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Planting the Seed

The first time I brought up adoption to Bernie was about three years after we got married. We were still living in Tennessee, renovating a huge old house we had felt compelled to buy, working days at our jobs and nights and weekends on our home. I didn't have a specific child in mind or even a gender or an age. I was just testing the waters. Bernie's response was not exactly enthusiastic, so I put it in the back of my mind.

The next time I brought it up was after we moved to Florida and were living in our first house there. Our youngest, Willie, was not in school yet, and Paul and Steven still lived with us. Yet we were down to only three kids from five, and the thought had worked its way forward in my head enough for me to bring it up to Bernie again. I think I just casually mentioned it, kind of like, "How was your day, what do you want for dinner, can you take Steven to get a new pair of board shorts later, have you thought any more about adopting a child?"

As best as I can recall, his answers were, “Good. I can grill something. Okay. No.”

So I dropped it again. Although Bernie had been an equal partner in adopting stray dogs and rundown houses, a child required quite a bit more than a pat on the head and a fresh coat of paint.

For as long as I can remember, adoption was something I felt that I was called to do. As an only child, I longed for siblings and a big boisterous family like the ones I saw on television. When I was born, my parents were quite a bit older than most parents of that day; my father was in his early fifties and my mom was forty-two. I was their fourth child, but the previous three did not survive infancy. I never knew that until later, and even then, it was not a subject either of my parents talked about. I know I asked them about having a brother or a sister and that they had looked into adopting, but in that era, they were considered too old.

I can't fathom the pain my mother had suffered when one baby after another died. Losing one baby would be a tragedy, but three? It's unimaginable to me. I've been known to cry for days over losing a baby goat. Maybe she became so worn down by her grief that she couldn't allow herself to feel anymore or become attached to a child when three had been taken away from her. Our relationship was always distant and cold. My mother was not in the least affectionate, and I longed for her to hug me, rub my back, stroke my hair. She took care of all of my standard needs—food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education—but she could never bring herself to tell or show me that she loved me. My father was different. I was his little girl, and I spent as much time with him as I could.

Mother didn't have any friends I knew of. She had worked for years in the accounting department at General Motors but quit when I was born. She didn't see her own family. Although they lived nearby, the only time I saw relatives was when her parents picked me up for the weekend, and we'd go places. A relative of ours had a horse farm and going to visit him and his family there

was the best thing ever. I loved the horses, the sense of family, and being away from my house, which was as quiet, still, and lifeless as a mausoleum.

My father worked for GM, too. Everybody in Michigan worked in the auto industry at that time. He started on the line, then got a dress-up-to-go-to-work job, but he didn't like dressing up, so he asked to go back to the line. They made him the shop foreman, which he wasn't crazy about either, but it was better than an office job.

We lived in a lake house, and almost everyone who lived near us was retired. There wasn't anybody nearby who had kids. I kind of grew up like a mini-adult, because I was only around adults.

My father raised beagles when I was little, and they were my only and best friends. I loved playing with them, letting them jump all over me and lick my face. Right about the time I started school I developed allergies, and because my parents thought the dogs were the cause, the dogs had to go. I tried to suggest that maybe it was something to do with school, but my mother wasn't buying it. I was heartbroken. I felt as if it was my fault, and I was very lonely without the dogs.

My parents were not role models for a happy, healthy marriage, either. They lived separate lives. My father loved hunting, fishing, yard work, and animals. My mother stayed in the house. I'm not sure what she loved or even what she did with herself all day. How dirty could a house get with only three people—and no animals—in it? How long did it take to cook dinner for three?

My parents didn't go anywhere together socially. They both drank, but they didn't even drink together. My father drank outside the house and with his buddies, and my mother drank secretly alone at home.

I was a good student in everything but math. I read constantly. I think lots of only children did, at least before computers came along. I loved animals so much that I wanted to be a veterinarian,

but my mother discouraged it because of my allergies and my struggles with math.

