San Antonio Review

The Third Pomelo

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In Dallas, the sky was big and blue and the air was thin, as if in the mountains. I felt a slight dizziness during my two days there, staying in a room on Gaston Avenue. It was December, a couple weeks before Christmas. My host was bald, heavysset, and unkempt. He had a poodle named Willis who jumped all over me when I met him in the hallway. It took a moment to get used to the ground-floor room, the lack of a desk for working, an uncertain sense of privacy, but once I did, I felt happy — to be in Texas, and to be anonymous.

I would have liked to have stayed for a week or so, longer even. But I wouldn't be. Our birth mother, Tasia, was due any day now. The call could come at any moment, and I'd have to tear down to San Antonio to Northeast Baptist, maybe before Diana, my wife, arrived by plane from upstate New York. This would mean meeting Tasia, the twenty-year-old stranger bearing our future child, alone, an encounter I simply lacked the tools to prepare for.

I'd stopped in Dallas because it was the city I could reach in a weekend's drive, about fifteen hundred miles in our new used Toyota. Now, in whatever weekdays I had left before the baby arrived, I could keep working, which I did remotely anyway, saving up the time off I'd need afterward. So in the daylight hours, I sampled cafes in the district around Greenville Avenue. But first I had to find this district, crisscrossing residential neighborhoods by foot, once calling Diana — who was at home with our eight-year-old son, Eli — for an assist. I still had a flip phone this late in the game. Then in the early evenings, after stopping back at my room, I'd walk the mile down Gaston to the supermarket, where I'd buy a pomelo, along with other provisions.

It was during these walks, aware of the pomelo with all its fecundity, that I found myself thinking deeply about cities in a way I hadn't in a while, not without a touch of mania — how they'd changed since I used to travel in them, second-tier cities in particular, with a friend. I'm sad to say I never published a single word on this topic, though not for lack of trying. Now, I was reading a book that I might have liked to have written myself: *Our Towns*, by James and Deborah Fallows, which had come out shortly after the 2016 election. Most anyone seeing it in a bookshop would assume it was a reflection on the dark outcome, but really it read like the opposite — an upbeat portrayal of innovation emerging from all manner of American cities; a testament to the nonpartisan character of local government.

A counterpoint to this book had given me a similar, queasy, feeling years earlier when I'd first seen it: that it should have been mine. *City by City*, it was called, published just after the Great Recession. Google it, and you'll come to an evocative passage about the Arkansas River originating in the state of Colorado. But read through all thirty-seven essays, as I did dutifully, and a collective indictment emerges, one detailing how greed was displacing working-class and poor residents of American cities; how the only proper response to high-end urban development was embittered scrutiny.

The Fallows was by far the more pleasant read, but *City by City* had a point. If suddenly you could buy a Parisian baguette on Greenville Avenue, if you could spend your evenings sipping bourbon around the corner at a tavern with a spare Estonian aesthetic, then someone else was suffering; someone was losing their neighborhood. Downtown Dallas served up starker evidence still. This was where I ate through my first pomelo, while walking to a Mavericks basketball game — prying off the leathery rind, ripping through the pith, juice dribbling down my hands and arms, citrus perfume rising to my palate, plunging the segments, crystals bursting with juice, into my mouth, arms sticky, seeking in vain a public trash can to dispose of the carapace.

A glance at downtown, and it was little more than that for me, suggested a city built of money alone, with none of the layers that make up the more classic urban experience. No palimpsest. Instead, tapered corporate towers; careening SUVs. "When measured by neighborhood," reports native son Lawrence Wright in his book *God Save Texas*, "the greater Dallas area is the most unequal big city in America, divided by pockets of concentrated poverty and extreme affluence." Once or twice downtown, I was sure I'd seen a Koch brother.

