

Because I Loved You
A Birthmother's View of Open Adoption

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Introduction

In 1984, I was twenty years old and not married when I became pregnant. I had to tell my family, my friends. Then I had to face the hardest decision of my life. You may be in this same place. Or maybe someone in your family is. It's not a fun place to be. It feels like the end of the world—but it's not.

I chose open adoption for my son because I loved him. It was the best option for my son and for me. I know it was the right thing to do because he is an adult now and I can see how his life and mine have evolved. I know the happy ending. I also know that when you are at this crossroads, happy endings seem impossible.

Adoption has had a bad history. Many stories about adoption are filled with pain and regret. This is because, in the past, women and girls who were unexpectedly pregnant often had no choices. Today you do have choices. Open adoption allows you to know your child is okay.

Open adoption provides a line of communication that benefits everyone: birthmothers, adoptive parents, and adoptees.

In this book I explore the full process of adoption: beginning before those fateful words “you’re pregnant” are even heard, through the decision-making process, the birth, letting go, and the many years afterward, as the child grows and relationships change. First, each chapter looks at the research, learning from mistakes of the past and giving direction for a successful future. Second, I share in each chapter a portion of my personal story of adoption. It is my hope that the combination will give insight to those trying to understand the thoughts and emotions of a girl or woman going through this process. To those of you facing this decision, I try to offer hope for your future. Adoption can be an amazing experience, filled with love and respect. I know how hard it is to step into the unknown. I hope that by sharing my story with you it won’t seem so scary. You can even skip the first part of each chapter and just read the story first—I wrote it for you.

As my story unfolds in the following chapters, respect, understanding, and love will emerge as the themes. I cannot say that everyone who chooses open adoption will have the same story. This is my story. However, when the elements of respect, understanding, and love are made a fundamental part of the open adoption process, as they were in my experience, success for all involved is inevitable.

If you are facing the choice of adoption for your child, reading this story of success can give you strength to move forward. Recognizing your commonalities with other birthmothers, like me, as well as your differences, will help you to form your own destiny—and that of your child. In this book, I refer to my unplanned pregnancy as a “mistake.” However, I recognize that there are those of you whose pregnancy is the result of failed birth control or even rape. While the circumstances that brought us to this place may have been very different, our journey forward from this point will share many commonalities. Seeing these commonalities and differences in our stories can show you that you are an individual, who deserves to make a personal choice for you and your child. I share with you my journey, and offer assistance in finding your path as well.

If you are an adoptive parent, this book will help you understand the love and strength it takes for a birthmother to trust you with her child, and help you take those first steps of trust also. Even if you have no contact with the birthmother (such as with foreign adoptions), understanding her point of view will help you in talking with your child about the love that made you a family. For adoptees, this book may help you fully understand the loving choice your mother made for you, and her own sacrifice to do that. For counselors, family members, and all who support a girl or woman through this decision and the years after, this book can guide you in your mission and strengthen you as you see just how deep your influence can be on the outcome of the story.

When my son graduated from high school, I said to his parents, “If I had only known then how it would turn out, it would have been easier.” There were many difficult times when doubts seeped in. If I had known how it would end, I would have had more strength to get through it. I offer my story to all of you so you can let go of your doubts, trust in your heart, and make it through the journey ahead of you.

Chapter Three

Choices That Last Forever

The decision-making journey is a time when everything from your life before the unplanned pregnancy comes together. Your past and what your ideals are of family and responsibility. Your sense of independence, level of strength during conflict, capability to make thoughtful decisions, and ability to think in a completely selfless manner. All these traits will guide you as you explore your options and find the answer that is right for you and your baby.

To help you through this difficult process, this chapter will cover the following stages of the decision-making journey.

- Taking responsibility.
- Getting help from a counselor.
- Looking at the future.
- Exploring options.

- Making your choice.

This process can feel overwhelming at times. You may feel the urge to just give up and let others call the shots for awhile. It's okay to feel this way. You may need to take a break from the decisions for awhile. Take your time, but don't give up. This decision will affect the rest of your life. It is too important to skip or to leave to other people. You can make the right decision for you and for your baby. There are people to help you and options to ease your fears. I did it, many others did it, and we're fine. There will be so much more to your story than this one time where you face this decision. This is why I share my story as it evolved over eighteen years, so you can see that life will go on, and you will find your answers over time. My story is there to offer you hope for your own future. Maybe reading it will help you to make your decision.

Taking Responsibility

When I read the stories of birthmothers who have regrets or felt pressure, most often they had someone in their life whom they feared or who removed the choice from them. Many had parents who simply took over and made the decisions, and they felt powerless to go against them. Many had social workers or counselors who did nothing more than lower their self-esteem to the point of hopelessness. Others lived in communities with such overwhelming social dynamics that the pressure to fit in overwhelmed them.

If any of the individuals in my life had been different, I cannot say that my choice would have been the same. The influence of each person in my life contributed to my final decision. The people in my life gave me information, advice, and—most important—the room and support to make a decision without pressure from others so it would truly be my own. Research and history tell us that a key to the success of an adoption is for the birthmother to be settled and sure of her choice, and that the choice needs to be what her heart and mind tell her to do.

As you reach out to others for help and advice, remember that this is your baby and your life that will be affected by this decision. You are the only person ultimately responsible for making this choice. You owe it to your child to stand up to anyone who tries to force you into an arrangement you feel uncomfortable with. Think of yourself as an advocate for your child. Fight for what will be best for this child. Don't leave this responsibility to someone else—you will be setting yourself up for a lifetime of regrets. Don't expect all the information to fall into your lap. If there is something you want or need, ask for it; look for it. If there is an option you are searching for, and it doesn't exist, find someone who can help you to make it happen. This is how we developed today's practices of open adoption. Birthmothers like me refused to be cut off from their child forever and stood their ground until the adoption agencies listened. Only you know what it is you need. Don't be afraid to find it. Be responsible for becoming informed. Be responsible for learning the lesson that is there to be learned from the mistake of getting pregnant. Be responsible for your child.

