

POLAR REGION

A SHORT STORY BY ERIKA DREIFUS

All the articles and handbooks agree. *BY NO MEANS SHOULD YOUR HOME BE PRISTINE*. A child adds clutter to any environment, they explain. Far better to show the social worker coming over for the home study that the mess won't bother you. But today has been a day of Ajax and Fantastik and fluffy, fresh-from-the-dryer bathroom towels nevertheless. Please, God, let this work. May Ms. Sawyer see the smoke alarms. May she commend the carbon monoxide monitor. May she linger over the list of emergency numbers posted by the phone in the kitchen.

"We *want* to give these children families, Ms. Freiburg," she assured me when we last met, at the It's a Small World, Inc., offices a few blocks up on Madison. "We *want* to see them in safe, healthy homes."

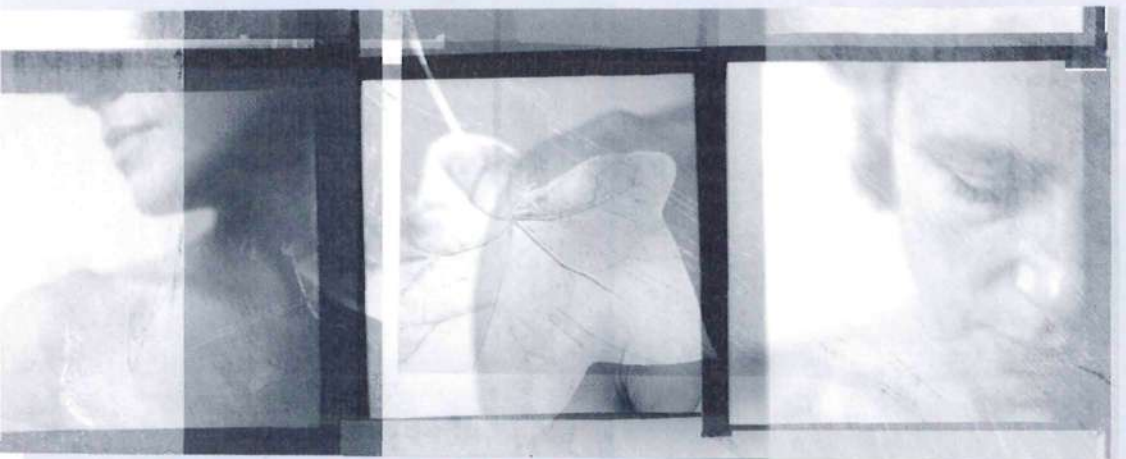
In the living room I refold the afghan Bubbe Irma knitted when I started college, the afghan that followed me to the med school dorm and then, when I quit med school, to the studio where I spent those first years trying to be a writer. Science writer. From the side table teak-framed snapshots smile. Scenes from my grandfather's last birthday party. My college graduation—a decade ago. Far more recent, and cuter, shots of my brother's new baby, asleep.

The engagement picture, alas, has been eliminated.

Is that dust? I almost run for a sponge and then, wiping the surfaces clean, I review the items strategically placed on the coffee table. The book of English countryside scenes, "to add calm and freshness," my best friend advised. The American Paintings catalog from the Met—good, solid patriotic values.

A small ceramic bowl filled with peppermint candies. And, after much debate, a copy of *Secret Sadness*, the book that grew out of my magazine series on a Connecticut family's intergenerational battle with bipolar disorder.

"It did get excellent reviews," my friend pointed out.



"WITH YOUR HISTORY, WILL ANY AGENCY GIVE YOU A CHILD?"

The intercom buzzes. I want to throw up. But the elevator chugs right on to its stop and Ms. Sawyer emerges. She's perhaps four or five years older than I am. But she's also no more than a size 6. And *she* wears a wedding ring.

Start things off right with a firm handshake and a smile, counsels "How to Survive the Home Study," the article my fiancé and I bookmarked on the Web at the beginning of this quest. That I have read at least two hundred times.