Seated to my left at the ballgame, where I'd secured day-of tickets for five bucks, was a friendly teen who told me he lived in Denton, to the north. I'd read in Wright's book

that Denton was “thought to be the most heavily fracked city in the country,” responsible for a contagion of earthquakes as well as a rising incidence of asthma and nosebleeds. But petroleum extraction didn’t figure too much in my neighbor’s assessment of his town. “I wouldn’t doubt that,” he said when I mentioned the fracking. He taught me, more usefully, that the Mavericks’ bench had been saving the team’s season. To my right sat a guy from another fracking town, Scranton, Pennsylvania. He was in Waxahachie, some miles to the south, for a few days of job training. As companionable as the Dentonite, he had a thick goatee, fatigue shorts, and said he considered diversity a good thing when I offered that Mavericks center Salah Mejri was the NBA’s only Iranian player. (Mejri, I read later, is in fact from Tunisia.) Usually, I would have probed deeper into these neighbors’ lives — might even have tried to make them a bit uncomfortable — but this time I didn’t want to be questioned in return. Walking around the arena concourse, I saw all these young, blond-haired, well-fed, jovial Texas families, three, four, five kids, and I felt superannuated.

As for that bourbon place I mentioned — never made it there. That would have been my third full night in Dallas, but that was the night Tasia went into labor. It was strange, like in the movies. A cold wind blew and the sky darkened. I shuddered at having to leave Dallas early, at having to assume parenthood before the scheduled time. Not only that — but just when I was relearning the art of being alone, and of thinking. I walked down Gaston to buy the second pomelo.

Once back at the room, I talked to Diana. “This is happening,” she said forebodingly. She was so nervous Tasia would back out, our contact at the agency having implied this was still possible. And in that sudden recognition of the depth of Diana’s anxiety — something closer to terror — I relinquished mine about receiving the baby, driving to San Antonio earlier than planned. Diana’s yearning had always been stronger than my resistance to building our family through unconventional means. In its pure form, her yearning was more convincing than any emotion I’d ever encountered.

On the road to San Antonio, I let the adoption details slide to the back of my mind and opened myself up to the pleasures of travel. At around nine, north of Austin, traffic came to a halt for a full thirty minutes, allowing me to dip my baguette into the hummus, take a swig from the Citrus Blend seltzer, and listen to the Texas public radio programming — segments about a pro-civil rights congressman from the 1890s and how the spring in Big Spring, in the western part of the state, had long since dried up. Later, as I crossed the Colorado River, I found myself singing out loud to a song about

this very region—"We broke on up to Hill Country, the air was thin and sweet / the air was thin and sweet." During parts of this road trip, even during the anticipation of it, I felt a vestigial urge to take out my guitar and compose songs. Other times, songs were coming to my mind that I hadn't heard in years.

The next day, I retrieved Diana from the San Antonio — her mom having traveled from Boston to watch Eli — and we lollygagged around the too pristine Pearl brewery district. The baby, I should probably mention, had been born about an hour earlier by caesarean section. Even though Tasia had declined our suggestion to visit her at the hospital — saying she needed time to rest — we were feeling confident that the adoption would go forward as planned. One reason for optimism, according to our agency contact, Deb, was Tasia's deference to us in naming the baby. She had texted Diana, "I know you said Daniel. That seems like the name that meant the most to y'all. But I was wanting to put the middle name up as Avery." We warmed quickly to this shared enterprise. I thought, in reading this message, that I was starting to understand the "miracle" of adoption, which I'd read about in an NPR commentator's fluffy memoir on his two adoptions from China. It struck me that the date, December 12, mirrored my own birth hour, 12:12 p.m.

So we waited out Tasia, heading by foot toward the Alamo along the river. We had now allowed ourselves to relax — to savor all the potential in this approach to a new city, to our growing family. We rented scooters for a little stretch, not knowing it wasn't allowed on the pedestrian path. This was an indulgence I'd first experienced along the cracked sidewalks of Dallas, Greenville baguette in my satchel. Here in San Antonio, I took a picture of Diana from behind on her scooter and sent it to Eli, who had long lobbied for us to rent one. The glimmer of downtown from the river gave San Antonio a touch of Venice in my perception.

At the Alamo, we met a middle-age couple with their daughter and granddaughter. The patriarch was Omar, originally from El Salvador. He looked to be about my age, forty-three, but later said he was fifty. Still, he felt like a peer, and this caused me to ruminate briefly on my fitness for the whole adoption project. Omar had served in Iraq, outside Baghdad. He'd had multiple back surgeries as a result but loved this country; would do anything for it. Omar also told me about Salvadorans' yen for transforming any living beast into a meal — his comment inspired by a koi pond with fat golden fish. Koi fish at the Alamo. Omar was in no hurry, but his wife eventually urged him along. Anyway maybe Diana and I should get back. We had no room reserved for the night.

