

Saying goodbye

*How our foster baby moved to her
forever home*



*“Great is the art of beginning, but
greater is the art of ending.”*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*“Only in the agony of parting do we
look into the depths of love.”*

George Eliot



On the last Thursday of the Easter holidays, we received a phone call asking us to take in a 7 week old baby girl. I let the request sink in. Taking on a baby, as well as having our two long-term placements, would be a massive change for us. But as the voice continued and I gained what little information they had, my heart became well and truly committed to this little person. How could I say no?

Two days after that phone call we watched a car pull up outside our home. As it was a Sunday and out of hours, a duty social worker emerged carrying a bundle wrapped up in a pink blanket. It was an April evening and spring was trying to make an appearance but the evenings were still a bit nippy. The bundle was crying. Open arms, baby Grace¹ was placed in our care. She cried some more. The next couple of hours passed in a blur. In our hallway were boxes of prescribed milk formula from the hospital together with medical notes and forms. I looked down at the small face with the big hazel eyes. She had been briefly pacified with a cuddle and a dummy but what she really needed was a feed.

Hours later and Grace was in the Moses basket in our room. She was awake and it was the early hours. We were awake too, sitting beside each other on the side of our bed, looking down at her beautiful, tear stained face. Gently we picked her up, pressed the bottle to her mouth and heard her suck, tiny rivers of milk streaming down one side of her face. We wiped them away with the muslin, then sat her up and winded her. She started to cry again. She was so tiny and the enormity of the task ahead consumed me.

“I can’t do this”.

Since that moment, I have come to recognise the anxiety associated with the darkest hours of the night. Day-times were, in the main, just fine. She smiled at us, started to

¹ Name has been changed

recognise our faces and our voices and had a natural curiosity in the world around her. But night times, at least in those first few weeks, were really hard. Initially she fed every two to three hours, including at night, which gradually extended to four hours. She was unpredictable at night time, sometimes happily guzzling all her milk and going back to sleep easily; other times she would fight against the bottle, wriggle and kick her feet. Her whole body would stiffen and we felt at a loss to know how to settle her.

Sleep deprivation, we discovered, is a form of torture. I didn't like it one little bit. But slowly we got into our stride. We realised that there was no point in both my husband and I getting up in the night. We moved the Moses basket into the spare room, next to a single bed and we took it in turns to go on night duty. Those nights off were blissful! Oh the joy of seven hours of uninterrupted sleep. It was like the world had suddenly turned sunny again!

Friends and family wrapped around us during those first few exhausting, emotional weeks. We had a meal provided every day for two weeks. People bought gifts of baby clothes and helped us slowly get onto our feet. And so the next 10 months passed. Our boys adjusted quickly to the addition and loved her like a sister. And we loved her like a daughter, taking great delight in her smiles and the joy she brought to our home, even knowing that one day, she would be entrusted to a new family and we would be asked to say goodbye.



When I took that phone call, we had made a promise to a little girl. We had resolved to accept her into our family and to care for her to the best of our ability. Now, knowing that a new adoptive family would be found soon, we resolved to end well. This meant completing a whole lot of practical activities –

compiling her memory box, labelling each valued item so that Grace could look back and know her earliest moments; taking as many photos as we could and creating her own special photo album; sorting out her clothes – the ones that needed to be returned to birth mum and the ones that would go with her to her new home; and continuing to facilitate contact.

The dreaded “goodbye contact” was looming when her birth mum would see Grace for the very last time. It was so sad that such a meeting would need to take place and we wondered whether birth mum would attend. It’s near on impossible to even contemplate the anguish of that final parting. Could you even utter the word “*goodbye*” or would you hold on to your child, tears falling down your checks, taking in with cloudy misted eyes the final sight of your baby, smelling for the last time that sweet baby smell, somehow entrusting her to another couple who you will never know? Then somehow leave that room, walk away and out into a new world and slowly try to pick up the broken pieces of your heart, scattered like tiny snowflakes on the icy ground. Who would support birth mum now that her child had finally been taken away? We could only imagine from afar; unable to get involved. But we could pray that she wouldn’t be forgotten, that perhaps only one person, but the right person, would draw alongside her and help her access the support she so desperately needed.

