

Keeping Promises

BIRTHPARENTS CLING TO WHAT LITTLE INFORMATION THEY HAVE.

My fiancée, Katie, and I are birthparents to a beautiful 23-month-old girl, whom we haven't seen in person since she was 5 days old. Placing her for adoption was the toughest decision we've ever made.

When Katie became pregnant, we were both in college and unemployed—with no discernible direction in our lives. We had only been dating for 3 months and didn't want our child to end up with only one parent. Even as a couple, we felt we could offer a baby very little and we didn't like the idea of our lifestyle being cramped by the demands of raising a child. All things considered, we realized that keeping the child would not be in the best interest of anyone, especially the child.

MAKING PROMISES

We contacted an adoption attorney and began the process of finding parents for our unborn child. We wanted to find the kind of parents that we would be to our child, and we wanted them to keep in touch with us through letters and pictures delivered by the attorney.

Before long, the attorney called about a couple who had adopted a baby through him two years earlier. We met the couple the following week at the attorney's office. He left us alone in his office

to get to know each other a bit. They were exactly what we had hoped for:

their interests were as varied as ours, their Ideas about raising children were the same as ours, and they both had professions that were fulfilling, yet allowed plenty of time for the children. They were the parents we wished we could be for our child. And they agreed to keep in touch with us.

We also agreed that if at any time during the pregnancy we changed our minds we would let them know immediately. During the baby's stay at the hospital we would be free to visit whenever we wanted. However, from the day that we signed the adoption papers she would be their child and our only contact would be through letters and pictures. They agreed to write every few months for the first couple of years, at which time they would leave it up to us how much continued contact we wanted. They promised to let us know about all the important milestones: first tooth, first crawl, first walk, first word, etc. They also encouraged us to write anytime we wanted

and said our letters would be welcomed. They were glad that the child would have as much information as possible about both birthparents. They regretted not having information about their first child's birthfather and were thrilled that I was involved with this adoption. They also stated that when the child was of legal age, they would leave it completely up to her whether or not she wanted to meet us, and that keeping in contact would help her find us more easily. These conditions were not determined by a list of demands or compromises on either side. Rather, it was a mutual consent by all of us that this was the kind of adoption we wanted. When the attorney returned, we informed him that they were to be the adoptive parents and that we had all agreed on what kind of adoption we thought was best.

THE PREGNANCY

The pregnancy progressed through some rough times. Katie had to leave school in the middle of the semester because morning sickness was keeping her from attending enough classes. With me at school and Katie living at home with her parents 50 miles away, it was a difficult time. I could think of nothing but the time I was missing with her and the baby.

Those were the only 9 months I

would get to spend with the baby, and I wasn't able to provide the direct emotional support that Katie needed and I felt the need to provide.

Being separated was also tough on Katie, who was forced to live in the same house with a family whose concept of support did not extend beyond that of financial. They couldn't even begin to comprehend the emotional support she so desperately needed. During the summer our attitudes toward the adoption began to change. We had now been together almost a year and the relationship was becoming more permanent. We began to wonder if there was more we could do in an effort to keep our child. We looked at apartments, enrolled in the WIC program, started talking about marriage, and all but convinced ourselves that we were going to have a family in two months. I still remember the night that whole dream came crashing down. It was one of the most terrible moments of my life when Katie and I both came to the realistic conclusion that we didn't yet have what it takes to be parents. Both financially and emotionally we wouldn't make it, and when we finally realized this, we sat on the floor of my bedroom for an hour—crying. So the adoption was back on, but this time with greater conviction. We were now going through with the adoption with the knowledge that we had done everything we could to be parents and this was our only option. This also left us quite vulnerable because we had come to a point where we saw no other way. No matter what, we were going to have to depend on someone else to do the job we both so desperately wanted to do together.

We had made many decisions in the past 7 months. All of them were difficult and they weren't made any easier by family members. In their

eyes keeping the baby was wrong because we were too young and irresponsible. Placing the baby for adoption was wrong because we were handing off our responsibilities to someone else—we should own up to the consequences of our actions.

Everybody knew very well what was wrong with our situation. But nobody seemed to know what was the right thing to do about it. So we made the best decisions we could, and are proud to say that we made the right ones.

THE BIRTH

August 2, 1994 was the most bittersweet day of my life. I watched the birth of our daughter, an experience that filled me with more love and pride than I had ever known before. At the same time, I knew I could only call her "mine" for a few short days. During that time our baby was showered with more love and attention than I could have imagined. Those who had cursed the pregnancy couldn't wait to hold the newborn baby in their arms.

The baby was at the hospital for five days. She had to stay at least 72 hours until we signed the adoption papers, but the 72 hours ended on a Friday evening after the courthouse was closed. So she stayed through the weekend. That gave us five days to visit her, hold her, feed her, and just stare into her deep blue eyes, falling in love over and over again. Family members went back to the hospital to visit her many times during those days. This was exactly what we had wanted—time to bond and time to say goodbye. The bond that was made during the 9 months of pregnancy and the first 5 days of our daughter's life will last forever.

SAYING GOODBYE

That Sunday evening, Katie and I had our last moment with our baby. In the morning we would go to the courthouse and sign the adoption

papers. Saying goodbye was the hardest thing I've ever done. We left the hospital in tears, but we were not defeated the way we were the night we realized we couldn't keep her. We could rejoice in our child's life and have faith that through letters and pictures, and hopefully someday a reconciliation, we would be a small part of it. We knew we had made the right decision and that kept us going and gave us the strength to sign the papers.

