

Watching Our Daughter Bloom

A father-to-be recently told my husband, Robert, “I know you wouldn’t trade your daughter for anything, but this experience is amazing.” He was speaking of his wife’s pregnancy, their first, and he was caught up in the marvel of biology.

For us, conception happened when our agency sent us an e-mail. Robert forwarded me the message and waited on the phone. We scrolled down the screen together until a round-faced, 12-month-old Russian girl stared back at us with blue-gray eyes. “She’s beautiful,” he said. I found the words. “She looks just like you.” The full face, the dimple in her chin. “I swear I haven’t been to Russia,” he laughed.

For weeks, we were too nervous to tell anyone our news, afraid that some errant piece of red tape might cause us to lose her. But we’d steal secret glances at the pictures we’d slipped into our wallets. Robert kept one in his desk drawer at work. “I can’t stop looking at it,” he confided.

A video arrived a few days later, showing a toddler who had learned to stand, crawl, and feed herself without parents to witness each milestone. Our daughter-to-be plucked an orange toy off a linoleum floor and watched as another little girl marched across the room. A lady in a kerchief folded children’s clothes in the background.

Seeking Reassurance

We also received our daughter’s translated medical records. We were told there might be health issues, so I spent nights searching the Internet, reading about separation anxiety, language difficulties, and angry children who raged against their families.

Our agency recommended a pediatrician who specialized in adoption medicine, and we sent her the video and records. At our telephone appointment, Robert and I each sat with a receiver, straining to hear the doctor’s soft voice. “She has good eye contact,” she said. Good eye contact meant that she should be able to attach. “She doesn’t look as though she has fetal alcohol syndrome.” FAS can sometimes be detected by features such as thin upper lips and short noses. She seems curious about her surroundings, which was an indication of her mental capabilities. “Your child is very adoptable,” the doctor told us. Nevertheless, Robert and I went through our list of questions, checking off each one as we listened to her cautious but optimistic responses.

Looking back on that evening, I wonder how many parents-by-birth consult books about toddlers and behavior disorders before they even conceive. Not many, I’m sure. Why do we inherently trust our own genetic makeup more than that of a stranger? Biological parents think nothing of the terrible twos, threes, and fours, but adoptive parents question each tantrum, fearful of all the problems they’ve been warned about. My heart told me biological children do not come with guarantees. Why should we expect adopted children to? How could we deny this child, who was waiting for someone to love her? How could we deny ourselves? Despite our limited knowledge and uncertainty, we decided to make travel plans.

Gaining Confidence

Robert and I held hands outside a closed door, the number three embossed on a metal plate at the top. Our escort, Yuri, rang the buzzer and a woman opened the door. The noise of children reached us from down the hallway.

I heard my daughter's name mixed in with a stream of Russian words. Yuri turned to me and said, "It will be a minute. You can wait in the music room."

He escorted us to a quiet room with a piano and several small black chairs. I walked around in circles, thumbed a key on the piano, and stopped at a window with a view of a playground set encased in a layer of ice.

Several moments later, the door creaked open and we saw our daughter. We stood up and walked to her. She stood right where the caretaker left her, belly poking out, a pout upon her pink lips, her eyes cast down to the floor, absolutely motionless. The caretaker said something to Yuri, who translated, "She is shy." No, I thought, she is still.

She was also small. Her hands were much smaller than I'd expected, and she was so tiny she barely reached my knees.

She played with the ball we had brought, and turned the pages of a book, yet she didn't say a word. We saw her every day for the next two weeks, and the silence continued. She laughed only when the caretakers tickled her. I was uneasy about her cautious personality, but I also knew that it was good that she was wary of us. She had attached herself to the caretakers, which meant she could attach to us. And, sure enough, each day, our little girl seemed a bit more secure. Soon she began stretching her body around the woman who dressed her each morning, so she could see us watching her.

Before we left to file government paperwork, I gave her caretaker a teddy bear. She should sleep with it, I said. I'd been sleeping with the bear for weeks, so it would smell like me. That night, I missed the bear's soft fur on my cheek, but I pictured it wrapped in my daughter's arms.

Coming to Life

Then came the day of our court appearance. Bundle her up, our agency had told us. Even if it's warm. In Russia, they believe in coats and hat and gloves. So we swaddled her in layers of clothing for the 30-second walk to the van.

After the orphanage had passed out of sight, we began unbuttoning and unsnapping. As our daughter emerged from the layers, she smiled and looked out the window with a curiosity I hadn't seen before. It was as if we were watching her enter the world for the first time. She played with everything — door locks, seat belts — and wiggled in my lap.

Later that day, we heard her speak for the first time. Robert was sitting in the front seat of a taxi, while I sat with her in the back. She looked up at me and said, "Da!" — the Russian word for yes. Robert turned around. "Did she just say something?" I nodded,

then looked back down at her and said, “Da!” She giggled, long and sweet, and responded, “Da!” Our daughter was coming to life in a cab in Moscow.

Our agency had told us to expect our child’s transition after adoption to take six months. She’d probably have some separation issues, they warned. May not be able to sleep at night. Might not like our food. Could take a while to attach. From the day we left the orphanage, she ate everything we put in front of her, slept soundly throughout the night, and cried whenever I left her side.

People are often surprised when they find out that we adopted and ask why we did. “Look at her,” I want to say. “How could we not?”