

Stranger Care

A MEMOIR OF
LOVING WHAT
ISN'T OURS



Sarah Sentilles



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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Preface

Faded pink construction paper letters taped to the wall of the Department of Human Services classroom spelled W E L C O M E T O D H S. Eric and I sat in the back, near the door, on blue cushioned chairs with wheels. On every long table, a scattered handful of hard candy—peppermints, butterscotch, Tootsie Pops.

We'd eaten dinner at 4:45 so we'd arrive on time. Though the department's office was less than ten miles from our house, class started at six, and in Portland's traffic, the drive could take an hour, which it did. The classroom was cold. I took off my jacket, but not my scarf, thankful Eric had brought us insulated mugs of herbal tea.

The facilitator stood at the front of the room. "Our goal at DHS is to keep biological families together," she said. "The first plan is always a return-home plan, but in the meantime, kids need a safe place to go."

A man in an orange sweater at the table next to us crunched one Tootsie Pop after another, scrolling through his phone's Facebook feed while the facilitator talked.

"Kids in foster care are our most vulnerable citizens," she said. "And the state doesn't make a very good parent." She handed us posters outlining foster children's rights: access to free soap and shampoo, to clean drinking water, to a working phone.

"Hang it somewhere visible in your home where your foster kids can see it," she said.

She wheeled an ancient television into the middle of the room, inserted a VHS tape into the VCR, and pressed Play so we could watch a video about being "mandatory reporters," which meant when we were certified as foster parents, we would be required to report any suspected violence. As the video played, she sat with her back to the television, doing paperwork. When

the tape froze and wavy lines filled the screen, she didn't notice, until we told her. "Nothing important happens at the end," she said and turned off the TV.

I walked out of the classroom during a break and into a larger room with glass-walled offices on one side and a waiting area on the other. Couches, chairs, toys, games, multicolored rugs—a place for parents to visit their children, who have been taken away.

"Remember," the facilitator said when we returned, "forming a healthy attachment to a child is very different from making a claim on that child. Foster families have to parent knowing the child will leave." She looked around the room. "How many of you are relatives of a child in care?" she asked, and everyone, except Eric and me, raised their hands. Our classmates were there to be certified as foster parents so they could care for nephews and nieces and grandchildren whose biological parents couldn't care for them.

"You're doing a good thing," she told them. "There are about four hundred foster homes in this county. Sixty percent of those homes are like you—*relative care providers*—but they take care of less than half of the kids in the system. The rest of the kids are living with people who aren't blood relatives." She gestured to Eric and me.

"We call it *stranger care*," she said.

I still think about that meeting in Portland six years ago, about that version of myself, with my hope and my fear pointed in the wrong direction, afraid I wouldn't be able to love someone else's child, unaware of the joy to come, and the heartbreak, the helplessness.

"Given what you know now, would you do it again?" people

ask, and I know what they are trying to say is that they wish they could lift this grief from me.

But it isn't the right question. Because this is how we find you.

Some say children come from stars, look down from that hot bright fire to this cool green blue and choose their families. Others say children arrive by stork, winged through sky, cradled by beak and blanket and brought to doorstep. But you will come by phone. For this reason, we have a landline, a word I like to say out loud because of the earth it names and roots me to, plumb line, divining rod, beacon to find your way home. There will be ringing and a voice saying "Are you ready?" Then we will ask questions, and the voice will answer, and you will wait, patient, already knowing our yes because you decided it. You will teach us that family is everywhere, well beyond the cul-de-sacs of our narrow minds, taking the edges of the ideas we have about who can be loved and who belongs to whom and stretching them wide.

There will be a social worker who will tell us there will always be holes in your story, missing pieces we can't provide. "You won't be able to tell them what it felt like when they kicked your ribs," she will say, and I will want to tell her I knew you before I had ribs. I knew you before bone, before marrow. I knew you when we were dust gathered and mixed with water and animated by wind. Seed, egg, division, explosion—countless are the ways you've been born.

