hurt. Afraid to fall in love.

And he has his first birthday.

And you get him his first hair cut.

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And you still have that red-blond curl in your wallet.

And you moan because his curls never did come back.

And he takes his first steps.

And he says “mommy” for the first time.

And yet he still has a different last name.

And you still live inside a question mark.

And he has his second birthday.

And he has Christmas with you for the second time but he’s still too scared to sit on Santa’s lap; preferring your arms instead. And that’s really okay with you.

And then you get the court paperwork.

And then you get the phone call from your lawyer.

And then the court date is set.

Two years almost to the day that you met him you walk into that courtroom with your family at your side.

And his name becomes yours.

And he’s squirming in his sweater vest because he has no idea what is going on, he just wants to crawl around on the floor!

And you walk out the door with your son in your arms.

You joke now, when you talk about it, that you went through a two-year labor.

But there was really nothing funny about it at all.

Every moment of every day until that fateful one in January two years later was filled with heart-breaking joy and heart-wrenching terror.

And you still sing him to sleep.

And you still hold him in your arms when he lets you.

And you still thank God every day for him.

And he’s in his first year of school; adjusting to kindergarten.

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And you worry as he struggles to fit in.

And your heart feels like it might burst with the love that you feel.

And you realize through the skinned knees and big, fat tears, and temper tantrums and sticky kisses and finger-painting and camping trips and fishing together off the pier and digging for shells on the beach and shoveling snow in the driveway and fevers and sick-days and football practice and growth spurts and growing pains you are somebody's mommy. It was a rocky and worry-filled road and it sure isn't over yet. But you're here. And he's here. And that's really all that matters now, isn't it?

Nina Dunlap and Danielle are moms to Cody (7 ½) and his dog, a goldendoodle named Idgy Lu. They live in Cicero, New York.