

Birth Mothers, Seeking

by Linda Hanley Finigan

A blonde girl, her youth evident beneath a cosmetic mask of bruised eye shadow and plum lipstick, claims the seat beside me on a train. A radiant six month-old gazes out from her hip, awe-struck at life, as my own son must have been at that age. I never even named my baby, knowing I would give him away. The girl struggles to collapse an aluminum stroller with one hand as she pins the child to her side.

"Can I help? Would you like me to hold him?"

She beams at my offer, a wide-mouthed grin that confirms my initial impression; she is a child herself. "That would be awesome."

The baby feels sturdy, warm and substantial in my arms. I inhale the rich deep smell of his scalp. Mothers don't realize how lucky they are, being able to smell a baby's sweet head. The girl stands on tiptoes to retrieve something from an overhead bag, her short halter top hiking upward to reveal large intricate tattoos on her lower back like colorful mandalas.

"I wouldn't mind holding him," I offer. The baby's tiny hand clasps my own. "If you need a break."

"You have kids?"

I tell her I have a son but he doesn't live with me anymore.

The baby glimpses a bottle in his mother's hand and lunges for it greedily. She hoists him onto her lap and I go back to reading my book.

"You could have more."

I startle at her voice. "I may someday."

"Are you with anyone?"

"Not now."

"Well, there you go!" A big throaty laugh reveals a glimpse of silver tongue stud. "Y'all gotta take care of that part first. You better get busy, girl, and find yourself a father."

She notices my eye linger on the photo in her heart keychain.

"This here's Stevie. He's totally hot. We're gonna get engaged as

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soon as he finds a real job. Got a ring on layaway and everything."

I smile and say, "I hope it all works out."

The boyfriend looks like he, too, is all of eighteen. This young girl with a tattooed spine and her boyfriend in the backwards baseball cap have managed to do what I could not. To be a young single parent of a baby.

I never even saw my son, that's the way I wanted it. Full anesthesia. The doctor was surprised. Women did not generally ask for that anymore. I did not want to see a baby, knowing I'd have to give him away.

As always, I scramble to my own defense with excuses. Too damaged, was that it? Too young, wounded, scared to be a mother. The father was married, a college professor twenty years older than I. The handsome Dr. Gallagher, going through his terrible divorce. I fell in love with him at the head of a lecture hall, rows of undergraduates bowed before him scribbling notes. For a few months one semester, I convinced myself he felt the same. In the end, I had a baby because I could not imagine doing otherwise. I feared I'd spend the rest of my life haunted by the alternative. Funny, that's the way things turned out.

The first time I logged onto an adoption web site, I had no idea what I expected to find. What kind of teenager would he be? Class president, class poet? Maybe he would be the strange kid, the one everyone made fun of, the painfully shy, hyper-intelligent boy who always ruined the curve. His father was incredibly smart, in the ways he was not crushingly stupid. His son could be dazzling, too. Yet who knew what he would be like now, raised by people I did not know, whose values were a mystery. Maybe they sat around all night watching television. Maybe their living room was the one you passed at all hours lit by the ever-present blue glow.

What began as a curiosity quickly turned into compulsion. Soon I was following links, scanning teenage boys' home pages, trolling through hobbies and snapshots, home videos, snippets of songs.

And then last spring, I thought I had found him.

The first time I saw Adam Tolley's face, it emerged achingly

slowly, bit by bit, downloaded off the web. He had posted a message in an adoption chat room. I sat before my computer, stunned, shaken, scanning the features for resemblance. I knew it was he the moment I saw his forehead. My eyebrows, the handsome Dr. Gallagher's classic straight nose and full lips, an intelligent forthright gaze that was both of our countenances combined. I hit a key in error and the machine pinged loudly, jolting me from my reverie. I knew I had found my son.

I visited Adam's web site for days before I ever contacted him. I'd go there just to follow his links, listen to his music, click through his photo album. This is my room before I've cleaned it. Click on the blue shirt on the floor if you want to know more about me. Here's my dog Jasper. You can click on Jasper if you want. I did and the dog barked, startling me once more. My son was a teenage cyber genius. I sent him my first e-mail and he wrote back.

We volleyed e-mail back and forth for months until the adoption agency finally unearthed the piece of information that ended all speculation. Adam Tolley was born in Cedars Hospital. My son was born in Mercy in the same city, on the same date.

"How weird is that?" Adam replied, a sad-eyed electronic cartoon figure scuttling across the bottom of his message. And my son receded once more as a ghost, fading as quickly as he had emerged, fully formed. I'd never even heard his voice on the phone. I went back to his web site for a long time after that, even after I'd found out the truth, just to watch Adam's face download, to see his features once more and look at the pile of clothes in his room and the gum wrappers on the floor and his dog Jasper and his favorite links and think he could still be mine.

To my left, the young girl's baby glances up from his bottle, his eyes curious, expectant. I reward him with a funny face and wait for his laughter. "My son doesn't live with me anymore because I gave him away," I tell his mother. "A long time ago. I wasn't much older than you."

Outside the window, scenery clicks by, trees and roofs and telephone poles, crossroads with blinking lights and villages I'll

never know the names of, places with secrets and heartbreak and intrigues of their own.

"Yeah," the girl nods sagely, taking it in. "It's tough when that happens." She smiles in her childlike way and the baby smiles, too, a breath of forgiveness arcing back across the years.

Cuddling the child to her breast, the girl nods in quiet absolution. "Y'all do what you gotta do," she says at last. "That's the way life is, right? You do what you do to get by."