You have so many mothers. The one who birthed you. The one who brought you home. The earth. The mountains visible outside your bedroom window. The three spruce trees in our yard. Ocean. Rocks. Rivers. Moon. Stars.

I remember a children's book about a baby bird looking for his mother. "Are you my mother?" he asked a cat. A dump truck. A wrecked car.

"Are you my mother?" he asked a cow.

"How can I be your mother?" said the cow. "I am a cow."

"Are you my mother?" he asked a dog.

"I am not your mother. I am a dog," said the dog.

But in your story, the one I tell you now, everyone answers,
Yes.



RANDOM HOUSE

I



SHOW YOURSELF
TO BE A MOTHER



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trailing spouse

I always imagined myself a mother. I kept a list of possible names for my future children, pictured myself pregnant and listening to fast fetal heartbeats, looking in wonder at the image on the screen. But I had reservations. I'd absorbed the messages in the cultural ether that framed motherhood as both holy work and trap. My ambivalence grew.

When Eric and I married in 2004 we agreed we'd eventually have a child, but we were busy doing other things—writing dissertations, writing books, chasing academic jobs around the country—and by the time we started talking in earnest about becoming parents, I was in my midthirties, and Eric was close to forty.

We moved to Southern California in 2007 and lived in a townhouse subsidized by the university where we both taught. Eric had been hired for his first tenure-track faculty position in a graduate school of education, preparing teachers for public school classrooms. I was the “trailing spouse,” language that reminded me of the signs along some California highways that show an adult holding the hand of a small child who appears to float in the wind, feet not touching the ground.

Eric liked our life as it was. He liked our freedom, the ease of escaping to the Sierras to backpack and to the Alabama Hills to climb, the unfettered time for activism, for work that might make a difference. We could turn our attention and our resources toward all children, he reasoned, not just our own.

“You're enough for me,” he said. “I'm okay if it's just the two of us.”

My friends had desperately wanted to be pregnant, and many had been willing to do anything to make pregnancy possible—take hormones, give themselves shots, find egg donors, buy sperm, endure IVF procedure after IVF procedure, go

into debt, hire surrogates. Their certainty threw my uncertainty into relief.

“I don’t know what I want,” I said.

“Figure out what you want,” he said, “and we’ll do whatever you decide.”

I’d struggled for most of my life to name my desire, separate it from other people’s expectations. To know my answers to even the smallest questions—pizza or burrito, hike or bike ride, comedy or documentary—I had to meditate, write in my journal. And when I did manage to figure out what I wanted, it was hard for me to say it. I didn’t trust my knowing. Especially when someone else wanted something different.

Eric does not suffer from indecision. He knows what he wants, and he isn’t afraid to say it. For him, this isn’t about control. It’s about integrity and honesty. It’s about not making other people read your mind. He says what he needs, and he trusts I will do the same.

But I didn’t do the same. When it was time for us to figure out if we wanted to have a baby, I hadn’t been saying what I wanted for years. And Eric was always so sure. If I didn’t know what I wanted for dinner, then why not eat what he wanted to eat? Why not watch what he wanted to watch? Why not hike where he wanted to hike?

These little deferrals accumulate.

I imagine it feels good to be married to someone who accommodates, especially if you don’t know that’s what’s happening. It makes it easier to say “We’ll do whatever you decide” because past experience indicates we always agree.

Until we didn’t.

Until I wanted a baby, and he did not.

the biggest gift

I wanted a baby, but I'd also swallowed whole the story that being a mother would ruin my writing, ruin my life. *If I have to play with trains for one more second*, a friend texted me, *I'm going to shoot myself*. Everyone I knew who had kids complained about it. There wasn't enough money. There wasn't enough sleep or sex or play. There wasn't enough time to paint or write or read. There wasn't enough time alone or time off or time, period.

"Work, kids, marriage, health," Eric said on repeat after he read some article in some magazine about parenthood and its demands. "Choose three."

