

Chloe

By Christy Belleau

My daughter Chloe is 16 months old, and I may have met my match. She is determined, focused and strong. I can respect that and more importantly, I understand it, and I can work with it! It seems weird to be proud of being able to hold my own with a 16 month old, but if you met her you'd understand. She's formidable for a baby!

Dale and Adoption Choices are great about educating adoptive parents and families about all the things that they will or might encounter. Trekking off to Framingham to monthly meetings after work was a chore, but it was always a learning experience. Sometimes you didn't get what you thought you would based on the meeting's topic, usually you got more and often just what you needed even if you didn't know it then. Sometimes the best stuff came from other adoptive parents who, like me, were feeling their way through family building each on their own never expected journey.

I wanted to know the straight poop. I wanted to go into this with my eyes wide open as the literature you may see is titled. I didn't want to hear "you'll see her and fall in love and it will be fine". I didn't want to hear the romanticized Hallmark Hall of Fame version, nor did I want the horrifying Lifetime Television for Women adoption story. I wanted to hear that it would be normal and healthy at any point in the process to question myself; and really examine the situation for what it was and decide if it was right for the child and for me. I wanted to know that feeling equal parts frustration, worry, excitement, joy, and abject terror was not unique to me. I wanted to hear what I was beginning to suspect: it will be hard, and you will be tired, but you can do this!

My daughter was 8 months old at referral, 9 months old when I met her and 1 year old the day I went to pick her up from the orphanage.

I had received three photos and a brief description at referral; and translated medical reports and her family/social history at the orphanage before I met her trip one. I had my international adoption doctor evaluate all of the information. Before trip one the word was that I could be "cautiously optimistic" and that they thought I should meet her.

In September at the first visit her head looked funny, and I was scared. But I took a deep breath and I watched her, and took video and photos and I played with her. And the minute I got back to the hotel I emailed it all to Dr. Lori Miller at the International Adoption Clinic at Tufts. She would email me during the night (the 12 hour time difference worked well for something!) and in the morning I'd return to the orphanage armed with questions for the orphanage doctors and specific things to note or photograph. I had expert advice, but the choice was mine. On the third day of visits, with one remaining, I said yes to Chloe.

Then the second round of grueling paperwork requirements began once home. Finally Thanksgiving weekend I flew to Russia, saw Chloe and went to court December 1st. Court was not bad, rushed documents hand carried were not needed (of course), the adoption was approved, and the ten day in country waiting period began the next day.

Continued on the next page...

And then I waited...in Siberia...in the dead of winter. In September the weather had been lovely and I saw some of Krasnoyarsk, the city of my daughter's birth. But in December, it was twenty-two degrees below zero at noon with no wind chill factored in, cold, bitter cold. Adults spent the days walking around in snow pants, it was wild. I met families adopting from Spain, Italy, Russia and the US. All the children were beautiful.

On Saturday December 12th, Chloe's first birthday, I picked her up from the orphanage which 300 children between the ages of 0-3 years call home. Chloe was handed to me freshly bathed and I dressed her in the clothes I'd brought. One of her caregiver's watched as I dressed her, and Chloe smiled at me. Her caregiver said "she is so happy because of all the beautiful things you have brought for her to wear." And then she smiled at me. And that was it.

I knew we'd need to get to know each other. I knew that while she would need me, she would not automatically love me. And I knew it was okay if I didn't fall in love with her on sight. I knew we both might be depressed at some point. I knew this would take time.

Certainly I felt great admiration for my tiny new girlfriend who had the strength to survive 8 weeks in a NICU and almost a year in orphanage care without a parent. I appreciated her feisty nature, her talent as a mimic, her inquisitive mind, seemingly quick learning, ability to make her desires clear non-verbally, her laugh, the huge smile I had to work for, hilarious facial expressions, out stretched arms, interactions with our pets and discovery of new things (like the dog's water dish!). I marveled at how fast she could crawl with her one leg up and one down technique.

I felt great compassion for how disconcerting and frightening it must be to leave all the people, sounds, language, food and smells she had ever known to journey with me to her new life in the US.

And I felt an enormous sense of responsibility to protect her and provide her with what she needed. But that isn't quite love.

I did know about attachment disorders. While I don't think my daughter really has this, or hers is thus far quite mild; I still was not quite prepared for her, a 14 pound infant, to not be at all cuddly! For her to always turn around in my arms and face forward instead of snuggling into my chest or onto my shoulder. Then I remembered that she was carried and held that way in the orphanage, and that perhaps I should think of it as her way to take in as much as she can of her world.

We fought through some night time holding, singing, story reading and rocking to sleep so she could begin to rely on me for comfort instead of thrashing her head around and rubbing the hair off the back of her head to rock herself to sleep or pinning her arm under one side to rock her whole body.

I learned to interpret "Chloe signs" for things she wanted, she wasn't using words but she was definitely communicating all the time. I distracted or comforted her when behaviors indicated she was stressed, like looking at her fists and rocking without music playing. I worked with Chloe through the multiple times a day huge tantrum throwing, which are no doubt effective in an orphanage setting, but not at home with your own mama. Happily tantrum throwing is now a rare occurrence.

And then there was April 25th's 3AM 105.9 fever just 4 months into our lives together...and the vomiting and the baths and the Motrin...and the days of her wanting only me, of collapsing onto my chest for comfort. We have been through a lot together, and I know it is just the beginning. She took her first 3 steps on May 5th, and we're off!

Today I read an article which the author titled "Love Learned" in an Adoptive Families magazine email. Like my daughter Chloe, her daughter had been adopted from Siberia. Unlike me, she didn't have the resources she needed from day one. I realize that it is not love learned for me or for Chloe, it is love earned. I am hers and she is mine, and I know we'll be fine.