When I was eighteen and close to graduating from high school, my father died in a hospital in Arizona following scheduled heart surgery with a specialist. My mother had not gone with him, which kind of tells the story of their marriage and the type of person she was. He was in a hospital room by himself miles away from us when he died. I had talked to him on the phone that evening, so it was even more of a shock to me when the call came in the middle of the night. His body was flown back home for the funeral. I was devastated and had nowhere to turn for comfort, certainly not to my mother. The funeral, my graduation—it was all a blur. I can barely remember any of it.

Then it was just my mother and me, and we were like strangers. She read magazines and watched soap operas. All I wanted was to be gone.

I had earned some scholarship money and intended to go away to a state school, but my mother told me I couldn't leave—that I needed to stay home with her and enroll in the community college to be a dental hygienist. She said I would be finished in two years, and I suppose she assumed that because the most teeth anyone can have is thirty-two, I could manage the math.

I had never expressed any desire to be a dental hygienist, and I have no idea how she came up with that idea, but I was not a questioning child. I never challenged what my parents felt was the right thing for me to do. Instead, I took the passive-aggressive route: two weeks before graduating, I dropped out. I just could not overcome my revulsion at putting my hands in someone's mouth, especially in the days before everyone wore gloves. I can put my hand in a dog's mouth or a horse's mouth—and in even worse areas of an animal's body—but I could not put my fingers in a human mouth. My brilliant career as a dental hygienist was over before it began.

I didn't have a plan B, other than getting away from my mother, so I made the classic leap from frying pan to fire and married my high school sweetheart. He had joined the military after graduation; after our very small wedding, I moved to Hawaii where he was stationed. Hawaii is even more beautiful than photos make it appear, only not the part of Hawaii where we lived. We rented a dingy apartment in a rundown complex that had lots of young military couples, loud parties, and cockroaches. I had no transportation, which made it difficult to even look for work.

Along with the crummy apartment, my marriage was not exactly paradise, either. My husband was secretive, he worked strange hours, and we were always broke. As naïve as I was, it took me several months before I figured out that he was doing drugs, a lot of drugs, and I confronted him. I have always been very antidrug, and I told him he had to stop. He refused, so I used some of my savings, bought a ticket, and went home to Michigan, hoping that would make him quit. When it didn't seem to have any effect at all, I filed for divorce and was right back in the frying pan with my mother.

I got a job at the mall and another job watching kids on the playground at the elementary school I had attended. I felt like I was on a slow train to nowhere. I really didn't know what I wanted to do, other than escape my mom's house again. I wasn't making enough money at even two minimum-wage jobs, so I got married again—to the best man from my first wedding.

Paul and I had known each other since elementary school, and our relationship was comfortable and familiar. We got married at the courthouse, a civil ceremony that was very quick; and then I moved into his mobile home in a trailer park. Within a month I was pregnant. I was twenty-two, and I knew that my life had already changed—no more sleeping in, no more spontaneous trips to a restaurant or a movie, no weekend trips to the lake. I had to be responsible.

Right after Paul Junior was born, I went back to work, determined that my children would not grow up in a mobile home.

My mother volunteered to watch the baby while we worked. I got a sales job in a furniture store, then started to do some decorating for them and worked my way up to buyer. I got to go to New York to markets, and I loved it. It was exciting to be there in the city, doing something on my own. But then I got pregnant with Steven, and I decided to quit working full time so I could stay at home with my kids. Paul Senior had gotten his builder's license and was making good money. We bought a house on a small farm, and we had two ponies, some chickens, and rabbits. My habit of building menageries had begun.

We didn't intend to move specifically to Tennessee; we just knew we wanted to be somewhere warmer than Michigan. The winters were really tough there. The weather affected work for Paul, and the boys were getting older and wanted to spend more time outside. That's not much fun when it's below zero!

