

The Tea Party

Inviting the Birth Mother



I wrote the beginning of this article several years ago, and have used it a few times in other places to describe the moment I realized I was parenting in deep water. Here, for Mother's Day, I also describe the meeting that followed...

~ By Jean MacLeod

"Mommy, why didn't I grow in your tummy?"

I looked my three-year-old daughter square in the face and gave her the speech that I had rehearsed in my head for as long as she had been mine. The speech was short, gentle and sweet. I told her about her birthmother in China, how much she had been loved and how much we loved her now.

"But Mommy, why didn't she keep me?"

I took a deep breath and explained that I didn't know for sure, but that it might have had something to do with the China rule about having only one child. I described a few other possibilities and ended with my proclamation of faith – that we were meant to be a family, that I was sure that her birthmother wanted her to have a family for always, and wasn't it wonderful that we had all found each other to love.

Coming down from my poetic rhetoric, I smiled winningly at the tiny figure in overalls and waited for my hug and kiss. What I got: a look of icy outrage, arms folded in haughty disbelief, and an attitude that screamed "what a load of c***!"

I was unnerved. This was supposed to be a mother-daughter bonding moment where we celebrated becoming a family. A moment of sadness was allowed, but then things were supposed to be joyful and loving. Why was I feeling like I had tried to tell a sixteen year-old there really was a Santa Claus? And how could a three year-old see through all of my carefully worded, positive explanations? I believed what I was telling her about her birthmother...why didn't she?

She didn't because she had lived her story and somewhere, deep inside, she knew the whole truth. My "old soul" little girl understood that a happy adoption is built on a heartbreaking loss long before I did, and she was cutting me no slack.

Clearly, my daughter's birthmother wasn't going to be explained away. I slowly realized that I would be living with a powerful ghost of another mother, and that this ghost needed to be acknowledged, embraced, and disarmed. My daughter needed some sort

of a relationship with her birthmother, and she needed *me* to have an understanding with her birthmother, too.

So, I invited my daughter's unknown, invisible, Chinese birthmother to tea.

Properly, of course, with a formal invitation dictated to me by my three year-old. In the backyard, we set up a child-sized table with three place-settings: tea-cups, cookie plates, and party napkins. Another tea-cup was quickly added for a favorite stuffed mouse who was a late RSVP. Lemonade tea was rapidly dispensed (formalities like small-talk pale with the preschool set when real teapot pouring is allowed), and we got right down to business.

"So, birthmother" I said to the empty chair to my right. "How are you doing? I'm thinking you might be missing your little girl. I know she misses you."

My daughter nodded, and I asked her if she had any questions for her birthmom.

"Why did you leave me?" she asked directly to the space occupying the third chair.

"Why did you leave her?" I echoed. "Was it because you couldn't care for a baby? Did you have 'big person' problems? It was a very sad thing for your baby girl. I think it might have been a very sad thing for you, too."

My daughter nodded vigorously.

We continued to chat about our day, the vast amount of Oreos eaten by Mousie, and the birthmother's magical trip from China... but my daughter was unusually quiet.

"Is there anything else you would like to ask your birthmother?" I inquired, watching her carefully as I pretended to sip my tea. My daughter went completely still, and I guessed at what she needed to ask and what she needed to hear.

"Birthmother" I said. "We want you to know that you are always welcome in our home and in our hearts. You are part of our family. But your little girl is **my** little girl to raise, and she will live with me until she is big and is ready to leave. You cannot ever take her back to China. This is her home now, and I am her mom, and I love her very much."

Then I left my child-sized chair to put my arms around the little girl with the enormous feelings; it is overwhelming to deal with big grief and big relief at the same time. In voicing my daughter's secret hopes and fears I had validated her connection to two mothers, and had begun my own long process of learning to deal openly with the painful side of adoption parenting.

The ghost? She still lives with us, mostly peaceably, nearly ten years later. We've felt her genetic legacy, as my daughter leaped into puberty. We've seen visions of her in the mirror, as my daughter grows into a beautiful young woman. Our joint acceptance of the ghost gave my daughter some power over her past, and allowed me to view the birthmother as an ally, instead of an enemy, during times that adoption compounded the emotional turbulence of adolescence. The three of us exist together, but only I remember that the three of us once attended a symbiotical summit meeting in the garden, and that we officially sealed our forever relationships with a splash of tea, and cookies.

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