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Adoption Story

Susan Kates

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ADOPTION STORY

The first time I meet Violet's Aunt Crickett, she tells a Bible story to her pregnant niece. It is from First Kings, verses 16–28. Wise Solomon is dispatched to decide a dispute between two bereft mothers who lay claim to the same baby. He solves the dilemma by requesting a sword. "Divide the living child in two," Solomon instructs, "and give half to the one, and half to the other." The real mother (a phrase that will haunt me throughout this adoptive journey), is horrified by the pronouncement. She exclaims, "O my lord, give that woman the living child, and in no way slay it: she is the mother thereof." The infant is returned to the biological mother because Solomon knows that only the natural mother would give the baby up to let it live.

Crickett finishes in a grave Pentecostal voice. It occurs to me that she offers this narrative in support of Violet's decision to allow my husband and me to adopt her baby. The story seems odd, though, given that Solomon returns the child to the biological mother in the end. But Crickett tells her niece, "If you are willing, like the woman in the Bible, to give this baby up, someday he will thank you for a good life." The aunt is not confident that her niece can mother this child, given that she already has a two-year-old son that she has sometimes neglected. I look at the petite teenager folding laundry for some indication of her response to the aunt's narrative. But Violet looks down and places a towel nonchalantly in a pile of others. Like me, the Pentecostal aunt is pushing forty, but unlike me, she is great with child. Crickett wears a gold cross around her neck, her blond hair flipped back, Farrah Fawcett style, in waves from her face. Both aunt and niece have demonstrated considerable fertility over the years. In a matter of weeks, they will have given birth to a total of six children between them. They also profess to have had a number of miscarriages. I, on the other hand, have found baby-making quite

a challenge and to my knowledge, have never been pregnant, even one day.

My quest for a child began years earlier with doctors who, thanks to laparoscopic photography, were able to capture color pictures of my diseased ovaries and those failed messengers, the fallopian tubes. After drugs that made me sick and “reproductive technology” did not take, Frank and I find ourselves in a room with adoption lawyers. We are matched up with a young couple expecting a child and weeks later I am here, listening to the wisdom of King Solomon in a teenaged girl’s apartment.

My desperate wish is that someone would put a baby in a basket on my front porch, ring the doorbell, and run away like they do in the movies. I think about Moses, pushed into the reeds by his biological mother, adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter, and raised as her own son to become the leader of the Israelites. I take walks near a pond by my house and imagine how happy I would be if I found a baby in a floating bassinet made of sticks the way the Pharaoh’s daughter did. Instead I am childless, one of the duped generation of career women who thought fertility would last forever, or at least until forty (If Madonna could do it why not I?). Standing in line at Wal-Mart, I am resentful of women whose shopping carts are full of children reaching for candy or squabbling with one another at the checkout.

And then a phone call changes everything.

A good-old-boy Oklahoma City lawyer telephones with plans to introduce us to a young couple. I dress for the audition of potential parent by trying to look stable, but not dull. Hip, but not trendy. Financially responsible, but not snobbishly rich.

On the day of our first meeting at the attorney’s office, I see that Violet is a slight girl with long chestnut hair and hazel eyes. She could be any schoolgirl, but she has been in no one’s class since the middle of the seventh grade. Her boyfriend, Dusty, has his right arm in a cast (I will later learn from punching through a window while doing lethal amounts of methamphetamines.) His unruly blond hair sticks out beneath a ball cap. Despite the light goatee that could be read

as a gesture of rebellious masculinity, he does not look tough. A skull and bones tattoo flexes across his bare shoulder with a caption that reads: *Lucky*. The two of them have been together off and on since Violet was fifteen. In a stormy relationship that resulted in the birth of one baby, they determine they cannot afford another.

The lawyer holds up a crumpled piece of paper with large curly-cued handwriting. "Violet has some questions she would like to ask you," he says, pronouncing "yew" in a drawl that makes him sound like a preacher instead of an attorney. *Have you ever been abused? Have you ever been in jail? Do you drink or use drugs?* I am conscious of a lump in my throat produced by sadness for Violet that she is in a position to need these questions answered. At the same moment I am indignant and sorry for myself that I must be asked such questions in order to get a baby. In this instant I learn that adoption will not be a clean or easy process, but there is no way I can understand yet how truly messy it will be. "I want to get to know you," Violet says earnestly. "I don't want to just hand *baby* to you at the hospital (she pats her stomach as she says this). *I have to know you*, she emphasizes in a voice that sounds brave for a minute before it trails off again.

