

I Became a Mother When Somebody Suddenly Handed Me a Baby

BY KATHY FLANN

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One day you're not a parent; the next you are. It's universal, the same story for everybody. Take us, for example, the way we arrived for a meeting with a social worker and she handed us a baby no one mentioned. Then we panicked and slipped into a supply closet. It's a tale as old as time, really. Even older than we are—and we are pretty old.

Right before life as we knew it changed, the social worker poked her head out of her office and waved us over. My husband and I smoothed our clothes, which were wrinkled from carry-on bags. Our shoes clicked, and the simple act of walking felt like a music recital, a cacophony of wobbly notes. So much of my life had been spent auditioning—for jobs, for the attention of editors or parents or love interests, even for the privilege to build a family. It should have been familiar by then, and yet every time I presented myself for inspection, it was new, my talents suddenly smaller than I remembered.

Up ahead, the social worker endeavored to separate something from herself, something identifiable as a baby only when the unsupported head drooped. We both assumed that the baby was from some other part of her caseload. "Here you go," she said. She wants an assist, we thought, needs her hands free. The limbs threatened to spill, and my husband reached out, instinct, like when something falls. He is a huge man, and he held the tiny baby tentatively as we lingered at the door, glancing down the hallway for a staff member to come and take the precious cargo. My husband and I are a physician and a teacher, accustomed to giving care, and it was a relief to be of use. It felt like a sip of water.

The social worker turned her back to us, rummaging through papers, and then, after a moment, sensing we were still there, she paused, nodded at the infant, and said more pointedly, "There you go."

"What?" said my husband.

"There," said the social worker, exasperated, gesturing to the baby. "There you go."

"What?" I said.

The two of us looked at each other, like What? It was true we had recently joined a waitlist to adopt a baby—but it's called waitlist. People wait. For years. That's why we'd taken the advice to register with agencies in two states. But even if you did somehow move up the line, there were orderly steps.

A different social worker—the one who invited us to fly down here to this large Southern state—had suggested that this meeting's purpose was to discuss a situation that could come to pass someday, an improbable possibility. While it seemed far-fetched that this baby might be that "situation," it was hard to think of another explanation.

My elbow clamped down on my shoulder bag, and inside it, Clarence squirmed. Our puppy had traveled here with us because the trip was short notice, and he was 12 weeks old. "Sorry," I said, patting the carrier.

Clarence was a teeny black fuzzball with giant eyes, and the vet said he'd be the size of a Yorkie. We'd been told so often that our ages might prevent us from being "picked" at all to adopt a baby. Ever. It was

the perfect time to adopt a puppy. The social worker raised an eyebrow, but she didn't ask why I was speaking to my bag.

Instead, she gazed toward children's voices that shrieked from around a corner someplace. We stood there for what seemed like an eternity, watching her, somehow still thinking we were here for a meeting. As if in answer, her expression slammed shut, as if she would march down there and tell someone off.

As so often happened, old thoughts about enough flooded my brain, a holdover from my own childhood. My brain was stuck in audition mode. The challenge of absorbing what was happening felt like a teeny tiny dog toy lodged in my throat.

My husband managed to regroup enough to say, "Are there medical records?" He had gone into his own default mode—the scientific method. He was trying to be calm, but whenever we caught each other's gaze, his eyes were the ticker in Times Square, colors and numbers and words traveling too fast to read.

The weather was, of course, hot in this balmy region, hundreds of miles south of our home, and even though it was December, the baby wore shorts, the clothes itty-bitty-doll-sized, and still too big. Skinny legs and arms seemed curled into the shape of a womb.

As old as the two of us were, this was a first marriage. We "picked" each other late, newlyweds. Then we picked adoption to build a family, choosing it over in vitro fertilization. Sometimes I wondered if it should pick us back. We wouldn't be around forever to care for someone. A child with medical or special needs could become an adult with no support system. Maybe someone had made a mistake.

The social worker sighed. Stacks of files on her desk stood several feet high. With its fluorescent lights and mazelike hallways, the whole place had the breathless feel of overwork. The social worker studied my husband in his adorable bow tie, and she sighed again. She reached for the phone and made a few calls about the medical records. I understood that while my husband was genuinely interested in the medical history, he was also stalling, trying to find a way to take a beat.

His temperament—kind and assertive—affected people. Before him, I spent several decades dating. No one could ever be enough for me. Or I could not be enough for them. My own parents had been together just briefly, hitched in a quickie ceremony in Vegas and then split up, and growing up, I'd had a front-row seat to each of their dating lives, neither of which were easy. I'd lived in 12 different homes by the time I finished high school. After my brother died in a car accident, my dad and stepmom fostered children. The dream to foster or adopt one day, just like my parents did, had been more constant than most relationships.

When I met my husband, I felt that same old familiar impulse I always did when connections percolated—to tip it all over, watch it spill and evaporate. Yet his kindness, especially the way he doted on my elderly dog at the time, gave me a reason to pause. Love devoted to dogs had always been easier to contain, to hold.

The social worker hung up the phone. Then she turned and said, "There aren't records—he hasn't been to the pediatrician."

“He’s 3 months old?” I said. The adorable tiny baby looked like a newborn.

“He hasn’t been back since he was hospitalized for sepsis,” she said. “They figured you’d take care of his appointments when you took placement.”

Say what? I thought. There was a lot to unpack, but mostly I was starting to think, This isn’t a mix-up. It’s just that communication is time-consuming, and everyone here is on the verge of crisis.