Paul was thinking about one of the Carolinas, but he had gone to a technical school in Nashville and also liked that area. So we put our house on the market and headed to Nashville first, with the idea of going on to see North and South Carolina. We had called a real estate agent in Middle Tennessee, because we wanted to see what small farms were like down there. He told us there were several properties that fit our criteria in a place called Lebanon. We thought he was kidding. Lebanon, Tennessee? He showed us a few places that didn't work, and we were ready to head east, but he convinced us to stay and let his wife cook supper for us. While we were eating, he went out and convinced the man down the road to sell his farm. You have to admire that kind of salesmanship. We went to see the farm and ended up buying it.

Paul was almost six and Steven was two when we settled in Tennessee. I stayed home with the kids, and Paul was working construction. We had rabbits and chickens again and then bought our first goat. I wasn't the vet I'd wanted to be when I was a young girl, but I had the animals I loved.

It was a good life, or so I thought, but Paul was working a lot, he had some issues that he didn't want to share with me, and we began to grow in very different directions. He eventually moved out, and we divorced when Steven was four and Paul not yet eight. Paul Senior was going through a kind of second childhood at that time, so I was left to raise two boys on my own on that farm. I squeaked by on child support, selling eggs and goats and eating what we raised and grew. We had a huge apple orchard, so there was a lot of apple eating—apple muffins, applesauce, stewed apples, apple pie, baked apples. I'm surprised any of us have ever eaten an apple since.

There were so many chores to do with that many animals that the boys had to help out; there was no choice. They became little men, they were so responsible for their age. We couldn't afford cable TV, but it didn't matter. The animals were our entertainment—we could watch them play for hours, and laugh at their antics. They were also our jobs, our livelihood, and an education for the boys. Paul and Steven saw babies being born and how the mother animals cared for them. They saw where food came from—not from the grocery store or a fast-food restaurant but out of the earth. They understood that a hamburger came from a cow, that hot dogs came from a pig, that fried chicken came from a chicken that had started as an egg and that may have been walking around the yard two days earlier. There was no luxury in our lives. It was hard work, but I remember those days as such happy times. It made us very close.

It's funny to Bernie and me how similar the arcs of our lives were prior to meeting each other. He was also an only child, although he had more relatives around, and I don't think he was as lonely and isolated as I was. We were both solidly middle class; our parents were hardworking and fairly strict. Spanking was an approved form of punishment back then, and Dr. Spock was still regarded by many as a little bit out there—especially to Bernie's parents, who had

been born and raised in Germany. Bernie was born there, too, but he and his family moved to America before he turned three. They ended up in North Hollywood, California, which wasn't anything like the Hollywood everyone knows from the movies.

His father worked as a carpenter; he had his own business. His mom was a claims adjuster for an insurance agency until his father's business grew and she came on to run the front office. His father didn't want German spoken in the house because he wanted to be sure that Bernie spoke English. He also made sure that Bernie learned carpentry, just by watching him and working with him. In the summers, Bernie's dad farmed him out to subcontractors, so he learned plumbing and electrical work, too. He wanted to go to college, but his father had very bad arthritis and relied on Bernie a lot. It wasn't in their culture to rebel against their parents, so, like me, he did what his parents wanted him to do and kind of segued from working after school and on weekends to working full time.

He got married the first time when he was twenty and his wife was only sixteen. She also saw marriage as a way out of her house. As soon as she graduated from high school, she got pregnant and had their first son, Shawn, and then Ryan a little more than a year after that. She was still a child herself, and when Ryan was only eight months old, she walked out on all of them.

So there was Bernie, a twenty-two-year-old single father. It was really hard for him. During the three years before his mom finally stopped working to watch the boys for him, he went through nineteen babysitters. I give him so much credit, to take on that kind of responsibility at his age. It really shows his character. His ex-wife rarely saw her boys, and she certainly didn't pay child support, although she did harangue him simply out of meanness, often calling social services to report him as neglectful or negligent. The inspector would come to the trailer and find it clean and neat, dinner on the stove, and Bernie folding clothes while his boys took a bath. Bernie was father and mother to them, as much as he could be.

He admits that some of the relationships he had then were more about getting a mom for his kids than a partner for himself, which had a predictable result. His second marriage was to a woman a few years older than him whom he'd met in church. She wanted kids of her own, and they really tried, but it never happened, and I'm sure that was hard on her.

