

Mija

In the end, nearly all parents know that their child was divinely intended for their family. This knowledge is inherent in the love we have for our children. Despite all that we had just endured, very quickly the supposed golden rule of being “in-process” - one does not regard this as your child - was shattered. An intense inner fear accompanied this revelation, but that fear only made the feeling stronger. In my defense, there were reasons why everything seemed real this time.

Calm waters

From the day we accepted our referral, our case tangibly proceeded better than before. No referral documents were missing. There were no issues with Isabel’s medical tests. Even the process of having our funds transferred from the hogar where Rocket Boy had lived to the new Guatemalan attorney went off without a hitch.

One day at work an amazing thing happened. An e-mail arrived in my in-box from a Jorge Alberto Cruz Barrientos. His mother, Betty, was Isabel’s foster mother and Carol Ann had given him my e-mail address. The relationship we have forged with this family will be echoed strongly in the pages to come, but this e-mail was something different than this permanent bond we now have. Receiving this e-mail gave me the security to believe that Isabel would some day sleep in the beautiful nursery Sheila created. For far too long, flashing over that nursery stood a blind to the eye but fluorescent to the soul “vacancy” sign.

Immediately, I formed a steady e-mail relationship with Alberto. We were about the same age and would come to find out shared many things in common. It was interesting to meet someone with the same general persona as I who came from such a different culture and life experience. His was a large, traditional family with six children. His mom had been fostering children for a number of years. He would tell me how beautiful, wonderful and precious my Isabel was. Alberto often referred to Isabel as our daughter,

which warmed the “cockles of my heart” as Woody Allen would say. And best of all, Alberto was very functional, if not fluent, in English. At a minimum, his English was better than my Spanish and so between both our pseudo bilingualities, there was no language barrier.

Within a few weeks of accepting Isabel’s referral we discovered that we had crossed yet another milestone in the process. We had received approval from the U.S. Embassy to initiate a DNA test. This test would prove that the woman relinquishing Isabel was in fact her biological mother. In ways we didn’t realize would be important at the time, making it through this hoop also meant that our case was officially started in the eyes of the law. Two days later, the DNA test was conducted. Once we had the results, we would be permitted to visit Isabel in Guatemala when we wished.

There is good reason why most adoption agencies have a policy against meeting the child before the DNA results are returned. The obvious reason that you want to be sure the test results are a match is not the rationale. Very rarely is that a problem. The reasoning is that the birthmother has the right to reclaim the child at any point in the process before the official adoption decree is issued. While the process is under way, she has to physically see the child twice. The first is generally at the DNA test. In fact, she is forced to hold the child on her lap and have a picture taken that accompanies the samples and results. For many adoptive children, this picture will be the only one they will ever see of her. The logic in not traveling until after the test is that if she has doubts about relinquishing the child, seeing the child and holding the child on her lap will be the catalyst for her to change her mind and reclaim the child.

In addition to clearing the DNA hurdle, we were told that our case had entered the Guatemalan Family Court. The good news was that we had been assigned to court five, not the infamously horrible court three. So for the time being, it seemed like smooth sailing.

Getting involved

It was around this time that I plunged head first into the virtual adoption community. The adoption process, politics, and general information and camaraderie can easily become addictive. This was exacerbated by the Hague Convention looming overhead and the storm of uncertainty that went along with it. There are countless websites, chat rooms, e-mail lists, bulletin boards, and blogs all dedicated to adoption from Guatemala. These resources should be cherished by all going through the process for a myriad of reasons. But they can also become too much whereby they become the total focus of the adoptive parent's life; which I certainly fell pray to.

Learning about Guatemala also became a fascination. I already knew more than the average American about Latin-American politics and probably even about Guatemala. But I wanted to learn more about the indigenous peoples, customs, cuisine, and the other things that I would need to integrate into Isabel's life. While often upsetting, because of the history of US intervention in the country and its impact, this was a welcomed departure from the all-encompassing fanaticism of the actual adoption. Through this, I gained a personal security about what we were doing, really coming to grips to why it was that this little infant from Guatemala came to be in a position that her being adopted by us was necessary. Nothing was bothering me about this before, but learning about the people and the struggles did put something inside my soul at ease and probably was the kindling for what would become my adoption activism.

As time went on and the negative impression of what the Hague would mean soared, that kindling turned into a three alarm fire. It became clear that a bunch of human rights groups, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and bureaucrats were trying to keep Isabel from coming home. This infuriated me for two reasons. First of which, I did not believe that they examined the issue from a spiritual sense as I did and thus their attacks were complete misguided idealism. Secondly, it really bothered me to see so many organizations that I generally support participating in this idealistic rhetoric. Imagine the reaction of someone who prides himself on his political correctness, ethical behavior, and

activism being deemed a child trafficker by the largest children's rights and charity group in the world?

Me llamo???

One thing Sheila and I had not reached agreement on was whether, or how, to change Isabel's name. We both liked the name Isabel. Since it was also her birthmother's name, we both agreed that keeping it somewhere was a must. Sheila and I had a deal that I would get to name boys and she would get name girls. The caveat is that the other parent can veto any name. Sheila ran many family and other meaningful names past me. I tried to be honest when I hated a name but also wanted her to decide. Which name she chose was more important to her than it was to me so long as we didn't lose the "Isabel". I felt strongly about keeping that tie to her life before becoming a Kreutner. In the end, Sheila had two names she could not do without – Katherine and Louise. So Isabel was going to have two middle names one way or the other. It came down to two choices. One was "Isabel Katherine Louise" and the other "Katherine Isabel Louise". I preferred the former, Sheila preferred the latter; ultimately it was her decision to make.

Know thyself

Sheila and I started to talk about visiting. It would take a little bit of coordination for her to get her time off of work. This is not to imply that anything could have stopped us from visiting Isabel. But the extra income was what we were planning to use for visiting during the process.

Before we could think seriously about travel details, we had something more serious to discuss. At this point in time, it was clear that UNICEF had successfully lobbied the head of the PGN to make drastic changes to the system. If past history of UNICEF's lobbying efforts elsewhere were any indication, there was no telling how egregious a process we could end up with. This was no joke, as they could very easily come up with something that says a child is not eligible for intercountry adoption for years after they

are relinquished. No matter how much we tried not to believe it or think about it, there was serious question about if and when Isabel would be able to come home.

One night when we started to discuss travel I told Sheila that we needed to consider something before going any further. We had to be honest with ourselves. Flying out to Guatemala and meeting Isabel would create an overpowering bond and love with her. We had both wanted to be parents for so long - nothing was going to create some emotional barrier between us and her. That barrier was already virtually nonexistent without physically holding her in our arms. Once we met her, we were toast!

This meant two things given the Hague uncertainty. We had to be realistic and prepared to handle the possibility that these bastards would make it impossible for us to complete the adoption. We both knew what we had been through already, this time it could be losing a child that we had come to know physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Secondly, we could not turn a blind eye to the fact that if we visited, we would fight endlessly to bring her home no matter how long it took. This can't be taken too lightly.

It was not us agreeing to some course of action, it was the fact that I had to realize the activist in me would be unable to have any peace until Isabel was home. A beautiful, but at times detrimental, thing about the activist mindset is that it is impossible to come to terms with all the things in life that don't happen as they should. Activists are the people who take to the streets, vent their anger, sacrifice themselves, and refuse to give up even in the face of impossibility. Activists do this because they have no other choice; they are unable to just accept things. I knew myself, once I met Isabel I was on a mission that could have infinite different results.

Sheila and I seriously discussed all of this, although as usual we both already had our minds made up. The thrill and excitement of meeting Isabel overpowered logical discourse. All the little milestones in the case were great, but visiting her was one that obviously hits on another level in the quest to become parents. So while it was probably

pre-ordained that the result of the discussion would be the decision to travel, we were not in denial of the possible ramifications.

We both agreed that it was possible that Isabel might end up being our second child if it looked like adopting her could take years. We were prepared to accept the financial and emotional impacts that might have. We understood that this could require drastic action on our parts and dramatically change the direction of every aspect of our lives. I distinctly remember saying to Sheila, “We didn’t start this adoption for humanitarian reasons, but we may end up finishing it for humanitarian reasons”. In short, once we met Isabel we knew that in every fathomable way she would become the glue between our larger social responsibilities and our most personal selves.

This sensation of the macro issue becoming the personal issue is not uncommon. It is what makes someone who has developed lung cancer lobby against big tobacco. Christopher Reeves and Nancy Reagan didn’t advocate for stem cell research until they had a personal interest in it. The difference in our case was that we were voluntarily signing up for Alzheimer’s - usually people don’t walk into the cause on their own volition. By holding Isabel in our arms, given the complete uncertainty with the Hague, it could be that kind of life changing event.

Having this discussion and thinking it through was the smartest thing we could have done. It is so important to be real through the process. Most everyone is going to follow their hearts down the road to immediate gratification; it is our nature to do so. Understanding the possible ramifications mentally prepares us for what may lie on the road ahead. Doing it openly and consciously makes the fears less powerful. Not having the conversation does not equate to blissful ignorance, because the fears and thoughts will still be there. Addressing them stops them from eating you up inside, bringing about a feeling of security less likely to hamper you during the actual visit.

The best made plans

Alas we were ready to actually plan our trip. How long did we want to stay? Where should we stay? Which hotels? All the normal questions crossed our minds. Some were easy to answer. We decided to try to stay about ten days, and do some sightseeing around the country before hooking up with Isabel. We thought we'd like to see the Mayan ruins at Tikál. However, everything regarding the trip was not up to our discretion, there were also some rules we had to follow.

As mentioned earlier, all adoption agencies have their own rules regarding travel. Some are extreme, such as that parents have to book their travel through the adoption agency. Mostly though, they have to do with where and how long you can see the child, whether you can keep the child overnight, how much contact you can have with the foster family. Carol Ann was very progressive in this regard with one exception, she did not believe it was in the best interests of the child to be away from the foster mother overnight. We understood this as the child should likely not be subjected to the separation anxiety if avoidable.

At this exact point in time, there were other influences on travel policy. The Hague Fiasco unleashed seemingly unrelated attacks on adoptions in Guatemala. The government stopped issuing the documents, called an "aviso", that showed the foster mother had legal custody of the child. In addition, police were raiding the homes of foster families. Because of the lack of appropriate documents, the families and the children would be brought into custody. The Guatemalan newspapers would print stories about the raids on "casas de cunas" (crib houses). They would use terms describing the clandestine nature of these places where they fatten up kids so that they can sell them at a good price. To my knowledge, each and every one of these raids proved to be a legal foster home once the lawyers were able to provide them with sufficient documentation. The newspapers did not cover that part of the story.

In addition, foster mothers were being harassed and detained by police when they entered and left the popular hotels in Guatemala City for adoptive parents. Many agencies were limiting visitation to being at the lawyer's office for a few hours in the afternoon. This

was where Carol Ann was going because of valid concerns. Some agencies and lawyers were just not permitting travel at all.

Our situation was unique in that I had forged a friendship with Alberto and his family was eager to meet us. They really seemed to care deeply for Isabel and enjoyed the direct contact with us. Without going into details, we did feel like whatever the official rules declared; with some cautious discretion we might be able to bend them a bit. But turning our first time meeting our daughter into a covert operation wasn't exactly the picture I wanted in Isabel's lifebook.

My mind often views everyday life like a game of chess. This was one occasion when this proved to be a gift. Pondering all the intricacies of what was happening, I had a revelation. I realized that what we would love more than anything else would be to get to stay with our foster mom during our stay. Or more appropriately, to have her come stay with us. That way we would be able to get to know them better and better understand Guatemalan culture. This could also allow us plenty of time with Isabel and spare her any discomfort. Isabel could get to know us with the comfort of her caregiver by her side. If Betty was willing, we could stay in La Antigua where it was safer than in the city and a more pleasant place to be. There'd be no issues with hotels. Besides, we were fortunate that Betty was probably one of the last foster mothers to get the legal aviso paperwork.

First I ran the idea passed Alberto. Making sure his family approved was the most important thing because if it wasn't cool with them, I wouldn't want them to feel pressured if Carol Ann and our lawyer suggested it. To no surprise, they thought it was a great idea. Now we had to convince Carol Ann and our lawyer. To my knowledge, this was not something that had been done before for an adoption visit. Obviously, if we asked and were refused, it would complicate any covert visitation we might be able to put together. But we had to go with what was right and challenge the powers that be to do the same, so we went for the legit approach.

Without too much deliberation, Carol Ann okayed the plan. As things turned out, it was a welcomed solution to the situation. In fact, she later made it her new travel policy. I'm very proud of being a catalyst for this. Today it is not altogether uncommon and as the story shall show, is a wonderful experience for everyone involved. Carol Ann did, however, have certain stipulations. We had to pick from one of a few hotels that she felt were safe. And we had to promise that without exception, Isabel would not leave the hotel grounds.

Soon after we had the plans all set. We would travel from July 3rd-13th and have about three days alone before Isabel and Betty would arrive. We had to abandon the idea of visiting Tikál when we discovered that it was mosquito season and before going to that area we would need shots for malaria. Because it requires a series of shots, we did not have enough time to be treated before the visit. We looked into the hotels Carol Ann gave us to choose from and decided on Quinta de las Flores. The grounds looked beautiful and they offered two bedroom casitas that included a full kitchen and dining area. That would make things like sterilizing bottles much easier.

We certainly had something to look forward to.