Getting Help from a Counselor

There are as many adoption agencies and counselors available as there are possible options for an adoption plan. A lot of wonderful people in this field are just waiting to hold your hand, give you a shoulder to cry on, and answer all your questions. You don't need to do this alone.

Research tells us that "young mothers who receive comprehensive counseling are more likely to choose adoption than young women who did not receive this service" (Buckingham and Derby). Unfortunately, many young women don't get the information they need in order to make a decision, and they are left to make a choice based purely on emotion, with no real discovery of the truths and realities in their life. Or just as bad, they make a choice based on someone else's thoughts and feelings instead of their own, setting themselves up for regret.

When I was attending birthing classes with my mom, all the other girls in the group were young teenagers, and they all were planning to keep their babies. We watched a video that showed one girl who kept her baby, one who kept her baby and later placed the baby for adoption, and one who chose adoption from the start. The girls in the video reflected the girls in our class: the older girls chose adoption; the younger ones kept their babies. The younger girls in my birthing class seemed to have no idea what they were really getting into. Many of them talked about it as if it were a fun game—this cute little doll they would get would be fun to have around. One girl said it out loud: "Babies are just so sweet. They smell good and they look at you and smile. They're so easy to take care of because they sleep most of the time." They didn't seem to

understand about all the late-night feedings, colic, the spitting up, the blowout diapers, the overwhelming expenses. No one seemed to even consider long-term issues like discipline, toilet training, getting kids to school or running them to soccer practice, and, again, the overwhelming expenses. Only the girls who had been out of school, working and living on their own, seemed to have a truly clear picture of the “real world” waiting for them after the baby was born.

My mom and I became convinced that the young girls were not mature enough to make this decision. It was obvious that they needed to be given more information than their young lives had provided them. We felt sad that the parents of these girls had not done much to guide them in fully exploring the adoption option, or at the least, truly understanding what they faced ahead if they kept their child.

Birthmothers need someone to be there to provide information, love, an ear to listen to their thought processes, and a shoulder for them to cry on as they wrestle with their emotions—and that’s it. The actual decision has to be made by the mother; history tells us that anything else will result in years of regret and pain. Still, when the birthmother making the decision is too young to have much actual experience with babies or children, it’s critical that her family and counselors help her to understand all the aspects of raising a child.

If you are a young girl facing this decision, trust your counselor to provide you information, and please, listen to the facts. Motherhood is a very difficult and demanding job. It can also be the most wonderful experience of your life. Look at everything—the good and the bad. Concede that there are things about being an adult, and being a parent, that you may not understand—and work to understand them.

It is imperative that those who counsel these girls and women, and the families surrounding them, provide a support system free of bias and judgment, giving them the space they need to explore their choices and find answers.

Professionals who deal with young mothers are beginning to create this type of needed support system. Adoption agencies have changed their tactics and policies drastically in the past twenty years. Most of them offer open adoption and/or a form of semi-open adoption and have registries for adoptees and birthmothers to connect. If the first agency you talk to doesn’t offer the support you need or the kind of adoption you are looking for, don’t hesitate to look for another one.

The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement in 1989 offering guiding principles to physicians to help educate and offer support to young mothers. They encourage the discussion of all options available and state, “All of these options should be explored. Their discussion should be open, informative and non-preemptory.” They instruct physicians to find help for their patients: “All nurturing and supportive people, such as social workers or clergy, can then be mobilized to assist in the solution of this problem.”

Catholic Charities, the adoption agency that I used, has undergone drastic changes as well. When I went to them back in 1984, open adoption was unheard of, and even semi-open adoption was a new concept. I was lucky enough to connect with Nancy Kinley, a counselor who was a maverick in the agency and who advocated heavily for connections between birthmothers and adoptive families. She had started the tables turning, and I was able to join the few before me who opted for a semi-open adoption. Now Catholic Charities not only supports semi-open adoptions, in which birthmothers and adoptive families share information on an annual basis, but also supports fully open adoptions, in which birthmothers and adoptive parents meet and continue a relationship after relinquishment.

You live in a time when you have numerous options. You can get much more comprehensive and effective information and support from your adoption counselor than in the past, regardless of what choice you make in the end. You will learn more and have more choices than women have ever had before. Use this fact. Accept the advice and help you are offered, and arm yourself with the information you need.

Looking at the Future

It is also during this time that your inventory list becomes the most challenged. When items in your inventory change, you will have to take the time to reevaluate your future. Your emotions may change as well, and you may reevaluate your decision. Even if your inventory or instincts have not changed, it will be important to consider how they will change in the future.

It is crucial for you to take the time to play out the possibilities both for now and for the long term. Looking at each choice not as an answer to a current problem but as the stepping stone to a future will be key in creating a successful outcome.

When my inventory list began to fall apart, I was lucky enough to have people around me who made me take notice. While it was becoming more obvious that adoption would be the best option, no one pushed. This allowed me to make my own decision—and stick to it. They asked tough questions, pointed out realities, laid every card on the table for me to examine, and let me learn on my own just what it takes to be a great mother—the love to do what’s best for my child.