On the walk we were thirsty from the Japanese noodles we'd imbibed for lunch. My hands were swollen in the humidity. We bought cold drinks at a bodega built into the walls along the canal.

Back at Pearl, we found a casita to rent about a mile's walk away for three nights; a birth mother in Texas was required to stay with her baby just forty-eight hours before signing off on the adoption release papers. The main room had a long leather couch perfect for two people reading and a sturdy rectangular table in the kitchen for working in the daytime. Tasia hadn't texted Diana for a while, but that wasn't especially alarming; she very well could have been asleep following the procedure.

After we'd unpacked, I called my old college pal and music partner David in New Mexico and paced slowly on the stones outside while we chatted. He asked what the odds were of the adoption actually happening. Shortly after I said "eighty-five/fifteen," I saw a 210 call come in. We'd asked Deb to call me, not Diana, if any bad news arrived regarding the adoption, and this had to be trouble. It was. Right after the birth, an aunt had apparently begged to "keep the baby in the family." What this meant in its details didn't matter. Tasia hadn't made a binding decision, but the course was set.

Hearing me take the call, Diana had walked outside. I saw her mouth open, her eyes wide, reflecting the dread of a disappointment she had somehow known would come.

That night in bed, I felt a fluttery nervousness. We couldn't sleep. I was hollowed-out, deathly awake.

Diana now would have to get her tattoo, as we'd planned. The image, which she'd sketched out months ago on her wrist in preparation, would have five open circles and one closed circle. The five open circles represented each baby that had almost been hers: the first, lost during her sixteenth week of pregnancy in early 2014; the next three, lost in succession during miscarriages by a surrogate in 2015; and the last, this baby, born to Tasia, on leave from her college studies in San Antonio. Then there was the closed circle, Eli, born at just twenty-eight weeks gestational age on November 3, 2010, Diana's thirty-second birthday. Now in second grade, he is skinny and talkative and likes to sing. But that pregnancy, too, produced crushing stress for Diana. We passed much of it on a kind of sabbatical in Rabat, Morocco. A memory of the warm, still, anxious days we spent there came to me the Thursday morning in San Antonio as we awaited final word that the adoption was off. There was the southern air, the

breakfast in a Mexican cafeteria that served instant coffee alongside the tortillas and scrambled eggs, the strangeness of being somewhere unfamiliar and pleasant, the sense of time suspended.

In early afternoon Diana texted Tasia directly to confirm she'd be keeping the baby. Waiting for the agency to deliver this news felt like masochism. Diana also knew from experience that she wanted to say goodbye to Tasia and meet the baby in person. So that afternoon, we drove the few miles to Northeast Baptist, where on the third floor Tasia greeted us shyly from her bed, not even looking up toward me although we'd never met. Diana had said I'd be unlikely to feel much of a connection with Tasia — she was not especially outgoing — but somehow I'd drawn up a fantasy of her as wry and perceptive. Maybe this was because she aspired to be a physician from her full-time post at a telecom sales call center, binge watching *Grey's Anatomy* in her free time. Maybe it was because her texts, as relayed by Diana, intimated wit if interpreted generously.

Tasia was a self-described “shopaholic” who liked cosmetics, but now she wore no makeup. She had wide-framed glasses and pale skin, but her appearance struck me as altogether indistinct as she lay there. Bags of chips rested on her hospital tray. In those moments, I could not believe this was the person Diana had been courting all these months with texts, a visit in October, teas from Ottawa — Tasia had always wanted to visit Canada, had never seen snow — chocolates and miscellaneous other enticements. Tasia, to her credit, had also sent a care package to us, a rare gesture for a birth mother evidently, with a note referring to the “new, sweet baby boy brought to your beautiful family.” But now all that potential connection was cut; Tasia was just a random twenty-year-old.

In the hospital room, Diana addressed Tasia with patience far beyond what one could have expected from someone so recently forsaken.

“So your aunt and uncle are going to raise the baby?”

“Are they driving here from Nevada?” Their home was a casino town on the Colorado River.

“When do they arrive?”

“Will you move to Nevada?”

Tasia answered the questions in turn.

She explained, "This way, I'll be able to see the baby."

"That makes more sense," Diana agreed, and she meant it.

Then Tasia, in her slight drawl, murmured, "I didn't mean to do this to y'all," and cried softly to herself.