I didn't believe that scarcity narrative, but I couldn't point to anyone's life where it wasn't true.

Sometimes when we shopped at Target, we'd see tired parents wheeling carts filled with plastic through the aisles, kids running behind them. "Why do you want to be a mother?" Eric would ask me while a toddler screamed and threw himself on the floor next to shelves and shelves of detergent.

"Because I want to" was all I could muster.

Eric didn't want to have a baby because of the stress parenthood would bring, but there was a deeper resistance, too. Eric loves the earth and hates what people do to it. He follows me around the house turning down heat, turning off lights. "When did you two become vampires?" a friend asked when she came over for cocktails and walked into our dark kitchen. The environmental argument against making another human was a logical one for him to make, an ethical extension of his worldview. "We're a cancer," he said and emailed me article after article about overpopulation and melting ice and the great Pacific garbage patch and how much an American child consumes compared to a child born somewhere else. "The biggest gift I can

give to a planet under stress is not creating another human,” he said.

Knowing that Eric thought having a baby would cause the earth harm made it harder for me to admit my longing for one. How do you pit personal desire against planetary destruction?



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the wisdom of mother trees

In the forest, underground, there is another world. In a single footstep, hundreds of miles of fungal networks are buried in the soil. The ecologist Suzanne Simard studies how trees use those networks to talk to each other, to communicate their needs and help their neighbors. These pathways connect trees, allowing the forest to behave as if it were a single organism. Through the fungal threads, trees share carbon. They send warnings and distress signals to one another. And they look for kin.

Scientists have mapped those underground grids, which look like our brain's neural networks. The trees are the nodes and the fungal highways are the links. The busiest nodes are called hub trees or mother trees. A mother tree might be connected to hundreds of other trees. She nurtures her young, the new growth of the understory.

Simard wanted to know if mother trees could tell the difference between their seedlings and seedlings from other trees. And if they could, did they favor their offspring? She did an experiment. She grew mother trees alongside both kin and stranger seedlings. And it turned out mother trees knew their offspring. They colonized their kin with bigger mycorrhizal networks than they did the stranger seedlings. They sent them more carbon. They even reduced their own root competition to make room for their young. And when the mother trees were injured or dying, they sent carbon and defense signals to their seedlings, messages of wisdom that increased the resistance of their young to future stresses.

But trees also help strangers. They cooperate and share. As the climate changes, as the earth heats up, ponderosa pine, a lower elevation species, will replace Douglas fir. In a greenhouse, Simard and her team grew Douglas fir and ponderosa pine seedlings. They then injured the Doug fir that was acting as

the mother tree. When the mother fir was injured, she gifted her carbon to the ponderosas. She also sent them a warning, information that gave the ponderosas an advantage as they took on a more dominant role in the ecosystem. She shared what she knew about the warming world with the trees that would take her place.



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brave enough to have your heart broken

Eric and I met in divinity school in 1999. I was studying to become an Episcopal priest; he was studying to confirm that if people think they know God it is not God they know. RADICAL AGNOSTIC read the bumper sticker on his car. I DON'T KNOW AND YOU DON'T EITHER. In school, instead of *Does God exist?* we were taught to ask *What do our ideas about God do? Whom do they harm? Whom do they help?* We learned to engage not whether someone's belief about God is *true*—because how could you prove it?—but rather the ways faith affects people's lives. That can be measured, observed, evaluated, changed.

Humans play a crucial role in creating the world in which we find ourselves, its beauty and its terror—about this, Eric and I agree. We understand that the world is made and believe it can be unmade and remade to be more just and life-giving for the most vulnerable among us.

But Eric thinks humans, as a species, will never choose to do that.

And I think we might.

This difference was at the root of our disagreement about whether to have a baby. Running alongside Eric's love for the earth was a fear he rarely spoke about: Picturing our child in the world made him feel vulnerable, afraid, helpless. All those people who don't take care of one another. All those systems that exploit and pummel and hoard. "I don't want to give my kid to this world," he said. "To be a parent, you have to be brave enough to have your heart broken, and I can't imagine a worse heartbreak than watching our child get hurt."