It can be difficult to accept a new option if you were settled with your first. But holding on to a decision that was based on facts that are no longer true is foolish. Making a choice based on a current situation, when you cannot be sure it will not change after the baby is born, is equally foolish. Your baby depends on you to be realistic and have a solid plan for his future. Your baby doesn’t need a home for six months—he needs it for his entire childhood. She doesn’t need food for a year—she will always need it. Look down the road, and see how each option may play out in your life and your child’s.

I want to point out again here that it’s all right for you to consider how each option will affect your life as well—in fact, it’s essential. Thinking about your future will help you to think about your baby’s future too. Your baby will need a parent who is strong and capable, who can teach him or her by example how to be a self-sufficient, contributing adult in our society. If you cannot see yourself as progressing with your life and improving as a person when considering a particular option, then it may not be the one to take. You want a bright future for both you and your baby. Imagine the possibilities in the years ahead and find it.

Exploring Options

When you read my story in this chapter, you will see how limited my options were—yet I still had a successful arrangement. You will have so many more possibilities! I am very excited for you because with so many options, you will have a much stronger possibility of creating a successful arrangement.

If you choose to keep your child, the options will vary greatly depending on where you live, what your income status is, and what amount of support from your family you have. However, most places offer some type of support or help for single mothers, whether it is child care at the schools or assistance with food, housing, or utility costs. Your social service agency will be able to provide you with this information.

If you choose to relinquish your child for adoption, you will find a lot of different options as well, but they don’t vary quite so much by where you live. Practices may vary at different agencies, but in general, the following steps will occur. First, you will meet with a counselor to discuss your views and opinions. You may meet with your counselor several times as you go through the process of deciding whether or not to choose adoption for your baby. Your counselor will help you to find families who share your opinions and goals. You will be given a brief biography of them and usually a letter from them as well. This will be their chance to tell you about how they feel about you and the adoption arrangement. From here you will be asked to narrow it down to a few families, and you will receive some type of portfolio or scrapbook that they have prepared. Most often these are filled with photos, but usually families also write in them to tell you more about their family and their lifestyles.

At this point you will be asked to choose a family. At most agencies you will only meet with this one family. Keep in mind that these families are very anxious to be chosen and to bring a child into their homes. It is very emotional for them as well. Many have tried to have a child for years, only to be disappointed. Many have been waiting on the list at the adoption agencies for years as well. To get up their hopes by meeting with them face to face when you are really not committed would be unfair. Wait until you’ve made your decision to get this far in the process.

You will be given the choice to meet the potential adoptive parents, or not to. In most cases birthmothers choose to meet the parents, but you should do what is best for you. At this meeting you may wish to bring some sort of support person. This may be the birthfather, or it may be one of your parents. The counselor is usually present. You will talk in advance about who will be there, so there are no surprises for anyone and everyone feels comfortable with the arrangement.

You may meet at the agency office or in a more neutral place such as a restaurant. Again, you can give your opinion as to where you would like it to take place. At this meeting you will have a chance to talk with the parents and ask them any questions you have. Everyone has different priorities, and I think it’s important you think about what is important to you to know. I don’t want to give you a list of questions because at this point you should be following your

instincts. You've been given all the facts and figures about this couple; it's time to let your heart decide.

I also think it's important for adoptive parents to understand this. I gave a lecture last summer at an agency, and an adoptive mother spoke to the group just before I did. She talked about how shocked she was to find out that a birthmother had chosen to meet with her and her husband because she saw in their portfolio that they had cats, and the birthmother had three cats of her own that she loved dearly. The adoptive mother went on to say she was equally surprised at the meeting when the birthmother asked them questions about the activities they liked to do. The adoptive mother thought she should have asked more business-like questions such as: "Will you stay home with the baby or use child care?" or "Can you afford to provide for a baby's needs?" What this adoptive mother did not seem to understand was that the birthmother already knew the answers to those questions. Simply by being on the list at the agency the birthmother knows that the family has met certain criteria. After reading the letter and seeing the portfolio, the birthmother finds that most of her other practical questions are answered. The birthmother knows that any family she meets will be financially able to raise a child and that they are anxious to have a child to love. She knows they can provide her child with all her child needs. What she doesn't know is if she can trust them.

When you are meeting strangers and looking for a way to trust them, the surest way is to find a connection with them. That's what that birthmother did when she saw the photos of the cats in the portfolio. That's what you need to do. And here I am talking to both the birthmothers and the adoptive parents reading this. This meeting is your chance to reach out to each other and take those first steps of trust. Find a way to connect, make it a starting point, and you will find a way to build a relationship from there.

For me this took huge amounts of time because we only corresponded through letters. You will have a chance to do in minutes what took my son's parents and me years to do. You will be able to reach out to each other and find a connection, begin to build a trusting relationship, and show each other respect all in one meeting.

This is why these meetings will be different for each group of people. Only you know what is important in your life, only you know the types of things that make you feel connected to other people. It may be having similar hobbies, it may be having similar families, it may be your height or the fact that you play piano or sing out of tune. Whatever that thing is, talk with each other, and see if it's there. You'll know if it is.

If after this meeting you decide the connection wasn't there, your counselor will help you to go back and take another look at your choices. Take your time. It's okay to feel unsure, and no one should pressure you into picking just anyone. If you are to build a respectful relationship that will last for years with this family, then you have the right to get it off to the best start possible.

If you do connect at this meeting, you will then begin to discuss your birth plan and your expectations of openness in the adoption arrangement. Be honest. Tell them what you are comfortable with and what you don't want. Be open to their feelings and opinions as well. This is a great opportunity to show each other from day one that you will respect each other. Find a plan that works for everyone. Don't try to dictate the situation. Be open to compromise, but don't compromise on anything you feel strongly about. Until you have relinquished your child (legally placed him or her for adoption), you have the right to make decisions for the baby and yourself. We will discuss possibilities for a birth plan in the next chapter. For now, understand that your feelings are important and will be respected.