As well as the practical tasks, which were comparatively easier to undertake, the emotional ones took a lot more investment. We knew that there were a lot of people other than her birth family who had come to know and love Grace and were upset at the news of her going. How could we draw alongside them and enable them to participate in the goodbye process whilst continuing to make space for our own feelings? One lady at our church, herself adopted, had prayed continually since Grace’s arrival for us to be able to adopt her. Breaking the news to her was so hard – she had carried on praying right to the end. But now, it really was the end. It

wasn't that there was no more need for praying, but they were now whispered with pain. It's difficult to be in the position where you feel guilty to be the source of someone's sadness but also to be overwhelmed by the emotional response because we realised just how much Grace was loved.

One day near the end of Grace's time with us I was poorly and needed a rest. My parents took Grace for the day. She had fallen asleep in the car on the way over – Grace was a good sleeper so completely failed to notice the transition from warm car to cold outside to the hallway of my parents' house. She looked peaceful, making tiny snoring noises, with one hand resolutely grasping hold of her pink, snugly blanket. My parents looked down at her and my mum sighed;

“Oh Grace, we're not ready to say goodbye yet”.

But it was probably going to be better if the end came quickly. Long drawn out goodbyes are not good.

That week we received an email then a phone call from Grace's social worker saying that adopters had been found and that they would be looking at Grace's profile information that week. This information would detail all of Grace's life – the story of her birth, her time with her birth mum and her months in care. There would be no photo, just facts. She seemed positive that they would make the matching panel in December, only a month away. If successful, then introductions would start immediately – an intense five days of meetings and interactions culminating in Grace's departure for her new home. It was all so new to us, and we didn't know how we would manage, only to keep going one small step forward at a time.

A few days later the adopters had a name: David and Kerry². Real people living not far away from us, excitedly

² Names have been changed

preparing to welcome home their new daughter. People who would have waited a long time for this moment. And very soon we would meet them.

In the meantime, our eldest foster child started to unravel at school and we received numerous phone calls about his behaviour including walking out of lessons and bullying others, as well as being bullied himself. During this time he chose to share his story of being in foster care with new teaching staff telling them that he was confused about why he had to stay with us. We wondered whether Grace's adoption had triggered memories in his own mind, as well as serving as a reminder that he lived in a foster family where arrivals and departures were part of the norm. One day I decided to broach the subject and asked him straight out how he felt about Grace leaving us.

"You know that Grace will be going very soon", I said quietly as he sat beside me in the car.

"How do you feel about that?"

A brief moment of silence then he replied: *"Dunno...do you think they will change their minds?"*

"No my love, they won't, I'm meeting her adopters next week. But it's ok to be sad about it".

Foster brothers and sisters, foster grannies and granddads, foster aunts and uncles, friends, members of the close knit support group around a foster family – they all have to be included in the grieving process when a foster child moves on.

When the time came to finally meet David and Kerry, I had mentally and emotionally prepared myself. The social worker arrived first and gave me a brief overview of the kind of questions I would be asked and reminded me of the need to

keep the adopters identity completely confidential. We would never find out their address or contact them on social media. It was so vitally important that the placement is protected and that Grace and her new family are kept safe.

After half an hour of discussion over a cup of tea, the door bell rang. I was really looking forward to this moment – when I would shake hands with Grace’s new parents and welcome them to our home. They walked into our hallway and I greeted them with a smile – not a forced brave smile, resenting them as the people who would be with Grace forever, but a genuine smile, happy for them and recognising the excitement and anticipation that they must have been feeling. I found out later that the first thing they had noticed when they stepped into our home was Grace’s pink, floral winter coat hanging on the peg. I hadn’t thought about hiding it. It must have been so difficult for them to see the coat, without seeing the owner.