They ended up in Nashville after she saw a segment on *Oprah* called "50 Fabulous Places to Raise Your Family." Nashville and Phoenix were the two places that appealed to her, and Bernie didn't want to go to Phoenix, so he and his wife came to Nashville, right around the same time that Paul Senior and I did. We laugh that we have Oprah Winfrey to thank for our being together.

Bernie's second wife didn't think Nashville was so fabulous, though. After they spent about four years together, she ended up leaving, so it was just Bernie and the boys again.

I had gone to work for my ex-husband Paul, who had a construction company that specialized in trim. I did doorknobs. I have no idea what skills I possessed that translated to doorknobs, but it was good work. Every building needs a door, and every door needs a doorknob. I would get up at Dark-Thirty o'clock every morning, do the farm chores, get the kids up, get them ready for school and onto the bus, race to work, do a half-day, dash home to be there when they got off the bus, supervise homework, make dinner, do chores, and fall into bed. Then I'd get up and do it all again the next day.

Bernie and I met on the job; there was nothing at all romantic about it. We were both seeing other people at the time, and he was a smoker, which is a deal breaker for me. Yet that gave us a chance to become friends first, and we became really good friends. This was a first for both of us in a relationship. He would talk about his girlfriend troubles and challenges as a single parent, and I would do the same. We saw each other all day on the job and then talked on the phone for a couple of hours after our kids went to bed.

As time went on, I think we both began to see the possibility of a relationship, although I was probably more hesitant than he was. There were his kids, for one thing. Maybe it was because they were being raised by a single dad, but I had a problem with some of their behaviors. Bernie's boys were older than mine, so I was afraid they might influence my boys to be age-inappropriate.

But eventually Bernie won me over. He quit smoking to seal the deal, and we were married on March 31, 1997, at the Baptist church Bernie attended in Franklin. It was very simple: the four boys and just a few friends. The church was feeding the homeless that night, so we ate our wedding dinner with them. That felt right to us. We didn't have the money for a honeymoon, so we just went home after our dinner with the homeless. At least, we had a home.

I think I got pregnant that very night. We definitely didn't plan it—we had quite enough on our plates, and we didn't feel a driving need to have a child together. Bernie was under the impression from the fertility doctor he and his second wife had seen that his siring days were over. At least, that's what he told me. Surprise! But we embraced the news as God's plan and celebrated William's arrival the week before Christmas.

Blending the families was a bit of a challenge, and we probably should have done a little more prep work on that. The boys had gotten along fine before we were married, but when my sons and I moved into Bernie's tiny three-bedroom house, things got tense. Steven and Paul were used to sharing, but Shawn and Ryan had previously had their own rooms. Shawn was sixteen years old and had always taken on a lot of responsibility for running their house. In hindsight it's understandable that he might get upset at a relatively strange woman coming into his house and taking his job, on top of being forced to share his father and his bedroom. There was definitely some tension. When we moved to a larger house, Shawn had the whole basement to himself, and we just tried to stay out

of each other's way. Thankfully, the misunderstandings between us lessened when Shawn went to live with his mother, who had settled in Atlanta.

Then we moved again, to a huge old house that had been converted into rental units. It had six apartments, six bathrooms, and six kitchens. Restricted to the no-budget plan, we did everything ourselves to turn it back into a single family home. It took us almost four years of backbreaking work on nights and weekends before we finished that house. It consumed every waking moment, and it was a showcase when it was done.

But we wanted warmer weather. Paul kept getting bronchitis every winter, so we thought a change in climate might help. We had driven through Florida a year earlier on vacation, down one coast and up another. We liked the west coast of the state better—the Gulf water was warmer, shallower, and calmer than the ocean, which we thought was better for Willie. He was only three, and the Atlantic was very rough. We found the kind of small-town community we liked in Fort Myers Beach, so in October 2002 we put our Tennessee home on the market, packed everything up, and moved to Florida, the Sunshine State.