You have so many options. The possibilities for you are limited only by your imagination. Think of your best-case scenarios—for keeping your baby or for choosing adoption—and talk to your counselor about them.

Making Your Choice

As you explore your options and come to conclusions, remember that this will be your choice. It may be very difficult to do this; you may feel pressure from your family or friends to choose something else. Where you live, there may be a social stigma for or against a particular choice. Pressure from society has always existed and probably always will. This is why it is so important to rely on your counselor for an unbiased view. Those who have been in the adoption field for years understand the mistakes of the past. They have seen how having a "one-size-fits-all" approach did more harm than good.

We have come a long way. Adoption today is considered a deliberate choice made by the birthmother because she feels it's the best option for herself and her baby. But making that choice

is becoming more and more difficult to do as society builds pressure to choose other options. The pendulum has swung from adoption as the first option in an unplanned pregnancy to adoption being the last option. Women are being faced with pressures to keep their baby at all costs, and I worry that years from now we will find (as we did with closed adoptions) that the cost was too high.

Regardless of the specific societal trends, one thing remains true: society as a whole has an opinion as to what is the “best” decision for a young, unwed mother to make. In *Waiting to Forget*, Margaret Moorman discusses the reasoning behind her decision for adoption and that of other birthmothers of her time. She says that young women of her time chose adoption “because society expects her to do so, because she has been told it is the best solution.”

It’s time for society to let the girls and women facing this problem make the decision for themselves. It is likely you will face pressure from the current trend to keep your child. I offer this insight to help you understand why this may be happening: the majority of adults today grew up in the era of closed adoption. They grew up hearing the stories of pain and regret. They had friends who were forced into giving up their children. They had families who were torn apart and are now searching for each other. The thought of having someone else they care about—you—go through such a negative experience is frightening to them. I don’t blame them a bit. But what you need to remember is that was then and this is now. Adoption today is very different from what it used to be. It can be an experience filled with love, respect, and understanding. You owe it to yourself and your child to explore what adoption means today and to educate those in your life about it as well.

About two years after I had placed my son for adoption, I was at a hospital for a test, and as I sat in the waiting area, I noticed a very young, very pregnant girl sitting a few seats away, crying. I scooted over and smiled at her and asked if she was okay. She began to tell me about how she was there for an ultrasound. She was seven months along. I noticed immediately that no one was with her. She started to say that she wasn’t sure if she should keep the baby but that her parents wanted her to. Her mom had told her it would be awful to give away a member of their family. It was clear in the few minutes that we talked that the decision had been made for her and that no one had really listened to what she wanted.

I asked her if she had thought about adoption. She said that she did, but what scared her was thinking she could never hear from her baby again, never know if he was okay, never hold him. She didn’t think she could do it that way. I told her my story. I explained to her that adoption had changed a lot in the past few years and that she could not only hold her baby but also have ongoing communication with the adoptive parents if she wanted. I asked if she had ever talked to a counselor at an adoption agency. She said no. Her parents had been making all the decisions. I told her about Catholic Charities. I made her write it down. I told her about my counselor and how she let me work things out for myself and that there was never any pressure to choose anything. I tried my best in those few minutes to let her know that she did have other options and that even though she might still decide to keep her baby, she owed it to her child and to herself to explore all the options. Most important, she needed to make the decision herself. She seemed to be relieved to be able to talk to someone who listened to her. She had seemed so powerless in those first moments we met. When it was time for her to go, she seemed hopeful.

I prayed for her for a long time after we met. I still think of her often and wonder what happened. I wonder if she had the courage to go to an adoption agency, or if her parents’ pressure was just too much for her. I wonder what her final choice was, and if it wasn’t her own choice, how much pain and regret she has felt. I pray that whatever happened, as she grew older she found someone who would truly listen to her and give her a way to heal.

Armed with the truth and information you will be able to stand up to any pressures you face and forge ahead on a path designated as your own. You deserve a future without regrets. When you make the choice your own, when you know without a doubt that you have explored all your options, you’ve gathered all the information, and your gut is telling you it’s right, it will be one you can stand by. Your resolve and confidence in your decision will be what helps you to get through the difficult times, and you will get through them. Be proud of yourself for doing the hard work and making the hard decisions.

My Lesson

Where to start? With the facts. Fact: I was going to give birth to a baby. Fact: I had no real career at the time. Fact: I would not be marrying the father. Fact: I had no home of my own. Fact: I

was a talented person with a good prospect of obtaining a decent job again. Fact: If I did get a job, someone would have to care for the baby. Fact: If I didn't get a job, I wouldn't have the income needed to raise a child. Fact: I loved this baby. Fact: I knew what it would take to care for a child, giving him love and supporting his growth and development, and I felt confident that I could do it.

A mix of good news, bad news. As I started to jot down these facts, I came to one where I got stuck. Fact: My family will support my decision and me. Emotionally, there was no question. My dad's big shoulder was always available to cry on, and my mom would always be there to listen. But would that be enough? Did I need more from them? Would they be willing to make sacrifices in order to show their support? Time for another talk with my parents.

These questions were some of the toughest—not just to get an answer to—but to ask in the first place. Mom wasn't at home raising kids any more. She had moved ahead with ambitions of her own and had a career she really enjoyed and was proud of. Dad worked on highways and could be away for weeks on a job. Keeping the baby would mean someone had to provide financial security, and someone had to care for the baby. I couldn't do both. While Brad had said he would be supportive, I had no delusions about his providing child care, and since I hadn't heard from him in weeks, I was beginning to wonder just what his idea of "supportive" was.

