

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

He was waiting for us at the door. I imagine he had been there for days, from the moment his foster parents told him we were coming. With his perfectly parted hair and his blue shirt buttoned to the very top button, he had a smile so big it threatened to swallow the whole of the earth. I suspected his bags were already packed, tucked discreetly behind the door, in anticipation of our arrival. He would have come home with us in that moment had we let him. He would have gone anywhere with us in that moment. Us, the parents he had been waiting a lifetime to meet.

It had been six weeks since the decision. Some faceless committee on the other side of the country deciding our future and creating our family. From the start all we had been given was a basic narrative and a photo. It's the photo that gets you. It's the photo that dares you to imagine a lifetime of

birthdays and Christmases and bedtime hugs. It's the photo that teases you with a tomorrow that may never happen.

That photo. It invades your dreams. It speaks to you. It sometimes calls you Dad.

I had that photo, his photo, on my computer, but I tried not to look at it, afraid that I would go even further down the rabbit hole. Without the photo he was just a collection of words; a story with a beginning, middle and a distant end. Without the photo, I could close the book, put it back on the shelf. Without the photo he was not real.

Except he *was* real and I had already imagined all of the birthdays and the Christmases and the lifetime of hugs. I heard his voice call me Dad. I pictured a future with him, my son -- this boy I'd never met. And that was dangerous. Because the faceless committee on the other side of the country deciding our future might have hated us. They could have chosen another family, a better match.

Of course, that wasn't the case. They chose us.

We traveled backward through four time zones, arriving in Oregon shortly after we had left Pittsburgh. It was a few miles from the hotel to his foster home and as we drove I remember looking over at my husband and thinking, *This is the last time it will be just the two of us*. In a few minutes, for the rest of our lives, it would now be the three of us (at least).

I closed the car door and rounded the corner to the house. Everything changed.

In the movies and in books when writers employ that laziest of clichés *love at first sight* (see chapter three), I always roll my eyes and silently chastise the author for condescending to his audience with weak plot devices. "Show, don't tell!" I want to scream as I throw the book across the room. "This isn't real life!" I say as I shake my fists in protest at the movie screen.

People do not fall in love at first sight. Except for parents. Parents fall in love at first sight. From the moment they see their child they are in love. And it does not matter if they are seeing a newborn or a seven year old, that love is immediate and unconditional and eternal.

The moment I saw my son standing at that door -- with his perfectly parted hair and his blue shirt buttoned to the very top button and his smile so big it threatened to swallow the whole of the earth -- I was in love. We may have lived in two different worlds for the first seven years of his life, but he was my son as sure as if I had made him. Looking at him I realized that every moment in my life before this moment had been nothing more than an audition.

Curtain up.

He opened the door, offering his hand to me in greeting. It had been a rehearsed bit meant to show respect, but also a subtle wink from his foster parents to let me know that they had done their job, that he had manners. He shook with his left hand. I shook with my right hand. It was very awkward, less of a hand shake and more of a hand embrace. Just another reason to love him.

He had decided that I would be called *Dad* and Todd would be *Papa*. "I'm Christopher," he said.

My son, Christopher. And me, his Dad. Was I really someone's Dad?

We made our way to the living room and sat on the couch, my husband on the left and me on the right with our son between us as if he had always been there. A camera appeared, immortalizing our first moments as a family. The picture captures two smiling grown men, wide-eyed and deliriously happy, and a young boy, home at last. The photo sits in my son's room. Sometimes I find myself staring at that photo and suddenly I am inside the picture, living a memory as if today were yesterday and yesterday were now.

I hear my son reading to us. I can't remember the name of the book, just the sound of his voice. The voice I first imagined before there was a voice, when all I had was a photo and a collection of words. Christopher, Chris, sits

across from me, his face buried in his book as he reads with tentative confidence. I close my eyes and his voice takes me out of the room, out of the house, past the hotel, past tomorrow, fast forwarding me through a life that has yet to happen. We are on the plane, back in Pittsburgh, at our home. He is eight, nine, eighteen, twenty-seven years old. There are birthdays and Christmases and a lifetime of hugs. No longer a child, now a man. From the beginning of our story to the end of mine. He reads and I see it all.

In July of 2013, my husband and I traveled to Oregon to meet our son for the first time. It was the beginning of a life-changing adventure. Five days later when we boarded a plane back to Pittsburgh with our soon-to-be-adopted then-seven year old son in tow, we were a family. Sometimes everything just falls into place. Sometimes *love at first sight* transcends cliché. Sometimes only a stale platitude will do: *it was meant to be*.