What the children really need

There were lots of travel particulars to be planned. All the normal stuff of arranging cars, booking flights, reserving hotel rooms, and the like were pretty easy to arrange. We had all of this done by a travel agent in La Antigua who is an American expatriate and adoptive mother. But like many other adoptive families, we wanted to bring donations of some sort with us while visiting and get a chance to do some good while there. I think this comes as much from the guilt of our own prosperity as it does from the desire to help others. Whatever the reasoning, it's certainly a positive thing that many families don't travel to Guatemala empty handed. Filling a suitcase with aspirin, antibiotics, baby formula, and other common necessities is not uncommon. Often times they travel with

packages for other families' children and foster families. In fact, we had already signed on to both. But there was one more thing I wanted to do on this trip.

I wanted to donate a touch of San Francisco, the United States' ciudad de paz (city of peace).

The impoverished children of Guatemala needed tie dyes!

Sheila had been making quite a few tie dyes in these days. They had been sent to Isabel, other people's kids, and even to the hogar where Rocket Boy had lived. But now we had to do it on a more grand scale.

The idea was to have a large tie-dye party and ask people to bring medical donations with them. We'd provide all the shirts, dye, burgers and beer. Then we'd take a picture of the person who made each individual shirt as they first saw how it turned out. We were going to go to a hogar that did not receive funding through adoption and give them out to the children. The child would get the picture of the person who made the shirt. Then we'd take a picture of the child with the shirt and give it to the person who made it - a way to complete the circle of giving and personalize the act of charity. Pretty cool idea I must say.

The turnout for the party was not what we had hoped but we did have a good ten people eagerly working to get the 125 shirts done. And we all had fun doing it even though it proved to be more work than we had imagined. In all the prior tie dyeing Sheila had done, we had used the kits sold at craft stores. These kits are not inexpensive and the cost to do 125 shirts this way would have been enormous. So we decided to buy normal clothing dye and improvise. It turns out that the dyes are not the same. As a result, the shirts did not sit out to dry long enough and were rinsed prematurely. Many bled badly. All was not lost because Sheila, bless her heart, found ways to make all of the shirts look cool and unique by selective dyeing them again.

The process of trying to match the shirts with the pictures was no easy task. Luckily I had the foresight to have the picture's backdrop determine what size shirt it was. But because of Sheila's fine work, some of them no longer looked like they did in the picture. We did our best to match them appropriately and even if we got some wrong, the thought was the same.

We did not receive very many medicinal donations at the party so Sheila and I head on out to Target to stock up. I was disappointed when I was not able to get the store to offer any donations or discounts. I did provide information on the organization who would receive them. So we flipped the tab and had a great time going though and grabbing all the things we knew were needed. The fun part was trying to figure out things like which brand of children's vitamins the kids would like best – the Flinstones, Barney, or Dora the Explorer? Practicality often took over and we opted for the generic. There was no need to spread our consumerism south! One interesting tidbit is that the health clinic that would receive the stuff did not want anything anti-bacterial, excluding things like Bactine. The feeling was that these products do more harm than good in the realities of the impoverished lives.

The organization we were donating to is called Hands of Hope. It is a medical clinic that offers medical services to three rural indigenous communities. The organization was started and is run by an American couple, Gregory and Anita, who first went to Guatemala after it had been hit by a hurricane. They went on a church mission utilizing Anita's skill as a nurse. They were moved by the experience, packed up the family, and moved to Guatemala to devote their lives to helping people and spreading some gospel in the process.

Trying to set up the delivery of the tie dyes was next to impossible. We could find ways to get them to the appropriate places, but not in a way that we could meet the children personally. Gregory from Hands of Hope suggested that we bring them to the area around their clinic and give them out at a local school. He explained that the people are truly needy and on the brink, even if they are not orphaned. He also explained that we

needed to give them away in a controlled environment or else we risked starting a riot. The needs are so great and the people have so little that a gringo showing up with anything is likely to be swarmed. Calling it a riot is an exaggeration, but the point was that it might be more than we could handle. So going to the school would offer this controlled environment and so long as we had one for the teachers, they'd let us in and facilitate it. So it seemed like a good idea.

We also made some other plans for our free days in La Antigua. One was to meet with a couple from the Bay Area who had two adopted children and were staying in La Antigua for a while. The other was to pay homage to Rocket Boy. We wanted to deliver a framed certificate to the staff at his hogar signifying that a tree had been planted in Israel in their honor for the love they showed him during his short life. We knew that the staff had blamed themselves in many ways for his death and we wanted to show them that we did not feel that way. We also wanted to visit his grave.

Paranoia

While excited about the trip, there was a cloud overshadowing it. Not only was there the Hague, but also just the reality of meeting Isabel and traveling to this strange country and spending nearly a week with a stranger. Obviously, it was very important to us that Betty walk away feeling good about us as parents. But we didn't know what to expect. We didn't now how relevant the cultural barriers might be.

There was also the issue of language. Betty spoke no English. Sheila spoke very little Spanish. And while I am fluent in Spanglish, I often have a hard time understanding people whose native tongue is Spanish. So much of language is expression and that is where fluency begins. Many families hire a translator when they meet the foster family. But we had days alone to get to know one another so we figured a little language barrier might help take up the time and be fun. So we decided to wing it and not hire a translator, not even for a short time.

The prospect of the number of days we'd be spending with Isabel and Betty intimidated us. We're not always the most outgoing people. Because we're somewhat radical, coming up with non-controversial conversation can be a challenge. Luckily, we knew that George "Dubya" Bush was none too popular among the Guatemalan population. In fact, numerous people on internet lists had talked about how saying something like "Bush es stupido" had gotten guatemaltecos to befriend them. So even if I slipped I shouldn't get into too much trouble. Who knew, maybe I'd end up a hero. But the fear of conversation was only a part of it.

The infertility and adoption processes do weaken us and create insecurities. No matter how much we consider ourselves secular, it is like there is some divine ordinance outlawing us from becoming parents. Now we would be alone, in the middle of the adoption process, with a woman who professionally takes care of infants. Maybe we would fail so horribly in her comparison that we'd walk away thinking we're not going to be capable parents. We knew from Alberto's e-mails that they looked on fostering as more than just some income, that they cared deeply for the children. So what if we sucked so badly at parenting that Betty didn't think we'd be suitable parents? What if this turned into the longest week of our life, with us being afraid to get close to Isabel because we had no idea what we were doing?

We were going to experience something like we had never experienced before. That was for certain.

The man decrees

As the days until our trip numbered to only a few, a rumor was spreading in the adoption community. Someone at the Guatemalan Consulate in Washington D.C. told an adoption professional that the PGN was going to announce the new adoption system on July first, just two days before we embarked, also happening to be my birthday. At first it seemed like just another rumor. The person relaying it was trustworthy, but whether the Consulate official knew what he was saying was another story. Then there seemed to be

miscellaneous other sources validating this as well. What the rumor mills lacked was any detail on what the meat of the new system would be.

I went to bed on June 30th a nervous wreck. This time around, we did not discuss the “what ifs” of our trip. If somehow we discovered the next morning that we could not adopt Isabel, we could decide then whether we wanted to take a vacation to Guatemala. It was hard to be optimistic after everything thus far. It seemed like nothing had gone our way in the quest for parenthood. For someone who believes in karma, I had to wonder when my good karma would come save the day or face deeper spiritual doubt over my own self. Unfortunately, you never get to decide when the good karma is going to kick in. Things may not yet have hit the point at which that was meant to be so. All philosophical and spiritual bullshit aside, tomorrow was likely going to be a day in my life I would never forget.

There was no way to guess what time an announcement would come out. One thing that was sure was that once it was made, the internet would beam it all over the world in an instant. The first thing I did that morning was, of course, check the computer. There was no news so I went on with my normal routine. I poured a cup of fair trade, organic, shade grown Guatemalan coffee (How’s that for politically correct!?) and let the dogs outside. I had some coffee and gave the dogs their ritual morning love. Before going to shower I checked the computer again – nothing. After showering, getting my big boy work clothes on, and giving Sheila her kiss goodbye I checked the computer one last time.

There was an announcement.

As I recall, at this point the actual declaration was not available, there was just a synopsis. All I remember is that it did say our referral would be recognized. We were going to be allowed to adopt Isabel! I cheered and quickly went to give Sheila the great news.

Sheila, surprisingly and to her credit, was doing much better with adoption-related neuroticism than me. She hadn't sold her soul to the barrage of internet propaganda. She was better suited mentally that it was out of our hands and everything would be okay. So while the news made her happy, she wasn't as taken by it. She also was sleeping at the time and does not wake easily. But I was full of life.

On the drive to work I blasted tunes, especially enjoying the Grateful Dead's *Sugar Magnolia*. I sang. I danced as best I could with a seatbelt. I smiled and screamed in joy. When I got to work, I sent out an e-mail to my family and friends about how it was the best birthday of my life.

We realized soon after that the news was not so great and that we still had no way to complete the adoption. But at least we were able to travel to Guatemala as planned and knew that the government had officially said that someday, somehow we'd be able to bring her home.

The Free Wheelin' Smuggling Humanity Blues

We hired our friend Marco, who owns a limousine company, to take us to the airport. He was probably as excited as anyone about our adoption. We were booked on a red eye flight that arrived in Guatemala very early in the morning. We departed on time and had an extended layover in Houston. We were both exhausted and quiet.

As the time for the flight to Guatemala got closer, we waited near our gate and had our first touch of Guatemala as the other passengers arrived. Sheila and I were officially minorities. Other than a couple of backpack bearing students and some clergy, we were the only gringos. It's amazing how middle class Caucasians can go through so much of life never being the minority in an open environment. Admittedly, I do at these times become self-conscious about it and feel as though my every action is one on behalf of middle class gringos everywhere.

One thing preoccupying us was how open to be about the fact that we were in the process of adopting a baby from Guatemala. So far as we knew, anti-adoption sentiment ran high among guatemaltecas. For most guatemaltecas, the only exposure they had to adoption was the negative stories in the press about rich Americans buying babies. On the other hand, I was proud of what we were doing and am not one to lie when I have nothing to hide. Besides, why in the hell else would we be going to Guatemala?

Before too long, we had to address this preoccupation. There was a family sitting near us with some beautiful kids. I don't remember how it happened, but we started talking with them. They lived in Los Angeles and were going to Guatemala and El Salvador to visit family. Eventually the conversation inevitably came to why we were going to Guatemala. After hesitating for a moment, Sheila told them exactly why we were going. I could tell as she did so that both of us were bracing, trying to read the expression on their faces. As I have found to be the case virtually without exception, they thought it was a wonderful thing. They gave us their phone numbers in Guatemala in case we needed anything and offered to show us around and meet their family. It had been eight years since I left the restaurant management business in Southern California and separated from the Latino community. But it took only minutes for me to appreciate the hospitality and kindness that had always captured my heart. Meeting this family brought optimism about the trip at just the right moment.

The flight to Guatemala seemed very quick. Maybe it was because it took us half the flight to figure out how we were supposed to fill out the customs forms given to us by the government. First of all, they were written in that version of English that even a Notre Dame MBA Magna Cum Laude can't understand. We also weren't sure of whether we should say we were visiting for an adoption or make it out to be normal vacation. Most importantly, we had something to hide.

Suddenly we were no longer just adoptive parents visiting, we were drug smugglers!

Legally, we were supposed to declare the supplies we were bringing for Hands of Hope. Believe it or not, if declared they would be subject to taxes. In addition, it was possible the Guatemalan authorities might confiscate them. In a country where millions of dollars worth of donated pharmaceuticals had recently and mysteriously never made its way to the people, we could think of better ways to spend our philanthropic funds.

We had detailed descriptions of what to expect once we landed, how to navigate through customs and the airport, and how to avoid having your bags searched. As the plane was coming down toward the mountainous landscape, we were making sure we were prepared to get out of the airport unscathed.

After exiting the plane, we walked down a long hallway. It had the appearance of an aged urban high school. Then it opened up into the main airport building where we had to go through customs and have our passports stamped. There they do a rudimentary check of the forms and send you on your merry way to collect your baggage.

The baggage area in Guatemala City can simply be described as a trip. The nice thing is that they have lots of luggage carts and unlike in the United States, they are provided free of charge. The bags show up on what is a fairly small, curvy turnstile compared to those I'm accustomed to. Because the flights are generally full and most people are bringing back things for family, there are lots of people and lots of bags and lots of carts all in a chaotically small area, especially once the bags start to arrive and everyone stakes out their access to the turnstile. There are always large stacks of bags everywhere, making you wonder whether your bag is already sitting somewhere. The bags come off the plane and are thrown together on a small flatbed trailer as high as the eyes can see. It is amazing that they don't all tumble to the ground. Our luggage consisted of three large suitcases and one normal corrugate cardboard box with the tie dyes. The baggage operation looks pretty disorderly, though they have never lost one of my bags (correction: on a trip we took after initially writing this, they did lose a pack and play. Though it arrived the next day).

Now it was the time for the clandestine operations to begin.

Our mission was to walk calmly past the guards at the left, avoiding the people checking bags on the right side of the exit. If they let us pass, we were home free. If they didn't, we honestly didn't know what to expect although we had been told not to worry about our safety or anything like that. We got our nerves together and with our best calm, unassuming faces on we started to walk towards the left.

The guard stopped us and while I didn't understand exactly what he said it was clear he was telling us to go to have our bags inspected.

We stood back for a minute and while that guard seemed distracted, we made a break for it trying to walk past the other guard on the left.

These guys were good! We had no way to escape. We kept our nerves and proceeded to the line of people having their bags checked. As it became our turn my heart starting beating hard and I got nervous. Nothing too severe, just the same kind you get when pulled over for a speeding ticket. It was just the confrontation with authority impacting me.

Our concern had been with the medications we were bringing. Little did we know that it would be the trusty tie dyes that might prove troublesome! As we approached the guard she motioned for the cardboard box. My guess is that it looked a little bit too much like a box used for commercially shipping goods. She was correct in that it was the box that all the shirts shipped to me in.