If I went back to work, could I ask Mom to quit in order to raise her grandchild? If I stayed home with the baby, could I ask Dad to support us financially? Even though I had moved home, I knew it was considered a temporary fix. Would they consider letting me live there with a baby long term? They had both obviously transitioned to a life without young children under their roof, with more options for their time and money because of it. Could I, should I ask them to give that up? If I did, would they?

Independence was a gift my parents had given me beginning at a very young age. It was something I was proud of personally, and when an act of my independence made my parents proud of me, it was so overwhelming that there would be no way to stop the tears. I had spent many hours trying to earn their pride in this regard. Likewise, I realize now just how many years they had spent trying to instill self-pride in me in this regard. Independence was our family badge of honor and not given up easily. So it was not surprising to me the answers I received in our conversation.

We sat at the kitchen table. It was a beautiful solid wood circle pedestal table, now stained a soft brown, a large improvement over the lime green it had been painted when I was little. And Mom had recently been able to purchase six chairs that matched, finally throwing out the assortment of garage sale bargain mismatches she had had for years. The sun was streaming in through the tall windows. (After I grew up in a house with ten-foot ceilings and long windows, every other home has felt like a small cave.)

Dad's workboots, brown with dried mud, were left by the screen door, a cluster of kittens piled against the other side. Dad had a firm "This is YOUR mess, YOU clean it up" look on his face, but his eyes gave him away. One look told me he wanted nothing more than to swing me up in his arms and protect his little girl with everything he had. Mom still looked stunned. I'm not sure if she was thinking anything more than "Oh my God" yet. I got the impression that when she looked at me she saw a four-year-old me in pigtails saying *Mommy, can I keep my baby?*

"What will it take in order for me to keep my baby?" I asked her.

"You know the answer to that," Dad answered for her.

He was right, of course. "Could I live here and take care of him?"

"You know we'll help you any way we can, dear," Mom said. "But you'll have a lot of expenses for the baby. Do you really want to go on welfare? How will you keep your career options open? How long do you think you'll be here?"

"I don't know."

"You can't raise a baby on I-Don't-Knows," said Dad.

Mom stepped in. "We know that if you want to do this, you'll find a way, and you'll make it work. We've always been proud of you and what you've done with your life so far. But think ahead a few years. Are you going to be proud of yourself? If you give up on yourself and your own future now, what's left for your child to learn from?"

I knew all of this, and I knew the answer to her question. "Nothing." I looked at my dad. I couldn't remember one moment in which I had not been proud of him and learned from it. Mom too. For a split second I secretly wished they were going to be the parents to my baby. That's what he deserved—the best.

"We want you to think about what you will have to offer this baby, not just how you'll get by. You can't just cover your bases for the first month, or year. Having a baby means forever.

You've got to think five, ten, twenty years down the road. This isn't a job you can quit once you start. You've got to be sure."

"I know, Dad. I'm trying to think about it. I just need to know—if I got a job and had to get day care, things would be tight for a while. Can we stay here or not?"

"You know you can," answered Mom.

"And if I went on welfare and got help paying for a place to live, would that be okay with you?"

"This is your decision," said Dad. "You do what you think is right, and we'll help any way we can. We're not going to tell you what to do."

"Thank you, but I do appreciate your advice," I said.

"Are you even considering adoption?" asked Mom.

"Yes," I answered, "but it's hard to think about it. I want to be sure I look at all my options."

"Do you think it's easy for us to even consider having our first grandchild put up for adoption?" Dad was boiling over. "This is very painful. But we care enough to want what's best. This baby deserves a family—a mother, a father, a home, security. Things you can't give right now and don't know if you ever will be able to provide. Do you realize how much harder it will be for you to meet someone and get married if you already have a child? We're afraid you not only won't be able to provide a family for this baby, but you'll never have one for yourself. We've always wanted to provide something for you girls that was better than what we had growing up. Wouldn't you like to do the same for any children of yours?" Dad sighed and leaned back in his chair. You could see the memories of a tough childhood flash across his eyes and dissipate into the pools of tears forming there. I knew he didn't need answers to his questions. He'd made his point and expected me to get it the first time.

"I can't imagine ever being able to provide a better childhood than the one you gave me." I stood up and hugged Dad, then Mom. "I love you both."

"We love you too," they answered in unison.

"I'm going upstairs," I said. "I've got a lot to think about. Thank you," and I headed for the stairs. As I started up, I could hear Mom start to sob and the scrape of Dad's chair on the linoleum as he got up to go to her. Again, I wished this baby were lucky enough to be a sibling of mine, instead of being stuck with me as his mom.

I began to imagine what life would be like if I kept my baby. I thought about Jenny, a single mother who had lived across the hall from my apartment in town. Her daughter, Stephanie, was the cutest three-year-old I had ever known. Jenny worked a lot and even with welfare was barely keeping financially afloat. She worried about it a lot. Jenny had a boyfriend, Chad. He was not Stephanie's father, and many of the girls in the building revered the fact that he so obviously adored her "anyhow." I prayed they would become a family someday. Stephanie so desperately wanted a daddy. You could see it in the way she turned up the charm whenever Chad was near. When she flashed her cherub smile at him, it broke my heart.

Now, as I remembered them, I put myself in Jenny's place. I was lonely, worried about money, working all the time. I imagined my child wandering into neighbors' apartments looking for friends, someone he could count on, a father. I started crying. I tried to imagine I had gotten a great paying job—but then a scene where I had to leave my baby with a babysitter at a house full of babies and a TV entertaining them all flashed in my brain. I screamed into my pillow.