"How nice to see you again," she says.

Sure, it's nice. The Home Study is costing me \$1500.

She settles in the purple chair everyone loves. I perch on the edge of the sofa. Smooth the afghan again. She removes a folder from her briefcase and tests a pen. Red ink.

She adjusts her eyeglasses and surveys the room. "This is a lovely apartment. Have you always lived on the Upper East Side?"

Is that bad? She wants me to explain why I live here. What are my neighbors like? Where will the child go to school? Where is the nearest hospital?

She flips through pages and pages of documents. "We do have quite a bit in your record already. Let's see. Grew up in Scarsdale. Princeton. Columbia, for journalism." She pauses. "You teach writing, too, don't you?"

"Yes. Very flexible schedule. Excellent for child care."

She smiles. "And we have here the statement from your bank. Fine. The police verification—as expected. And the letter from Dr.—"

"Sussman. My internist."

She nods. "Well, we didn't really expect you to have tuberculosis now, did we?"

I laugh weakly. No. No tuberculosis.

"And of course I do know why you and your—why you and Mr. Paltzman wanted to adopt. I've encountered other couples

who have made similar decisions. The genetic risks—" She makes a pitying sound. "I might add that given the time it takes, it wasn't such a bad idea to begin seeking information before your wed—when you did. I must ask again, however." Here she shifts in the chair. "Where are you in terms of resolving your feelings for Mr. Paltzman? You can understand, of course,

the concern that you might really be seeking a child as a kind of—"

"Substitute."

She nods.

I assure her that I would never try to duplicate that bastard, or "Mr. Paltzman," as I more politely refer to him. Never ever ever. Ever.

For some reason she doesn't appear completely comforted by that answer. So I tell her quite plainly that I don't see a child as a substitute for him, or for any husband-fiancé-boyfriend-whatever. I've always intended to be a mother.

She writes a few more lines. Then she asks, "Could I have a glass of water, please, Ms. Freiburg?"

"Of course, of course." Leap up from my perch. "Are you sure you only want water? I have wi—I mean, I have soda, and coffee. And something to eat?" *Be sure to offer refreshments—such a gesture demonstrates your nurturing qualities.*

No, she really wants just a glass of water. When I return from the kitchen, shaking a little, she's flipping through *Secret Sadness*.

"This was quite a book. I remember the magazine articles."

I hand her the glass and a coaster and continue to smile. "Thank you."

"You really got to the heart of the issue. How bipolar disorder—or any mental illness, really—can affect an entire family." She sips the water. "What made you interested in that story? I remember thinking, at the time, and of course I didn't know you at all then, that this writer had a personal investment in her subject."

Don't have to tell her a thing. Just concentrate on the Americans With Disabilities Act. My brother looked into it again after his latest clash with his boss in San Francisco, and while he was at it he found out that private agencies, like the

one Ms. Sawyer works for, are covered under Title III.

Aaron had explained it quite well. "So they aren't supposed to screen you out on the basis of your so-called 'disability'."

"Unless I pose a 'direct threat' to the health and safety of others, right?"

Over the phone I'd imagined him closing his eyes. We have the same dark brown eyes. We're twins, actually.

"Like to a child?" I'd pressed.

He hadn't answered that, and I couldn't blame him.

"Well, let's move on." Ms. Sawyer takes up her pen. "Your book deals with mental health issues. Are you prepared for *all* the challenges, physical and emotional, that so many of these children coming from abroad bring with them?"

"Yes, I really think I am."

Then she wants to know about "basic disciplinary issues." How I would handle a child's tantrum in a supermarket? A refusal to do his homework? Breaking curfew?

It's as if I'm six years old and playing hopscotch. Darting from answer to answer. Two-footed on some. Less sure on others. Where will the stone land next?

She says she's a little concerned about the issue of "support." Since I'll be a single parent, and all.

I pick up the picture of Aaron's new baby. Tell Ms. Sawyer how close Aaron and I have always been, tell her how I spent the first two weeks of little Jamie's life out in San Francisco.