Tasia led us to the nursery. The baby had thick, dark hair, his eyes closed but tremulous. Tasia had not yet seen his eyes open, she told me. She hadn't held him either, and this was something she "wanted so much." So there I was, looking at a stranger's baby that could have been ours. I felt neither revulsion nor attraction. But I was curious enough. Had he been ours, the attachment would have developed in ways I would never know.

As we exited the reception area, the greeter looked up to us. She was a black woman probably in her seventies, with short hair, stooped posture, and deliberate, enunciated speech. At first this deliberate quality suggested sternness, but I shortly saw I had misapprehended.

"I apologize," she said to us, "I didn't realize you were the adoptive parents." Earlier, she had asked us to wait at the desk for Tasia to lead us into the ward, in keeping with hospital regulations.

"Yes," Diana said, "actually, a family member of the birth mother has stepped forward and offered to raise the baby."

The receptionist squinted. "And where did you drive from?" she asked, an expression of concern forming.

"From upstate New York," Diana answered.

The receptionist's eyes grew wide. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "Oh."

"Yes," Diana answered, tears welling.

That evening, from the casita, I sent an email I'd drafted weeks earlier to everyone we'd told about our plan, maybe thirty-five recipients. I titled it "Disappointing News from Texas." This may have been the grimmest part, the task of awaiting all those condolences and having to reply.

I'd assumed, when our time ended suddenly like that, that we'd just book it home to relieve my mother-in-law. Eli was eager to have us back, to have order restored. But Diana said the days on the road would be cleansing. She saw a bigger picture that eluded me. We shouldn't rush it.

Plus, the cities still awaited us. They wouldn't be brimming with potential like they were on the ride down — like when I wandered around frigid Medina, Ohio, in its bicentennial year, on my first morning, a Saturday, or later the same day, when I left a friend's in Cincinnati at dusk knowing only that I'd stop for the night around Nashville. (Sometimes, even months later, I'd dream I was in Cincinnati, this jumping-off point into the unknown South.) But we had our Toyota, and we had to get it home somehow. And you couldn't pass Waco, Texas, without feeling a certain electricity.

We didn't pass Waco. We stopped there for lunch on that overcast, raw, and windy Friday afternoon, our first break on the long ride home. We dined at a chic, spacious Indian takeout downtown, staffed by a stocky guy of about forty; a young, pretty, androgynous Croatian at the register whose father had led the family to Texas for work; and a tall, burly white line-chef wearing a Stetson. The food was delicious, so hot it burned the tongue. On the way out of town, toward the highway, we peered into Chip and Joanna Gaines's Christmas-inflected empire. You had to take a ticket just to enter the bakery. Texas tourists, with lots of kids like at the Mavericks game, spilled out onto the steps.

A few miles down the road, we picked up the obligatory doughy, cloying kolaches (apricot, poppy) at Czech Stop, in West. The wind blew hard and cold as I filled the tank, traffic roaring from I-35. I hated the thought of driving north.

And at about seven, we exited the Lone Star State, with plans to spend the night in Hot Springs, Arkansas. But I'd spotted the sign for Bill Clinton's birthplace on the drive down, and now there it was again. I couldn't resist exiting at Hope. (The Southeast was teeming with sumptuous place names.) Diana agreed. She was quite amenable, less pragmatic than usual, and I felt an unexpected swell of affection for her.

Hope was quiet on a Friday evening. It had a wide main street, clapboard storefronts, a frontier ethos. Bats swirled in the gap between buildings where we parked next to a burger place, basically the only open restaurant around, across from the train station. Inside, Clinton was pictured obscurely on the wall posing with staff. The photo had been taken in the past few years, since the former president had grown gaunt and lost public sympathy.

The high school girls behind the counter told us Clinton had lived at 117 South Hervey Street, just around the corner. A minute later, in a gesture of hospitality all the more touching for being gratuitous, one of them delivered this address to our table in big handwritten letters on scrap paper. Next to Clinton's birth home, also facing the tracks, was an old sprawling three-story home for sale, *price reduced*. With a little research, I later deduced that this residence might be the childhood home of Vince Foster, whose suicide proved so fertile for the "vast right-wing conspiracy." The house, measuring 4,348 square feet, was on the market for \$115,000.