Eventually, my crying subsided to an occasional sob. I lay in my childhood bed, staring at the plaid curtains that my mom made when I begged her to redecorate my room in high school. I decided that it was time to stop thinking like that kid and start thinking like Mom. My child deserved her, so the least I could do was to start to think like her. Then maybe I could take the first steps to being a good mom and start making some decisions.

The next morning I asked Mom to make an appointment at Catholic Charities. I asked if she would come with me, and I was not surprised when she answered, "Of course."

Nancy Kinley was my counselor. She was funny and kind and seemed genuinely interested in hearing every word of whatever I wanted to talk about. I looked forward to my sessions with her and would often call her before it was time for our monthly appointment. I could vent about my parents, Brad, feeling sick, my business, everything. And I could cry. At home, I felt the need to hide my crying, to be strong. When I was with Nancy, I didn't hide anything. Some days I don't think we talked much at all; she just let me cry. I never realized how badly I needed to until the door closed and we sat down. When I got it all out, she would always have something positive to say to help me let it go and move forward. This didn't mean she let me off the hook—she asked

some tough questions. She made me think. She helped me break through that “everything’s fine” façade and face some real issues with real solutions. She helped me get my focus back.

When I first lost my business, I went into such hopelessness that I felt there was no other course but adoption. You’d think this would have my parents and Nancy jumping at me with papers to sign. But they didn’t.

I think the reality of my parents’ first grandchild entering the world was sinking in, and even they weren’t as clear about what I should do anymore. It’s always easier to make decisions with your head—once your heart starts to join in the debate, it gets really messy.

I think maybe Nancy got to know me well enough after that first meeting to know that if I made a quick decision, I would probably regret it, or worse, wouldn’t stick to it later. She seemed to know that I still had a journey to make and that until I truly came to terms with what future I was choosing and why, I’d never move on. So step by step, she held my hand and took me down the road.

We kept talking about both options. Up to this point I had considered if I could afford to keep the baby, if I could emotionally handle giving up the baby, and if I would have acceptance and support from my family and church if I kept the baby or chose adoption. Then in December came the session when she asked the toughest question of all: “What do you think your baby would want?”

No one had asked me this yet. I was told what my parents wanted. What my friends wanted. What my church wanted. And none of those opinions were enough to set my mind one way or the other. I didn’t really care a lot about what other people wanted. At twenty years old I was too focused on what I wanted. What I felt. What I needed. I thought it was my decision to make and really no one else’s business. Nancy pointed out to me that it was very much someone else’s business—my baby’s.

We started talking about what kind of life I thought the baby would want. I thought of my childhood and how great it was. I couldn’t imagine anyone not wanting exactly what I had had. I thought about Stephanie. I remembered the longing I saw in her eyes whenever Chad came over.

Nancy invited me to attend a birthmothers’ meeting, where there would be a group of girls who had gone through the experience and could share their feelings with me. Although to Nancy and my mother I stated that I was leaning toward adoption, despite the odds against me I was still pretty sure I was going to find a way to keep my baby. But I wanted to talk to someone who had gone through this. Somehow I hadn’t felt yet that anyone I had talked to truly understood how I was feeling. I was hoping to find someone who could, so I agreed to attend the next meeting.

I sat quietly and listened as six women shared their stories. They ranged from someone who had just had her baby two weeks earlier to someone whose baby was now three years old. Some were getting a letter or a picture each year from the adoptive parents; some were not. Most made their decision during their pregnancy, but one didn’t decide until three weeks after her child’s birth. I remember being amazed at how different each person’s story was. I was expecting to hear one of them tell my story. I wanted to be able to say—that’s exactly how I feel! But instead, I heard a wide range of emotions and saw myself not in just one person’s story but in a collage of their different stories.

It was a very emotional experience. I cried the entire drive home, and secretly for days after. The reality of my situation was sinking in. There was life after the birth (for both the baby and me), and it wasn’t all hearts and roses the way everyone was trying to make me believe, regardless of which choice I made. My heart ached for the pain that some of the girls shared. Overall, I got the impression that they each felt they had done the right thing, but one thing was very clear: not one of them was forgetting. My family had been emphasizing to me that if I chose adoption, I would then be able to forget, put it behind me, get on with a normal life. While it seemed the girls at that meeting had indeed gone on with their lives, no one was forgetting a thing.

In fact, instead of long discussions about how their lives were now back on track or how happy they were, they talked about the children they had lost. They shared their worries about their baby’s parents, their joys of receiving letters and pictures, their hopes for their baby’s lives. No one seemed concerned about whether or not their own lives had turned out okay. Everyone’s main concern was that their babies’ lives turn out okay. In fact, no one even discussed their own life and what was happening now for them personally.

This was new for me. So far everyone throwing opinions at me did so under the umbrella of what would be best for ME. I was beginning to see now that this decision was really about choosing what would be best for my baby. I learned from those mothers that yes, they did suffer loss, but what mattered most was that their babies would be happy.

I shared all of this with Nancy. I was not surprised that she was pleased at my revelation. She had been leading me toward it for some time now. Caring more about someone other than myself was not going to be an easy task. As a very independent twenty-year-old I could not have been more self-absorbed. But Nancy was patient. She gave me books to read and more meetings to attend, and she spent hours discussing babies with me.

On my own I spent time talking to my baby. I would rock and sing to him. I would rub my growing belly and tell him about his grandparents, his aunts. And I would tell him how much I loved him.