Getting to know you is the theme of open adoption. Open adoption is a relatively recent, and by some people's account, radical form of adoption in which the birthparents and the adoptive parents form a relationship brokered by lawyers or social workers. As we sign up for this process, it feels hazardous, and I understand why many people pursue foreign adoption where the chance of encountering the birth parents is less likely.

But I am glad that we have come a long way from hiding pregnant women in homes for unwed mothers and whisking infants away abruptly and destructively from birth parents. Oddly enough, a pregnant woman who chooses adoption over abortion receives very little acknowledgement in a nation where mothers and motherhood are considered sacred. On a recent TV show about celebrity adoptive parents, Rosie O'Donnell was the only individual to grant any appreciation at all to the ones who had made it all possible. "I am the

beneficiary of other women's tremendous generosity," she said. It was the first time I ever recall anyone using the adjective *generous* to describe someone who relinquished a child for adoption. *Unwed mother* and *woman in trouble* are terms that more easily come to mind. In the history of adoption, voices of birth parents have often been silenced. These individuals are supposed to disappear gracefully, forget, and go on with their lives. They are often the ghosts that haunt adoptive families: fearsome kidnappers or fantasy parents, sources of hidden genetic defects, holders of the ever-elusive key to history and identity.

I come to think of Violet as a rescuer, someone who might, depending on the outcome, rescue me from childlessness, but certainly someone who, on many days, shakes me from my own middle-class self absorption and self pity. Abandoned by her own mother, raised in the midst of alcoholism, domestic violence, and poverty, Violet is struggling to do the right thing, whatever that may be. She tells me that she does not want any baby of hers to go through what she had been through as a kid, when she was left to wander the streets of rural Oklahoma towns, eating at missions when her mother had disappeared and there was no sight of her or her next meal. Violet compares herself to friends who are living out the legacies of their neglectful parents and pauses thoughtfully. "A few of my friends called me a 'baby seller' the other day. These are people," she proclaims in an injured voice, "who live in filth and do drugs in front of their children." We contemplate the ethics of adoption, and discuss the trials and tribulations of the wayward adolescents she knows who become parents before they become adults. Violet recognizes the considerable odds against them and herself. "What right do they have to judge me?" she asks.

Nor can I judge Violet, no matter what she decides to do. Had I been a mother at seventeen, I could have no more cared for a child than a needy puppy. Faced with an unplanned pregnancy and no finances to speak of, I would have never for a minute thought of carrying a baby to term and planning an adoption as Violet was in the process of doing. "I don't believe in abortion," Violet tells me thoughtfully one day. "That's just wrong." She has handed me a tiny photo album

of the baby's first ultrasound pictures tied with a red ribbon. "Happy Valentine's," she adds with a smile. "It's kind of scary if you've never seen these pictures before," she warns. "The baby looks kinda like a Martian at this point, but it's all normal." There is nothing about this process that seems normal, least of all the embryonic dream that floats in this tiny piece of celluloid.

In the remaining four months of the pregnancy, Violet and I spend at least three days a week together and talk on the phone frequently. We sit in Sonic, that 21st century drive-in, drinking Dr. Pepper and eating cheddar fries. Thumbing through the pages of the *National Enquirer*, we speculate on the lives of the rich and famous. "I'd sure dress better than that if I had her money," Violet says one day, pointing to a particularly trashy-looking Britney Spears. I couldn't agree more. We make trips to K-Mart, standing mute before an assortment of baby accoutrements: plastic bath tubs, cribs and strollers. As an experienced mother with a two-year-old, Violet, at age nineteen, is in a position to give me advice on the care and feeding of newborns, a subject on which my forty years of life experience are no help at all.

Before long Violet and I resemble joyously betrothed people who long to introduce the beloved to members of our families. One day she takes me to visit a relative she affectionately refers to as "Uncle Pig." While her mother was out staying drunk for weeks or months on end, Violet lived with this gentle uncle. "Why do you call him Uncle Pig?" I ask, stepping up the cracked sidewalk to his house. "It's because he has some kind of pigmentation on his hand. When I was a little girl they called me Grunt, and I named him Uncle Pig." Violet pulls a Valentine card out of her purse for her uncle. "One with mostly pictures," she whispers, "since Uncle Pig can't read."