She opened the box with a box cutter, slicing through the expensive "air-free space saving" bag we had used to fit them all back into the box. She thought that we were bringing them in to sell them, not to donate to the poor.

Very quickly, I shot my Spanish into fifth gear. Under pressure, I forgot I was horribly out of practice and any national would have to be patient to try to converse with me. In a defensive but humble tone I explained the whole thing. We had thrown a party with friends and made them. I showed her the picture tucked inside each shirt. I told her that tie dyes are a symbol of peace from San Francisco that we wanted to share that sentiment with the poor. I told her where the shirts were going to be donated.

My argument was compelling, or annoying, enough for her and she looked past the shirts. But she wanted us to open another bag, presumably to make sure they weren't all full of potentially commercial merchandise. We held our breath and she chose one of the bags with our clothes in it. As we zipped that one back up we hoped we were finished. At this point if she chose another, it was 50-50 she'd find the seventy-pound bag full of humanitarian supplies. After what seemed to me a very long pause, she waved us along. We were home free.

As one walks closer to the exit, just outside there is a barricade and beyond it is a huge group of people. The trick is to find your driver quickly so that you are not caught in the middle of the crowd. So you walk outside and signal the guy with your name on a sign. Very quickly, there are union members there to get your bags from inside the barricade to the driver's car. People do not mess with these union guys and so they keep your bags safe during the wait. Luckily, we knew to expect them so I had already separated tips for them in my pocket.

The drive from Guatemala City to La Antigua was an interesting one. It begins with a drive through the city. It was still very early in the morning so things were calm. But it was very interesting just to see the shops, street signs, billboards, and everyday life of this city. Then is the trip over the mountain. The highway is in remarkably good shape though it is still an adventure. Along the way are some small towns or villages but mostly it is just beautiful forest. Our driver was a nice guy and was willing to talk a little politics with me since Guatemala was gearing up for an election.

Arriving in La Antigua was unforgettable. You know you are there when the streets turn to old brick and narrow. All of the buildings have the same antiquated colonial Spanish appearance. The place was bustling, but communal. Lots of kids out on the streets, people sitting outside shops, people riding bikes and other things that just seemed very tranquil. As we pulled up to our hotel and they opened up the large wooden gate, we entered into what would become our home away from home – Quinta de las Flores.

Paradise found

Quinta de las Flores is a beautiful property. The grounds have old fountains that used to be communal washing areas. There are, as the name implies, different flowers everywhere. There are only about twelve rooms in all, with about half being the casitas like ours.

“Casita Numero Tres” as we now affectionately call it suited our every need. Everything was full of the colors of Guatemala and vibrant with native textiles. As would be expected, the architecture was Spanish colonial and there was a lot of fine white cement. The couches were actually cement frames built into the wall with cushions made out of Guatemalan textiles. The kitchen looked fully functional absent a microwave. There were two bedrooms upstairs. Our master bedroom had a balcony and the other had two twin beds and a built in loft. The main bathroom had a beautiful shower curtain made of Guatemalan weave, an idea we have since integrated at home. The view from its window was a magnificent panoramic view of two volcanoes whose tips lay just above the cloud line.

We didn't have any energy when we got into our room as it had been a long, largely sleepless journey through the night, so we opted to nap a few hours. We had nothing planned for this day other than recovering from the trip. That afternoon, we first met Gregory who was actually about to leave the country and needed to pick up a digital camera we had brought for him. We didn't venture out until that evening when we went out for dinner at a Brazilian steakhouse called Nifu Nifa. Most of the restaurants in La

Antigua are outdoors. This one was very much so with trees and fauna adorning the dining room. The food was delicious and, like most places there, very reasonable given the level of service, décor, and quality of the food. We ordered a bottle of Argentinian cabernet and enjoyed the evening, alas relaxed and ready for the days that lie ahead.

A dose of reality

Going off into the rural areas of Guatemala donating tie dyes and medical supplies is not the conventional way for Americans to spend the fourth of July. However, despite the lack of patriotism I am sometimes accused of, I believe that what we were doing was the embodiment of the true American spirit.

Our driver was an interesting college aged guy who did a great job as a tour guide. The journey begins on a normal highway. He'd show us the points of interest and tell us a little bit about the area. We learned about historical sites as well as how land ends up being developed and the dynamics of the economy and control over water. After going down the highway for about half an hour, we turned onto an unmarked dirt road. For much of the way, the road was edging its way along the side of a mountain. There were large agricultural areas along the hillsides. These were the lands that the indigenous people were farming. The flatlands were owned by wealthier people. While the road was bumpy beyond belief, it was a beautiful drive. We'd pass sporadic villages with all the females wearing traditional attire. The people lived in rudimentary encampments of tin sheeting. There were some actual structures, mostly for small stores selling things like soda, and these were the only places that appeared to have electricity.

At one point our driver pointed to a small building that was about the size of a normal US living room. He told us that it was the official government health clinic. During the last election, the president had promised to build health clinics for the indigenous poor. He kept his word and did build many of these small clinics. The only problem, rarely was a doctor there, averaging once every ten days or so. And the doctor did not have medications, only the ability to write a prescription that the person would have no ability

to have filled. Our driver told us that often people come to the Hands of Hope clinic with prescriptions from this government clinic.

This was our first experience in this type of environment. These people were very poor. Not the kind we see in the United States, the kind we see in National Geographic and on weekend Christian charity infomercials. These were not people sitting around asking for some spare change, these were entire communities where struggling to survive is the norm. It showed in their eyes and wrinkled faces. Nonetheless, they seemed very friendly, smiling and waving as they passed on foot. Our driver said that it had taken a long time to earn the trust of the local people, but that now they all knew the Hands of Hope people well. Anita, especially, had become a local saint.

Arriving at the clinic, it was an impressive site in retrospect to its surroundings. It is not a large place, but is a modern building and extremely clean. It was not someplace that I would worry about receiving medical care. We unloaded the donations and Anita gave us a tour. She told us a bit about what it is like there. She explained about the indigenous people and how they lacked medical knowledge now considered universal. For example, if a child had a diarrhea many believed it was because of too much liquid so they would cut back on the child's fluid intake. Or the fact that many people would not bathe their children when sick because they didn't want the child to become cold when taken out of the water.

Anita spoke with a passion for her purpose there. She seemed so devoted to it that the obvious difficulties it had to raise for an American weren't relevant. I believe she found her strength because she is able to see the fruits of her labor. She can personally eyewitness the help they provide in physical treatment and education. Beyond debate, they are beautiful people for sacrificing their own day to day comforts in order to help others.

We didn't stay long at the clinic because there were patients waiting and we didn't want to keep Anita from them. So we said our goodbyes and got back into the minivan to have the long awaited sharing of the love with tie dyes.

One for me

As we pulled up to the nearby school, it was evident no one was there. Our driver explained to us that the teachers don't live in the rural area but come in from the closest town. They don't get paid very much so very few have cars. If they walk too far up the probably ten mile road without someone offering them a ride, they don't always make it to work. The schools are somewhat a waste anyway. While the government does supply the building and the teachers, it provides little else. Thus, impoverished children are only educated to the extent possible without books, stationary and all the other necessary tools.

There was a group of children with an elderly woman standing nearby. So we approached them to give them some shirts. With no other plan to give them out, I was going to give every child I passed one if it killed me! The kids seemed to love the shirts and even the elderly lady got one. It was very calm and every so often a few new children would arrive. As best possible, we got pictures of them with their shirts, though it was a challenge trying to get them away from everyone else holding up the gringo designer picture for a solo shot. With this first group, I was able to explain the meaning of the photographs and the significance of tie dyes in America. It was easy since the customs agent had made me practice.

We head back down the road to another spot where there were a few children and gave them some shirts. A little farther down the road we did the same. Children kept arriving so we stayed there for a little while. Out of nowhere up the hill about two hundred yards was a bus. Not just any bus, but one full of children. Before I knew it a stampede of kids was running towards us. I was surrounded by an anxious group jumping up saying "one for me" or "uno por mi". It was amazing how many knew this little bit of English.

It truly was a scene right out of a movie.

Sheila and I developed a good supply flow with her moving to and from the van with shirts and me handing them out. I will never forget one cute little girl about seven years old. I gave her a shirt and saw her stuff it under the shirt she was wearing. Then she immediately started jumping up and down again saying “one for me, one for me”. Unfortunately, there proved to be more children than shirts and we felt quite guilty when we left, promising ourselves and the kids to come back some day with more tie dyes.

Sheila wondered why it was that the girls who had such beautiful, ornate traditional indigenous clothing would want these tee shirts. Gregory would later explain it two ways. One is practical because it does get chilly and the traditional blouses (called a “huipil”) are made of rough fabrics. So for both these reasons tee shirts come in handy under the huipiles. But he added that the people are so poor, they would act that way even if we were handing out broken toys. The children have virtually nothing they can call their own – they happily take anything they can get.

Spreading our fortune

We had the driver drop us off in La Antigua near the artisan’s market. We proceeded to have lunch at Pollo Campero, a fast food fried chicken chain popular in Central America (and making its way into the United States). At this point, I also had my first Gallo beer, a love second only to Isabel that I would find in Guatemala. Then we went shopping and did as most tourists do – spent a bunch of money. We had many gifts to buy for others and ourselves. As I knew would be the case, I found myself unable to try to bargain significantly. I’m sure we could have saved some money but I would have felt guilty while doing it.

Knowing that some Guatemalans still harbor anger at Americans for our country’s involvement in their civil war, Sheila and I both adorned Canadian maple leaf flag patches. We did have some vendors say they gave us a better deal because we were

Canadians, though who knows if it was true. The crafts are wonderful. There is everything from jade ornaments to colorful textiles, wood carved masks and musical instruments. La Antigua is a very amiable place to be, where one feels safe to explore and not judged or targeted for being a tourist.

The next day we had lunch with an adoptive family and spent some time with them in the Parque Central. Then we endeavored on to our mission to visit Rocket Boy's former hogar and his grave. Despite our most valiant efforts, we were unable to get this set up formally. So we just went to the hogar and knocked on the door.

Revisiting and remembrance

The person who answered was reluctant to let us in and got someone else. I once again explained who we were and why it was that we were there. She opened the door to let us in and explained that the hogar director, an American expatriate, was out of the country. So as best I could, I explained what the Tree in Israel certificate said, gave it to her, and asked how we could go to Rocket Boy's burial site. She asked us to wait for a few minutes and that was fine with us as it gave us a chance to look around and play with some children.

The facility was very well kept and there seemed to be an adequate number of people to care for the children, though maybe not enough for extensive personal attention. In the newborn area, we saw many children wearing the tie dyed wares we had sent months earlier. There were probably about fifteen newborns altogether laying flat on mattresses placed on the floor. That sounds bad in words, but in person, it actually looked safe, efficient, and appropriate. Outside they had a series of toys that safely hold and occupy infants. Things like bouncing chairs and rockers. This seemed to be where they took the children for stimulation, though there was not anyone there playing with them at the time. I quickly made friends with one little guy who was in a hanging seat that bounced a bit. It was kind of surreal to be there. Not only because of our history, but also just to see all of

these children and realize that there is a family somewhere waiting desperately to bring them home.

A woman soon came and took us to a cemetery on the outskirts of town. Like everything else in La Antigua, it had a very antiquated, ornate nature. There were very large burial sites and a mausoleum. Where Rocket Boy was buried was less impressive. In fact, buried probably is not even an appropriate term for it. There was a cement wall and built inside of it were blocks containing the bodies of young children who had passed. Each block was approximately two feet on either dimension. Some of them had plaques serving the purpose of a gravestone. We were disappointed to see that Rocket Boy's did not have a plaque, especially since we had been told he would have one. We agreed to make sure he got one.

The daily afternoon rainstorm had come in and we had given our only umbrella to the lady from the hogar. We were both feeling very sad not only by the reminder of his passing but also by the ignominy in his short life and final resting site. Even in his death, his anonymity and lack of permanence would follow him. In too many ways, no matter what pictures we keep on our walls, his life was a statistic. Another child born without a capable or willing mother. Another child in the hogar. And another child without a plaque to make him unique. This gives new meaning to Pink Floyd's song *Another Brick in the Wall*.

We were exhausted mentally and physically soaked so we decided to call it a day and head back to our hotel. That night we went for dinner at a restaurant serving local cuisine. It was a nice informal place with a piano player. I was enjoying Pepian de Pollo, a dish made with pumpkin and sesame seeds, cinnamon, tomatoes and red peppers. The piano player amazed me when he played the Alan Parson's Project tune *Eye in the Sky*. On my way back from the restroom I complimented him on the song and asked if he knew any Billy Joel. The place started to become animated as he played a great assortment of songs. Oddly enough, he played *Hatikva*, the Israeli national anthem. There was an Israeli couple at the table next to us and we started talking with them. We

came to discover that Guatemala was a popular vacation spot for Israelis and that many young adults visit after completing their mandatory military service. As it got later, the party side of La Antigua appeared as the people outside got younger and the music suitable only for nightclubs began to glare from places around the street.

We returned to our hotel for the night eager for tomorrow to arrive. At last Isabel would be with us. We had spoken to Alberto on the phone earlier to make sure all the plans were set and clear. So we knew that sometime shortly before noon, we would at last hold our daughter in our arms. Surprisingly we slept soundly despite all the anxious anticipation, anxiety, and sundry of explosions that ring out in La Antigua throughout the night.

The next morning we woke up, had some coffee and breakfast then proceeded to prepare ourselves. We had the video camera set up so that we could catch that first moment on tape. We had ourselves looking respectable but also comfortable. We had stopped smoking in the casita the day before, but we still made sure to air it out again.

Then we waited, calmly, with our hearts beating like a low-rider's bass drum.

