

Separation Anxiety

My blond, blue-eyed boy runs to the door screaming “bye-bye, bye-bye!” with all the joy of an exuberant two-year-old. I smile to see him so happy. But I know the happiness will not last past the first left turn that leads to his sitter’s home. Now, we are not going for a leisurely ride around the neighborhood or to the grocery with its promise of cookies and balloons or to Taco Bell for special cheese “sandwiches.” I’m now taking him to another woman’s home for a full eight hours.

At the sitter’s, he will make no field trips, seldom venturing out of doors since Karryn, his sitter, also cares for five other children. I will leave him there and he will display his new skills for her all day long—he’ll make sentences like “where Daddy is?” He’ll smile and hug her when she hands him his juice cup. He’ll learn to play with other children. At least I hope he will. After leaving him for short periods this summer, I learned he liked to run and hide when anyone new came to the door, clinging to Karryn’s legs. He never did that at home where he welcomed strangers, prancing around the house like a prince in his kingdom.

To my husband and I, he is our prince, almost like our personal “knight-in-shining-armor.” Fresh from the hospital, he entered our home like many newborns do, with cries that often rose to staccato-like screams. But he wasn’t exactly like most newborns; he was adopted. My son saved us from a life of childlessness, a life I could not embrace. My husband and I took him home to live with us after another woman walked silently down a long hospital corridor to bring him to us. She placed him in my arms and I struggled to hold him closely so I could believe he would be mine. I was introduced to a new life, and at the same time, my new life. I was reborn as a mother.

Every day as I leave my son at his sitter’s, I try to learn one of those lessons.

Recently I returned to work after almost two years of staying at home with him. In those two years I had learned much about mothering an infant and then toddler. The traditional jobs of reading books, playing with “play-dough,” and buying diapers were ever-present, but each activity was always tinged with a familiar refrain: “I have a child!” But I am now learning how to leave that child in another woman’s care.

On each shiny new day as I load my toddler, all our gear as well as myself into the car, I tell myself that I’m making the best decision I can. He will have fun playing with the other children, and Karryn will care for him like a doting mother would. But still, he is no miracle to her.

On day seven of the repeated ritual, I thought, how much longer will he do this? My friends at work smile and nod knowingly, “It’s only separation anxiety,” they chant as if coaxed by some eternal, mothering bible. I know they must not remember mornings like the one I just had.

I have wondered if the separation is harder for me because my son is adopted. I think the seven years I had to wait to become a mother are still fresh in my mind, unabsolved by the two years I’ve had with him. I want to witness the miracle of my son now, especially while he is small and learning about the wonders of his world. “It doesn’t seem fair.” The words are barely out of my mouth when I remember that I’ll pick him up in only six hours.

He’ll run to me, each foot stretching behind him as he half-dances, his arms open wide, ready to jump into mine. I will see him again, this evening, this weekend, this summer. I think of rocking him to sleep again tonight after he wakes from a bad dream and I again remember the joy I felt when I first held him in the hospital. Then it hits me; I will see and hold my son each evening, each afternoon, every day. Perhaps the nervousness at being separated from him is more mine than my son’s; after all, I know how tenuous human connections can be, and I remember what my life was like before I became a mother.

I hope the rhythm of our daily separations and reunions will calm me, the routines easing my anxiety. When I leave my son in another woman’s arms, I cannot forget that he is bound to me, his adopted mother, by an untested cord. Each day I am learning to hold that miracle in trust, because each evening when I see him again, I behold its power in my son’s laughing eyes—that is a tie that binds.