I felt peaceful as I guided them to the table and made more cups of tea. There was no social awkwardness or stilted conversation – we clicked straightaway and I was able to talk at ease about Grace and her general wonderfulness. As I talked and showed them pictures and videos of Grace, I wanted to bring Grace alive to them – up until that point she had been a still, slightly blurry, picture on a matching report. Now she smiled, cried, ate her dinner, played with toys and enjoyed cuddles – she was a real baby, but above all, she was their daughter and it was wondrous to see the fascination and love on their faces as they eagerly bent over the screen of my phone.

By the end of our time together I felt absolutely sure that David and Kerry were the right family for Grace. They were lovely and it was obvious that they had already opened their hearts to her. It would still be so very hard for us to say goodbye to Grace, but the parting would be made easier by knowing that she would be living forever with such a warm

and caring family. They just had the matching panel to get through the following week and then they would finally get to meet their baby girl for the first time.

Grace was only nine months old when we started the introductions with her forever family, but she had already made a massive difference to the lives of a handful of elderly residents at our local sheltered housing complex. As her contact with birth mum reduced and I spent more and more time with her, I had decided that we needed to get out more and I contacted a friend who worked as a housing support officer, supporting elderly people in sheltered accommodation. She arranged for me to bring Grace into one of the places where she worked and it became a regular part of our week. Every Friday morning I would wait in the communal lounge as my friend persuaded a number of the residents to come and have a cuddle with Grace.

We soon had some regulars: George and Shirley, Beatrice, Bill... Sometimes we were joined by the local community police officer. Shirley spent a week faithfully knitting a white woolly hat and scarf for Grace – it didn't matter that the hat was massive and covered most of her face; it was the love that had been woven into it. She also started to open up to me and share things in her life story that nobody knew about.

Beatrice had suffered a bad stroke and had hardly been out of her flat – until Grace arrived. Now, there was nothing stopping her – each Friday she slowly, faltering but resolutely walked down the corridor to the lounge leaning heavily on her walking frame. As she sat and Grace was handed to her, her eyes danced and she looked at me and smiled.

Bill had spent twenty-two years in the parachute regiment and completed over one hundred jumps, until the one that went wrong. When his chute failed to deploy correctly, he broke his back and his knee and had been wheelchair bound

ever since. One day I noticed all the badges on his jacket and asked him about them. He proudly told me that they represented places he had served: countries in the Far East and the Falkland Islands. On a later visit he told me that he still suffered from combat stress. I wondered what he might have seen and experienced during his years of service. I decided to talk to him about parachuting having done a charity skydive years ago. His eyes lit up as we remembered the sheer exhilaration of freefall then the calmness that descends as you pull the chute and glide silently back to earth.

“There’s not a feeling like it in the world. I wish I could do one again”.

Then a completely mad idea came into my head and before I knew what I was doing I uttered seven words that I would never have thought I would say to an elderly war veteran in a wheelchair:

“Bill, how about we do a skydive?”

And before I even had a chance to claw the words back, Bill had agreed.

“Can you do a skydive in a wheelchair with a broken back?” I asked incredulously.

Well he was going to find out, and above all decided that we should do it to raise funds for Help for Heroes, a charity that was very close to his heart. I wondered what on earth I had let myself in for.

Our time visiting the residents at the sheltered housing culminated with a Christmas meal, scheduled for the day of Grace’s matching panel. Cooking for fifteen elderly residents, some with missing teeth, would certainly be a way of distracting myself from the adoption process. It turned out to be a joyous occasion. Yes, it was completely mad, pre-cooking

most elements of a Christmas dinner at home then transferring everything to the tiny kitchen at the complex. Potatoes balanced precariously on top of a bowl of sprouts submerged in water, turkey breasts wrapped in foil to keep warm, plus equipment for the baby. When we arrived I found that the kitchen didn't have enough saucepans, the oven cooked unevenly and the grill was over-enthusiastic in its heat producing qualities – turning the pigs in blankets char grilled. But everyone mucked in and somehow a Christmas feast miraculously appeared. Grace tucked into her first Christmas dinner and was completely spoiled by the residents, one surreptitiously plying her with cream from the top of the trifle and matchmaker mint sticks.