I didn't see things that way. When I imagined our child in the world, I felt joy, a sense of possibility, a hope that what is broken might be repaired.

We were at an impasse; we decided to see a therapist. At the end of our first session she said, “Eric, you don’t need to come back. Sarah, I’ll see you next week,” and I thought, *Did I win?*



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show yourself to be a mother

The oldest known image of Jesus's mother is a third-century fresco painted in red on red rock in a Roman catacomb that shows baby Jesus feeding at Mary's exposed breast. All through the Middle Ages, Mary was called "the wet nurse of salvation." It was believed she offered balm to communities suffering from disease or enduring the violence of war. People reported lactation miracles. They built milk shrines. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the story goes, knelt in front of a statue of Mary and Jesus. "Show yourself to be a mother," he said, and Mary pressed her breast to his mouth and nourished him with milk.

Through the Renaissance, breast milk was believed to be processed blood. People thought there was a vein that turned menstrual blood into milk, which meant Mary fed Jesus with her blood, just as Jesus later fed believers with his blood. In some paintings of the crucified Jesus from these years, the wounds on his side leak milk. In one image by the Renaissance painter Quirizio da Murano, Jesus sits on a throne. He opens his garment and exposes his breast, sending milk into the open mouth of a kneeling monk.

With the invention of the printing press came mass-marketed pornography and the reproduction of anatomical drawings used as medical texts. No longer was the female body viewed as divine. It was a sexualized object, demystified, scientific. The breast became inappropriate to see in church. Instead of Mary's body, the Bible became the holy thing. Text above experience; mind above body. By 1750, the image of a mother nursing her child as the primary symbol for God's love for humanity was replaced by the image of a father sacrificing his child. Not the breast, but the cross.

when you least expect it

I went to see our therapist, who was now just my therapist, week after week, and in between visits, the question *Do I want to have a baby?* ran through my mind, until one day the question shifted: *Do I want to be a parent?*

Adoption began to feel like a viable option, and I wondered why I'd never considered it before. Why make a new child when there are already so many children who need homes? A different version of motherhood, of parenthood, became visible to me. It was not dependent on pregnancy or genes. It suggested we all might belong to one another, might be responsible for one another.

But I was still afraid.

What if I couldn't love a child I didn't give birth to?

What if the child arrived traumatized beyond repair?

My friend Maylen came to visit and led me through a writing exercise. She told me to write for ten minutes without stopping, without lifting the pen from the page. She lit a candle and set a timer. I wrote and wrote and in those words I heard a voice. The voice was mine and also not mine. The words came from me yet surprised me. It was the voice of myself as an old woman, wise and strong and clear. *A child will come when you least expect it, and you will recognize them,* she said. The hair on my arms stood. *Open your heart,* she said. *We are waiting for you.*

stronger than everything

The video shows a four-story building in Syria that has been bombed into rubble, and from somewhere inside that pile of rocks comes the sound of a baby crying. A group of rescuers called the White Helmets can't get her out. They're worried she'll die. For more than two hours, they dig, careful, slow. When her rescuer, Abu-Kifah, finally pulls her from the wreckage—one month old, wearing a yellow onesie, face covered in dust—he holds her. He can't stop crying. "When I first laid eyes on her," he says, "I felt as if she were my own daughter."

In another video about a three-story house in Syria hit by barrel bombs, a mother tells the White Helmets that her infant is in the rubble. A boy. Two weeks old. They can hear him crying. He's in a place nearly impossible to reach. If anything more were to fall on him, he would not survive.

Rescuers dig for twelve hours.

"This is a life," Khaled Farah, a White Helmet, says. "One has to be delicate dealing with life."

