

MY RECOVERY STORY OF BIRTH AND REBIRTH

by Nicole Darr

I spent my early childhood in Southern California, where life was filled with warmth, color and poetry. Lyrical Spanish names surrounded me, whispering like the warm breezes of the Santa Ana desert, like the salt spray of the Pacific Ocean.

The year I turned 10, my family moved to Pennsylvania. Melodic Spanish town names were traded for guttural names of German origin. Walks to the beach after Sunday church were replaced by drives to my grandmother's for dinner. Palm trees gave way to pine trees, and the majestic rise of the Sierra Nevadas was replaced by the gentle rolling of blue Pennsylvania hills.

But I was a child, surrounded by loving family; so, despite the culture shock, I found it fairly easy to embrace our new life, reveling in the quiet beauty of the hills and changing seasons.

And then came our first Pennsylvania winter. At first, the snow was a novelty. But, as February approached, I got confused. Surely the snow should melt now? And where were the flowers? February in California had been beach weather; why was it still winter? I was tired of the gray and cold.

Two winters later, I thought for the first time, *Something Is Wrong With Me*. I was standing in a hallway filled with the laughter of classmates, but it felt as if I were hearing and seeing through a glass pane: removed, detached, unable to break through.

From the outside, I was living a 12-year-old's dream life. My parents, my little sister and I all loved each other. My report cards were filled with A's. I was popular at school. But, inside, I was living a nightmare. At night, I cried myself to sleep. *Something Was Wrong With Me*.

Throughout my teen years, I rode a rollercoaster: up in the summer, down in the winter. Each winter *Something Was Wrong*, and I wanted to go to sleep and never awaken. Each summer, I revived in the sunlight. I survived through family support, telling myself that summer would return, and hoping for a happier life someday.

Finally, following a suicide attempt at age 19, I was given a diagnosis: bipolar, seasonal pattern. Initially, the diagnosis brought relief, because surely if the Wrong inside me could be named, it could be cured. But there

were no magic pills to eliminate my pain. Medications brought side effects, including a dulling of creativity that – for an art and literature student – felt like erasing my very personality. I rejected those non-magical pills quickly.

Meanwhile, the nightmares that had haunted my childhood grew more vivid, the depressions got blacker, and the despair increased. I dropped out of college and reenrolled. I went into the hospital and came out.

Then, the summer I turned 21, I got pregnant. I could not marry my baby's father, for many reasons. For me, that left only two options: parenting as a single mother, or relinquishing my baby for adoption.

For nine months I agonized. I loved my baby and began to turn my life around, for her sake: eating healthfully, abstaining from sex, attending prenatal check-ups, and returning to college. I sang lullabies and read to her in the womb.

Meanwhile, I fell in love with a coworker, Matt. He supported me through the pregnancy, accepted my dark side, and showed me through example how to go to work in the midst of fear and depression.

On a hot June day in 2001, I gave birth to a baby girl with burnt-red hair and buttery smooth skin. For three days in the hospital, I held her and kissed her and named her and cried over her. I whispered to her softly: Don't worry, you'll be okay. You're safe. I love you. And then I signed away my parental rights and placed my new daughter – Marie – in the arms of adoptive parents.

Afterwards, I threw myself back into life: getting engaged and married, graduating college, landing a professional job, having another baby. There were hints during my second pregnancy that I had not resolved Marie's loss. I would tell anyone who asked that there were no regrets, and that we – Marie, Matt and I, Marie's adoptive parents – all had better lives through adoption. Other signs of my denial surfaced occasionally, but I would not acknowledge them.

In January 2004, Elise was born, and I glowed. My motherhood was restored; my aching, empty arms filled. For eight months I took immaculate care of my new daughter, feeding her, playing with her, bathing her, loving her.

Then, one day, my world collapsed.

It was such an innocent event: Elise crawled after me one morning. She reached out and cried for me. Separation anxiety: so normal. But, in that moment, it hit me: Elise loved and wanted me. I was her mommy, and that was all she cared about. In one horrifying instant, I realized that this is how it would have been with Marie. Exactly the same. She would not have cared about the size of our salaries or our house, about the wedding band on my finger, or whether she wore hand-me-downs. As long as she was loved, fed, and warm, she would have been happy.

I looked around the room and saw, with horror, that nothing had fundamentally changed since the adoption. I was living in the same house, with the same man, earning a similar salary.

It was August 2004; fall was approaching. As months passed, I tried to remember the "right" reasons for adoption, but they made no sense anymore. It all came down to one thing: I had placed my child for adoption believing I would be a bad mother; and now I knew, in the core of my being, that this was untrue – I was a good mother.

Outwardly, I held myself together – dragging myself to work, feeding Elise, and staying in contact with Marie and her family (through our open adoption); but I lost weight and sleep. Matt took over childcare. It hurt to play with Elise, because seeing her reminded me of Marie. The pain became unbearable. And just as when I'd relinquished Marie, I became convinced that my child – and husband – would be happier without me.

By February, my mother was pleading with me to see a psychiatrist. I scheduled an appointment for March. Days before the appointment, I lost my tentative grip on life and swallowed 200 sleeping pills. A couple of days later, I awoke in a hospital to IVs and a breathing machine, and the news that my husband and a toxicologist had saved my life.

I was transferred to a psych ward. And this, finally, is where my healing began.

Five years later, I am in recovery. After my last suicide attempt, I attended therapy and took medication for two years. I sought out other mothers who had lost their babies to adoption. I learned about trauma and framed my daughter's loss in a new way. I engaged in adoption reform activities – advocating for biological parents' rights – and began working in mental health. I started eating, started playing with Elise again, and leaned on my husband.

Looking back, I can see resiliency in my life before recovery. Much of that resiliency can be attributed to family, peer support, introspection, positive "self-talk," and internal strengths. Today, I still use these tools to maintain my recovery; but they weren't the cornerstone of my recovery. Because even with those tools, there was no recovery until I embraced one truth: the truth that sometimes, there are no escapes.

After awakening and getting locked up in that hospital against my will – literally kicking and screaming – I'd run out of options. I had tried for eight months – or, rather, 25 years – to fight off depression and loss; and, when that failed, I had tried to die. But there I was, locked up, unable to live and unable to die.

This left me on the brink of a strange discovery: that I couldn't live with all that pain in my life ... but I could live with it inside me. If I welcomed the darkness, fear and outrage to come inside me, they would have a place to reside and, contained there, would stop destroying my life.

So that's what I did. I gave up hoping for happiness. I bowed my head and said, "You know what? It hurts. It hurts because my daughter is gone. She will always be gone. It will always hurt." I stopped believing in "moving on." Instead of trying to leave the pain behind, I decided, instead, to move forward with the hurt.

So now? Well ... now it hurts. Now, losing Marie hurts. Now, winter hurts. But now, I'm okay with that.

Now that I've stopped fighting depression and loss, I can focus my energy on parenting Elise, building my marriage, advancing my career, learning photography, washing the dishes, baking banana bread, listening to music, and feeling the warmth of a hot summer sun – even the chill of a winter wind. But, now, I don't do those things in an effort to forget, banish, or minimize the pain. Now, I do those things along with the pain.

The paradox is that, in accepting suffering, I have found that my contentment – and my recovery – grows. The sirens of suicide – close companions for 13 years – no longer beckon. Because what I've discovered is this: Sometimes there are no escapes ... and that's okay. I can live with pain. Pain is not the enemy. Pain and I? We make delicious banana bread.

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