Just before pudding was served and we had started to clear dinner plates, my mobile phone rang and I answered it to hear the voice of Grace's social worker. The panel meeting had gone ahead and the adopters had been formally matched with Grace. Though the celebration hearing was still months ahead, which would finalise all legalities and transfer parental rights to David and Kerry, she was now theirs. Their new daughter would be coming home soon, just in time for Christmas. For us, we were nearly at journey's end – just ten days left to go.

It snowed heavily the day before introductions week. That morning we woke to the first snowfall of the season and the boys were beyond excited. We had a good couple of inches – enough to turn our street into a winter wonderland. Grace usually woke us up early in the morning. On this particular morning, as we prepared her bottle, I gazed outside the window at the perfect blanket of white; pure and unblemished. Just as our street had been transformed, so our lives had been by the arrival of the boys, followed by a succession of respite placements and finally by Grace. Even now as she was going, something new would result – a new reality and normality for our family. And just like newly fallen snow, it would be beautiful.

Living in a country where a good sprinkling of the white stuff disrupts all aspects of everyday life, the following day the boys' schools were both shut. For most families this would result in a fun "*snow day*", with children joyfully engaging in snow ball fights, and the making of snowmen and snow angels; for us, this created panic. Firstly because any unplanned disruption to our routine can deregulate the boys to such a degree that we need a long lie down afterwards. But secondly, because introductions were due to start that day and the boys were not allowed to be present when Grace met her parents for the first time. Thank goodness for an incredibly understanding boss who allowed my husband to take the day off with practically no notice and take the boys to his parents, allowing me to concentrate on this momentous day for Grace.

In my mind's eye I had imagined what this moment would be like, when David and Kerry would meet Grace for the first time. I had envisaged Grace playing happily on the floor then turning and locking eyes with her new parents, who would scoop her up joyfully into their arms, crying tears of happiness. I wanted to look upon this scene as if watching a film play in front of me and capture the sense of wonder as a family is brought together.

The reality was rather different – moments before David and Kerry's arrival, Grace had fallen sound asleep in her bouncer, her head resting against the soft sides of the harness, completely oblivious to the significance of the day. I wondered whether to wake her, but decided instead to leave her as she was. She was so peaceful. When her parents entered the room, Kerry walked over to Grace, knelt down beside her and quietly stroked her hair. Time seemed to slow a little and all was quiet except for the ticking of the clock. I felt like an intruder and stepped back, allowing David and Kerry some more privacy during those precious first minutes with their daughter. As Grace slowly started to stir I forced myself to step back into their reality. During this first day of intros it was important for me to continue to parent Grace, whilst gradually making room

for David and Kerry to take over. That way we could build trust and help Grace attach to her new mummy and daddy in a safe environment.

By day two, it became clear that Grace was starting to recognise David and Kerry and to engage with them without me having to be with her. We had spent day one at home, going through Grace's routine and doing some tasks together. On the second day we braved the icy pavements and took Grace out to one of my favourite haunts – our local cheesecake shop. It was bitterly cold and Grace was wrapped up in the pink blanket that David and Kerry had provided before their first visit. It was a “*sensory blanket*”; in the weeks leading up to intros David and Kerry had slept with the blanket under their pillow. The blanket had been given to Grace the previous week, along with a cuddly lilac bunny, a soft book containing photos of the family and her new home, and a beautiful butterfly. Under each wing of the butterfly was a picture of her family and by lifting each wing you could hear their recorded voices:

“Hello it’s mummy here, hello it’s daddy, we can’t wait to meet you.”