A tall thin man with no teeth comes to the door and smiles shyly. I like him instantly. The inside of his house resembles a Walker Evans photograph. Magazine pictures, tacked to the cracked plaster, form haphazard wall paper. Uncle Pig says, "Hello ma'am," and then proceeds to focus on his favorite niece. "This is the lady; it's her husband and this lady who is going to adopt the baby," Violet tells him in a voice of shame. The uncle acknowledges me again, smiles, but turns

his attention back to Violet and waits, as if she is the translator and I am a stranger from a distant country.

We sit in the little room on a shabby couch with foam exposed cushions while a mini TV with an aluminum foil antenna brings in *One Life to Live*. Despite the bad reception, I make out a scene where a middle-class couple converses about the heartbreak of infertility. They hug one another with exaggerated tenderness, contemplating a childless future or the possibility of adoption.

Once a month, Violet and I visit the OBGYN together, viewing new ultra sound pictures and asking questions of the doctor. "Look, he's waving to us," Violet says one day, her enormous stomach a gel-covered planet. The ultra sound pictures reveal a sweet infant's face, a tiny hand raised in an Okie hello. I want to lift my hand to his, say *see you soon* or something like that, but I am cautious. I have worked hard to practice distance, despite Violet's insistence that she will go through with this. To make myself brave, I read about famous childless women who made plenty of their lives without babies, women who wanted children but found other ways to live remarkably and fully in their absence. Women like Rosa Parks, who became the mother of the civil rights movement when she waited for a baby but none came along. I practice at the role of supporter, telling myself that my job is to help Violet to make a decision that she can live with no matter what that decision turns out to be. I say *hers, not mine* when I stare at the ultrasound pictures. I say *hers, not mine* when Violet urges me to feel the kicking in her stomach. I say *hers, not mine* when her teenaged friends stare at me with contempt.

One day after an ultrasound appointment, Violet turns to me in the car and asks, "What are you guys gonna name him?" It is four weeks before Mother's Day, a holiday that has caused me some grief in recent years. I feel obliged to reply, "He's not our baby to name yet, Violet. You have every right to change your mind."

She looks sadly out the passenger window. "I'm not gonna change my mind." Turning back, she tries again: "Just tell me. What names do you like?" Finally I give in. I say, "Carson. We like Carson."

As we drive along, Violet's hair whips out the window, a shiny brown flag. In a high pitched teenaged girl squeal, she wags a playful finger at the dashboard, trying the name out. *"Stop that Carson! Put that down Carson! Come back here Carson!"*

"Do you like it?"

"Sure I like it," she grins, "but you're the one who is gonna be calling it out for the next twenty years."

Weeks later, I go to the mailbox and find a large card in a blue envelope. There are baby's footprints on the front of a card that reads *Happy Mother's Day. See you soon Mom! Love ya, Carson.* It is signed, swirls and twirls, in Violet's hand.

Despite any woman's good intentions to relinquish her baby for adoption, it is easy to understand why she might change her mind when the labor pains begin. I am not shocked on the evening we get the call to come to the hospital that Violet does not seem glad to see me for the first time in four months. I have expected it and tried to practice saying, "It's OK. You can keep him." As though it were up to me. As though I had any right to grant permission.

As Frank and I arrive in the small birthing room with yellow duckling wallpaper, Violet is crying. Her Aunt Crickett and Dusty stand on either side of the bed, each holding one of her hands. Until now, she and this infant have lived in the same small, private province. Now she knows that this baby might be moving away for good. Violet has a Samaritan's heart, a sweet disposition, so her confusion comes as no surprise.

"How will I ever forget him?" she whispers to her aunt.

"You won't ever forget him," Crickett says. "You never will."

Suddenly the labor pain starts again, and I see that childbirth is no picnic, even for a nineteen-year-old.

"I love you Violet," I blurt out, helpless and guilty, rubbing her toes.

"You better," she gasps as she manages to grin at me, "cause this hurts."

I have seen babies born on television, but never in real life. At last Carson emerges, screaming and wriggling, a red, angry

infant. Violet holds him first, tears running down her cheeks, then hands him to the nurse who hands him to me for a moment and then to Frank. He weighs five pounds. Dusty, who has massaged Violet's legs throughout the birth and coached her, is visibly upset. Although there has been some question from the beginning about whom the biological father might be, Dusty has always believed he's the one. He looks at Frank and pulls a ball cap awkwardly toward his face to hide the fact he is about to cry. "Send that boy to college," he says softly. Then he walks out of the room.