Alas... Too precious for words

The front office called us to let us know that Betty had arrived. Immediately, all my plans of waiting for them to enter the room and capture that magical first moment on video went astray as I walked outside to greet them. First I saw Alberto walking in with bags. I gave him a greeting and offered my help. He was fine with the bags and then came Betty with Isabel. The next thing I knew, that little baby whose pictures I held dear was dearly held in my arms.

A father's sensation of the first time he holds his daughter is usually done in a maternity ward. For me, it was a different, more incredible in my mind, dynamic experience. I can sympathize with soldiers we often see in the media coming home and meeting their

children that were born while they were at war. Isabel felt like she was just where she belonged. “Muy tranquilo” as Alberto would so often say to describe her. She looked at me softly, obviously unaware herself of what was happening. Or maybe she could tell. I believe children, unable to do so many things, may be more tuned in to emotions and spirit than they are credited with. I stood there and just held her for a minute, trying to appreciate the moment and relish it as a memory I’d be able to relive forever. There are not words that can give this moment its proper due. While I knew we still had a long way to go, *mi’ja* (short for “mi hija” or “my daughter”) had arrived.

Sheila had since walked just outside of the door and was meeting Alberto and Betty. As we all walked inside I handed Isabel to Sheila. As much as I wanted to be a dad, Sheila felt twice so about being a mom. Incredible joy came to my heart as I had the honor of resting Isabel in her mommy’s arms for the first time. I watched on at Sheila, who I could tell was nervous and trying to hold back her tears. A serene beauty filled the room as I watched Sheila rocking Isabel, intently gazing into her eyes.

We stood around near the door and shared what at first felt like some awkward small talk with Betty and Alberto. We were very fortunate to have Alberto there that first day to help break the language barrier. With numerous reminders to Betty to speak slowly, I did okay. Sheila would either ask for my help, or do amazingly well piecing together the little Spanish she knew.

We spent the afternoon lounging and getting acquainted. Before too long had passed, our worries of whether we’d get along well with Betty had passed. She was obviously a very kind and nice woman. She looked to be in her late fifties or early sixties. She had the demeanor of a proper lady but also definitely of one who takes charge. While she later told me that she was very nervous about the trip for much the same reasons we were, it was not apparent in her behavior. She was jovial and approachable. Most of all, there was no denying that she cared deeply for Isabel.

Betty knew how to handle Isabel. This was something that would become painstakingly obvious as time went on. When she held her, Isabel was calm. When Betty wanted Isabel to sleep, Isabel complied. Betty was clearly the boss and a strong mother figure for Isabel. But she did so in a manner that emanated with love and caring all the while. The tone of her voice as she sang lullabies was not one of superficial sweetness, it was genuine. Her tone when she spoke about Isabel was all the more so. She was amazing in that there was nothing she couldn't do while holding Isabel. I joked with her that she didn't seem able to eat unless Isabel was in her arms.

Alberto stayed with us for much of the time. He and I bonded very well and I knew that if we lived in proximity, we'd be great friends. We spent one morning going around town together while everyone else was at the hotel. Our purpose was to get a bathtub for Isabel since the hotel only had a shower. I also needed to get ingredients to cook dinner for everyone that night. Finding Dijon mustard in La Antigua was not easy! Alberto and I got to learn about each other, our lives, and our worlds as we ventured. Along the way I decided to buy him a digital camera, under the condition that he e-mail us pictures regularly. That camera proved to be the best purchase I've ever made.

Cooking dinner for everyone earned Betty's respect. I made Chicken Dijon with pasta, broccoli, and salad. She kept me company as I prepared the meal, fighting off her urge to jump in and help. I was insistent that she relax, although I did eventually give in and let her prepare the broccoli Guatemalan-style, boiled in salt water with a squeeze of limón. That was the first time her and I had a good heart-to-heart about child rearing, adoption, and overall philosophies.

Later that night, Alberto and I sat at the kitchen table having a beer and started to talk politics. As unthinkable as it may seem, he and I had virtually synonymous opinions. He also tried to keep up with what is "really" happening in the world. Our discussion was amazing as I learned about Guatemala's history from a guatemalteco perspective that fundamentally mirrored my own. After we returned home I'd describe Alberto as being the "Guatemalan Kevin".

Sheila and I naturally went through some embarrassing moments, proving that we were inexperienced parents. Bathing Isabel was one key example. Who knew infants were so slippery in a tub? But Betty was very understanding and nonjudgmental, while teaching us the right way to do things. With a couple of days practice, we had it down pat. Not just how to bathe Isabel, but also Betty's whole routine of baby powder all over her skin, cleaning her ears with a Q Tip, putting a little baby oil in her hair, and adding a little bit of baby perfume. Betty didn't realize what she was doing, but she was already doing my mother's job of turning Isabel into a pampered Jewish American princess!

We were lucky that Isabel was not a difficult or cranky infant. We had her crib set up beside our bed. At this time, she needed a pacha (bottle) at some point in the night. When she woke up for it, she would not cry. The only indication would be sucking her thumb. Needless to say, Sheila and I slept very lightly always wanting to be sure we didn't sleep through her feeding time. Tossing and turning constantly thinking that we heard the sweet, faint sound of a tiny mouth sucking on an even tinier thumb.

Isabel was a morning person. She woke up cheerful and playful. Sheila and I used this time as our play time alone with her. We'd let Betty sleep in and keep Isabel in the bedroom with us while we enjoyed the cool, clear, sunny mornings. Being only three months old, Isabel did not do much. But she was "muy linda" (very sweet) with a smile that screams of all that is good and pure in the world. That smile alone was enough to capture us in ways we didn't know possible. And during this time alone with Isabel, she got us to know us and become comfortable. She even seemed to like my singing. Unable to remember the words to children's songs, I instead serenaded her with the Beatles, Grateful Dead, Oingo Boingo, Michael Franti, and of course the Notre Dame Fight Song. Once Isabel saw Betty, keeping her interest was significantly more difficult. While that didn't always feel good, we knew that Isabel attaching to Betty was a very good thing.

All in all we didn't do much while we were there. It was a welcomed break for Betty, who seldom had time to relax. We were eager to spend as much time with Isabel as

possible. So Betty was on vacation until her expertise was needed. While there is not much to do with a three-month old child in tote, it was hard to spend day after day just sitting around. Betty, being the confident matriarch she is, was not scared to leave the hotel with Isabel. She had her aviso documents and I got the sense that any police officer who tried to harass her would live to regret it. So despite the strict rules, we did cautiously venture out.

Whenever in public, we were vigilant to let Betty walk in front of us with Isabel. We never held the baby in public. Mostly we only went to the park, out to eat and to church. Betty is an extremely devout Catholic who normally goes to church daily. We felt bad to be keeping her from it so one day I suggested that she and I and Isabel go to church since Sheila wasn't feeling well. The mass was very interesting to me, mostly just because of the ability to experience people from another culture in that type of surrounding. On the way home, Betty and I discussed religion. She was not 100% comfortable with our mixed religions, neither of which was Catholicism. But after speaking freely with her about our beliefs system and how Isabel would be raised, she seemed happy and satisfied. Maybe the promise that Isabel would attend Notre Dame, the best Catholic school in the United States, really put it past her. However it happened, Betty came to the conclusion that Isabel would be in good hands physically and spiritually.

One night Betty also told me a secret, one that I couldn't keep for very long. Throughout the trip, we had been joking around about whether "Isabel Katherine" or "Katherine Isabel" sounded better. Sheila had been trying to teach Betty how to pronounce "Katie" in attempts to lobby for her vote. I used the fact that since even trying pronounce "Katie" was a challenge for Spanish speakers as evidence that it should not become her first name. It was, of course, all in fun and good for some laughs.

Apparently Sheila had been discussing the names with Betty in my absence. Sheila had told Betty that despite the pillow her mom had already sewn "Katie" into, she was going to keep Isabel's name. Really, I don't think she had completely made her mind up, otherwise she would have told me. But once Betty had told me, she could not back

down. Besides, one great thing about our marriage is that when it comes to something important, we both like to sacrifice for the other. Somehow I already knew she'd choose "Isabel Katherine". I love Sheila for that!

The night before we left Guatemala, Betty invited us to her home for dinner. We knew this was probably breaking a cardinal rule of adoption, but we also knew that it seemed important to her. It would also give us a few more precious moments with Isabel and give us the chance to meet her whole family. Eager to experience yet another slice of Guatemalan life we obliged.

Because of all the "potential" problems for harassment, the drive to Betty's frightened me. The tour company had made a scheduling error and so the only driver they had available was driving a tour bus built for about twenty people. As we drove through Guatemala City, a constant tension gripped me, especially when we passed police cars. We were clearly two gringos with one guatemalteca and a baby in a tourism bus driving through parts of the city where tourism doesn't exist. Trying not to bring attention to ourselves was not an option.

The area of the city where Betty lives had an interesting assortment of very dilapidated areas coupled with very modern looking suburban corner shopping centers. As we pulled up to the security gate for their apartment complex, it looked like something I had only seen in pictures of war torn countries. The gate structure was a permanent one, but it also showed clear signs of decay and makeshift repair. We headed up a dirt road to their building, which looked a bit like a public housing area in the United States.

We exited the bus and some of the family was there to greet us. Most notably was Leonel, Betty's husband. The way he hugged and kissed Betty showed his love for her and how much he had missed her the past week while she was away. He looked like a stereotypical handsome, strong, sensitive, traditional Latino patriarch. He had streaked gray hair, a well trimmed moustache, and if in the United States would likely have been confused with a mafia leader or high-powered attorney.

As we walked up to their third floor apartment, the site of the real life gringos became a spectacle. My paranoia worried that someone would call the police, but then I realized that Betty showed no fear and that this was her home. Those fears were tucked away for a while as I realized our luck in being afforded this experience. Everyone we came across smiled and seemed very friendly, with the children most openly coming up to catch a peek and then running away.

The family had decorated their apartment with balloons and a banner. They treated us like royalty while also making us feel like family. Their entire extended family stopped by at some point in the night to meet us. The most incredible thing was how each and every member of their family treated Isabel and the other child they were fostering with love and care. From Betty's young grandchildren to her son's girlfriend, they all loved these children. Isabel was also clearly comfortable with them all, even "Coco" the terrier. So far as Isabel knew, she was part of a large, close-knit family.

While getting to know the family, Leonel was anxious to show us the video and pictures they had of other children they had fostered. He smiled watching the video of one child's first Christmas in the United States the way any grandparent would. There was no doubt that we would have to keep good on our promise to keep them up to date on Isabel as the years passed.

One memorable moment came about when one of Betty's daughters referred to Isabel as "negrita", which literally means "little black one". While it is true that the indigenous people in Guatemala are darker skinned and face huge racism, we knew that could not have anything to do with what they were calling Isabel. Sheila asked what it meant and everyone blushed as if embarrassed, unable to answer. Alberto was working so there wasn't anyone to translate. I would later learn that "negrita" is just a term of endearment used that can't be taken literally. I learned this through a poem I heard on the radio about the differences between Latino and mainstream American culture. It ended with the line "because in Puerto Rico, 'negrita' means love".

While at their home, we experienced the differences between the middle class in the United States and that in Guatemala. These observations have to be taken in a sociological context rather than a judgment-based one. We deeply love and respect this family as they have the kindest of souls in their hearts and in their actions. Leonel is an accountant and an educated man. Their children go to college as well. By all comparisons I can analogize, they should fall into some sort of upper middle class. Yet their apartment seemed more like government or poor inner city housing. As an example, their kitchen did not have a sink. It was not built with washer and drier hookups. It was very small considering the size of the family they raised there. I realized completely that this was American values rearing its ugly and ignorant head. In fact, it was a smack in the face with just how far from reality I live. Nonetheless, it made me realize just how fortunate we are and that as people like myself fight for what we believe could be a better America, we should also heed caution to just how great a place it is and how lucky we are for certain things.

It's worth noting that Betty's family did not seem to feel as though they are underprivileged. The fact was that it was a nice, safe home. The things that I would be unable to contend with were just the way life was. This was a valuable lesson for me as well. Because as much as I could identify what they didn't have, I was also enlightened by what it created. Americans turn to physical things for their gratification. The bigger house, the newer car, the brand name apparel are all ways that we find meaning and define ourselves. Absent of the possibility for commercialism, people focus in on other areas. The sense of family becomes more of a priority. Enjoying life's moments becomes a far greater catalyst than material gain. I imagine that in a society where all the wealth is extremely concentrated, the people of all the classes below it, assuming survival is not an issue, are almost happier because they are able to appreciate the little things that we all know are the true treasures of life.

After dinner, we knew that the time to say goodbye to Isabel and the family was near. We did not want to be driving back to La Antigua too late into the night and we still had

packing to do. As we prepared to leave, the uncertainty we faced in the process encompassed me once again. For most of the trip I hadn't worried about it. Now that we had to leave, somehow that possibility that we might never see Isabel again fought its way to my consciousness. Once the taxi driver showed up, we knew we just had to be brave. Since the driver was a family friend, Pepe, one of Betty's sons, and his wife, Brenda, accompanied us on the drive back to La Antigua. As we were saying our final farewells to Isabel and the family, Betty said something about trying to see us off at the airport tomorrow. So maybe it wasn't really goodbye yet.

Sheila was very quiet on the ride. While I'm sure it was in part due to the prospect of leaving Isabel, in part reflection on the trip, it was also because I was the only other English speaker in the car. The rest of us talked about cars and sports teams. The amazing thing was that Pepe and Alberto were different from each other in exactly the same ways as my brother and I. This was true down to the part that Pepe, like my brother, was working on a film career, was a sports fanatic, and wanted nothing to do with Alberto's radical politics. People and families can be so different in some ways and yet turn out the same in others.