We continued on to Hot Springs, staying the night on the outskirts. In the morning we headed into downtown, a strange place: grand and dilapidated all at once. "Sin City," it used to be called. Bathhouse Row made for an elegant centerpiece. Fountains around town spouted evidently health-giving water, some of it steaming hot, which locals collected in jugs. But decay had long set in on the fringes. An example was the high-rise Medical Arts Building, opened in 1929, which was pocked with broken windows all the way to the top; in its grander years, I read later, the ground floor had a lunch counter where the city's gambling boss would stop for ice cream. The huge, turreted Arlington Hotel, dating to the 1870s, loomed at the bend of Central Avenue.

We took the waters at the Buckstaff-Baths, an act of healing, I guess, and marital self-affirmation. The place felt like an old world sanatorium, with no pretense of luxury. Men and women took their treatments separately, on separate floors. Diana rode up to hers in a crank elevator. My attendant, Bobby, had worked the baths for forty years now, and he led me from one spa feature to the next — whirlpool, sitz bath, needle shower. Once, as I made my way between stations, he ribbed me, "You like wearing that little towel [over your loins]?" Most of the time, in that dungeon-like space, I found myself nude. While I lay in the whirlpool, a pleasant enough experience, however ancient the apparatus, Bobby engaged me like this. "I'm lookin' for some home-cooked food today," he said. "You like home cookin'?" "Sure," I said. "You like beans?" he said. *Sure*. "You like chicken?" *Yes*. "You like turkey?" *Um-hmm*. "You like deer meat." Now I had to perk up: "Never had deer meat." "Oh," Bobby said, "deer meat's real good."

After walking up and down Central Avenue, sipping a tea and contemplating the 140-degree waters bubbling beneath the Arkansan earth, we resumed our drive under continued clouds. At least we had Little Rock to look forward to. On the ride, I told Diana that having made it to Arkansas, I had only one state left to visit in the continental U.S., Oklahoma. She was impressed. And I was surprised that I could still

impress her at all after ten years together. I'd read, by the way, that Oklahoma was the last state in the Union to allow tattoo parlors, in 2006. Our mood was dim, but we had a certain expertise at this type of grieving. Knew what conversational triggers to avoid. Knew not to let ourselves keep saying, "This is just unbelievable." I could anticipate Diana's reply to even minor comments and found myself withholding most of them.

In the state capital, we stopped for lunch at the same place where I'd eaten just six days earlier: poké. Trendy Hawaiian on a Sunday in Little Rock told you something about the American city in 2018; something even more than the Dallas baguette. The previous week when I'd passed through town, the weather had been mild and sunny. I'd remembered then the sensation of entering a warm-weather place in winter: the birdsong, the echo of car horns against city buildings, the pathos of Sunday afternoons in December. I had experienced a handful of those Sundays during my years-ago travels with my friend: in Mobile, St. Louis, Sacramento, Reno. A streetcar slowly followed its route around Little Rock's downtown, and I'd envisioned taking Eli on it later in the month if everything went as planned. The sun had been gloriously blinding as I left town on I-30, due for Dallas, ready to pop the REM disc into the player once I'd hit Texarkana.

No sun shone on the ride home. After lunch, Diana and I continued onward into Tennessee, crossing the Mississippi River at Memphis, then logging the three hours to Nashville, where we wouldn't have the pleasure of staying, as I had, in a sleet storm, on the drive south. And the inevitable long drive into night. Nighttime helped our collective state of mind. Sometimes we sang together even though Diana can't approach carrying a tune. We ate at a tavern in Christmas-gilt Bowling Green, Kentucky, home of Western Kentucky University (but not of Bowling Green State — which is in Ohio). Middle-age women were seated beside us with big blonde hairdos, college bowl games on the TV sets. Outside, Clydesdales clopped around leading carriages in the otherwise empty town square, students vacated for the break.

Back on the road, around eleven at night, we took the exit to Abraham Lincoln's birthplace but didn't persevere long enough to find it. Then to a hotel in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where we awoke the next day feeling pretty low. More clouds, and this was our last real day on the road. Usually I was the one who wanted to travel forever, ready to discard all commitments, but now Diana did too. The weather up in New York, my mother-in-law reported, hadn't been too cold, but it was gray. Eli wasn't talking much anymore about the baby, though in his own way he had wanted it

too. He had sensed the acquisitive thrill. After hearing the news, he'd rushed to email his best friend.