They carve a hole in a large rectangular rock, scrape the dust away with their hands. You can still hear the baby crying. Then you see his head, the stone a birth canal the child is pulled through. A cheer goes up from the crowd. Farah lies down, holds the baby on his chest, cradles him like a new mother. Other hands reach for the child, and Farah pushes them away, tears on his cheeks.

"This baby was stronger than barrel bombs, stronger than collapsed ceilings, stronger than everything," Farah says, days later.

waiting room

I shared with Eric what I'd heard during the writing exercise, the words my old-woman-self had said to me. "Let's adopt," I said.

We could become parents without creating another human, I offered. We could choose to take care of a child already in the world.

At our kitchen table, we each agreed to write four letters—one to the biological child we wouldn't have, one to the earth, one to ourselves honoring the decision we'd made, and one to the child we would someday welcome home.

"If we're not having a biological child," Eric said, "I should get a vasectomy."

We scheduled the surgery. We bought a special electric razor and followed the directions on the handout the nurse gave Eric during the class he was required to take before the procedure. "No hair at all," she'd said, brandishing a razor and waving it around her groin. "Or I will have to shave you."

The night before the surgery, Eric's sister called. "I'm pregnant," she said.

I ran upstairs to find the other phone. I ran upstairs to be alone. I ran upstairs because I wanted to be the one calling to tell people I was pregnant.

"Why are you crying?" Eric asked when we got off the phone.

"I'm happy for your sister," I said, which was not the whole truth.

The next morning, I went on an early run and my stomach hurt so much I had to turn around and race home. I threw up.

Maybe I'm pregnant, I thought.

I hope I'm pregnant, I thought.

I didn't share my doubt, didn't speak my longing. Instead, I drove Eric to his appointment. We sat in the waiting room, and

the nurse called his name immediately. He stood. "I'll be right here," I said.

I'd hoped to make my way through my pile of unread *New Yorkers*, but I'd been waiting for less than half an hour when Eric walked in, slowly, carefully.

"Did it hurt?" I asked.

"We'll talk about it in the car," he said.

We picked up codeine at the hospital pharmacy. We read the instructions that told us what recovering from a vasectomy looks like: No exercise for one week, no baths or showers for three days, pain killers every four to six hours, no sex for two weeks.

In the car, Eric told me that while he'd waited for the doctor, he'd been visited by the biological child we didn't have. He'd watched her walk away.

The doctor had tried to talk Eric out of the procedure. "I'm going to do my best to convince you not to go through with this," he'd said. "What if you later change your mind?"

"I won't," Eric said.

"How old is your wife?" the doctor asked.

He made the first cut.

"You can still back out," the doctor said and held up the knife. "What if you marry someone else?"

mate for life

Most hornbills build their nests in existing tree hollows that have been created by other animals. The hollow might be made like this: A woodpecker pecks the tree in search of insects. Then the woodpecker's hole is enlarged by fungus. Later a bee colony moves inside, and when a bear scrapes the tree to find the honey in the bees' nest, she makes the hole even bigger.

Hornbills mate for life. When it's time to lay eggs, a couple choose a hollow for their nest, and the female seals herself inside. The male brings her material—lumps of soil moistened with saliva, chewed wood and bark, whatever he can find that makes a good wall. He swallows mud and regurgitates it to the female. She then builds the wall from the inside.

In that dark hollow, with a narrow opening just wide enough for feedings, the female waits. Just before laying her eggs, she molts and casts out her tail feathers. At that point, if she decides the male is not dependable or the nest is not safe enough, she can still fly away. But once she lays eggs—fertilizing them with sperm she has stored from her mate—she molts her wing feathers too, rendering herself flightless, unusual behavior for birds and not yet fully understood by scientists. She incubates the eggs until they hatch. When there are chicks, the male makes as many as seventy feeding trips a day. He brings geckos and seeds, insects and frogs, slugs and berries, figs and spiders, sometimes even a snake. The mother and her young remain inside the nest for months. They are dependent on the male for their survival until the mother regrows her flight feathers, which she does just before leaving the nest.

say it out loud

I told a friend I was having breastfeeding dreams, and she sent me an article about adoptive mothers who lactate. While they wait for the babies they will adopt, these women stimulate their breasts by hand and with a breast pump. Sometimes it takes months. Sometimes weeks. Sometimes all it takes is their infant's sucking to stimulate the milk supply.