I do not mention that little Jamie did not stop crying from the instant he was placed in my arms to the second Aaron took him back.

"I seem to recall that your parents are still alive?" Ms. Sawyer checks her notes.

"Yes." My voice cracks.

She looks up.

"They've just been very busy—my grandmother is very elderly and, well, you know, she needs a lot of their time."

As do the phone calls ten thousand times a day trying to convince me what a terrible idea "this adoption business" is.

"Shouldn't you at least reconsider?" Mom says.

Dad isn't even that diplomatic. "I hate to say it, but with your history, will an agency even give you a child?"

They'd held back before, they explain, again and again, when Glenn was in the picture. Because they felt more secure about his "steadying influence." Then, too, they had felt somewhat responsible, since Glenn and I began looking into adoption because our pre-marital screening—we're Ashkenazic, after all—showed that we were both Tay-Sachs carriers. And while Glenn was willing to play genetic Russian roulette, I wasn't.

There was the small matter, too, of weaning myself off my daily regimen to avoid further stacking the biological deck against any potential child, to save it from the "teratogenicity" that strikes pregnant rats and mice administered the same chemicals streaming through my own brain and blood every day. But those chemicals also form a "steadying influence." Right? Just take a look at people who go off *their* meds and drown five children in bathtubs to figure that one out.

"It's too much for a child to deal with," Mom says. "I know that." Then there's a deep silence, while we think of her child-

hood, and Bubbe Irma's battles. The hospitalizations. The medications. The silences. It was bad enough, back then, to be Divorced. How much worse, to be Depressed, at times, too.

"You're being very selfish," Dad tells me, repeatedly. "I'm very surprised."

"Still?" One might surmise that the shock would wear off, somewhere around the twelve thousandth enunciation of this line.

"You should think about what Glenn said," Mom urges.

Because, naturally, I've forgotten all about it. Anyone would. It's a snap, to erase from memory the "discussion" in which your fiancé dumps you. Especially when you visit a therapist three times each week.

"Hurtful as it may be," Mom continues. "If he, an adult, had so much trouble dealing with your moods—how can you expect a child...?"

And so it goes.

Ms. Sawyer sets her glass on the coaster and stuffs her file back in her case. "I'll just take a look around here for a few minutes, if that's all right," she says.

It's all right. Medicine cabinets included.

Weeks pass. The employers and teachers listed as references tell me when she contacts them. My best friend introduces me to a lawyer she and her boyfriend met at the boyfriend's fifteenth college reunion. After the few miserable blind dates I've made myself endure post-Glenn—I'm still trying to decide whether they were equally or more unbearable than the "Friday Night for Singles!" evenings at the Jewish Museum and the 92nd Street Y—Josh's love for French movies, his antipathy toward household pets, his laugh, his intellectual quickness, and—yes, I confess—his looks and more intimate charms, which are also no one else's business—cheer me immensely.

And then Ms. Sawyer summons me to the office.

"I have something for you." She opens an envelope and removes a photograph.

It's him. Joseph Freiburg. Grandpa's namesake.

I have to sit down. Hold the photo in both hands.

My little boy.

"He's seven months old," Ms. Sawyer says. "And as far as we can tell, he has no serious health problems."

Pale baby. But that face! Rounder, fleshier than I expected. Even the hint of a double chin. His little ears stick out. Like his cousin Jamie's, actually.

"But he's not smiling." I look up. "Why isn't he smiling?"

"We don't usually see pictures of smiling babies until they've been here some time."

Not only isn't he smiling. His eyes are dark. Dark blue, but dark in mood, too. His eyebrows seem drawn together like a worried old man's. It doesn't help that the bit of hair he



has is pale, pale blond. The eyes dominate. But he's beautiful. And he's mine.

Weeks more pass, and one day, the phone finally rings again. "It's Patricia Sawyer, Ms. Freiburg. I was hoping you might be able to come by my office sometime today. Two o'clock, perhaps?"