The more I thought of him in terms of the future, the more worried about him I got. The more I worried about him, the more I loved him. The more I loved him, the more I wanted to be sure to do what was best for *him*.

Over time, I realized that one of my biggest fears about adoption was that he, or that anyone, would think I gave him up because I didn't care. That he would think I didn't want him. This thought petrified me. Just the possibility made my blood run cold.

I shared this fear with Nancy, and she gave me a book called *Dear Birthmother*. It was filled with letters from adoptive parents, and some adoptees, to the birthmother. I devoured the book. I read it over and over and over. I cried. Then I read it again and cried some more. This was my first exposure to adoptive parents and their thoughts and feelings. I was surprised by the amount of love and respect they showed toward the birthmothers. And thankfulness. It was overwhelming. My circle of concern was now broadening past myself to include not only my baby but also his prospective parents.

Reading *Dear Birthmother* addressed my biggest fear: would my baby, would his parents really understand how much I loved him? It was clear that they would. I had bought into the myths of adoption: that choosing it meant I didn't love my baby, that my baby would grow up angry with me. The pages and pages of letters written by birthmothers, adoptive parents, and adopted children all had one underlining theme: love. While society was still attacking me with their conviction that all the myths were true, I knew after reading this book that they most definitely were not.

As my search for a decision continued, Lori and I spent a lot of time together to discuss what I was learning, or to just escape from it for awhile. Some days we'd just go to a movie and out for brownie sundaes at Perkins, the way we had for years, and talk about everyone except me. It was during one of these gossip sessions in January that she told me she had heard Brad had left town and was engaged. I was stunned. I had talked to him just a couple of times on the phone since my announcement, and he had seemed open to whatever my decision was. Regardless of my decision, I had assumed he would be supportive and involved when the time came to follow through on it.

The next day I tried calling him and could only reach his sister. She said he had left the state, and she wouldn't tell me anything else other than he didn't want anything to do with the baby or me.

My house of cards was falling down. Finances and a home were already proving to be obstacles to keeping my baby; now not having a father was added to the list. I couldn't imagine a life without my dad. How could I deny my child that relationship? This was getting harder by the day. I knew my family would help me when I needed it, but I wasn't prepared to ask them to do everything. Without a dad around I knew my father would step up to the plate, but was it fair to ask him to? Dad would be sacrificing being Grandpa; my child would be sacrificing an actual dad; my entire family would be sacrificing finances, a life with no kids at home, possibly their reputations. If family is meant to support each other and sacrifice for each other, didn't that apply to me as well? Why should they give up so much for me? Shouldn't I be willing to give something up for them? How can I ask a newborn baby to make a sacrifice when as a grown woman I'm afraid to?

Should I be trying to keep our family together at all costs? Even if it "costs" someone in the family? Not in our family. For us, family was about helping each other to be our best. Whatever it was. Everyone. So sacrificing my future in the hope that I could provide a future for my baby was not in line with this value. We were always taught to be our best, to put forth our best effort. Mom and Dad gave us whatever we needed, or asked for, to get us there. When I joined the track team, Dad built me hurdles. When I wanted to enter cookies in the 4-H fair, Mom bought the ingredients and spent days with me showing me what to do, then letting me bake batch after batch on my own until I got it right. When I wanted to open the print shop, they gave me the collateral. And I knew that if I chose to be a mom, they would give me anything I asked for in order to help me to do my best.

But would “my best” be good enough? Could I give up all my ambitions and put a baby’s life first? If I did, would I ever regret it, or worse, resent my own child for it? I doubted I would. But if I didn’t become my personal best, would I have anything to offer my child? Would I be able to support him in becoming his own personal best? The pride I felt in my own parents and all they had done for me was overwhelming—would my child feel the same about me?

These questions ravaged my brain for days. Slowly, after hours of praying, I found answers. I couldn’t ask my family to make sacrifices, even if they were willing to. I couldn’t expect my child to, either. But it had to be more than just doing what was right for my family, or even what was right for my baby. I needed to find the best solution for everyone involved. I understood that a decision for adoption would affect all our lives, not just mine.

I don’t remember actually making the decision for adoption. It’s not like I woke up one morning and announced to everyone that I was ready to give up my child. The decision had so many layers for me that it went beyond one choice to become a myriad of decisions and concerns.

I didn’t just want to give up my baby. I wanted to make a plan for his life. I wanted to control as many issues as I could, to do all I could to make this turn out right. I told Nancy I had to know he was okay. She had asked me to learn to care enough about my baby to put his needs first—I wasn’t about to leave it to chance; I had to KNOW.

Nancy said there were some parents willing to share information annually until the child was eighteen. I wouldn’t get to meet them or learn their name, but they would send letters to her, and she would pass them on to me. She cautioned me that sometimes the parents change their mind and don’t send letters. That wasn’t an option for me. I had to know he was loved, he was happy, he was okay! I decided that finding the right parents for my baby would be the deal breaker. I wasn’t just going to give my baby away—I wanted to give him to the right parents for him.

This task was even more difficult than I had imagined. Nancy pulled out a file of prospective adoptive parents. Each page had a short description of their occupations, their ages, and a sentence or two about their lives—no names, no addresses. I had very little to go on. It was frightening. Nancy helped me through it one small step at a time. She gave me a file with dozens of descriptions in it and told me to take it home, look through it, take my time, and see if anything stood out. I did what she asked and came back just as confused a week later. She handed me another file.

I sat on the end of our couch in my parents’ living room, looking through the file. I was struck by how many couples were desperately waiting for a child. Nancy had told me that most had been waiting for years, and because there were so many, the older the couple got, the less chance that they would receive a child. This saddened me. It was hard to imagine getting married and never being able to have a family—then to have your hopes up for years and years, waiting for someone like me to see your little slip of paper in a file and answer your prayers.