During our three days on the road, we took our main sightseeing breaks in the morning. Would it be an overstatement to say these mornings were a buffer against eternity? We had been on the adoption list for three years now, and this case had to be our last chance. We'd admittedly been cautious, passing on profiles that noted spousal abuse, drug addiction, and other red flags. But we'd been worn down all the same. We just couldn't keep spending and waiting, waiting and losing.

At first, downtown Louisville struck me as pretty depleted, lots of asphalt parking lots, not many pedestrians, with exceptions like the street near the river. We asked in an upscale restaurant where to find "Hogtown," where Diana had been a few years earlier. "I know a Hogtown, Indiana," the bearded restaurant guy said. Diana did some describing, and then it came to him, "Ah Butchertown," and directions followed. There we walked into tiny Hi-Five Donuts, where Diana remarked to me that they were out of *sufganyot*. "You mean for Hanukkah?" I said. The woman behind the counter affirmed this, adding that the proceeds were supporting causes linked to the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre. We kept walking: noticed the train tracks as they curved right through the putrescent slaughterhouses. Into the shopping district, we saw a coffee shop that declared "No Decaf" and sold a nibble called "sex mix," with goji berries. Louisville was opening up to us, and I would have happily accepted a two-day reprieve there from the inevitable ride north.

We had no good excuse to stay. I was prepared now to drive the whole way home, arriving well after midnight, but Diana said we should break it up. Once again, she was the voice of moderation. Not to mention that my eyesight had deteriorated over these thousands of miles on the road. Around Columbus, Ohio, the lanes were blurring. So we eventually stopped in the small western New York town of Salamanca, which falls within the Seneca Nation and is home to the late Jewish songwriter Ray Evans, a co-writer of the Christmas standard "Silver Bells." A pink flyer in the hotel lobby advertised "Silver Bells in the City," a series of cultural events spanning the holiday season. Christmas was a week away, and we'd be spending it in Boston after all, not by the fire in the New York hills with the new baby, neighbors stopping by with casseroles.

We'd been staying at the same reliable hotel chain in recent nights — I'd read that Bill Clinton was perfectly content with the Holiday Inn Express while campaigning for Hillary, as long as he had access to his TV shows — but the one in Salamanca didn't measure up. The evening of our arrival, a prostitution arrest played out in the lobby.

The hot tub, open just another fifteen minutes until eleven o'clock, emitted toxicities that burned our throats and produced a rash on Diana's back. The next morning at nine, the hotel's water needed to be shut off for a pipe to be fixed. A notice asked us to forgive the inconvenience, but offered nothing in the way of compensation.

We left exactly at nine and took a final detour through downtown — split gracefully by the Allegheny River — but with hardly a single storefront in use. Salamanca appeared entirely dead. We crossed over the river and back, rode toward Route 86 and the Seneca-run casino, then kept on heading east. All I'd ever wanted was an excuse for a road trip, and now it was over.

So many Christmases, it seemed, we had driven to Boston with hopeful aspirations to complete our family, only to be inevitably let down. This time, on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, I rode with Eli from the suburbs into Jamaica Plain, our old neighborhood, to reprise a familiar subway route. This was a route we had taken especially during the weeks after Diana lost her pregnancy and I was trying to give her some respite from parenting. Eli was three years old then, just out of diapers. Catch the grimy Orange Line at Stony Brook, ride it past New England Medical Center, where Eli spent six weeks in the NICU, then finally disembark at Haymarket — a site, I must mention, of some of my life's cheapest grapefruits — where we'd have a slice of pizza, maybe ride the new carousel if the weather was good. Then, as if it were a novel idea each time, ride back on the Green Line, nobler than the Orange, also above ground, all the way to the terminus at Heath Street, where we'd walk, with me often having to do some carrying, along South Huntington, cross Centre Street, sometimes picking up an additional snack there needlessly, then home on one of the narrower streets, Boylston or Spring Park or Seaverns, to Diana, nestled by the fireplace with a friend or on the phone.

Light snow was now falling during our return visit, and I was starting to enjoy the walk, browsing newly opened bookshops, record stores, the décor of taquerias and chocolatiers. The old bohemian neighborhood had gone sleek, and I should have perhaps been offended, but instead I couldn't look away. Eli had other ideas. He was ready to go home to Grandma and Grandpa's, and did not share my reawakening.