I look over to the side table, to the picture of Joey in its teak frame. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

"There's just something we need to discuss," she answers. "Is two o'clock convenient?"

Two is fine. But if she had good news, wouldn't she say so? Wouldn't she say, "Pack your bags, you're going to Russia!"

Daniel going into the lion's den. Danielle. Amy Freiburg. Whatever. That this meeting isn't going to be happy is obvious the second I walk in and see *Secret Sadness* on her desk.

She closes the door. "Thanks for coming."

"Sure," I manage.

She returns to her desk, settles in her brown leather chair. Behind her the faces of dozens of children smile. Joey's should join them, soon.

She adjusts her eyeglasses and reaches for the book. "I reread this." She flips through the pages. "I must say, I was even more impressed, this time. The critics were right."

It takes enormous effort but I unclench my teeth. "Thank you."

"I told my husband—." She glances at me. "I said to him, 'Bill, don't you think it's hard to imagine someone being able to write like this, with such sensitivity, without some personal experience?' He thought it was."

What a guy.

Silence is still the best policy.

"Perhaps not exactly with the ups and downs of bipolar disorder, specifically," she concedes. "But some sort of mood instability." She pushes the book a few inches away. Toward me.

"I'm sure you're familiar with the subject of 'wrongful adoption' cases."

I nod. Josh was good enough to fill me in on that. My own father's a lawyer, but it isn't as if he has been exactly helpful in this process. For that matter, my mom's a social worker. But she works with the elderly. "You should know about these cases," Josh said, "where adoptive parents sue agencies for failing to disclose information about a child's background, particularly medical background."

She leans back in her chair. "What people know less about, because cases usually don't reach litigation, are situations where adoptees seek damages for 'wrongful placement.'"

Wrongful placement.

"Those are situations," she continues, "when the adoptees come back to an agency and say, 'Look, you were remiss in

placing me because you knew—or should have known—of a problem with the parents.' You can understand why the agencies might be extra careful. But it isn't just the agency's liability," she adds, leaning forward now, biting her lip, probably because I'm staring at her in a very unpleasant way. "It's really, very much, very much, the issue of the child's best interest."

Her hand grazes *Secret Sadness* as she reaches for another, very slim volume.

"Are you familiar with the Uniform Adoption Act?"

I shake my head. I can hear Josh defending himself already: "Look, Amy, I told you, this isn't my specialty."

She explains that while New York has not yet ratified it, there's still a provision she thinks I should know about. She rummages until she finds something and it seems she's almost about to read aloud. Then she hands the book to me.

She has stuck a pale green post-it on *Section 7-105. Failure to Disclose Information*. And highlighted subsection (d) *A prospective adoptive parent who knowingly fails to furnish information or knowingly furnishes false information to an evaluator preparing an evaluation pursuant to [Article] 2, [Part] 2 or [Article] 3, [Part] 6, with the intent to deceive the evaluator, is guilty of a [misdemeanor] [punishable upon conviction by a fine of not more than \$] or imprisonment for not more than [], or both.*

There must be no blood left in my face. I hand the text back. "I'm not a lawyer."

"No." She keeps her gaze fixed on me. "But you're a very intelligent woman."

For what seems a very long time we sit in silence. At any moment she may grin and shout, "Checkmate!"

"Of course, we do still have all of Mr. Paltzman's information on file," she says. Now she isn't looking at me. She holds her red pen, stabs it against a legal pad. Her desk lamp glints off her rings. Stab-glint. Stab-glint. "I could give him a call, ask him a few questions."

Checkmate. No grin.

I wait until she looks at me again. The pen stills. She twists her wedding ring instead.

"But I take it that won't be necessary." She's issuing a question-statement.

"No." That won't be necessary.

"Is there anything else?" she asks. "Anything you want to talk about? Anything I can do for you now?" Her voice surprises me in its gentleness. She hands me a box of tissues. "Amy?"

Eventually my throat opens, and my eyes can meet hers.

"The picture," I say. "May I keep it?" ■

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