

Love Forever

I'm probably not supposed to tell you this, but I didn't really start loving my daughter until she was around 2 years old. I mean I loved her before that, but not the kind of no holds barred, unconditional, can't get enough hugs from those grubby little hands kind of love. That is, until she was legally mine. That's the dirty truth about being a foster mother. You can never really let that love engulf you, not really, until all legal matters are settled, all appeals followed through, and you never have to worry again that someone will take your child away.

There wasn't one day where I woke up and decided to be a foster parent, although adoption had been part of our family from the beginning. My husband and I adopted our oldest son from Ethiopia before having three biological children. By the time my husband and I decided to become foster parents, we already had four kids we were raising with enough love pouring through our family to flood the Nile. Foster care seemed like a different beast; one I was afraid might drown us. By contemporary American standards, we didn't need another child. Our life felt busy and chaotic as a family of six with four children ten and under. Suffice it to say, we didn't think we were missing anything. Our river of love poured through us as we cooked meals, read bedtime stories, kissed boo boos, and washed piles of laundry. And more laundry.

When my husband and I traveled to Ethiopia in 2008 to pick up our son, our first child, the legal adoption had already taken place. Our trip was a chance to see his culture of origin and meet him for the first time. At the orphanage, we saw the room our son lived in with about 20 little cribs lined up along the walls. In an unfurnished room across the hall, a group of toddlers crowded around a small TV with one of the caretakers. The facilities were fairly clean, and the staff seemed friendly. And yet, there wasn't enough staff to hold each baby for their feedings

with bottles being propped up with blankets. There had been an outbreak of chicken pox, leaving some children, like our son, with little marks scaring his face. In an orphanage where kids live in tight quarters, when one kid gets sick, they all get sick.

Despite the depressing conditions, we brewed with excitement and nervousness to meet our child. The orphanage worker handed us a 6-month-old baby dressed in a puffy red coat. He wouldn't make eye contact, a normal habit for a kid growing up with several care givers who hadn't yet learned to form an attachment. My husband and I held him close, examining his face, and gently squishing his tiny body in our hands. Later in our hotel room, I watched myself in the mirror while I held him - my son. It was almost unbelievable. I stared at our reflection together, his chocolate arm against my tanned skin. I don't know what I was searching for in that reflection, some recognition of belonging together, I guess. I had to get used to seeing that tableau; we were officially a forever family. No one could take him away.

Maybe my never-ending love wasn't immediate that day. Being handed a child in a foreign country was a rare and awkward experience, like meeting someone you're related to for the first time. You seek connection, for that thing that proves you're bonded in some way. But it's not always easily identifiable. With my new baby in a strange place, I cleaved to him. And while our bond wasn't instantaneous, what was certain was that we'd be afforded the time to grow our connection, with no threat he might leave my care. From the day I met him, it was official. He was my son - forever.

My husband and I tried again to adopt from Ethiopia, finishing our dossier just before Ethiopia announced its closure in May 2017. Saddened by that development, and after much discernment, we decided months later to become foster parents with the hope of adopting a child

who needed a permanent home. But could I slay my fear of the monstrous uncertainty inherent in foster parenting? How could I open my home to a child that might not stay? Despite my trepidations about a system that does not offer any guarantees, my husband and I resolved to go to battle to bring another child into our family.

Ethiopia wasn't the first country to close its doors on adoption. At its height in 2004, Americans adopted almost 23,000 children internationally in that year according to the State Department. That number has plummeted to 1,785 in 2020-2021. There remain various reasons so many countries around the world halted their adoption programs altogether, many due to political reasons, not the lack of children who need safe and healthy homes.

One might think that the lack of options internationally might have led more Americans to open their homes to foster care. Nevertheless, that has not been the case. The number of children in foster care greatly exceeds the number of foster homes available. This suggests that Americans are interested in building their families with permanency as the goal. For every child adopted from foster care, two children remain in care who are awaiting adoption. This is probably the other thing I'm not supposed to tell you. People don't want to hug and kiss and possibly – gasp – fall in love with a child who might not stay. And a lot of people, including me, are afraid of that possibility. According to the National Council for Adoption, “Foster care, to be clear, is intended to be a temporary solution to keep children safe until they can reunite with their families of origin.” On the contrary, there's nothing temporary about adoption.

Ask many foster parents and you're sure to hear tales of woe - a child reunified too soon or sent to live with relatives they've never met. One of the hardest parts of the process is not knowing – if the child will stay or go, when and who might show up to claim them, and what

happens to them once they leave your care. It's a saint-like task to live with that kind of uncertainty.

Not being a saint myself, I wanted nothing to do with foster care at first, believing it would be too gut-wrenching, like a perpetual jack-in-the box keeping me on edge for when the next surprise might jump out. And yet, I became aware of the dire need of homes for thousands of foster youth across the country. Where I lived at the time, Los Angeles County, an estimated 21,000 foster children were in the system without a permanent residence. In Oklahoma, there are over 6,000 children in foster care with 78 on average in a shelter waiting for a home. We had a home and food and a gaggle full of kids waiting to smother someone with love. Our problem wasn't that we couldn't provide, it was the possibility of getting our hearts broken.