All night long Frank begins a love affair in front of the window of the nursery, making ridiculous enamored father gestures, tapping his fingers lightly on the glass. Down the hall, Violet is sick as a dog from the pain medicine, and I stand beside her bed holding a pan while she vomits again and again. The nurses are baffled by our situation. They look at me with eyes that say: *baby stealer* and I think maybe I am. Maybe blood trumps everything: Maybe there is no reason in the world why we should be given this child.

In the morning Violet asks to hold him. I take pictures of the tiny girl and tinier infant. "That flash is gonna hurt his little eyes," she says, her hand slanting like a tent above his face. She is in tears, and for a long time she does not speak. They look so *Madonna and child like*. I am a third wheel. I wait for her to look at me and say, "I can't do this," but after a few minutes Violet hands the baby to the nurse and returns to her room to gather her things. Before she can be legally released from the hospital, she walks out the door. Her cousin Donel comes to pick her up. We walk out into the harsh Oklahoma sunlight spilling over the parking lot. She is no longer crying, but I cannot stop. Hugging me before she gets in the car, Violet instructs resolutely: "Go in there and show off your new baby." Then she slams the door on her cousin's red Chevrolet and drives away.

In the weeks that follow, Violet signs away her parental rights to Carson. She and Dusty split up, and he and their son Trenton go to live with his emphysemic mother in southeastern Oklahoma. Every few months Violet calls me to check on Carson, but I hear through Crickett and Violet's cousin that

she deeply regrets her decision, that she has begun a descent into drugs and nomadic stops around the state. For a long time, no one knows where she is, and I feel responsible for her calamity.

One side of the coin is heartache, the other is joy. Waking up to Carson is an every morning Christmas. Eyes shut, he opens his mouth like a baby robin. Relatives fly in to see him and celebrate him. We are given multiple baby showers that Carson attends, oblivious to the car seats and strollers unwrapped in his midst. We go to court and in a ceremony that resembles marriage we raise our right hands and pledge to take care of him, to feed him, clothe him, love him. Then we are given a birth certificate with his name changed to ours, and that is supposed to be that.

I buy a scrapbook with a blue pastel elephant on the front and place Carson's wristband from the hospital and first pictures in it. I wrestle with how to tell this story. It seems like a lie to omit pictures of Violet, Dusty, and the other relatives on the birth side of his family. But for the time being, I put those pictures in a box in our closet, and make our narrative more traditional despite my instinct to do otherwise.

One day near Carson's first birthday, Violet calls to ask me for a ride to a town a few hours away. She gives me directions to a ramshackle house, grey paint peeling from the wood in Shawnee, Oklahoma. No longer an all-American-looking girl wearing polka dot maternity clothes, Violet sports the baggy shirt and jeans of a rap artist. Her small hands wave as she talks, an array of gold and silver rings on every finger. "I'm writing songs now; I'm going to become a drummer," she says resolutely. Gothic blue glitter polish dots her tiny fingernails. I hand her Carson when we stop to eat and she carries him into the diner.

"What a chunk," she says, pinching his cheeks, "How much do you weigh, little man?"

Inside the restaurant, I put Carson in the highchair at the end of the table. I see that there are needle marks, bruised moons that dot the inside of her arms. "Well," she says with adolescent indifference, "I guess you know I'm on drugs." On

drugs means Crank, that toxic blend of methamphetamines that is cheap and easy to make, the poisonous choice of those who can't afford more expensive chemical recreation.

A waitress approaches our table, puts water down before us. "Whose baby?" she asks, assuming it is not a trick question. She is a waitress, I tell myself, not King Solomon, but inquiry hangs in the air: Who is the *real* mother? We pause nervously. "He's ours," I say, smiling. But then I get a strange look from the waitress who has concluded we are lesbians. I gesture toward Violet. "She gave birth to him and allowed my husband and me to adopt him." "Oh . . ." the waitress replies slowly, backing toward the kitchen, sorry to have opened this can of worms.

On the way to Dougherty, Oklahoma, Carson sleeps in the back.