We returned back to the hotel more reflective than somber. We relaxed for a while and thought back on the trip we were completing. Sometimes it is hard to appreciate things as they happen. So sitting back enjoying the memories was definitely a better choice than dealing with having to leave.

This visit had turned out exactly as we had hoped!

Most important was the time we had spent with Isabel. We knew without doubt that we had been blessed with most bestest baby ever. She was beautiful, sweet, happy, and tranquil. We had great pictures of us with her at a very young age that we knew would be so important in the years to come. We had bonded with her and she seemed to have done the same with us. We had been through a one-week immersion program in parenting. While still not perfect, we were certainly capable. We knew how to bathe her, feed her,

put her to sleep, and of course give her oodles of love and kisses! Not only had the time passed easily with Betty, we became close and got to know and love her. On the same note, we could not be more comfortable with the environment Isabel was living in. We knew she had lots of love. We knew she had great care. And we knew that she was getting plenty of nutrition – when Betty shoved a pacha in Isabel’s mouth, she drank it! There had been some great adventures as well. While we didn’t travel around very much, we did get to experience the culture and learned a lot about Guatemala. We had managed to pay our respects to Rocket Boy, putting to peace part of what we could never comprehend.

The next morning we said goodbye to Quinta de las Flores and head out for the airport. Once we were all checked in, I was ready for one last dose of Pollo Campero and Gallo. We still didn’t know if, where, or when Betty might come. We sort of assumed she wouldn’t come so as not to have some nagging obsession that we’re missing her. After eating we proceeded to the waiting areas. Sure enough, soon after we were once again in the bliss that is Isabel. Along with that came another reminder of how lucky we were to have this foster family. Maybe they were just being so incredibly kind to ensure they’d get to see Isabel growing up? I thought it was just more their very nature. This time, we were more tearful when it came time to go through security and depart. We hugged and kissed Isabel, told Betty we loved her, and reiterated an earlier promise that she would be Isabel’s “abuelita por vida” (sweet grandma for life).

Back to reality

The six weeks that followed (before the Hague decision was reached) were an extremely trying period. The anxious adoptive parent becomes even more so after having visited the child. But we were still in the position of not having any system in place to complete the adoption. In addition, we started to become concerned that our Family Court interviews had yet to be scheduled.

Sheila's concern over Family Court was stronger than mine. My story of "don't worry about the Hague until we're stuck in PGN" morphed into "don't worry about Family Court until there is a way out of PGN". Nonetheless, Sheila was correct in that the delay in Family Court is usually in getting the report written after the interviews have taken place, not in trying to get the interviews conducted. And she also pointed out that there would be a rush of cases once some news came out.

It was around this time that we started to have some problems with Carol Ann. All along, she had been a bit aloof and hard to reach. But we hadn't needed much help and we knew from other families using the same lawyer that delays were not due to negligence. So far, Carol Ann's lack of attentiveness had only been a problem in coordinating our trip. Because I had regular contact with Alberto and was resourceful, this hadn't been too much of a challenge. But now we were facing our case not moving. When we'd call, she would rarely return our calls. E-mails would also go unanswered. Eventually, we would get an e-mail that did not directly answer our questions. Well aware of the "psycho client syndrome", we were not overly aggressive. Like most families, we did not want to get on the bad side of our agency. So mostly it became a personal frustration. We were fortunate that our doctor e-mailed us directly so we did have her monthly doctor's reports.

Our saving grace was to no surprise our foster family. While the wait was grueling, we knew Isabel was happy and in good hands. The digital camera we bought Alberto also proved a blessing. He would e-mail us regular updates and pictures, paying careful attention to dress Isabel in clothes we had given her. Not too much longer after we got home, we mailed them a video tape and pictures from the visit. Alberto and Betty would tell me about how they play the video for Isabel and that her face lights up when she hears my voice. Their regular updates kept us up on her physically and helped make us feel like her parents. But with them also came an emotional downside as we were perfectly well aware of everything we were missing.

The level of grassroots activism among the in-process parents stepped up. We were involved in a multifaceted campaign to not only get our kids home, but also to expose all the sons of a bitches that spread false propaganda and would rather see kids end up homeless huffing glue in a city garbage dump than have them adopted by loving American families. UNICEF was a major target of these efforts and I joined a group of parents, which we would later name Families without Borders, to write a report about UNICEF's positions. Parents from the Bay Area also became particularly active in lobbying congressional representatives locally and providing a kit that could be used nationwide for others to do the same. We vigilantly attacked any derogatory story on Guatemalan adoptions that appeared in the press. This was easy to do because virtually every story could be proven away as something that could never be laundered into a legal adoption.

My addiction to the Guatemalan adoption internet scene intensified. There were probably four or five internet lists I was reading at the time. On some of them, I was a newbie and far from being one of the experts. On others, I found myself having to explain things to many people and often getting into debates with people who didn't know what they were talking about. There was always a lot of rumor and speculation, caused mainly by many people who had a hard time deciphering fact from opinion. But there was a strong sense of solidarity for all that came from the ability to go through it with others, something to keep us occupied and focused during the rough times.

Though no one ever said anything, I know that my work performance had to suffer during this period due to my preoccupation with the adoption. I was not able to think about much else. Luckily I work for a very supportive company who knew what I was going through. Because I had been very open about our plans and they had ridden the highs and lows with me, I had to contend with the constant barrage of well wishing coworkers asking me if we knew when Isabel was coming home. Albeit that the questions came from the best of intentions, they were another nagging reminder that I didn't have an answer. It takes everything you have in you to not reply, "Thanks for the reminder

asshole. Don't you think I'd tell you if I knew when she was coming home? You cruel fucking moron!"

Now that we had met Isabel, the natural worry and concern that is my family became greater. It was a real challenge to try to describe what was going on and why the human rights people did not want Isabel to come home. Unless someone is willing to sit back and listen for a few hours or do a fair amount of reading, it is impossible to explain. This leads them to the worst-case scenario conclusions. So once again, despite the best of intentions, I found myself in a struggle. It was as if I had to defend the adoption foes in order to try to show logic to what was happening. I would also come out of these conversations with the feeling that we weren't doing all we could, pushing Carol Ann hard enough, or getting help somehow. My grandmother, gotta' love her, was the worst offender, openly saying such things. So on one hand I was stretching myself working on the things that maybe somehow could get Isabel home and on the other hand I was feeling like I wasn't doing enough. Once again, this pushed on the control freak and activist within me. Desperation and frustration were taking over.

Victory

When many of us in the adoption community were just about at our breaking point, simultaneously numb and angry, the Constitutional Court of Guatemala announced its decision that the Hague was unconstitutional. The day after the decision was printed in the national newspaper, it would become effective and everything would go back to the system we had signed up for.

This day was exactly what we had been praying for. At last there was a system in place for us to complete the adoption. For some unknown reason, I don't recall first hearing about the ruling or how I reacted. I do recollect some hesitance in believing that the cloud had dissipated. Our problem now definitely became one of our personal case, not the system in general. We were still stuck in Family Court and our interviews had not even been scheduled.

Our challenges with Carol Ann had intensified. We wanted answers to what was happening with Family Court more than “they’re trying”. At one point Carol Ann told us that the judge from our court wasn’t approving any cases with the Hague still in force. Then it was that he would only sign something like two cases a week and so there was a huge queue. After struggling to get any answers back, these generic responses did not address the question at hand. When were the interviews going to happen? After the Hague decision, we started to push harder. Eventually Carol Ann told us that they were trying but the social worker just wouldn’t schedule them. I have every reason to trust what Carol Ann was saying and she did have a sense of humble guilt in her voice. The truth is that some times things are out of their control and this could very well have been one of them. There probably wasn’t much more she could say.

Absent of a speedy completion to our adoption, we decided to take another trip to Guatemala. It would have been three months since our first visit, and we missed Isabel horribly. This trip would differ from the first because with the Hague Fiasco over, we knew that Isabel would be coming home. The worst-case scenario I could fathom would be a year, though it could also just as easily be a matter of a month or two. We decided that visiting every three months was probably an even balance of not missing out on her development and being realistic financially. Sheila had also decided that she wanted to spend Christmas with Isabel wherever that may. So a trip in October made sense.

Planning the trip was much easier the second time around, especially because I just wanted everything to be like the first. So we booked Casita Numero Tres at Quinta de las Flores and a few rides and were ready to roll. Sheila’s challenges getting time off of work caught up with us and taking this trip did mean the end of our second income. But we were somehow optimistic Isabel would be home soon. Since Sheila was going to be a stay at home mom, it would give her a chance to get everything ready.

Just a couple of days before we left for Guatemala we got a call.

It was Carol Ann.

Our Family Court interviews had been scheduled for the day before we left.

Returning to paradise

After the first time you travel to Guatemala, the process becomes second nature. You know what to expect and get an ego about the fact that you know what you're doing. You even try to help others who are Guatemala travel virgins.

This time around, we traveled through Los Angeles, again on a red-eye flight. This was an easier route because it consisted of one very short flight from the Bay Area and then one long flight through the night to Guatemala City. When we arrived in Los Angeles, we were still wide awake. We went to a small food consignment to grab a snack. A plane from China had just arrived. On it were a number of families bringing their newly adopted children home. We spoke to one couple with a beautiful little girl about the process they had been through. Meeting them was a very nice reminder of things to come. There was another lady there who was also in the process of adopting a child from Guatemala. She seemed nice enough but a bit forceful, even going to the length of taking this Chinese baby out of the stroller to hold her without really asking the parents. Nonetheless, we befriended her and told her to let us know if she wanted a ride to La Antigua since we ought to have space in our car.

When we arrived in Guatemala, this woman flew past us not saying a word about the offer of a ride. While waiting in the customs line a young gringo behind us asked if we knew how to get to Antigua. Will was a student on a college photography project. He didn't know where he was going exactly, and had never been to Guatemala before. So we took him under our wing, helped him navigate baggage claim and decided to make sure he got to La Antigua safely.

Even our drug smuggling operation went smoothly this trip. In fact, we were probably at a greater risk because we had a bag full of prescription, mostly expired, samples another adoptive parent had picked up from her doctor. Again we played it cool walking past the guards to the left. This time they let us pass by uninterrupted.

When we got outside to find our driver, we had a surprise. The lady we had met in Los Angeles was waiting for us. She hadn't bothered to say anything while we waited half an hour for bags, but now she was waiting with our driver. There wasn't really space for everyone and I hadn't thought about the fact that we had only paid for two people. This lady acted kind of annoyed by the whole thing, making Will feel guilty and apologetic. Despite her best attempts, this was my car and by this point, if forced to choose, Will was the one getting the extra seat! Luckily we worked it out and made everyone fit, tipping the driver generously for being flexible.

Betty and Isabel weren't coming until late that afternoon so Sheila and I showed Will around La Antigua. We even took him out to lunch at a restaurant whose claim to fame was having served President Clinton. He took lots of pictures and was able to feel comfortable with the city. That evening, we were also having Gregory and Anita over for dinner and to give them the donations so we invited Will to join us as well. I spent the afternoon preparing for cooking so that I wouldn't have to once Isabel arrived.

When Betty, Isabel and Alberto arrived, it felt much differently than before. While certainly less exciting, this time it was more comforting and sentimental. These were old friends or family coming and we had much catching up to do. So Isabel's arrival seemed less grandiose, even though the warmth of holding and kissing her had not changed.

We had a wonderful little dinner party that evening and got to know Gregory and Anita better. They are truly fascinating people that are a constant reminder to me that people's faith can bring them to do great things. I had recommended to Will that he go visit their clinic because it would offer him a safe glimpse of majority Guatemala culture. He did

end up taking my advice and the last time I heard from him, he said he was organizing a charity showing to benefit Hands of Hope.

Most of our visit was much like the first. Isabel had become a bit fussier but was still her cheery self and very sweet. She was more playful and alert than she was before, busy blowing raspberries much of the time. Her favorite game had become to drop something and watch the adult pick it up. We felt very comfortable with her and caring for her was like riding a bike. I was christened a father one day when I was holding her up over my head a little too soon after eating. The rest you can picture for yourself. She had learned to roll over and was able to sit up for a very short while. She liked to dance as well and especially appreciated a musical teddy bear now named “Oso” (bear in Spanish).

Without too much effort, we could get huge smiles from Isabel. She had started to become vocal and had even waited for us to arrive to sprout her first tooth.

There was another client of Carol Ann’s staying at Quinta at the same time. It was a lady with her mother who was adopting her second child from Guatemala. Her foster mom and Betty knew one another already. They were fun people and we got to share the joys of our visits with them. I also got to teach them a lot about Guatemalan politics and organic foods.

Strange as it may seem, the meats and eggs in Guatemala appear to be what we would label organic. I could tell this when I bought chicken to cook for dinner because organic chicken has a different texture and color. Alberto had confirmed this to me explaining that Guatemala imports a large amount of chicken legs and thighs from the United States. He said that the local producers market their chicken as not containing all the garbage used in the United States.

While the rules still said we couldn’t leave the hotel and the environment had become potentially more hostile, we still deviated a few times. Mostly, this was only to attend church with Betty. The Dia de Hermano Pedro happened and we attended mass at the

church of San Francisco. Hermano Pedro was apparently the patron saint for helping children and we certainly needed all the help we could get. One day when we attended mass, I actually felt something religious in me. Despite the sin it is in traditional Judaism to kneel, I decided to pay homage to where I was, got down on my knees, and seriously prayed that we would have a speedy completion to our adoption. I prayed mentally in Spanish and was sure to acknowledge that I was in a house of Christ without contradicting any of my own beliefs. In some ways, my prayer seemed almost more like the closing arguments in a criminal trial. But I proclaimed what I felt in my heart and figured it couldn't hurt to have the big man on our side.