When Vanessa first came, she sat on the floor, her braids swinging about her head. Within the first two hours, she curled up on my lap and fell asleep. It felt like she belonged in my arms. So trusting. So delicate. In the next two weeks, she rarely ventured far from my side despite the fact that she could crawl and cruise like a typical 11-month-old. She smiled at me and fell asleep when I rocked her. When I found out she had a grandmother who was looking for her, the dull ache in my chest ballooned, putting pressure on my heart. She suddenly felt heavier to hold. Her smile, in the beginning, bright and cheerful, now teasing. I wanted to keep her.

Meeting her grandmother and aunt slowly released the pressure built in my chest. They loved her. They could care for her. It had truly been a misunderstanding. Even though I had asked God that she stay with us, I knew upon meeting Vanessa's relatives that he'd answered my prayers in another way. She would be rocked, and fed, and taught her ABCs - just not by me.

We could have given up then on foster care, told ourselves it was not meant to be, but we forged ahead. We'd made a commitment to help children whether for a day or a lifetime. It wasn't time to quit yet.

As foster parents, we grow attached to each child who enters our home. We're trained knowing we're there to support the child or children whether they stay forever or just a day. At the same time, it's difficult, like ten-thousand band-aids being ripped off our skin at once, when a child has to leave and all we want to do is cocoon them in an embrace and protect them like a mama bear does with her cubs.

When Aubrey first came, she lay on the floor and kicked her legs. We all laughed. She had spunk and determination. Aubrey, too, would nestle in my lap and fall asleep, comfortable in my arms. One day at the beach, she sat on the beach blanket laughing, the sun beaming on top of her hat. The breeze smelled of salt water and the sand felt coarse between our toes. My tired husband laid face down on the blanket, the sand warming his figure. Aubrey rolled over, for she couldn't crawl yet and nestled her head on his back. They both slept like two cuddly koalas basking in the sun.

Three weeks later, a judge ordered Aubrey to an overcrowded living environment against the recommendation of her lawyer and social worker so Aubrey would be considered "reunified with relatives." The decision saddened and angered me. I cried about losing her. I cried about the situation she was being sent to live in. I cried because I couldn't understand why she had to leave when we already loved her so much.

When the social worker picked her up a few days later, she let me carry Aubrey out to the car. My kids, glum and disappointed, shuffled along behind me. I buckled Aubrey into the car

seat, and we all waved goodbye. For months after, I stayed in touch with the social worker, making sure she was checking up on Aubrey.

At some point we lost touch, and I can't say I know what happened with Aubrey. I hope she's thriving. While I'm confident she would have blossomed under our care, having to let go and trust the system to watch over her pained me like riding a bike up a steep hill, each breath more and more of a struggle. I couldn't prevent losing her, my thoughts of worry swirling in my head each day after she left, dissipating little by little. I still think of her often.

I wanted to quit – again. My children had welcomed and showered with love two beautiful baby girls only to say goodbye in less than 2 months. We weren't a revolving door, used to taking people in one minute then spitting them back out. We were playing for keeps, and we hadn't found a child yet who needed a forever home. I started to think that it wouldn't work out in our game of chance, and I didn't want any more heartbreak. Even more, I couldn't watch my kids become attached to another child only for them to leave.

But it was a peculiar thing that my children were the ones who egged me on, begging me to accept another foster placement. They'd gotten used to messy baby feedings and baby giggles when they blew on their tummies. They didn't mind the uncertainty or quite understand all of the adult worries that kept me up at night. So, I agreed to give foster care one more chance.

When Liberty first came, she sat on the floor and stared up at us, her big blue eyes taking in her new environment. We played with her and shoved bright-colored toys in her face. She smiled and rolled over, showing us her superior body control for a 7-month-old. We didn't know how it would work out. The odds of adding her to our family permanently didn't seem that strong, but as foster parents we had signed up for the unknown.

As the months went by, Liberty grew and developed. Life for our family bustled around her and included her in all our games, and school concerts, and family outings. With all the twists and turns of her case, I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster ride. One moment it looked like she'd be staying with us, the next day, we weren't so sure. Nevertheless, we loved her through the ups and downs, navigating a set of tracks we'd never traversed before. The longer she stayed, the longer I held my breath – through each review hearing and social worker visit. I didn't want to lose her. I was falling in love.

When the paperwork was signed for her adoption, we celebrated as a family. It was also a sad day in a way, to lose her family of origin. That's another dirty secret about foster care, there's always someone left heartbroken. That day in August, however, it wasn't me with the broken heart. I could finally breathe, and sleep, and revel in Liberty's beauty – that daughter of mine – forever.

(*Names changed for protection)