

Into The Hinterland

“What has been your biggest challenge in adopting an older child?” someone asked me recently. Nearly two years ago I met nine-year-old Jessica, and life has been an exhilarating journey into the unknown ever since. I was 42, single all my life, and childless, when I adopted this lively, independent little girl with sparkling brown eyes and a shock of dark hair.

The challenges have been many. One of them has been trying to understand Jessica’s chaotic emotional makeup. On the one hand, she impresses me with her acuteness and maturity. On the other hand, she surprises me with her need to be a baby and drink up all the mother love I have to give. In the past two years, she has gone through various phases one would expect from a much younger child. Forty times a day she’d ask, “Do you love me?” That progressed to, “Why do you love me?” Nowadays it’s “Why did you adopt me?” She must have the answers memorized, as often as I’ve explained the same details over and over. Yet she still wants to hear it again and again, as if she needs to be reassured five or ten times a day that the answer is still the same.

Paradoxically, this child who is grasping so desperately for security is also exasperatingly independent. Almost daily she assumes the pose of the parent and demands that I perform servant roles to suit her wishes. I can’t count how many times I’ve told her between clenched teeth, “Excuse me, but you are **not** the mom around here; **I** am. No, you do not have the right to make this decision; that’s **my** job.” During the years of chaos in her birth home, and later as she moved from foster home to foster home due to her uncontrollable temper tantrums, she learned that she had to control the situation lest she be swallowed up by the system in which she was trapped. Jessica was evidently born with a fighting spirit, an intense will to survive. I have to admire invincibility. Yet, I want her to also be able to relax and trust me as a parent and provider. At eleven, she still needs to experience the freedom of childhood, the exemption from the heavy responsibilities that will come as she grows up. My challenge is to let her be a baby when she needs security, and understand her sense of autonomy when submission to my decisions threatens her need to be in control.

The temper tantrums did not stay behind in her foster homes. They came right along with the rest of her luggage when she moved into my once peaceful house. The challenge of behaviour management has been difficult. Sometimes I have endured the embarrassment of the whole neighbourhood in our small town hearing her scream. There have been times when I have run out of the house in desperation. As I hid behind a bush in the dark, I wept my humiliation and powerlessness to a far-off God behind the cold impersonal moon and stars shining silently overhead. At some of these darkest moments I’ve doubted the wisdom of taking on this task for which I feel so ill-equipped.

Another challenge has been trying to explain to her the “whys” of her removal from her birth home when she was six, the various moves in her foster care experience, and now her adoption by me, a single mom. It’s like walking a tightrope to affirm that her birth parents loved her and still do, and yet help her understand why things are as they are. I’m not sure I fully understand it all myself. When questions haunt her, how can I answer truthfully, lovingly, and reassuringly?

Yet none of these have been my biggest challenge. What I was least prepared for was my loss of personal time and freedom to live the solitary life I lived as a single woman without dependents. The first year after the adoption, I also moved with Jessica across the continent from northwestern Canada to the southeastern United States. I had a fulfilling career opportunity that raised by income and provided more options for the future for both of us. I had expected the move to be a big adjustment, and knew that I had to lay aside some of my favourite activities while we adjusted to being a family and living in a strange new environment. One of these days I kept telling myself, the paperwork would all be done; the thousand and one details of a major

move would all be finished. Jessica and I would begin to bond and grow more at ease with one another. One day I could retrieve some time for myself again.

Slowly it dawned on me that I had embarked on an adventure that would sap hours of my time for years, not just months. Jessica is now my child, my responsibility, the human being most important to me in all my life. She consumes nearly one hundred percent of my waking hours. If I am to get any time alone anymore, I must rise at an unaccustomed early hour to read or write or simply soak up the pleasure of being alone with my thoughts in the quiet house.

Thank God, Jessica sleeps like a log. I am granted at least this one precious reprieve from total invasion of my previous solitude. From the moment I wake her to get ready for school, her presence will fill every corner of the house from her cheerful singing to her dirty socks lying in the corner where she tossed them last evening. Even my thoughts will be barely my own. We are a family now. I have learned to think, not just about me, what I'll have for lunch, what I'll do after work, and how I'll spend my paycheck this week. Now my daily decisions revolve around her as well – making sure she has an adequate breakfast and clean clothes to wear, helping her find lost homework and favourite teddy bears, ensuring she knows which bus to board after school to her babysitter's, adding her needs to my shopping list, making sure she has time to do her homework and be with her friends. Just when I'm ready to call it a day and relax late in the evening, she's dressed in her nightgown, waiting expectantly with a shining face for her nightly story, cuddle and chat, bedtime prayers, and a final bone-crushing hug and wet kiss on my cheek. This is her special time each day to have my undivided attention. Ever since we instituted this ritual during the early days of her coming to me, she is determined that we keep every detail of it, every night.

I've always been a night owl who loves my morning sleep best. But when she is tucked in and silence settles over the house, I suddenly realize my exhaustion, and all I want to do is toddle off to bed myself and rest up for the challenges of tomorrow.

Now I realize that until she's eighteen or twenty or older, and is ready to find her own niche in life away from me, this is where she belongs and where she'll hang out. She'll be around and needing me and gobbling up all my spare time for years more. I'm in this for the long haul.

Is it worth it? Oh, yes! A hundred times yes! Through the haze of physical exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and painful sacrifice of my time and previous hobbies, I'm also feeling great exhilaration at tackling this journey. I'm experiencing new vistas that I previously dreamed only dimly. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that I'm doing the right thing. There is something about total commitment to your own child that repays you in full for all you have to give up.

Jessica enriches my life with her sparkly personality, her many friends, her lively activities, and her rapid development. She is teaching me how to let go of selfish little rituals that used to rule my life, and just live each moment passionately for its shining self. I've discovered that several week's worth of dust doesn't kill us; macaroni and cheese out of a box for supper won't irreparably ruin our mutual good health; and a book read in five-minute snatches while sitting in the bathroom may take longer to get through, but is still just as interesting.

In my old life, most of my pleasures were lonely ones. My satisfaction with some of those pleasures has more than doubled as I witness Jessica's joy in sharing them with me. I read her my best children's books and watch her eager mind and emotions soak up good things. I share my security in my wonderful, solid, positive, extended family, and am tickled to hear her rattle off the long list of her new uncles, aunts, and cousins to her acquaintances. She has claimed them as her own, as they have her, and is happy to become a sturdy branch of the family tree when once she didn't know where she belonged.

Bit by bit, she is relaxing and letting me be "mom". It is gratifying to have her miss me when I'm away. She begs me to come along on her school field trip with other parents of her

classmates. I tell her about my day at work, and she chatters about her day at school. Now our memories together go back more than two years. We enjoy talking about our long train trip to our new home in the States, the new people we've met, the weekend she got sick away from home, the day we got locked out of our car at Walmart.

Yes, there have been challenges. Some were expected, and some were more than expected. But now that I've faced the frontier and discovered the joy of conquest, I'm ready to head further into the hinterland. I've not begun a second attempt at adoption of an older child. I have no idea what new paths I'll have to forge, but the challenges beckon me on. There are new worlds out there to conquer.