By giving Grace all these sensory items – smell, sight and sound, the idea was that sub-consciously she might know them a little before meeting them in person. Now she lay snuggled in the blanket on her first outing with her parents. As I tucked into my cheesecake and sipped on my coffee, her parents sat either side of her pushchair and stole loving glances at her. It again felt like I was intruding on a precious occasion and I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. This was their time: I was merely the facilitator.

As we reached the halfway point of intros week, I knew that I needed to become less so that David and Kerry could become more. Day three would always be forever etched on their memory – it was the day when Grace would visit her new

home for the first time. She was picked up in the morning and taken back there for lunch and returned to me just before the school run. What a day to wish that you had super powers and turn yourself invisible, just to see what that would have been like for David and Kerry. I can imagine them making the journey to their home, carefully taking Grace out of her car seat and carrying her in their arms as they showed her round, letting her explore her new surroundings and take a nap in her new bedroom. The photos they would have taken that would be forever recorded in their family album, the joy that must have filled their hearts. And the wrench it must have been to return her to our home at the end of the day.

Day four and the end was nearly upon us. It was the last full day of intros – tomorrow she would leave for her new home. Our waiting was nearly over. All the emotion that weighed in us, hemming us in, would soon be released. It's a strange feeling – waiting to cry. The waiting is a heavier burden than the actual expression of sorrow. We longed to be set free from it.

Grace spent the day at her parent's house, meeting her new big brother and taking in what would become familiar sights and sounds. We kept ourselves busy – hubby at work, the boys at school, whilst I went to foster carer's choir. It was so important to stick to the usual routine, particularly for the boys. Their minds needed to be kept active, their environment needed to have structure and their hearts needed access to attuned trusted adults who were fully aware of Grace's imminent departure. My husband needed the familiarity of the office and I needed my fellow foster carers, some of whom knew all too well the heartache we were going through. Grace had been part of our singing group – she loved music and I would bounce her on my knee as we sang. Now my arms were empty, and the song lyrics took on extra poignancy:

“...and if you have a minute, why don't we go. Talk about it somewhere only we know? This could be the end of

everything, so why don't we go, somewhere only we know", (from the song "Somewhere Only We Know" by Keane).

Grace was returned to our house for the last time in the early evening. She seemed happy. The day had gone well and tomorrow would go ahead as planned. The boys had expressed some anxiety about Grace's new family – they had yet to meet them and were keen to check that they were indeed nice people who would love and care for Grace. So David and Kerry agreed to stay at our house for a while and meet the boys. They didn't have any particular questions but it served the purpose for which it was intended and was a crucial part in the goodbye process. The boys' own experience of children being removed from a family was one of extreme trauma – they had to see that this was very different.

In the meantime, we had one last task – to host a goodbye tea for our friends and family. Grace had been loved by so many people and she was showered with affection. I smiled my way through, determined to make it a celebration of her time with us.

Time flew by and people started to leave, kissing Grace, hugging us and wishing us all well. The boys went to their Christmas socials at their youth groups and soon we were alone in the house with Grace. She was tired – it had been a long day and so I gathered her in my arms, climbed the stairs and got her into her cot for one final time. The room was in semi-darkness and the house was still. Grace's large brown eyes stared into mine and for a brief moment something seemed to pass between us. If a photo had captured that moment, it would show a mother and baby and the unconditional love that united them. It would show a baby's trusting eyes and a mother's hope – that whatever the future held, she would be loved completely. Our hearts had been knitted together and the pain of being pulled apart was becoming almost unbearable. In my faltering voice I quietly sang the lullabies that had been sung over her since her

arrival – the songs that made her curl into a tight ball, close her eyes and peacefully drift off to sleep.

We woke early the next morning, the final morning. In most ways, it was like any other – Grace protested loudly for her bottle then snuggled with us as we rubbed the sleep from our eyes. She had done a particularly smelly nappy and the aroma permeated our nostrils. She didn't seem particularly bothered, content to poke the cat who had cautiously jumped onto our duvet seeking some affection. One determined pull of the tail later and the cat was off with a disgruntled meow.

