

Letter from America Spring 2017

My husband and I did not expect to walk out of there with a baby. We'd been summoned to a foster care office in downtown Miami, and we were under the impression that this would be a meeting to find out more about the three-month infant that was possibly available for adoption. We thought, at most, we'd do some preliminary paperwork if we thought the situation was right for us.

We had known about him for a while, mainly through text messages from a case worker at the adoption agency. He was a ward of the state, his birth parents homeless. They had signed papers terminating their parental rights, but the state took custody before their wish for him to be adopted could be fulfilled, possibly because he had siblings in the system.

"Here you go," said the DSS worker, handing over the tiny sleeping baby. We had not expected to see an actual baby. His big head drooped from his noodle neck. He didn't stir as my husband, a family practice doctor, got him settled on his shoulder.

"We're taking him?" I said.

"Right now?" said Howard.

The DSS worker nodded.

"Are there any medical records?" said Howard. We'd been asking about this since September, and we'd had no reply. We knew we weren't prepared to care for a child with severe conditions. We were in our forties and would not be around to care for someone deep into his or her adulthood.

The worker sighed, irritated by the question. After a few phone calls, the worker said, "He hasn't been to the pediatrician for his two-month visit. That's why there aren't any records."

"But he's three months old," I said, looking to Howard for confirmation that this was confusing.

He nodded.

The worker said, "We knew he was going to be adopted, so we figured the adoptive family would take care of it."

Would we take the baby? We had to decide right then and there. Yes or no.

Howard made a Facetime call to a friend who was a neo-natal specialist. The friend squinted, peering through the screen at the sleeping baby. "He looks pretty good to me," he said. I wondered if he looked good because this friend was accustomed to babies on respirators. But really the question was: How could we not take him? I couldn't imagine the life we would live, the person I would become if we left the baby here in this dingy office, where people were too busy to see to his medical care. We'd surely worry about him for the rest of our lives.

So there we were, sweating in eighty degree weather in December in our wholly inappropriate, Northeast clothing, carrying an infant down city streets lined with palm trees. We had no type of carrier, and we had to stop a lot to readjust him and the duffle bag of his things – formula and diapers and a couple of Puma basketball-themed onesies. We also had the 12-week-old Yorkie-poo puppy we'd adopted from a rescue a few weeks earlier, before we knew that this baby was going to come into our lives. He pranced at the end of his leash, happy to be out of his crate, which we had lugged through the labyrinth of dark hallways of the DSS and now carried through downtown Miami, as well. The hotel was six blocks from the foster care office, and walking there had seemed like a fine idea at the time, when we thought maybe we could get our puppy tired so that he'd sleep during our meeting.

It had always been possible that this trip could culminate in a decision to adopt, of course. Otherwise, we wouldn't have flown down. But we expected to be vetted further. We thought we'd know more. I had pictured us examining a case file. There would be legal hoops. There would be long discussion in a coffee shop where we would hold hands across the table and make a thoughtful decision, were we lucky enough to have one to make.

Instead, by 6pm that night, we were holed up in a Hampton Inn off the interstate with an infant. We were driving to my folks' house a few hours away, so that we wouldn't have to spend the required in-state waiting period – which would last a couple weeks – in a hotel.

Now there was a new panic. What were we doing? What did I know about babies? What had made me think I could do this? My husband rolled up his sleeves and got dirty. Literally. The baby poop was all over his hands and on the long sleeves of the dress shirt he'd chosen this morning, back when we thought we needed to make a good impression. But he wasn't rattled. He changed the diapers. He prepared the bottles expertly, put them in the baby's mouth like he'd been doing it all his life. I, on the other hand, was afraid to touch the baby. I had little experience of caring for people's bodies the way that Howard did. What if I broke him? He was so small.

Also, bigger fears washed over me. The three of us were all of different racial backgrounds and Trump had just been elected. Was I prepared to shepherd a family like ours through such tumultuous times? Would my ineptitude ruin this small person's life?

During the coming weeks, especially after we got home and I was alone with the baby all day, I sunk further into despair, wondering if this had all been a terrible mistake. I spent hours a day feeding him bottles that Howard had prepared and staring into middle distance. The infant was developmentally delayed, we discovered when we took him to the pediatrician, and what if he had major problems? Even if he didn't have big problems, maybe I did. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this.

I'd had a panel accepted at AWP before all of this happened – the puppy and the baby – and Howard and I had planned to make a long weekend in DC for the occasion. We decided we'd still go, the little ones in tow. It had seemed like a good idea in the abstract. When we got there, though, we felt chained to the hotel, the needs of these two little guys keeping us close to our supplies – the food, the diapers, the dog treats, the puppy accident spray, etc.

When I escaped to my panel, I felt guilty for leaving Howard in charge of everyone, but relieved to get away and talk about something other than “Did he eat? Did he poop? What

about the other one? Him, too?” The session was lively, and it was refreshing to use my brain. Afterwards, a guy approached – in his early thirties with a beard – and I quickly recognized him as a student I’d taught more than ten years earlier. He’d been a quick study – bright, driven, enthusiastic. And now here he was, telling me he had stuck with it, enduring the slings and arrows of a writing life. He’d recently published a book, a memoir. He’d come to the panel to see me, to reconnect, to say how much it had meant to be in my class, how it had fueled him and shaped him.

I left there and walked back to the hotel in the gray nip of February, full of the sunshine of such encounters. And that was when it hit me.

Just as Howard had been training for a couple of decades to care for people’s bodies, I had been training, too. I could think of parenting, it occurred to me, as a new teaching challenge. From that perspective, I’d been training for this new responsibility all my working life. Maybe I did know what I was doing, after all. Sometimes, with teaching, there’s a certain similarity to feeding bottles to a baby. Teaching can be an exercise in faith, a deposit toward an imagined future. We don’t see for a decade sometimes – as in the case of my former student—that what we did helped someone. But we do it anyway. We trust ourselves. We trust our students. We trust the process. What I’d been feeling about parenting was fear. And the fact that I was afraid was simply testimony to how much I cared.

The wind was bitter and it flapped the signs of the protesters who wandered casually down H street, returning from a rally somewhere. *Build Respect, Not Walls.*

I zipped my jacket tight and pulled on my hood. More than a decade after our class together, my student had returned and taught me something. The world could be a cold place, but I (probably, hopefully) had the skills and the will and the heart to help this child – my child – navigate it.

Kathy Flann