Two weeks later, we both returned to school and soon became engaged. We both yearned for the family we had begun planning during the sixth and seventh month of pregnancy. But we never questioned our decision. We had definitely done what was best for the baby.

OUR FIRST LETTER

Around Christmas time, we received our first letter from the adoptive family. They thanked us for the presents we had sent. They told us our daughter was adapting well to her new family and enclosed pictures of her with her new older brother. They included a couple of cute, heartwarming anecdotes and told us what a well-behaved and lovable child she was. We were thrilled. Although it had taken them a little longer than we expected to write, it was well worth the wait. The letter and pictures were everything we had been hoping for.

We wrote back immediately, telling them how thankful we were for the letter and pictures. We stressed again how much we looked forward to hearing about all of the baby's "firsts."

Although we bought a dog to vent our parental instincts on, there was still a void. A void that could only be filled by the letters and pictures sent by the adoptive family. We watched the mail every day. The next letter came, again later than expected, but welcomed none

the less. it was great to hear about how our birthdaughter was doing. There was, however, something odd about the letter. They didn't mention any of the milestones we had specifically asked about. Instead, they focused on how difficult they felt it would be for us if they sent letters and pictures too often. They also indicated that our writing to them must be difficult, and they would understand if we wanted to write less often. Quite the contrary was true. We lived for their letters and we loved responding. It was clear that they were the ones that wanted to limit communication.

We wrote back right away to tell them not to worry. We wanted to continue writing back and forth as often as possible. By our daughter's first birthday, we still hadn't received our next letter. So we went ahead and wrote again and also sent some birthday presents. A week later we received a short letter thanking us for the presents and apologizing for not writing to us sooner. The letter talked about their summer vacation and how wonderful the children are. Still no mention of milestones.

A week or two later, we received a letter from the adoptive father (which was unusual because it was the mother who always wrote). He expressed some concern because their son never received letters from his birthmother and they were worried that he would wonder why his sister received things from her birthparents and he didn't. He thanked us for our concern and stated that our contact was important to them, but implied that we should tone it down a bit. This was a far cry from his statement in our initial meeting that there's no such thing as too much information. I began to wonder if, when he said that, he was referring simply to medical information. But still we didn't let the letter get us down—too much.

We took their concerns into consideration and decided that for Christmas, we would send only one present from everybody. Instead of one from Katie and me, one from my parents and one from Katie's parents. Also we decided to send a little something to her brother. We wrote

this idea in a letter and asked them for their opinion in the matter. Christmas came and went with no response. Early in January, we received a letter with some pictures. We were thrilled to have more pictures. The letter, however, never addressed our idea about Christmas, still didn't say anything about milestones, and again stated their concern that it must be hard for us to hear from them and that they wanted our true feelings on the matter. This was our chance. We went and revised a nasty letter we had written but never sent expressing our disappointment that they were not keeping their part of the deal. We took out the nasty parts but left in all of the honesty about our disappointment and how they seemed reluctant to write even after we had expressed many times the importance of their letters. And when they did write, they didn't answer any of our questions. We let them know that, in our position, all we could do was wait for their letters and all we had was what they gave us. We were completely dependent upon them. We asked that they continue writing a few times a year, at least Christmas, Easter, and her birthday. We also wrote another more newsy letter and took it, along with the Christmas presents we had bought but never had a chance to send, to the attorney. He said he would take them to the family. We had hoped that when asking for our true feelings, they really meant it, and that our honest response would open up the lines of communication to the level of our first meeting. Five months later, after no response, Katie called the attorney to make sure he had our correct address. He called back the next day to say that he had something for us and he would put it in the mail that day. The anticipation was almost unbearable. Unfortunately, there was no letter to ease our worries about the lack of communication on their part. In fact, things only worsened. They had sent many pictures, for which we are greatly thankful. But instead of a letter,

we received a two-sentence note telling us that they had adopted a third child who was four months old and keeping them very busy. No information or stories about our birthdaughter. We now felt completely defeated.

KEEPING PROMISES

Our birthdaughter's family has the assurance that there is nothing we ever could or would do to take her away from them. We, on the other hand, have no such assurance. All we have of our birthdaughter is what we are given by them. We have to live with the constant fear that they could decide never to communicate with us again.

Certain conditions, to which we had all agreed less than two years ago, now don't seem to play any part in their lives, but they play a large part in ours. With each month that passes without any communication, we have to wonder if we will ever hear from them again. We will never know if they ever intended to keep their promises to us. Sometimes I wonder about the birthmother of their first child and whether our daughter caused them to break promises to her. I also wonder about the birthmother of their new child and whether they promised her the same things they promised us.

We did the right thing by placing our baby for adoption. We selected wonderful parents for her and she is better off with them than with anyone else. Whether this decision was the best thing for us, we may never know for sure. But parenting isn't about what's best for parents—it's about what's best for the children.

We have learned how important it is to define the relationship between the birthparents and the adoptive parents in the beginning. Neither party should make promises they can't or aren't planning to keep. We put our child in the hands of her adoptive parents—now their promises made so long ago, are all we have left.

Andy Wagner is a student at Wright State University. He and Katie recently married. They live in Columbus, Ohio.