When a few days later we returned home to New York state, Diana retreated into glum detachment. The skies remained gray, but no snow fell. Deeply uncharacteristically, she was doing a jigsaw puzzle on zodiac themes on the round table by the windowed

alcove in our entryway. We went to a New Year's party near the university and watched 2018 turn to 2019 on the high rises to the south.

In those days the adoption question still hovered there, even though we told most people, including our parents, that it was probably closed. On the ride home from Texas, Diana had shown some of the moroseness that would visit her for the rest of our shared lives if we did end it. Moroseness was not endemic to Diana; action was. And I had come to see that the burden of our family narrative, one tinged with tragedy, weighed on me perhaps more than I had estimated. I told friends that I'd felt some relief in losing the adoption, but this was a lie. I felt pure disappointment. A part of me now thought: shouldn't we just press on until we succeed, whatever it takes? Even if it meant going broke. Every trip down to Texas, I saw in thinking it over, affirmed the impulse to life. The travel itself exhilarated, sure. But adoption itself was an affirmation, however complicated the reality might be, however tedious parenting could get day to day. My friend, over a drink, passed a message to me from her husband, "They'd better keep going." The mother of another friend in town had tried decades earlier to have a second child without success, including through adoption. The mother had never gotten over it. A cousin of Diana's who had adopted her second and third children through the foster care system had said: "It's much harder but much more rewarding than I ever could have expected." This line had penetrated Diana, I could tell.

On January 4, the agency wrote to see what we wanted to do. That particular Friday was clear, and I took an afternoon run, returning home via Gun Hill, with its sweeping view of the lake to the north, prettier than anything I'd seen on the entire drive to south Texas. The idea that we might keep going breathed life into my dry bones, reopened the curtain on the future, and for the first time, I felt desire: desire to adopt a baby, rather than just passive agreement to it.

Another week went by and we were back on the list. Adoptive parents who had lost a match, Deb told me, got priority.

On a Thursday, January 31, exactly two days after Diana got her tattoo, we were matched with another birth mom — one who listed "violinist and volleyball" as her hobbies. Volleyball even though she wasn't quite five foot three. In her first text message to Diana, she set a comma between independent clauses. She had two living grandparents in their nineties, suggesting formidable genes. That night, in the living room, Eli, Diana, and I crackled with the sense of revived opportunity.

Another match, another C-section, this time scheduled in advance for late February. But on Sunday February 3, the agency called to say the procedure would actually be happening the next day, first thing in the morning, and could we make it back to San Antonio by then. That phone call came on a day of snow-melting warmth, and I had just returned home from running six miles, all the way to the sodden shores of the lake. This run was certainly an indulgence, as was the jam-slathered waffle that I kept crunching even after taking Deb's phone call. Somehow, we found a flight leaving in two hours, taking us through Detroit. We drove Eli to his friend's for the night until our diligent parents could, once again, spell us. We arrived at our Texas hotel at midnight and were at University Hospital by five in the morning.

The rest of the story, in the words I kept repeating to myself, was "almost comical" in its ease after all those years of struggle. The birth mother's profile unfolded in three layers. The first involved her appearance: she was attractive, blonde, and trim, even on the verge of having her fourth baby. This was superficial, of course, but beauty was central to the reproductive act, wasn't it? I was still mulling the implications of this when the second layer emerged: her emotional intelligence, evident in the way she assessed her own family's dynamics, siblings and parents, motherhood, the neighborhoods where she had lived. It was dislocating to appreciate this complexity, to know part of it would be ours, even as she herself would remain distant, mostly an idea.

At one point, she asked Diana to retrieve from her handbag a black-and-white picture of her three girls, ages eleven to fourteen. They were catalog beautiful. After that came the third layer: her relative affluence, an attribute not often linked to birth moms — not linked to any we'd seen on the list over the past three years. This might have been the strangest twist of all, leveling the field of interaction between us. It also offered an inevitable alternative lens for the whole story: that of privilege. Over the years of our failed surrogacy and adoption attempts, we had always held an implied advantage over another woman enlisted to help us. Our happiness would come, somehow, at her expense. But now the roles felt scrambled. Not unlike Diana, the birth mom was capable and decisive. Our exchange with her had the feel of a communing, requiring full candor — but also of a shared conspiracy. One had to concede that point about adoption.

Diana accompanied the birth mother during delivery, and at eight-thirty we welcomed the baby in the receiving room. She was six pounds, eight ounces, had gray-blue eyes,

and her dark hair curled in its post-womb dampness. Diana, I saw, in her hospital scrubs, was being released from her suffering right there; it was just seeping out.