Another friend sent me a link to a video of a cat nursing a baby squirrel alongside her kittens. In the video, the squirrel purrs.

"I keep having baby dreams," I told my new therapist, Juliana.

"What are you doing with the babies in your dreams?" she asked.

"Holding them," I said.

"Is that all?" Juliana asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Really?" Juliana asked again.

"No," I said. "I'm breastfeeding them."

"Why do you make this so hard?" she asked. "Why can't you admit you want to have a baby?"

"Fuck," I said. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck."

"Say it," she said. "Say, 'I want to have a baby.' Say, 'I want to have a baby with Eric.'"

"I want to have a baby," I said. "I want to have a baby with Eric."

Driving home I thought, *I'll tell him, and he'll have his vasectomy reversed, and I'll get pregnant, and we'll have a baby.* I laughed until I cried. My body relaxed. I'd been holding back, steeling myself, trying to find a way through, but deep down I'd known

what I wanted—a baby. I hadn't let myself fight for it because I knew Eric didn't want a baby, and I had my own doubts about what mothering might do to my life, so I'd tried to bury my yearning. But it had been there all along, a seed, growing, reaching for the light. Admitting it, I felt free, giddy.

Eric was watching the U.S. Open when I got home, the tennis ball flying back and forth across the net.

"I want to have a baby," I said.

He turned off the TV.

"I want to have a baby with you," I said.

"I had *surgery*," he said. "How can you ask me to undo something I've already done to my body?"

I remembered the signs advertising vasectomy reversals I used to see along the highways when I was an elementary school teacher in California. "It's not that hard to reverse," I said.

"We decided," he said.

"But what if I've changed my mind?" I asked.

"Some child out there needs a home," he said, "and we can provide one."

He'd said it was up to me, that we'd do whatever I decided, and I had decided to adopt. But I made that choice, in part, because I knew it was the only way Eric would agree to become a parent—an existing child, not a new one. It was a compromise. We understood the stakes. We both knew we'd have to choose between our longings and our marriage. Adoption was our middle ground, but we didn't yet live in that shared landscape.

That day with the U.S. Open on TV, when I finally said what I wanted, confessed the deepest truth of it, I was too late.

II



FAMILY PICTURE



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three births

We moved from California to Oregon for Eric's new job in 2011. He was a professor at a graduate school of education in Portland. I worked part-time as an adjunct professor at an art school downtown, and I wrote. I was working on a book about photography and war, about what difference art might make in the face of violence that feels as if it can't be stopped. I still wanted to have a baby and Eric still didn't, but we'd found our way to a tenuous agreement: We would adopt a child through the foster care system.

Because it was, at first, a compromise, there was no urgency for either of us. We were in the doldrums. And we didn't talk about it with anyone, both of us feeling that we were doing something wrong. Our secret shame turned us defensive.

Not being a mother when so many people around me were parents was its own kind of storm. Parents make assumptions about what the lives of people without children look like, about the kind of love their hearts can feel.

"Do you have kids?" strangers asked almost every day.

"No," I said, not wanting to explain, because, really, it's an unimaginative question, full of their beliefs about what family means, about who counts as kin, and it's a hard question for anyone with a complicated relationship to family making, for those of us who've experienced miscarriage or failed adoptions or the death of a child, for those of us estranged or embattled or in grief. It's a question I now refuse to ask. "Tell me about your family," I say instead, because I know belonging comes in all shapes and sizes, visible and invisible, hidden and made and chosen and found.