Then I found a page that said the following:

Adoptive Father: Age 39. Education: B.A. in Sociology, 18 hours towards an M.A. in guidance and counseling, and a two-year course in dental technology. Works part time. Religion: Catholic. Interests: Basketball, sailing, traveling and being outdoors in general.

Adoptive Mother: Age 37. Education: B.A. degree, M.A. in counseling and a DDS degree. Occupation: Dentist. Religion: Catholic. Interests: Reading, sewing, tennis and watching Iowa football.

This couple has been married 13 years and has no children. They live in a medium-sized town in an older home. It is acceptable to them to annually share ongoing information and pictures with birthparents until the child is 18 years of age.

What struck me first was their ages. At twenty, I thought thirty-nine and thirty-seven seemed incredibly old. I was amazed that they hung in there and were still waiting. They hadn’t given up as they got older; apparently they felt it would be worth the wait. I was also impressed

that they were both professionals and had degrees. At that time no one in my family had ever graduated from college.

I also liked the idea that they were dentists. I used to babysit for a dentist in Dubuque. The dentist and his wife were really creative people who had wonderful adventures, great kids, and a beautiful home. I imagined my child becoming a part of that picture. The dad said he liked the outdoors, and the mom was a Hawkeye fan. *I'll bet they have a lot of fun together too*, I thought.

As much as I appreciated couples who probably had more to offer financially than I did, as someone who grew up without much money and still had a fantastic childhood, I knew that true happiness for my child would come from having loving parents, not a big house. I liked the idea that they lived in an older home; the farmhouse I grew up in was over a hundred years old. Reading that they had been married for thirteen years told me that they had loved each other a long time. A home full of love was exactly what I wanted for my baby.

The mom especially stuck out for me. The first things listed for her interests were reading and sewing. Those were my own mom's two favorite hobbies too. Tennis meant she was active, and a football fan meant she stepped out of traditional female roles now and then—those were qualities that described ME. I had been praying for a while that my baby could have my own mom instead of me, and now I felt that I had found a mom who was a little of each of us.

I still can't explain exactly how, but the few words on that page spoke to me. I saw a couple who reminded me of my own parents and me, even though on paper we only had a few things in common. It was just this feeling I got. I turned the page and read on, but every four or five pages I'd flip back to that one page and read it again.

On my second visit in February with Nancy, I showed her the page and asked if she could tell me anything more about them. She said that she knew that their priest had highly recommended them, that he said they were very kind and patient and would be devoted and loving parents. That did it for me. It wasn't a friend, a social worker, a relative—it was a priest who gave this recommendation. I had been praying so hard for so long to make the right choice that at that moment I felt God was stepping forward to say these were the parents he chose for my son. That may sound foolish or dramatic, but it was how I felt, and I am as convinced today as I was then that God had chosen my son's parents. I told Nancy they were the ones.

At my next appointment in March, Nancy told me that she had talked with the adoptive parents and they were elated. She said they had almost given up hope and were very excited. They were more than willing to share letters and photos, and Nancy was confident that I could trust that they would. She also said they asked how I was doing and sent their prayers that the rest of my pregnancy would go well. From the very beginning, they made me feel respected. I began filling out the necessary paperwork.

The decision made, I relaxed and moved forward, savoring the few precious months I would have with my son. I continued babysitting, sitting in the rocking chair every afternoon during the little girls' nap to rock my own baby and sing to him. I told him how much I loved him over and over and over. I talked about the family God had found for him. And I told him about me. I told him about my childhood, my sisters, my parents, my grandparents. I shared family stories, funny anecdotes, and secrets. I sang to him "Skim-a-ra-link-a-dink" and "Jesus Loves Me." Over and over and over.

I referred to the baby as "him" because my cousin and I had decided it was a boy, even though we had no proof. For years we had called each other "Patty Jo" and "Debbie Jo," not because our middle names actually were "Jo" but because we had an aunt who called us by these names and we thought it was funny. They became our secret nicknames for each other. One day during my pregnancy we decided it was wrong to refer to simply "the baby" and that I should pick a name. The choice was easy—it HAD to be a "Jo." So he was.

A couple of months earlier, just after ringing in the New Year of 1985, my grandma was in a near-fatal car crash. She had broken most of her ribs, torn open her stomach, damaged organs; she was barely alive. My grandma and I had always had a special, close relationship. For the first five years of my life I lived a short walk through the woods from her house and had unlimited access to her hugs and cookies. Every summer I spent a week with her, learning to bake, play cards, and talk about everything and everybody.

At the same time that Grandma was in the hospital, my grandfather was brought in for what they thought was appendicitis. Instead, when the surgeons opened him up, they found cancer.

The family was a wreck. Our beloved grandparents were both in pain, and they were not even able to be at each other's side for support. When they were both finally released, it was clear

they were going to need help. I had great concern for both my grandparents and wanted to do everything I could to help, so I moved in with them. I still worked my babysitting job during the weekdays, but I was able to be there every evening and the weekends. I lived with them until the middle of March, a couple of weeks before my due date. Grandma was too tough to stay in bed for long, she was soon running the house (and Grandpa) with her old gusto.

Although on the surface those months appeared as trying times, they really were quite happy. I loved being there with my grandparents, learning from Grandma about baking, how to know what “till it looks good” meant in any given recipe, sharing the food with Grandpa, and watching him tease Grandma. I prayed every day that my child would some day find the kind of love they had. I was pretty sure that I wouldn't.

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