Then followed the nights in Room 446, where the hospital allowed us to stay — at our birth mother's suggestion, I should add — while awaiting the final sign-off on the adoption. We ate meals from the cafeteria. We worked on our computers in our room as the baby slept in her bassinet. We held her and fed her. We forwent all communications on the matter, except to our immediate families. Hardly anyone else even knew we were in Texas. Leaving the baby briefly in the nursery, we sometimes wandered out along the commercial strip for air. Diana got a pedicure that seemed to go on forever. We ate a Chinese lunch. Sometimes the wait played tricks on us. Was this real? At the very end of the two days, we decided on a name, Miriam, the name we had long imagined for our daughter.

After the adoption became official on a Wednesday afternoon, we said goodbye to the birth mother, all of us tearful at the parting, then sat outside at a coffee shop across from the hospital to chart the rest of our lives. We were in middle age. Our baby knew nothing of the world except those two days in the hospital, now the mild Texas breeze, us.

We rented a little place in the flats near Alamo Heights to await the completion of paperwork between Austin and Albany. Our host, an evangelical pastor with a five o'clock shadow and the surname Miracle, brought us an oversize Tupperware for bathing Miriam. Shortly thereafter, right after dark, I sent an email to loved ones with the subject line "Reporting Again from San Antonio." (In the attached picture, Miriam's eyes are closed, her cheeks full, her lower lip in a slight pout.) Watching the replies light up my inbox was a thrill without comparison in my adult life.

In the days to follow, we made daily sojourns to the supermarket, where we indulged the embarrassing varieties of Texas citrus, while carrying around this seven-pound inheritance, a girl to go with our boy. A cold spell struck briefly, even bringing sleet to south Texas, and virtually all we had were the hospital-issue onesie, knitted hat, and swaddle blankets for dressing Miriam. When the sun reemerged, I took daytime jogs around the mansioned part of the neighborhood, imagining I might encounter a San Antonio Spur, mulling whether to cadge a lone remaining Beto lawn sign, not doing it. Miriam slept all the time; sometimes she even slept for sixteen hours straight, not even waking during her meals. She curled on my chest like a koala.

Another thought germinated in those transitional days, one previously totally unknown to me: that everything was possible. It was a dangerous idea, like building cities, but in its early stages you could harmlessly float along on its current.

My dad soon replaced Diana, who had resumed her teaching responsibilities in New York. He lay on the foldout holding Miriam, singing over and over a fifties melody with the refrain "Somebody to love/Somebody to love/Somebody to call me turtledove/Somebody to love." Only occasionally did he pause to nourish himself with a handful of peanuts or a slice of dry toast.

After a week, Miriam and I flew to Syracuse by way of Chicago. It couldn't be otherwise than gray with light snow swirling in that northern city. I spotted Diana and Eli, wearing his weathered blue coat, approaching in the arrivals area. Eli was tentative but tender as he neared Miriam in her car seat. "Can I see her?" he asked, causing me to suppress a sob. He commented on how small she was but didn't dwell on it. He'd been away from me for two weeks and now wanted to walk together. So we did, sitting briefly in an old airplane cockpit stationed in the newly refurbished airport.

The family soon began the hourlong drive south toward home. But first, I thought, we might stop quickly in Syracuse for a coffee. I hadn't had one all day, and the headache was coming on. I recalled that the three of us had gone to Syracuse during the interadoption period. We had eaten pierogies at an old-time Polish deli in Solvay, seen the eagle aloft outside the mall, skated downtown on ankle-breaking rentals. I had later reread the excellent piece about Syracuse, more meditation than harangue, in *City by City*; its eccentric industrial past — shards of Syracuse china showing up in the most unlikely places like an island in the Gulf of Alaska — and its uncertain future. We might as well stop because the baby was happily asleep, and we could let the new reality sink in, reflect for a moment, peer at the back seat, at last filled. After all, wasn't everything about to get a bit quotidian?

Jason Warshof and his family recently returned home to upstate New York after seventeen months in New Zealand, where they were waiting out the pandemic. His essay "Men of Feeling," published in Isthmus, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His other essays and reviews have appeared in the Antioch Review, Maryland Review, Boston Globe, and elsewhere.

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