A couple of years after we moved to Portland, in 2013, I joined a feminist earth-based spirituality group. I didn't want to. My friend Amy made me. After graduate school, I'd left the or-

dination process and Christianity. Too much sexism. Not enough activism. I'd earned a doctorate in theology and still considered myself a theologian, still liked thinking and writing about the language people use to talk about God, but I wanted nothing to do with organized religion of any kind.

"You need community," Amy said when she invited me to join the spirituality group. She knew I was struggling to become a mother, knew I felt alone in that labor.

"Fuck community," I said.

"You need community."

"Fuck community."

This went on for some time.

"Trust me," she said.

I signed up. I met with the local circle in Portland. I liked it, liked that I didn't have to leave parts of myself behind to participate. My politics, my feminism, my body—everything welcome. A year later, I traveled to the group's national gathering. At the end of the weekend retreat, there was a healing circle. Each person was invited to lie on the ground with people singing all around you. I lay down, not sure what to expect. Someone cradled my head. Someone bent my legs at the knees, put the soles of my feet on the ground. A birthing position.

And in a dream in the center of all that singing, I gave birth three times: To myself. To the biological child we would not have. To the child we would adopt.

In graduate school, I took a course called "Mysticism and Literature," and most of my classmates spent seminar after seminar arguing about whether people actually had the religious experiences they claimed to have. Did Julian of Norwich really see a little thing the size of a hazelnut in the palm of her hand? Did Margery Kempe really see a purple-robed Jesus sitting on her bed? Did she really hear him tell her to stop eating meat and to stop having sex with her abusive husband? Did the

enslaved man named Morte really hear God calling him to preach the good news to White people that the chained and oppressed were God's chosen people? But the veracity of these religious experiences didn't interest me; what mattered was what those claimed experiences allowed people to do. They'd been shut up and shut out—but now, doors opened.

On the ground in that healing circle, my body tingled, vibrated. I didn't speak. I didn't tell anyone about giving birth. Someone bathed me in water, washed my face, my head, my chest. Someone anointed me with cedar oil, rubbed it under my nose. "In some traditions," a woman whispered in my ear, "cedar oil is the first thing infants smell when they enter the world."

I went home and told Eric what had happened, what I'd experienced on the ground, in that song. I didn't need him to change his body again. My longing to be pregnant was satisfied. I'd had the birthing experience I'd been dreaming of. I was now ready to adopt.

"I wish I'd been there," he said. "I wish I'd witnessed the birth of our child."

pick a picture

Though we'd decided to adopt, we'd been dallying for years. An intro meeting here, an informational phone call there, a training here, another phone call there. After my birthing experience in the healing circle, I called the Department of Human Services and enrolled us in the official process of becoming certified as foster parents.

"But if you wanted to adopt, then why did you foster?" people ask me now, and I don't know what to tell them. There are nearly half a million children in the foster care system in the United States on any given day. Eric and I wanted to share our home with a child who needed one. Though we had done some research, we didn't yet understand the ins and outs of the foster care system, how it works or what it would require of us or how likely it would be that we could adopt. We knew we might have a foster child in our home temporarily before we found our forever child, but we underestimated what our attachment to that foster child would feel like, how immediate, how deep.

DHS sent an enormous stack of paperwork to complete that asked about our medical records and our finances, our families and our employment records, our philosophies about child-rearing and punishment, our drinking habits and our sexual histories. We were assigned a social worker named Kay, who was tasked with determining whether a foster child would be safe in our home.

Before her first visit, in the fall of 2015, we cleaned the house. Swept. Mopped. Folded the blanket on the couch just so. Checked the kitchen counters, which were speckled and looked clean until you put your eye at counter level and saw crumbs and dust and hair because our two cats walked on the counters no matter what we did to try to make them stop.

Eric brewed coffee. I heated water for tea and set out a plate of cookies I'd baked. We'd been told Kay would be looking for fire extinguishers, for carbon monoxide detectors on every floor.