The days flew by very quickly. Once again, the trip had gone according to plan. Isabel had recaptured our hearts and we had grown closer to Betty. Our goodbye this time was a little bit more stressful. We were once again alone in a tour van and foster moms were being hassled regularly by police. When we pulled up to the airport, there were many police standing around. Concerned about Betty being harassed, we did not give her or Isabel many hugs and kisses. Betty did not share my concerns so I worried that she might have taken our quick and orderly departure badly. Better safe than sorry had to be the motto though because by now, Betty was like a mother to me. Never would I risk my mother being taken in the cops.

The final stagnation

It was nearing the end of October and things were starting to get back to normal in Guatemalan adoptions. Shortly after coming home, our case exited Family Court and we were on our way to the last major hurdle that is PGN. One nice side effect of reaching adoption process milestone is that each one brings with it a few weeks of calm. Once we had entered PGN, there was no reason to suspect anything would happen for a few weeks. Not expecting anything to happen is much easier than waiting for it to happen. So until we felt PGN was taking too long, we had no reason to bother Carol Ann or be frustrated by her flakiness.

I had really become accustomed to living in the adoption process. Having a daughter in Guatemala seemed normal. At times I'd even joke that she was in an infant boarding school. All the questions from well wishers no longer bothered me and I knew it was just a question of when. I was not very optimistic about how long we would stay in PGN. Thus far, nothing so far as the process was concerned had gone smoothly, so why would PGN be any different. Luckily, Alberto was very confident that Isabel would be home soon and helped raise my spirits and expectations.

Sheila and I were busy trying to decide how to treat the holidays. We wanted to spend Christmas with Isabel but we also wanted to go visit her family in Kansas. Intermingling with this was the possibility that Isabel could come home before the holidays so we had to have contingency plans. We also thought about what to do if we get out of PGN right before Christmas and can't pick her up for a couple of weeks. Would we make two more trips to Guatemala – one for the holidays and another for homecoming? It was annoying but inherent was the greatest of realities – we were thinking about Isabel's being with us forever!

Another reminder of things soon to come happened when a friend of ours brought home her daughter. Karina was born just a few weeks after Isabel. We became friends with her mother, Cathy, at a class for adoptive parents shortly before she started the process. By coincidence, Cathy had used Carol Ann and our same attorney. She too had developed a close relationship with her foster family. She had even helped at the tie dye party. Cathy's adoption had been a smooth ride outside of the Hague. She did receive one previo from PGN, but other than that no problems what so ever. We were very happy for Cathy. There was certainly an ounce of jealousy since she had started the process after us, but we knew that was our own sorrow and not a lack of happiness for her joy. Karina's homecoming pointed to one other thing. Karina was the first post-Hague child to come home to the Bay Area. Most of the other local in-process families had been in PGN before us and many of them had been kicked out with previos. So we proceeded with cautious hope, expecting to get kicked out of PGN but also realizing that the end was not too far off.

The real victim of the extended adoption process turned out to be my grandfather who passed away before he could meet his great granddaughter. He had been suffering from Alzheimer's for many years and likely couldn't have understood it if he had met her. The loss of my grandfather was obviously saddening, but we had all known that his day was near for quite some time. In most ways, he was not himself before he passed away. Definitely not the kind, intelligent, and humorous man I remembered. The last time I saw him he seemed to recognize me, but not as his grandson. We showed him pictures of Isabel and his other newly born great granddaughter. He smiled at the pictures of the pretty children, but definitely didn't grasp any relation to them. Possibly selfishly, I wished that he could have lived long enough to at least meet Isabel.

That's why it's called Thanksgiving!

The holiday season had arrived and we were going to some close friends' house for Thanksgiving. We had been bickering a bit over how to make the green bean casserole or something like that. All in all we were doing well and just starting to get antsy about PGN. If nothing else, we were confident this would be our last Thanksgiving without Isabel. Not having her home did make for some sadistic extra-special occasions, as every reminder she'd be home soon was a dose of nirvana.

As we were getting ready to leave, locking doors and turning off lights, something compelled me to check e-mail very quickly. I'm not sure why I did since we were running late as usual. There was a new e-mail.

It wasn't from Carol Ann.

It was from Alberto!

Someone in the lawyer's office had told Betty that we were out of PGN and they would be picking up our case on Monday. Within a few weeks, Isabel would be home!

For some reason, nothing can ever be simple for us to enjoy. At first, we were purely ecstatic. Then some doubt set in. What if Alberto didn't have perfect information? What if what actually happened was that we had been kicked out? We wanted to immediately get Carol Ann on the phone but couldn't. We knew that Betty and the person in the office could get into trouble for having been the messengers. The worst thing was that Carol Ann was in emergency-only mode for the holiday weekend. So we knew that she wasn't making calls until Monday.

On the drive to dinner, we talked over and over about it. The bottom line came down to the fact that Alberto is smart and knows the process. How could he possibly have something like this wrong? So while we still kept a small shadow of doubt, we both pretty much knew deep in our hearts it was true.

My friends are not by nature children people. They don't have anything against kids; they just don't fall into the normal family mindset. So while our good news was well received, I don't think they could comprehend the gravity of it. To them it seemed more like one less hassle, without personifying what it meant to feel this process was complete. Traditionally, before dinner we go one by one and say our personal thanks. I think they better understood our relief after we had completed ours. The turkey was delicious and we were exuberant.

It was, however, a very long weekend of uncertainty. Until we heard it from Carol Ann, we were not going to be 100% confident. I did call and talk to Alberto and he seemed pretty certain, telling me that we'd have Isabel home for Christmas. We, of course, were unable to keep the news from family. They, of course, were not going to believe Isabel was coming home until she landed on American soil. Mostly though, we went about our weekend business as usual and tried not to think about it. Rarely do I look forward to Monday. This Monday was an exception.

Sheila and I had actually agreed to give Carol Ann until Tuesday before we'd call and ask. We had also discussed how to sound surprised when she called so as not to blow Betty's cover. When I arrived in the office Monday morning, there was only one phone call I was hoping to receive. Despite the fact that everyone in my office had a "if Carol Ann calls, find me" rule, I let a few people know how our Thanksgiving went and thus to be sure to find me if Carol Ann called. As hard as Carol Ann can be to get back on the phone, I didn't want to miss her call. Around 10:30 a.m. the phone rang.

It was Sheila...

...Telling me Carol Ann had called.

And...

...We were out of PGN!!!

I screamed. I smiled. I jumped. I danced. I cried.

Sheila went on to tell me that the birthmother had already signed off and the adoption decree had been issued.

I was a dad!

Isabel was legally my daughter!

Let my people go

Life was wonderful. We knew now that nothing could stop us. We could walk right up to a police officer in Guatemala holding Isabel and ask him for the time. We had an adoption decree stating that she was our daughter. (Note of honesty: I'd have been scared shitless to walk up to a cop in Guatemala holding Isabel even with the decree at the

time!) While we still had some time to wait before we could bring her home, it was definitely now sooner, not later. We relished in the moment for a few days, euphoric but still a little unable to grasp that the process was all but over.

We didn't have long to relax because travel plans around the holiday season would not be easy. Flights were booking up quickly. We were confident that we would have her home before Christmas so we went ahead and booked flights to spend it in Kansas, this time getting to note that we'd have a lap baby. The problem was that we didn't know exactly when we'd have her visa. We wanted to spend a few days in Antigua with Betty as a way to transition Isabel as well. I didn't want to just grab her and run. We also wanted to have a going away party for our whole foster family. Figuring out flights to Guatemala was no simple chore.

Eventually, we did some best guessing and made reservations. We wanted to leave Guatemala as soon as we could, so we added days to the front end of our estimate of when that could happen. If it took longer than expected, worse things could happen than us being stuck in Guatemala, with Isabel, a little longer. We booked our trip through Los Angeles again and this time left a few hours for a layover on the way home. This would give my parents the opportunity to meet Isabel as she first came off the plane. We wanted to be alone with her for a few days before being bombarded by family, so this layover would give them enough of a fix to give us some small chance to adjust.

It is customary to bring the foster mother a gift when you bring the child home. Betty had told us numerous times how she loved cappuccino. So we decided to get her a cappuccino machine and went out to the mall shopping for one in the midst of the Christmas rush. First we went Sears and did not see one we liked. At Macy's, I had some questions and we could not get anyone to help us despite actually jumping up and down waving my arms trying to find an employee. Then we went to JC Penny and found a machine we thought was perfect. The lady at the checkout counter asked us if we needed a gift receipt. We told her that it wouldn't do any good unless they had stores in Guatemala and she asked us why Guatemala. As we explained to her why we were going

to Guatemala and who the cappuccino machine was for, tears filled this lady's eyes. We showed her a picture of Isabel smiling and those tears grew larger. It was a touching moment and kept Sheila and I on cloud nine.

The week before we left for Guatemala, the Bay Area group of families who have adopted from Guatemala had its holiday tamale party. There was a large turnout and for the first time, we felt no sorrow seeing other peoples' children. The infertility boogers were extinct. This was the first time we got to meet Karina, making it all the more special. Our swift stay in PGN had actually put us ahead of where we thought we would end up on the homecoming timeline. For once in this process, we were the lucky ones. We got to tell everyone about our trip plans and wonderful foster family.

I realized why it is Guatemalan adoption is so special. It is all the people along the way that bring us through the impossible. Here was a group of families who have all been through it and survived. We were people of all different kinds joining together in what we share. The children were seeing that they aren't alone. They were experiencing some of their native culture as something to take pride in. All of these people, though their individual stories, had come to share in our common experience. We had all created ties to Guatemala through our children. Now Sheila and I too were part of that club.

Gotcha

Carol Ann had provided Sheila with a long list of sundries to bring along with us for the trip. The list was so long, I think we were probably prepared to do brain surgery if needed. While getting prepared for this trip was quite an endeavor, Sheila loved every minute of it. We were so close to having Isabel home, she could taste it.

A very excited Marco drove us to the airport. He was so overjoyed that we finally were bringing our little princess home. During the drive, he told us about how happy our home was about to become. He talked about the cute and adorable things little children do. As he went on and on, we were salivating to get to Guatemala.

The flight to Guatemala is a blur. We met us a nice family during our layover and there was someone else on the plane bringing the same cappuccino machine to Guatemala. Other than that, all I remember is that eventually we were back home in Casita Numero Tres. We'd stay there for three nights and then in Guatemala City without Betty while we finished the process.

Having Betty hand Isabel to us was yet another unique sensation. This time it was forever. The next time we said goodbyes, it was Betty who would be saying it to Isabel. While she was happy to see us, this goodbye was obviously already impacting her. She was overtly torn between happiness for our family and loss as yet another baby she loved and nurtured was leaving her care. Admittedly, we did not empathize well initially. We felt like Neil Armstrong landing on the moon. We had just conquered Mt. Everest. As close as I had always been able to feel with Isabel, now my skeptical, cynical, and paranoid spirit could not hold anything back. Isabel was mi'ja.

Betty cried many times during those three days. She had told me before about how they cry every time a child leaves; sometimes for weeks on end. This time the adoptive parent got to share that experience with her. By now, my Spanish had improved significantly. Betty and I had conversed enough that she was well practiced at speaking slowly using simple language. Seeing her pain I reached out to her and we shared many emotional and enlightening conversations. I learned all about adoption from the foster mother's perspective.

Betty admitted that Isabel was one her favorites because of her relaxed, happy spirit and beautiful eyes. But there was something else that made Isabel special to her and that was the time spent with Sheila and me. She had never developed any strong relationships with adoptive parents. While she didn't know how true we'd be to our pledge to stay in contact, she was hopeful.

She opened up to me about the difficulty of having a child under your care for months and letting her go. She explained that it was impossible not to fall in love with every one of them. No matter how hard the work may be, they are still babies. A religious, moral woman like herself is defenseless to try to keep proper separation with her emotions. The adoptive parents are the ones who wreak the benefits of this in the well-adjusted children she delivers to us. But she usually gets only a few minutes to talk to the adoptive parents. No matter what she thinks, she has to take these children she loves and hand them off to strangers. She said that some foster moms are able to handle this easily and view what they do as a job, and not a well paying one at that. She wasn't able to do that.

She went into detail about much it meant to her to have had the opportunity to teach us the ropes and ease the transition for Isabel. In part it was for herself, but most of that is because the child's well being is what she wanted most. We agreed that every parent should spend at least a few hours and have the foster mom tell them about the child. She started to rattle off all the different things adoptive parents don't know.

Betty and I talked about the problems facing adoptions. She told me about some of the bad foster parents that she had no kind words for. How some children are neglected and some foster moms sell some of the baby formula for extra income. We talked about how the lawyers and agencies try to control the process and that they aren't always taking anyone's best interests into account. She told me that our lawyer was good lady, even though she too had forgotten some of the importance in her trade. But she also told me about some of the bad lawyers, who don't even pay the foster moms enough to care for the children. Betty understood about the plight of the poor in Guatemala. While her Catholic values showed a bit of disdain for some of the "modern ignorance" of the poor that causes so many children to be relinquished, she also knew their struggle. Most of all, she knew that all of that had nothing to do with the children and that they deserved capable families. Betty and I decided that together we could probably fix adoptions in Guatemala if given the chance.

One night we went into the central city area for dinner. Isabel was now legally ours so, while still not recommended, no one could try to guilt us into being hermits. We had a delicious dinner at the Clinton restaurant. They serve an appetizer, cebollitas, that is just green onions grilled with lime and salt but somehow it is better than what I've been able to do at home. I made sure Betty had a Kahlua cocktail, it being her favorite. You can always count on La Antigua to have some sort of festival going on in the Parque Central. This time it was it was for La Navidad. There was a full orchestra and choir playing and fireworks going off. We had Betty and Isabel's picture taken with the most meager looking Santa I had ever seen. We sat down on a bench and enjoyed the beautiful night and festivities.

