

National Adoption Month: Bittersweet

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Holding on and letting go

This was the year I looked forward to ever since I became a mother. It's what gave me the courage to have my girls in the first place-knowing someday they'd leave.

Anya and Olya were almost 11 and 14 when we got them and had been living in a detsky dom-Russian for children's home-in St. Petersburg. Instead of having my belly scanned with an ultrasound, the first time I saw my kids was in an adoption newsletter. There were no baby pictures. We had to rely on tests administered by a psychologist thousands of miles away to measure who they were. The adoption process, unlike having a baby naturally, took less than three months.

Quick and painless; that was the whole idea. That was also 10 years ago. Our adoption fell over Thanksgiving, during National Adoption Month, coincidental perfection. That freezing Monday in the heart of St. Petersburg, in the orphanage director's office, I watched the girls emerge from a darkened hallway and make their way directly into my arms. Despite the thick layers they wore, the knotted joints that ran up and down their spines stuck out like spires. But I let my hands take comfort in their realness, their physical form. My husband wrapped his arms around the huddle that was our new family. His warm tears wet my neck.

Their voices were small, a tearful melody of "Mama, Papa." Weeping, I stared out the orphanage windows. Skinny trees bent beneath the snow, defiantly balancing enormous icicles twice the size of their frail limbs. I was grateful to have the girls in my life, terrified I'd be a parenting misfit and-this I hate to admit-relieved that sooner rather later these two beautiful children would be grown in case I was truly incapable in my new role. Friends and family never understood why we wanted to adopt a tween and a teen in the first place. They are tricky enough when you've known them intimately since birth. But traveling all the way to Russia to bring fully-formed people into our home? Let's just say folks were confused. Now that both our girls have moved out, I cannot explain it either.

Before our adoption, pregnant friends rubbed their bellies and said: "The older they are the more problems you'll have." "You must feel desperate," one said. "Do you think they're even capable of loving you?"

I didn't think those things but struggled with one other unofficial yet painfully true reason of why I wanted an older child, not a baby.

I looked down on those other mothers, so engrossed in their children they couldn't even talk on the phone let alone brush their hair. I wouldn't be trapped, not like them, for 18-plus years. I mean, what if the kid never left? Ultimately, however, I was ashamed. Babies, with their hands the size of rose petals and toes like creamy pebbles were natural. My lack of maternal instinct was not.

When the girls first arrived, unable to speak English, they clung to me; particularly our younger one, her smoky gray eyes always searching for a mooring. At the supermarket, Anya wouldn't let go. Even when the cereal was on the top shelf and I needed both hands; one to steady myself, the other to grab the box, she was attached-fingers slipped through mine, but more like a white-knuckled clamp. The ritual was I peeled her delicate (yet incredibly strong) fingers away, we giggled, I'd get the cereal, and a moment later she was hooked into the bend of my elbow, or hanging onto the sleeve of

my sweater. As we pushed the basket together, our hands aligned, fingers touching, I remember thinking, would she ever let go? Clearly, my job was to teach her independence, so when the time came I knew she'd be able to.

The time came. It feels like muscle being pulled from bone.

"At least you didn't carry them," someone told me. "You shouldn't compare your situation with someone who gave birth." Insensitive? Maybe. But I must confess, I had the thought as well, that maybe because the girls were never in utero, or at least in my utero, it might be easier-for me.

No first-time mother really knows what to expect when starting her family, from how many diapers she will change in the first week to how to clean strained peas from silk. Likewise, the new mother of the Russian child never imagines being tied to a little red translation dictionary, or having to mime words for dentist and vaccination and mashed potatoes, or needing to sniff her armpits to illustrate deodorant, or pick her teeth to demonstrate floss.

But I didn't expect the back end, the launch of my children to be more of a challenge than their arrival. They've moved out now, and are doing well. And I'm here at home in my nice quiet house wondering if they will have space for me in their lives.

Before when they'd run to the gym, or the store, I'd sit quietly alone, enjoying the freedom, the space. I'd smell their lingering perfume (which was always too strong) and pray they'd stay away longer, and wish, sometimes, they'd just leave. I'd had it with their music (too loud), their arguments (too long) and their convenient use of Russian when they didn't want me to understand something (too often). Now that I see them more rarely, I can't say that I miss all that, but can say that I miss them.

Before we adopted our daughters I spent a lot of time thinking about their other mother-their biological one. It was her decision to let go, but still, she gave them roots. A decade ago I was going to give them wings. That's what I told people, and it sounded so philosophical. But now it's time to let my daughters fly and, sometimes, I don't want to give them anything of the sort. I'll admit it. Sometimes I want to clip their wings, anything to keep them close to the nest, to me.

It's 2009 now; Olya is 23, Anya is 20. I'm 48. My husband and I are empty-nesters. I go to the supermarket alone again, like I did before they came, and only my hands push the basket. The light comes when I see my daughters, and jokingly I remind myself that this launching business is what motivated me to become a mom in the first place. That the time to say goodbye would come soon - meaning, I wouldn't be trapped; that I'd have time for myself. But hope shines for other reasons, too. As they are discovering the beauty within themselves as young women, I am rediscovering that which blossoms in me at middle age. I am learning to refocus on myself, to place myself at the front of the line.

That doesn't mean it's easy. Had someone told me how soon, or how little time I'd have, and how much it was going to hurt to go through this change, I probably wouldn't have believed it. Maybe had someone sat me down and explained how I'd never feel ready to let go, I wouldn't have been quite so glib about counting the days until my daughters walked out the door for good. Now I wish we could have adopted Olya and Anya when they were younger-much younger-so I'd at least have more days with them in the nest.

At least I would have their baby pictures.