

LETTERS TO OUR DAUGHTER: A Personal Experience in Cross-Cultural Adoption

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Adoption is a life-long experience. For our family, it began 6½ years ago when we began the process of adoption, first for our daughter, Elsitá, and then for our son, Sergio, both from Guatemala.

Of all aspects in the adoption process, probably the most difficult for us thus far was the waiting period from the "assignment" of our children until we were allowed to fly to Guatemala and hold them in our arms, united as a forever-family, at last. (Depending on the country of origin, the amount of bureaucratic paperwork required, and the special circumstances surrounding the child's placement, the waiting period for international adoptions can range from several weeks to over a year.) In anticipation of our daughter, who was first assigned to us erev Rosh Hashana 1986, I took on the only act of parenting I felt was available to me in the situation—I wrote her letters, in diary form, virtually every day. Below are a few excerpts.

LETTERS TO A FOREVER CHILD

Wednesday, December 10

Thursday, November 6, 1986

Dear Elsitá,

Today we saw your picture for the first time. You are absolutely beautiful. Two photographs of you arrived at the adoption agency, and your papa picked them up and immediately showed them off to everyone at his work. He is so proud.

Do you wonder what you look like? You have lots of straight black hair and in one of the pictures you give a hint of a smile, as if you knew this photo was going to be sent to your forever-family. You have a light complexion, healthy chipmunk-like cheeks, a high forehead (which your papa says makes you look very intelligent), a small nose and mouth, and two cute, pudgy little hands that reach out and try to grasp the world around you. It looks like you are waving "hola" to us. So "hola" back, our beautiful little Elsitá, we love you.

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Dear Elsitá,

In two weeks we will be in Guatemala with you in our arms. And we'll never be separated again. I keep pinching myself to help me believe that this is really happening.

When your papa and I told this good news at work, everyone was really thrilled for us. Some remarked on what a lucky little girl you are, but we think that we are just as lucky, to finally be united with you.

But first there is still a lot of work to be done. Fortunately, your papa has finished the new bookshelves to fit into the small room upstairs, which will now become his study. This clears out the bigger blue-carpeted room upstairs for you. Our friend Norma has offered us her son Daniel's old crib, which is in absolutely beautiful condition and has big yellow, green, red, and blue balloons painted on it to match the dresser that your papa will be painting.

I can't remember ever being this excited before. But for you, lying in your crib or being fed and playing with your *ninera* (nurse's aide), nothing has changed yet.

Oh, but it will, dear Elsitá, and I hope so much that the transition will be easy for you and that we can make you happy in your new home. Your papa and I pledge to do everything we can to make this come true.

Wednesday, December 24

Dear Elsitá,

This is the day we've been waiting for. Last night we could hardly sleep. At first your papa and I thought we should go out to dinner or to the movies (the last time for a while without a babysitter), but finally we decided we were too jumpy so we tried to get some much-needed rest.

But luck was with us, and this time it feels like it is real, that we will be together, beginning today until forever. It's really a pretty scary thought in some ways. I asked your papa if he was a little scared too, and he admitted he was. His fears are that somehow he won't be able to give you what you need and want. After all, neither of us has ever been parents before. Will it all work out? What if we don't like each other right away?

This is absolutely the biggest event in our lives, so of course we're a little anxious.

Wednesday, December 24

Dear Elsitá,

It is almost midnight. We have just returned from our first half-hour with you. It was wonderful. You were awake when we got to the orphanage, and you looked up with great curiosity when we approached. When your papa picked you up, the first thing you did was pull at his beard, and then, with me you pulled at my mouth and hair and smiled. Your toothless grin

was absolutely irresistible and we practically burst with gladness.

At 6 months old, you're a tiny little baby, fine featured, maybe 12 pounds. Your hair, though matted and sweaty this evening, is about 4 inches in length and just begs for those red ribbons that my colleague gave me for you. You have fair skin and intense, dark eyes that seem to take in all the sights and sounds around you. You are alert, eager, and very curious.

Let me explain how everything worked out when we arrived in Guatemala. Nothing is ever simple with international adoptions, it seems, and this was no exception. When we arrived at the airport, there was no one to meet us. We found a beat-up old taxi and arrived at our hotel. They hadn't received our reservations either, but fortunately had sufficient room for us. Somehow our Guatemalan welcome (or lack of it) had a suspicious feeling to it.

Later that evening we unraveled some of what had happened. Angie (the director of the Casa Guatemala orphanage) explained that the washing machines at Casa Guatemala had broken down that afternoon, and the clothes for 120 children had to be rushed to laundromats all over the city before they closed down for a 4-day Christmas holiday weekend. As a result, nothing else got done. Angie said that she had tried to phone us in the United States, but all the international lines were busy before Christmas. What she had to tell us was that your passport wasn't ready, which meant at least another 10-day delay before we can bring you home.

Another disappointment. But at least we'll be together getting to know each other as parents and daughter while this last piece of bureaucracy gets straightened out. Right now, our little one, we say "lila tov," "Buenos noches," good night. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, we'll pick you up at the orphanage and then you'll move into our hotel—our forever-family, together at last.