There was a young, obviously very poor boy playing with a ball. He was playing alone and seemed kind of bored, with no place else to be. After much hoaxing, I managed to get him to play ball with me, kicking it back and forth. We were both having a great time as we became more aggressive and he lost his hesitation about this gringo. After playing for a while we introduced ourselves and I could see that he lived a hard life. I asked him if he was hungry and he said yes. My temptation was to walk to over to the nearby Pollo Campero and get him a whole bunch of chicken, but we were getting ready to leave and I didn't want to create a scene so I handed him the doggie bag we had from dinner. Very excited, he thanked me, ran off, and sat down to enjoy the food.

On our last night in La Antigua, we threw another dinner party. It was fun to cook a full dinner while there and always impressed Betty. This time we had Gregory and Anita, two of their children, and our friend Julie, a Bay Area mom with her two kids who was staying in La Antigua until her adoption was completed. Julie was one of the people that had been very active in the adoption activism work I was involved with. The normally social Betty was very somber. She was so distracted that she started eating without saying grace. I actually stopped her and reminded her to say grace.

She always says the same prayer and it had become a sentimental custom for me while in Guatemala. This time she started on the same prayer but later broke from it. She began

to cry as she went on with the grace, which was clearly asking Christ to bless our family and thanking him for bringing us to Isabel. She regained her exposure, had a few bites, and went upstairs to be with Isabel. Sheila and I knew not to bother her and give her some last moments alone with Isabel. For much of this time, Isabel was sleeping. Betty just sat on the bed next to the crib and watched her. Okay, so we did check on her a few times.

As everyone was leaving, Betty came back downstairs. We talked some more about how she felt as we cleaned the dishes and kitchen. She was well aware that tomorrow would be the last morning she'd wake to Isabel's morning smiles, at least for some unknown period of time. We had to get off to an early start the next day and had lots to do, so we didn't stay up late. We gave each other a hug and kiss on the cheek and said "buenas noches". I doubt Betty slept much that night.

The next morning we had our last ceremonial breakfast at Quinta de las Flores as in-process parents. I had my usual plate of fruit, bacon, tortillas, and salsa verde. That morning, the watermelon was sweeter, the bananas riper, and the salsa spicier. The hotel had a scrapbook where guests could write about their stay and Sheila wrote a wonderful poem in it. We were saying our goodbyes to the experience that had become our visiting tradition and it felt magnificent. Never before had we been happy to bid Casita Numero Tres farewell.

Our plans for the day were to get checked in at our hotel in Guatemala City, have Isabel's Visa pictures taken, pick up our pink slip from the Embassy and take her for her doctor's appointment. Then the next day, Tuesday, we could get her visa and be free to travel. I had made a major mistake on our flight dates and had us leaving on Thursday morning rather than Friday. So if everything went according to plans, we'd have a couple of days to hang out before going home. If things didn't go according to plans, we were cutting it very close.

Everything was fine until it came time for the pink slip. Carol Ann has some associates who actually go to the Embassy to pick it up. We were supposed to wait in our hotel until four o'clock at which time this person would call us to take Isabel to the doctor. Four o'clock came and went. So did five and six o'clock. We had heard nothing and were only getting voicemail on cell phones. We could not reach Carol Ann. The driver we had hired for the day was on voluntary overtime and Betty had to get home, though she never said so. The air was tense in the room from what seemed the endless waiting. We gave up on getting our doctor's visit done that day, wondering what had happened.

Betty went through what would become a series of tearful goodbyes. While we had plans to take the whole family out for dinner on Wednesday night, this was the first night she'd spend away from Isabel. I think Betty forgot that she'd be seeing us again because she sure seemed to be giving the final goodbye to Isabel. I saw her out to the car and gave her a hug.

Sheila and I were finally parents alone with our child.

The final days of eternal spring

Carol Ann's associate later called apologizing that he had been unable to get to a phone. He had locked his keys in his car while at the embassy. Since you can't bring cell phones into the embassy, it was locked inside his car. He said that the embassy got caught behind and that our pink slip had not been issued. But it would be the next afternoon definitely. This was okay because it still meant we could leave as scheduled.

That first night with Isabel was a challenging one. She developed diarrhea and would not stop crying. Sheila calmed her for a little while by giving her a bath and letting her play in the baby tub. But as soon as we dried her off she was back to crying. We knew that it was probably separation from Betty causing it - certainly the crying, possibly the diarrhea. We had both just been through a very stressful day. We didn't know what to

do to appease and comfort Isabel. One thing was clear: we were being initiated into parenthood.

Sheila tried as long as she could to hold and rock Isabel. She must have done so for at least an hour or two. Nurturing isn't only a mother's job though and so I took over. In the past, we always had Betty to back us up. Now Betty was gone and Sheila had already done her shift.

It was time be a man.

I found it very nerve-racking at first as nothing I could do would stop her crying. As I started to feel myself tensing up, I knew I had to overcome it mentally. As long as I was fixated on her crying she would feel my stress and not relax. I have always had a hard time concentrating deeply enough to meditate. But I realized I had to take a crash course in it. So I started to breathe deeply and exhale. First I calmed myself down. The next thing I knew I had managed to tune out her cries. Then I started to rhythmically whisper to her, "it's okay, it's okay, it's okay" over and over again. I lost touch with time and my surroundings. I couldn't hear anything. I could only feel the warmth of Isabel in my arms, my breathing, and the "it's okay" energy flowing from my soul to Isabel. After probably two hours or so, Isabel calmed and went to sleep. That was the only night Isabel outwardly showed anxiety from separation.

Tuesday went off without a hitch in that we got our pink slip and completed the doctor's visit. I remember spending much of the day playing with Isabel and watching the news coverage of Saddam Hussein's capture that had happened two days prior. Strangely enough, not a single Guatemalan I spoke to believed we had caught the real Saddam. We spent a quiet night in our hotel. While Isabel still didn't feel her normal self, we were all doing well and bonding as family.

The next morning we woke early to prepare for the last step of the adoption process. We knew it was a mere formality with a forgone conclusion, but going to the embassy and

being interviewed by the Department of Homeland Security is destined to speed one's heartbeat. We arrived at the embassy a few minutes before they started to open their doors. There were a number of families there and much to my surprise the lady that had been at Quinta during our second trip was with her husband bringing her daughter home. That was an amazing coincidence.

There were a number of things that made me uncomfortable about the embassy. One was the extensive set of rules on what you can and can not bring in with you. You can't bring in any electronics or cameras, not even a disposable camera. In fact, you can't even take pictures in front of the embassy. They also restricted you on what you could bring in for your child. Given the long waits, those rules seemed heartless to me. The people working security showed no signs of hospitality or personality. This bothered me when coupled with the segregation at the Embassy.

When entering the Embassy, US citizens get to use a separate line that enters first. I suppose there is some logic to it as large numbers of guatemaltecas are there applying for visas. And it's nothing worse than the special airport ticketing lines for first class and high frequent flier status passengers. Then again, I've been able to use those lines before and I still don't think I like the idea of them. But the segregation at the embassy got worse as they have a special waiting room only for citizens. I can honestly proclaim that I never entered that room. This may have been bad idealism on my part – who knows, maybe they had doughnuts in there. Many other adoptive families also stayed in the larger waiting room for everyone. I was proud of them.

My subconscious guilt did make me wonder what the people in the room thought of us. It was impossible to miss the fact that every gringo in the room had a Guatemalan child at their side. It seemed like the only reason any Americans visited Guatemala was to adopt children. Of course, the people showed no animosity and were either disinterested or admiring the children.

At one point I was sitting in a chair holding Isabel when I noticed an elderly indigenous woman making play faces at her from the end of the row behind us. This lady did not look like she was from the city. There was something about her that showed a kindness that had survived many hardships. She was missing some teeth and those that remained were rotting; yet her smile was warm and inviting. I stood up with Isabel and brought Isabel over to the elderly woman. She played with Isabel a bit, smiled and reached out to hold her. I placed Isabel in her arms.

What happened next is a memory and feeling I shall take to the grave.

As soon as Isabel completely left my arms, she started to cry. The lady tried to bounce her a little but it did not work, Isabel continued to cry. The lady placed Isabel back into my arms.

Immediately, Isabel stopped crying.

She was only happy in her daddy's arms.

Eventually our name was called and we went in for our interview. The man was very amiable and remarked about how this was the part of his job he liked, when he actually got to meet the kids. The interview itself was very short. Basically we just had to confirm that we knew what we were doing. Where was he a year ago when we started this insane process? I kept my sarcasm at bay and we nodded when appropriate and signed on the dotted lines.

We'd be able to pick up her visa later that day so we returned to our hotel. Isabel may have been bonding with us, but she also seemed to be manifesting separation anxiety physically. Her diarrhea got worse and she also was throwing up. She seemed happy enough and playful, but we were concerned about her getting enough fluids and nutrition. We called both Anita and Julie to get their opinions, especially Anita being a nurse familiar with local ailments. We got the same call for Pedialyte all around along with

some enzymes. After finding a pharmacy we discovered that Isabel does not like Pedialyte. Luckily she was still drinking her pachas and eating some fruit, so we didn't freak out too much.

That afternoon and in what was a rather uneventful occasion, I returned to the Embassy and picked up Isabel's visa packet. Sheila and Isabel stayed at the hotel since we didn't want to give Isabel any unnecessary excitement. Isabel needed some rest. After all, we were having her going away party that night.

Celebracion

Sheila and I were stuck in our first major parenting decision. Isabel was definitely under the weather and we were taking her whole foster family out for a farewell celebration. The next morning, she would be on an airplane, experiencing air conditioning for the first time. That wasn't going to help her any. But to cancel the party would be so hard to do after seeing how Betty had been feeling.

Jewish family respects the grandmother. And you don't keep the child from the grandmother no matter what, even if it means the child might catch a cold. Then grandma can have the pleasure of telling you that you shouldn't have the child out because they'll catch a cold. And she'll really let you have it when the child comes down with a cold. Despite knowing what would happen, my heritage still took over and we went ahead with dinner.

We had an adventure of a cab ride trying to figure out which of two La Estancia restaurants we were going to. We ended up with a nice, unexpected, tour of Guatemala, which is not sarcasm because the streets were lit in the Christmas spirit. Our cab driver was a nice guy and talked about when he had visited the United States. Eventually we got to the right restaurant. Everyone else was also running late, making us the first to arrive.

When the family arrived, Betty immediately went to hold Isabel. My Jewish dilemma about catching a cold proved true. The restaurant was of course outdoors and we had Isabel wearing a beautiful baptism type dress. It was too chilly for her so our challenge was keeping her under the blanket covers.

People in Guatemala keep their children much more heavily wrapped than in the United States. So despite having a blanket for her, we felt like stupid gringos for not having her dressed in warmer clothes. I suppose the frilly dress for grandma also fits into the Jewish guilt fable. But we had Betty to come to the rescue and use her super powers to keep Isabel warm so everything would be okay. It had to be that way; we already knew Betty couldn't eat without a baby in her arms.

Once we had all settled and the servers had brought some wine, I read a toast I had written and had translated. The toast:

It is not easy to put into words all of the things that Sheila and I are feeling right now. We always knew that we wanted to be parents. After trying naturally for years we decided to adopt. And then we decided to adopt from Guatemala.

What happened in the last year has been an amazing journey for us. We have experienced the joy of receiving the newborn photo of the child that may someday be ours. We also experienced the sadness of losing that same child. We went through the frustration and anger of having governments and lawyers stand between a precious child and the loving home that she deserves. And we have had to live on-edge for months, not able to think about much other than "when will Isabel come home"?

Throughout all of this, there has been one huge blessing – this family. Without all of you, we would have gone crazy, I'd be bald, and Sheila would look 90 years old. When we received the first e-mail from Alberto (and we have saved every e-mail for Isabel to read someday), it was a wonderful surprise. Even then I could

tell that Isabel was in good hands. But since then, your family has become much more than just good people caring for our daughter. You have become family to Sheila and I, and most importantly, Isabel's family in her home country. We promise not to forget that and not to lose touch. You will get phone calls, photos and video. There will be more visits to Casita Numero Tres. And Isabel will grow up with knowledge and appreciation for her Guatemalan culture. We love you all, and could never put to words the debt we will always owe to you for everything you have done and for listening to my horrible Spanish with a smile. All through this process, we knew we were the ones missing out, not Isabel. She has always had all the love she needed.

Tonight we celebrate an end to Isabel's stay in Guatemala but more importantly the beginning of a family. Not just a family of Sheila, Isabel, me, the dogs and the cats, but a family of all of us.

Salud!

With that said, the celebration began. Betty cared for a cranky Isabel most of the night. I made sure the wine kept flowing and my glass stayed full. Sheila did her best not to worry about Isabel being cold and sick. The great mother she is was already surfacing.

The conversation started out slow. It was a long table with many people and Alberto, my trusty translator, was out of an ear's range. Plus the rest of the family was less accustomed to the special way they had to speak Spanish for me to comprehend it. But after a little time and a couple of glasses of wine, it didn't seem to be a problem and it felt like an appropriate celebration. There was laughter and tears. There was joking and also very serious conversation. At one point I went around the table with the video camera and gave everyone a chance to tape a goodbye to Isabel. Some day she will appreciate that video.

As we finished dessert, it was already late and that meant it was time for another round of goodbyes. Betty said that she was going to come to the airport in the morning, so once again it was not a final farewell. But once again she cried and it certainly seemed like one. This was, however, the final goodbye for Alberto, who had to work the next morning. His Latino machisimo came through as I could tell that he was trying to remain cool. But he had a sincere goodbye with Isabel. I gave him a hug and thanked him once again...for everything.

