

Beginnings: The Tea Party

by Lisa Tresch

Exactly one hour before I held my infant daughter for the first time, a stern woman slid a tepid cup of black tea in front of me. A table had been set with dainty cups rimmed in gold, stiff doilies, and precisely placed tea pitchers. In front of all the formality were the official papers we were expected to sign. It was a ceremony primed with exactitude and purpose, but it seemed a bit absurd. We were waiting for babies and had diaper bags filled with scabies medicine and lice treatment.

There were nine families seated at this odd tea party. We sipped and smiled and nodded as the translator relayed the good wishes of the Chinese adoption officials, then it was down to business. They had questions:

Why do you want to adopt a child from the People's Republic of China?

Do you plan to support this child financially?

Will you always love this child?

Will you never harm or abuse this child?

Are you happy that you will soon be a parent to this child?

Our answers had been rehearsed, but they were sincere. The first question was complicated, and so we didn't feel as though it was fair to put the translator through the rambling, and murky explanation. It was a question that curious friends and strangers asked often and it always left us stumbling through a new and different response each

time. We had yet to formulate an answer that would stick. Most of the time our reply sounded too mysterious and mystical, a variation on the theme of “it was a deep desire that didn’t so much come in the form of an idea, as a person who lodged herself in our hearts before we knew her.” We didn’t want to burden the adoption officials with such figurative language, and besides, we were still working out the answer for ourselves.

“We love China,” my husband, Kyle, said slowly. “We want another daughter. We are biologically unable to have any more children.” Every word was truth. The same woman who had provided us with the tea scribbled our answers, and gave us a quick sad smile when she heard the words *biologically unable*. No need to tell her that my husband had willingly chosen this inability – a mutual decision and one that we thought necessary at the time. We wanted no more children. One son, then one daughter in short succession had created a family unit of manageable proportion, and one that prevented Kyle and I from being outnumbered. It had been settled, and quite manageable, until this person lodged herself in our hearts.

“Yes, we will support her financially. Yes, we will always love her. No, we will never harm or abuse her. Yes, we are happy. Very happy.”

We fell silent. Our tea party hostess put her pen down and looked at us, and then she smiled as if the entire operation was in her hands and we had delivered acceptable answers. We knew better. In 2001, the year we adopted our daughter, China’s adoption process was a string of red tape that we had to cut through a little each week, but the program had the allure of predictability. With a reputable agency holding the hands of

prospective parents, the process could be successfully navigated and three days into the mandatory two-week trip to China, a baby would be brought through a hotel door and into trembling, outstretched arms. The stories were repeated over Internet chat rooms and email threads and they were eerily similar. There would be no surprise at the end of this five-question interview. Even now, our baby was probably on a rickety diesel-fueled bus that was carrying her and the eight other girls from the little town of Guiping City to the capital of Nanning where we were now waiting. She would be wearing layers of clothing and holding with a death grip the toy we had sent four weeks earlier. They would place her in our arms and she would begin to scream. We would proceed to comfort her, then whisk her off to our hotel room, plop her in a bath, douse her with scabies medicine and check her for head lice. Late in the evening, when we were sufficiently exhausted from the trauma, we would hold her close and tell her that we were now a forever family. This is the story we had heard with little variation over the past 18 months from adoptive parents of Chinese orphans. It was beautiful in print, but I was beginning to question what it might actually look like in four dimensions.

Someone poured more tea into our cups while Kyle and I signed another paper. We then received a certificate in a red binder, and were dismissed to sit with the other families and wait for the babies. The room was hot, but no one fanned or complained because this moment was sacred. The photo I took minutes before the babies were brought through the conference door shows us perched on the edge of folding chairs as if we were ready to spring into action. An hour earlier I had ordered Spaghetti Bolognese

from the hotel restaurant and picked around at it, too excited to eat. Now my stomach was gurgling, my heart pounding, and my mind racing with the question of whether we were more courageous or crazy. This uncertainty only caused all the physical malfunctions to intensify so I forced myself to sit with composure near the front of the room and construct a facial expression of serenity.

When the door to the hotel conference room opened, it didn't occur to me that it might be the babies. I was expecting some kind of fair warning, maybe an announcement that the bus was a few miles away and would be arriving in 20 minutes. Or perhaps someone might give us a drum roll proclamation: *Ladies and Gentleman, may we present...the babies!* But there was no fanfare, just nine men and women who filed slowly through the doorway holding nine little sleepy-eyed girls. I scanned the line of nannies and babies, but I couldn't find Jin Heng Ling. The baby in our referral photo was plump and her cheeks were full and filled with color. I had carried that photo around for five weeks and memorized that face, but I couldn't pick her out of the lineup.

"There she is," my husband said, pointing to a gaunt, bald baby who was dressed in a white shirt, yellow pants and a yellow vest. All nine girls were wearing the same outfit, but with a variation of pink, blue or yellow. Jin Heng Ling looked stunned, and nothing like the placid, healthy baby in the photo. She was frozen in the arms of the nanny, staring at all of us with an expression that was shifting from bewilderment to terror. Her tiny fingers were clamped around the toy we had sent. In the Internet chat rooms, I had learned from veteran adoptive parents that possessiveness was normal, and

that we should also be prepared for night terrors, sensory integration issues and a host of other possible institutional repercussions. From 6,000 miles away I had waved a hand dismissively at these forewarnings. Now, I stood in the Majestic Hotel conference room staring at the little girl in the yellow vest with the sunken cheeks and thought that perhaps I had been too smug.