We talked to our cats before Kay arrived. "Please be good," we said. I turned on my desk lamp so they would sleep there in that heat, stay put and not come into the kitchen. One of our cats takes antianxiety medication. She has to be fed in a bathroom by herself, undisturbed, so she doesn't vomit. I used to call the bathroom Hedgebrook, after the writing residency I love, as if it were her sanctuary, but since she started pooping on the rug if we let her out of the bathroom too early, we call it her panic room.

Will Kay think this makes us good parents?

We adopted our two cats. I'd adopted my first cat, too. I'd only had dogs as a child. One of our dogs was epileptic. My siblings and I were supposed to give him a pill every day, wrapped in American cheese, but sometimes we forgot, and he would convulse on the ground.

If the social worker knew this, I thought, she would not give us a child.

The doorbell rang. Kay stood on the front stoop with another woman, a social worker in training named Renee. I poured tea. We sat at the kitchen table, Kay took a cookie, and within minutes, one of the cats jumped onto the table. "Get down," I said and pushed him off.

"Good parenting," Kay said, and I knew she was watching everything I did. "How did you two decide to become foster parents?"

"We want to grow our family through adoption," I said. "And working with DHS feels like a good way to do that."

"Do you have infertility issues?" she asked.

"No," I said.

“Not that we know about,” Eric said.

“We were teachers,” I said. “I taught elementary school and Eric taught middle and high school.”

“We both had students who were foster kids in our classrooms,” Eric said.

At that time in Oregon, there were more than eight thousand children who’d been taken into care and were living with people other than their biological parents. Nearly two thousand of those kids would be reunited with their biological parents or another family member, but almost eight hundred children would be legally adopted, a number that, year after year, continued to rise.

In the United States about half of the children who exit foster care return to their parents or a previous caregiver in a given year, but more than fifty thousand children who cannot return to their biological parents are adopted, most often by a relative or by the foster parent they had been living with. I’d read about the trauma caused when children in foster care are moved from foster home to foster home to foster home, from school to school to school. A child in care is moved an average of four to six times. Sometimes they are moved as many as fifteen times. Being foster parents who wanted to adopt—foster parents who could give the child in our care a permanent home if needed—felt like a useful thing to be.

Kay explained that once she certified us, once she declared us safe, our house safe, then we would be given a link to a website and a password. The website would show photographs of children available for adoption, children whose parents’ rights have been terminated, who will never return home.

“You’ll scroll through the pictures of available kids,” Kay said. “And if you see a child you think is right for your family, you’ll need to make a photo album. You’ll say, ‘We think David or Abigail or whoever is right for our family,’ and you’ll send in

your album, and other possible adoptive parents will send in their albums, too, and social workers like us will sit around a table and look through your album and your file to decide if you're the right family for the child, if you're a good match."

Kay explained what the album should include. "Photograph yourselves doing things you like to do," she said, and I imagined a picture of me sitting at my desk typing. A picture of me lying on the couch reading.

"Photograph your kitchen table," she said. *This is where you will eat.*

"Photograph the child's bedroom." *This is where you will sleep.*

"Photograph the local park." *This is where you will play.*

The handout she left recommended buying special scissors, glitter, glue, making it fun.



RANDOM HOUSE

these are our babies

In the photograph, the man rests his head on the rhino's head, rests his hand between the rhino's eyes. This northern white rhino, named Sudan, is the last male of his subspecies, and in the photograph, he is dying. Joseph Wachira is comforting him.

National Geographic's Ami Vitale captured the moment. She'd first met Sudan when he'd been moved to Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya from a zoo in the Czech Republic nine years before. Poachers kill rhinos for their horns, and Sudan was one of just eight remaining northern white rhinos. The room to roam and the Kenyan climate were supposed to "entice them to breed." They were watched around the clock, guarded, protected. But now Sudan was one of three remaining, the only male, and he was dying. Vitale came back to say goodbye.

"It was really hard on all of his keepers," Vitale said. "They've fallen in love with him. They say they wake up in the morning and see [the rhinos] often before they see their own children. They say, 'These are our babies.'"