"I don't know why I ever gave him up really," she says. She could be speaking these words to a therapist or a stranger, for they do not seem to contain particular resentment towards me. She is simply stating a fact, like *yellow is the color of the sun*. I don't know what to say. But I am at long last territorial. Making bottles, changing diapers, and walking the floors at night with a sick infant has made me a mother, and as much as I love this woman-child in my car, I do not think Carson would be better off in her care. I am shocked by my response, determined as I was not to participate in a dueling moms scenario, but I find I am not above it after all.

When I can no longer wait to go the bathroom, I pull into a dilapidated gas station in a small town. We enter the establishment, and I hand Carson to Violet, visiting the Ladies' Room as quickly as I can. I have visions of her running away with Carson and up to the house of someone who believes in the superiority of biological mothers. What if they are gone when I come out and I never see Carson again? But when I emerge, she is feeding Carson little bites of powdered sugar doughnuts she has purchased from a vending machine. She carries him to the car and we put him in the car seat and drive away. Hours later, she climbs out of the car and hugs me, then opens the back door and kisses Carson, then waves goodbye to us from the front porch of a friend's house.

Listening to National Public Radio one morning, I am haunted by the voices of women whose lives have been devastated by the adoptive process. They call from Duluth, Denver, and Boston to speak of babies surrendered thirty years ago, as though it were yesterday or last week. One is a writer, one a nun, one a farmer's wife who had other children. But they do not forget. They tell of being thrust into homes for unwed mothers, denied the opportunity to touch what their own bodies had held and nurtured for nine months. Some were never told the sex of the child. A few women speak in voices of well-contained despair; others cry when they talk of children who have not looked for them or about whom they know nothing. One woman says when the news reported a case of child abuse in a town where her son's adoptive parents lived, she tortured herself by wondering: *Is that my child?*

Adoptees speak of the bureaucracy of failed searches or those that led to deceased parents, and other genealogical dead-ends. They talk about a desire to know. Who do I look like? Do I have biological siblings? A beneficiary of the adoptive process, I am implicated in the pain of these voices. I want to rescue Carson and Violet from the heartache these people describe, but I am not sure some days if keeping in touch will be more or less painful.

We read stories to Carson about adoption called *How I was Adopted*, *A is for Adoption*, and *Tell Me Again About the Night I was Born*. I show Carson pictures of Violet both pregnant and holding him as a baby and I try to make the term "birth mother" part of his considerable toddler vocabulary. One day as I explain to him that I couldn't have a baby so Violet gave birth to him and allowed us to adopt him, Carson studies her photo and emergent stomach for a minute thoughtfully. "She has a nice tummy!" he announces at last. "I was in there, waving to my mom and dad!"

Violet sends cards to Carson on Valentine's Day, Easter, and Christmas. She writes "I love you and I miss you" and signs them Violet. She sends pictures of herself when she was a baby, mementos for a keepsake book. I place these items in a wooden box in the top of our closet to give to him someday. It seems preferable to allowing Carson to think he was abandoned at a hospital without a second thought.

No matter how you come by your children, parenting is a crooked road, full of physical and psychological potholes that leave you panting beside any particular route you are fortunate enough to travel. I spend too much valuable time worried about the future, but I am happy to be jolted out of my thoughts by a four-year-old who needs a peanut butter sandwich or help putting on his Batman suit. On any given day, Carson runs through the house squealing with a delight that is high pitched and joyful, in a voice that is all Violet's. Sometimes it is haunting to have her here, but other times it is a comfort. The fact that she brought him into this world—that he has in fact, another mother and father—does not diminish Frank or me, does not change the fact that he is our son, the son of all that is the best in us.

This afternoon, from the backseat of the station wagon, Carson asks me to put on his CD of nursery rhymes. He waves his arm out the window, keeping time with "The Farmer in the Dell." He is jacked up on the sugar cookies he ate before we set off for the playground, wisps of his blond hair moving in the wind like so much dandelion fuzz. He is wearing black cowboy boots with red shorts and a Spiderman t-shirt.

It is easy to live in moments of such perfection. I park the car and lift the little cowboy from his seat. There's no telling what the future holds, but as I take his small hand and walk toward the park, I know I can live with this story. I feel a great affection for Carson's biological relatives who are knitted into the how and why of this boy and our lives. But before I can think too much about it I am interrupted by Carson's insistent voice. "Push me mama," he yells as he runs up to the swing set and takes a seat. I watch as he begins to pump determinedly, stretching his feet toward the white wisps of clouds. "Push me hard as you can," he adds, gliding back and forth, back and forth, "I want to get up to the moon."