Immediately, Roger, our Chinese host, began calling out names. The infant girl was always handed to the woman, and Roger would point dramatically at her and shout to the baby, “Mama! Mama!” It was a strange kind of introduction, and each little girl that was handed to her new mother seemed to break out of her stupor and into hysteria. The sound of sobbing babies filled the conference room. Jin Heng Ling was motionless in the arms of her nanny.

“Tresch family!” Roger shouted. Kyle and I stepped a few feet forward and were face to face with Jin Heng Ling. The nanny that was holding her had tears in her eyes as she handed her over. “Mama! Mama!” Roger yelled in Jin Ling’s face as he pointed at me. She had been so still that I expected her body to be rigid, but she was limp, and I couldn’t get her adjusted in my arms comfortably as we walked to a corner of the conference room. All the families had scattered to different areas, comforting their screaming daughters by holding them close, singing softly, rocking them back and forth in their arms. I looked down at Jin Heng Ling. She was staring up at me, leaning back awkwardly in my arms.

“Hello Alison,” I said and smiled at her.

She blinked.

“I’m your mommy.” I said, and pointed at Kyle. “And there is your daddy.”

She blinked again, a little heavier this time.

“We’ve been waiting a very long time to meet you.” I smiled and kissed the top of her forehead. My hands were shaking and my lips were dry as they touched her skin.

When I looked back at her face, I noticed tears welling up in her eyes, and when she blinked again they streamed down her cheeks. After 18 months of waiting, I had not expected this. I was ready for a tantrum, and had even prepared myself for her to try to escape my arms when she was handed to me. But this was something different. She leaned her head against my shoulder and sobbed quietly into my shirt. My hand went instinctively to the back of her head and cradled it gently while she burrowed her body into mine. My shaking stopped. I felt her grief.

“It’s okay Alison,” I whispered into her ear. “Mommy’s here.”

There is a danger in carrying around a mental image of a moment. For a year and a half I had envisioned our first meeting with Alison, but that day in the hotel conference room altered all my preconceptions. The baby in Nanning was not the baby I had seen in my mind's eye, nor the baby I had created from gazing at her referral photo for five weeks.

After we returned from China with our new daughter, I stopped reading the email threads and removed myself from the Internet chat sites. Much of what they discussed

didn't apply to Alison, or to me. She never had night terrors or sleep issues. I didn't have to wrap her tight in a bath towel to combat weak sensory integration or wear her strapped to my body all day to ensure bonding. She seemed to emerge from institutional living emotionally intact and equipped to love deeply and completely. It would have been a romantic ending to an adoption story if the mental image of my own bonding had been accurate. I had been prepared to fall in love at first sight, but I didn't. During those last few moments in the hotel conference room, when I had allowed my mind to list all the possibilities of how this could go terribly wrong, it had never occurred to me that *I* might be the one who stumbled through this transition.

Two months after we returned, our social worker paid us a visit. Alison was sleeping in my arms.

"How does it feel?" Rebecca asked me.

I hesitated for a moment, and decided to be honest.

"It feels different than I thought it would. She's bonding really well. I'm just not sure I am." Lately, I had started to loathe the word *bonding*. It kept running through my mind as if it were a dreaded assignment that I couldn't complete.

"Maybe I'm doing something wrong," I continued, but she shook her head.

"There is no formula for this," she said. "I remember one mom asked me how long it would be until she felt like she wasn't just babysitting someone else's kid."

I stifled the urge to ask for that woman's phone number.

“That’s the way I feel,” I said looking down at Alison. Her face was getting plump, and black hair was growing in thick enough to run a fine-toothed comb through. She had learned to say “cacker,” and “Dada” and she clapped with glee whenever the dog walked into the room. “She seems to be better at this than I am.”

Rebecca smiled and stood to leave.

“She might be,” she said. “So let her lead the way for a while.”

After Rebecca left, I sat on the couch with my sleeping daughter in my arms and thought back twelve months to our first home study. I had sat on this same couch in my immaculately clean house and answered Rebecca’s requisite questions about our motivations and intentions with absolute certainty. Two biological children gave me the advantage of experience, and my own status as an adopted daughter gave me the assumption that I would clear all the emotional hurdles. So far, neither of these had proven to be much help.

Alison woke in my arms and wiggled around until she could see my face, and then she smiled. Lately, I had been telling people that there was something about her eyes – black and deep with expressions that spoke to me of faraway places and agonizing moments. A bridge. Abandonment. Loneliness. A long bus ride. Strange faces. Departure. I wondered if it had all sealed something within her soul that gave her the courage to cling to us and lavish us with unreserved love.

I sat her up on my lap facing me and asked if she was ready to lead the way for a while. “You seem to be a little better at this than I am right now,” I said.

She stared at me, and for a moment I thought there might be something in her eyes that reflected understanding. I waited for something profound to happen, and she smiled and lifted a hand to point toward the kitchen.

“Cacker,” she said softly.

“Okay,” I replied. “I’ll have what you’re having.”