She studied our surprised faces, and then she looked surprised herself. She glanced at the clock. “Do you want to do this or what?” The question startled me because it wasn’t what I was thinking. I was too busy wondering why anyone else thought I should do this. I was the same person who had gotten speeding tickets, who nearly died once in a totally preventable house fire.

This was when I requested a moment in a conference room next door. She pursed her lips, annoyed; space and time were at premiums.

The conference room was actually a supply closet, and we crowded into it together and shut the door, baby breathing softly on my husband’s neck, the dog whimpering in the bag. We just needed a moment, that’s all, for our thoughts to catch up.

My husband looked exhausted, dark circles behind his glasses. The night before, Clarence had refused to pee after the flight, no matter how many times we all marched outside the hotel. By 2 a.m., it had been 12 hours or something since he’d peed, and the two of us bickered about what to do. One of us would be like, “Let’s just go to bed. He can pee on the floor. It’ll be just, like, a teaspoon of pee anyway.” Then the other person would be like, “But what if it kills him, like he explodes from pee?” Clarence weighed 3 pounds, the size of a palm. We kept switching sides of the argument. Finally, Clarence peed, at 4 a.m., at a city park, and we jumped and cheered, attracting quizzical looks from people who floated past, in the distance, beyond a big fountain, solitary ghosts behind the mist. At the time, the debacle seemed like everything in the world.

If no one was going to vet us on the baby’s behalf, maybe we should vet ourselves. At the very least it seemed as if the baby should sign off on this. If we could only see his eyes, I kept thinking. But in my tired fog, the same fact materialized, no matter how I blinked at it, as irrefutable as dawn: This baby is not going to tell us what to do.

So, we might as well come out. We emerged having discussed nothing, but having achieved nonetheless a silent consensus, best translated as What’s happening? I don’t know. This baby can’t stay here. With a few strokes of a pen, we gave the unconscious baby a name. The social worker lugged over a duffel bag. “Here,” she said. It was filled with heavy bottles of formula and diapers and a few basketball-themed Puma onesies.

The next thing we knew, we were blinking into the bright sunlight. The two of us took turns lugging the infant down six city blocks lined with palm trees, sweating in black winter clothing that had made sense the day before. Even though the baby was so small, he was somehow impossible to carry, and we had no carrier, which seemed like something real parents would have. We stopped often to readjust him and the duffel bag. If I were able to find this funny, I might have seen characters in a slapstick comedy.

Clarence pranced at the end of his leash, free, a pompom ball, a cartoon character. The paperwork had revealed that the baby and Clarence were both 12 weeks old, born the same week. Everything blew past me, fluffy clouds in the blue tropical sky, a breeze of white noise. My mind still seemed to be back at the hotel, asleep, dreaming. I viewed us from the sky. Lunching workers probably spied a group that didn't belong together—my husband and I didn't look like parents at all. We were three people of different races. This might be a kidnapping.

We couldn't fly home until the courts signed the paperwork, which could take up to three weeks. Doing so would amount to "transporting a minor across state lines." Christmas was three weeks away, too, another complication. Save for dutiful phone calls to our employers, the two of us seemed on the lam. We were headed toward my dad and stepmom's place at the other end of the state, many hours away, our "safe house."

At a pediatrician's office off the highway, we paid cash. Even when stuck with needles, the sweet baby barely stirred. In a bustling exam room, nurses coming and going, a doctor said he was so small he didn't register on the growth chart.

Back in the car, when I wasn't driving, I kept a hand on Clarence's warm body curled in my lap, and I turned frequently to check that the sleeping infant was real and breathing. My neck hurt from doing it.

Just as we exited for a hotel, he flitted into consciousness. By then, I longed for him to cry. His big, beautiful brown eyes opened, darting around the car, a flutter of eyelashes, and my breath caught, but then he was asleep again, a magical sea creature disappearing into the depths.

In the room at Homewood Suites, 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, put them in the baby's mouth, working to rouse him, as if he'd been doing it all his life. My love for this man's expansiveness brimmed, like the urge to cry.

I was afraid to touch the baby, even as I did it, feeding him, feeling his muscles awaken. I had little experience with caring for people's bodies the way that my husband did. What if I were to break him?

A bigger fear swelled inside, like a weather balloon. I'd already come to peace with the idea that I could be chasing a toddler in my 50s, that I'd be ancient when my child was a teen. I'd already pictured the kid's eye-rolling at how out of touch I'd be. But I wondered anew at how much insight it required to help a newly minted person navigate life's complexities—and how little insight it took to fail.

The baby lay in the hotel Pack 'n' Play, newly dressed in the striped pajamas we bought at Target. His eyes were open and blinking, relaxed, not fixed on anything. He still had never cried, and we didn't know what that meant. His face was so sweet that I felt sick. He just lay there, being perfect.

The room looked as though the storm outside had blown inside, our belongings and the hotel's strewn everywhere. I sat in a chair and it was quiet, aside from torrential rain beating onto the hotel siding, as if the emotions of the day had finally caught up to bang on the windows, to tell me something. The noise of my husband in the shower blended into the din outside.

Nearby, Clarence pawed relentlessly at a pillow. The puppy, with his black dandelion fuzz, snorted, shoved, and grunted in the effort to drag this bloated king-size pillow that was many times his size. He

pushed with his nose, and then he walked around it, pulling, coming at the problem from different angles.

Watching my dog and my baby made it clear that I'd been wrong in the belief that enough is something measurable. These old thoughts had always been tricks of perspective. Even an "empty" cup brims with air, something so vital, spilling upward, right into the sky.