Sheila and I were exhausted when we got back to the hotel. We cleaned Isabel once again and as I recall, she fell asleep rather easily. We packed up as much as we could and went to sleep knowing that the next night, Isabel's nursery would have a no vacancy sign above it.

Goodbye, for reals this time

Being extra cautious, we arrived at the airport very early. There was no reason why we should have any problems, but we wanted to be safe. We did some shopping at the stores to use some left over quetzales. While Sheila was inside of a small store, I met some people outside. It was a mother with her teenage son that had been adopted from Guatemala many years earlier. They were returning so that he could see the hogar he lived in as a very young child. All of the attacks on intercountry were news to her so she got an earful.

Before too long, much of Betty's family arrived. After saying hello, and in keeping with tradition, I went to Pollo Campero to grab some breakfast. Mostly, everyone was quiet and subdued. They each took their turns holding Isabel. It felt like the final farewell this time as everyone held her knowing it was for the last time. We got some touching pictures of this, especially one of Leonel cuddling Isabel close to his heart. It was getting close to the time we had to board our flight. There would be no more last goodbyes for Betty; this one would be the last time.

With tears in her eyes she hugged Isabel closely and rocked her as we had seen her do so many times before. Under her breath, she whispered a prayer. She tightened her hug a bit, gave Isabel a kiss, and handed her back to us.

We walked away and didn't look back.

Traveling in style

We had decided that it was nothing but the finest for Isabel's homecoming trip. If there was going to be a limousine waiting for her at the airport, then she might as well fly home first class. Thanks to frequent flier miles, we were able to afford it. We were seated in the first row of the plane.

Isabel was still not feeling well. We hoped that she was going to be able to make it through the long flight to Los Angeles without too many problems. She was already cranky by the time we sat down. If flying didn't agree with her, it could be a treacherous trip. We hadn't succumbed ourselves yet to the acceptance that our child could be the one that cries throughout the flight. So the fact that first class seemed full of business people made us a bit self-conscious and worried before we even took off.

As it turned out, Isabel did not have any problems with her ears popping or the air conditioning. Then again, her explosive diarrhea and vomiting did keep her occupied most of the flight. The lavatories did not have any changing tables. In order to clean her up, we (mostly Sheila) had to do it on the floor in front of our seats. Luckily we had the bulkhead seats. I'm sure everyone in first class got a good whiff of Isabel's misery, but there was nothing else we could do. Sheila got the worst of it herself, though dad's clothes weren't exactly clean either. We had not packed enough baby clothes for all of this, so Isabel spent much of the flight just wrapped in blanket. Ultimately and in hindsight, we have one of those memories that we will be able to terrorize Isabel with when she's older, describing how was she full of diarrhea, soiling Sheila, as they frantically navigated every lavatory only to find none with space to change her.

The flight to Los Angeles was a stressful but also rewarding experience. Obviously, we wished that Isabel was feeling better but we understood that she had been through a lot of stress. While not screaming hideously, she was uncomfortable and k'veching much of the flight. Sheila and I teamed together and handled it without too much dismay. We took turns eating. We'd trade off holding her, cleaning her, and relaxing her. Our parental instincts were glowing and we even started not to care so much about whether we were annoying anyone else on the plane. And not to be forgotten, we did still have a champagne toast.

As the plane prepared to land, I took some pictures through the window of Isabel's descent into America. When we approached customs, it was not clear what we were supposed to do. One line was for citizens, the other was for those traveling on a visa. Well we certainly weren't leaving Isabel alone in that line. I realized that immigrations people aren't always the most flexible, so rather than wait in the wrong line in haste I found someone and asked him, showing him the packet of materials we had been given by the embassy. Much to our chagrin, he told us that we had to wait until everyone else had gone through the lines and then they'd take care of us.

Thinking that we were in for quite a wait, I wanted to call my parents to tell them that we were there and not to worry. But of course taking photographs or making cell phone calls was not permitted in this area of the airport. The wait didn't go on indefinitely and actually proved to be a blessing of sorts. We got a chance to unwind with Isabel while not being stuck on a plane. We knew that once we got into the main terminal, there would be no peace as anxious, loving newly crowned grandparents awaited.

When our turn finally came, the gentleman who helped us was very polite. He ripped open the sealed packet of documents, thumbed through some stuff, hit some keys on his keyboard, stamped Isabel's Guatemalan passport, and wrote in that she was entering on an IR3 visa. He told us that we'd be receiving her Green Card in the mail in a few weeks.

Despite the fact that it appears as though Isabel was entering as a visitor or permanent resident on a visa that was not the case. Because as soon as this gentleman cleared us and we walked past his booth, Isabel was formally entering U.S. soil and as the adopted child of parents who had visited her prior to the completion of the adoption, she was in fact a United States citizen.

Sadness es sur, hay jubilation en el norte

The emotional context of the day completed its full circle as we braced to enter the terminal. As we were walking down a long hall toward the entrance, we could already see my mom, her boyfriend, my dad, and my recently deceased grandfather's widow waiting behind the door. Though the doors were still about thirty yards off I could already see the smiles on their faces as they made out that we were coming down the hall. The joyful energy poured out of them, filling the hall. Suddenly I realized two things.

Throughout the drawn out adoption process, I had never really given thought to the strain it must have caused my parents. They were ready and eager to be grandparents. They certainly could not have liked seeing their son get jerked around by a bunch of bureaucrats. They didn't need to understand it; no parents want their son getting screwed with. So for them, this was also more than just meeting their granddaughter. It was the culmination of a long stressful journey as well. They too had dealt with the questions from well wishing friends. They too had held on to Isabel's pictures, hoping that some day she'd come home. They too struggled through the uncertainty. And they alone had the added disruption of it being perpetrated against their son. So that energy coming down the hallways was coated with the thrill of victory.

I also realized the contrast of that energy with what we had felt at the airport just hours before. While my family and our foster family shared in the happiness for our new family, Betty's loss was the same emotion that we were now sensing as joy. It almost felt like Betty had sent the energy on the plane with us, following us as we walked away from her and toward our gate. And now that energy was off the plane and handed over to my

family. In this sense, the energy is very simple to name. It was the love and dedication to family and to one infant girl who stole her heart. This figurative passing of the torch is one of those fine points of the adoption experience that all too often goes undetected and unappreciated.

As we got closer to the door, we knew that our challenge was going to be trying to have a quick hello and then rushing to get Isabel into a restroom and cleaned up. Approaching the door, camera flashes started and the thing I remember most was the ear-to-ear smile on my mother's face. A short melee of hugs and kisses followed but we held firm and Sheila took Isabel into the ladies room, with grandma right behind of course! I went outside with my dad, had a cigarette, and told him about the flight. It was all men outside, so we didn't get overly emotional, though I knew that behind my dad's cool exterior, he was itching to get that baby into his arms and kiss her chubby cheeks. Soon he would have his chance.

When the ladies returned from the restroom, we stood around for a little while to give the grandparents some immediate gratification with Isabel. To her credit, Isabel had stopped being cranky and seemed to be feeling a little bit better. She was comfortable being handed around, ooh'ed over, and kissed by these strangers who were attracted to her like bees on honey. There had not been many times in my life when I knew I had given back to my parents. It's true that every positive milestone in a child's life is a gift to the parent. But this was something different. As I watched how jubilant my parents were to have this little girl around, I knew that for them, Isabel was a gift beyond my comprehension.

My brother lived very close to the airport so we went over to his house to hang out for a couple of hours before having to return for our flight home to San Francisco. Sheila had Isabel wearing a nice warm, cow-print, hooded outfit so that Isabel would be comfortable. She, Isabel that is, looked simply adorable. Sheila was still recovering from being puked and pooped on for hours.

The time at my brother's house was wonderful. My family got to see all the sweet sides of Isabel. She was playful, holding herself up on the side of a coffee table, giggling, and smiling. She was tender, relaxing unknowingly in my dad's arms. They saw the tenderness of their son gently feeding her a pacha. They were able to awe in the innocence of seeing her nap. One of the most touching things was when my dad said goodbye to her at the airport. He was the last to get to hold her before we had to get checked in. As he tried to hand her back to me, she got upset. She didn't want to leave her grandpa. He was touched and I knew exactly how it felt. He had the same feeling I did with the elderly indigenous woman at the embassy the day before.

Isabel was so calm and well behaved, especially given the discomfort of the flight, that it left no doubt in my mind that she was able to realize that these were not strangers. She could sense their love. She recognized that love as the same energy she received every day in Guatemala. Intentionally or spiritually, Betty had sent that energy on the plane with us. Maybe it was a byproduct of her care. Maybe it was more divine than that. However it is that it happened, Isabel was prepared for what was happening. She was comfortable in her new family. The love she knew as a given had built a confidence in her, allowing her to trust rather than fear.

As we made our way through the airport, Isabel was a huge attraction. Many people thought she was Chinese while remarking on how sweet and beautiful she was. The security people were amazingly helpful to us, getting our bags up an escalator because of a broken elevator. We were able to see one of the beauties of humanity – normal people comprehend and appreciate the sanctity and purity in children.

We waited at our gate knowing this flight was it.

The final transition from our lives as people struggling to have a child to becoming adoptive parents was just a short flight away.

At the end of the rainbow...

On our flight to San Francisco, Isabel decided she liked flying and first class. While it was a short jaunt, she made the most of every moment. We were playing games with the plastic drink cups. She was making friends with the other passengers. She had won the hearts of the flight attendants. We knew we were extremely lucky people!

All of our baggage arrived uneventfully and we called Marco to pick us up at the curb. While not a family member, Marco was a good friend who was very interested in progress as the process went on. So while not the thrill of introducing Isabel to her grandparents, this was still going to be one of our more exciting “Isa unveilings”. We waited anxiously, hoping each approaching white limousine was his.

Marco pulled up to the curb and quickly got out of the car. He was dressed for the occasion. It started with an all black suit. When combined with bright white cowboy boots and an even whiter cowboy hat, he was something to see. He had one more accessory adding to his guise - elation in “chabelita” (common nickname for “Isabel”) being home. Marco’s eyes filled with tears as he jovially mused in a long dissertation relaying everything wonderful about Isabel.

The limo of course was stocked with wares for Sheila and I to toast being back on our home turf. During the drive we told Marco about our trip in between stanzas of his on-going ruse about how wonderful Isabel in our lives will be. As we pulled up to our house, we were exhausted, emotionally and physically, from the day’s events.

The dream was about to begin.

We relaxed for a few moments, checked the house, and greeted the pets.

Sheila put Isabel to bed.

“No” was added to the vacancy sign above the nursery.

WE were home!

The never ending story

The story is ongoing as we now live our lives. The first days of bringing home your adopted child are special ones in their own right. Some would argue that the adoption process does not end with homecoming. Essentially, I would agree, adding that it never really ends. But the first days of bringing any child home are special and in that respect, I believe this is in many ways when our families begin to be like any other. There are some unique adoption related things we do encounter. One example was that it took a little while before I could go to a park alone with Isabel and not interpret the interested stares as people thinking I had kidnapped a Latino child. But by and large, we just went through the same learning curves as any new parent and got to experience the joy of things like taking our child into the office or, for me, going grocery shopping at Whole Foods Market with her.

The issue of attachment does riddle many new adoptive parents. In our case, we didn't really encounter it. This is not to claim that Isabel didn't have any attachment problems, but her tranquil soul did not bring them out much into the open. We went through hell and high water to get her home, yet we had been rewarded with the most wonderful, special, beautiful, and perfect child ever born by man.

Our early days home were hectic and challenging. We had to deal with her diarrhea. We discovered that she had scabies. Without very much time to rest, my mother came to visit us for a few days. Then we made a trip to Kansas and spent Isabel's first Christmas with Sheila's side of the family as more touching introductions and memories hatched. Then my dad came to visit. By the time all that was done, I was back to work and everyday life began.

We experienced a huge scare when Isabel developed an infection with extremely high fevers. We learned how difficult it is to find a doctor that suits our needs. We spent many long nights with a baby fighting sleep. We had to learn how to feed her the things she didn't like. In short, we were becoming parents.

So this story ends with the culmination of a dream years since hatched. Sheila and I have started our family as we have always planned to do. It didn't take the form or route we imagined, but it could not have come about any better. Isabel is a happy and healthy child. Her adjustment into our lives has been smooth. Even the little things that worried us such as how our psychotic dog would react to Isabel turned out fine. Our families all accepted Isabel and love her no differently than they would a biological child. If anything, Isabel is more special. Even my elderly grandmother tells me how she didn't think she could love a child from another country, but Isabel she tell me, "I could just eat her up". True, this sounds strange from someone that her self immigrated to the United States, but you'd have to know my grandmother to understand.

We live the middle class American dream and have our lives in to a comfortable, busy routine. Once Isabel came home, the strains from the process disappeared quickly, though they will never be forgotten.

We still keep in regular contact with Betty and are planning on visiting soon to attend Alberto's wedding. I truly look forward to seeing her face when it first lays eyes on Isabel.

The group of Bay Area adoptive families continues to grow and the friendships we are developing there have become more important in our lives. As I'm sure many politicians have said "it is not how we differ that brings us together, it is the things we share". Every homecoming in the group brings back heartwarming memories, and every worrisome in-process parent reminds us that nothing worth having comes easily.

Isabel is my daughter now in every sense of the word. Her smile when I come home from work each evening gives me my energy and drive in life. As life moves into its routine, I easily forget to enjoy the beautiful things that make up that routine. While Isabel's smile is one reminder, each day there is another. Because inevitably, each and every day at some point in time, without consciously knowing it, something magically and naturally happens.

I hold Isabel up, look in her eyes, kiss her cheek, and say...

"I love you Mi'ja".