Our youngest boy was already awake – we could hear him playing in his bedroom, talking to himself, happily engaged in his imaginary play. The teenager was still in bed, the duvet pulled over his head, resolutely trying to ignore the signs of morning and the resulting upheaval of getting up. It could have been any other day. Except this day was different. On the landing outside our bedroom door stood a pink suitcase decorated with butterflies. Most of Grace's personal possessions had been collected yesterday, along with her memory box. The suitcase contained her few remaining items – clothes that had been hastily washed and dried the previous evening, left over milk formula and nappies, and two teddies – presents from the boys to the girl they regarded as their baby sister, gifts that she could look at and remember them by.

I had taken a lot of care in compiling her memory box. It wasn't just for Grace; it was also for David and Kerry – two people who had missed so much of Grace's early babyhood and would appreciate the treasured keepsakes. I wanted them to know what the months had been like and the difference Grace had made to so many people. I had carefully packed each item: her first clothes, the hat and scarf knitted by Shirley, the wedding favour with her name on it from when she attended our friend's wedding, the teddies, photo frames and bracelet from her birth mum, the decorated box made by a friend of mine, cards we received when she first arrived and the

professional photos taken when she was six months old. I wrote cards for each one, detailing not just what they were but the story behind them. At the top I wrote a card for David and Kerry telling them how lovely it had been to get to know them, even for just a short while, and how happy we were for them. I wanted them all to treasure that memory box forever.

The memory box was now safely at her new house and the suitcase would be picked up later. All that remained was for us all to get up, get ready and begin the day. We had decided to send the boys to school as usual – we had considered keeping them at home but felt that the routine of school would be better for them. There was to be no long, drawn-out goodbye. The teenager left the house first, giving Grace one last cuddle, kissing her on her forehead and handing her back to me. He left the house quickly and didn't look back. Half an hour later I strapped Grace into her car seat and drove the youngest to school. He pushed the pram along the still icy streets and talked about other things – of the concert that he was very reluctantly performing in that day and the number of sleeps to Christmas. As we neared the playground he let go of the pram and ran to his friends, leaving me with Grace. He didn't say goodbye and he didn't look back.

It was still over three hours until David and Kerry would arrive. We chose not to hang around at home, watching the slow march of time. Instead, we went out for breakfast and we talked of other things – of Christmas shopping, plans for the holidays and pressures at work. We spoke of the boys and the hopes we had for them. We only occasionally paused to check our watches. I took one last photo of Grace. She was awake and in her pram, wistfully staring at our breakfast. She was wearing a soft denim dress with a floral design on the collar and pink tights. Her coat was zipped to the neck and she looked lovely. She smelt of baby shampoo and Johnson's body lotion. I reached out for her with my hand, gently stroking her fingers. When her tiny hand clasped onto my finger I reached for my phone and took the last picture. As she unfurled her

fingers I moved my arm away, the feel of her touch etched in my memory.

With some degree of effort we got up, left the cafe, pushed the pram back into the outside world and returned home. It was now 10.45am. David and Kerry would be arriving at 11.30am. There was just enough time to give her a bottle of milk, change her nappy and settle her in time for their arrival. The pink suitcase had already been moved from the landing to the front door. Grace's hair had become sweaty from the warmth of her coat hood and the car heater, and had become frizzy as a result. I attempted to smooth the hairs down, but they were determined to curl and in the end I gave up. She still looked beautiful. We settled down and waited in silence for the remaining minutes to pass.

At 11.30am we heard a car pull up outside our house, two doors open and shut and footsteps make their way down our driveway. Kerry came in first, followed by David carrying Grace's new car seat. We had been told not to prolong this moment so we turned straight away to pick up Grace and hand her to her expectant parents. As he did so, we quickly realised that Grace did not smell as fresh as we had wanted. The baby shampoo smell had been replaced with something else. Grace had chosen that exact moment to do the most gigantic poo! Almost gleefully we decided that responsibility for nappy changing had most definitely passed to David and Kerry and pointed them in the direction of our nappy changing facilities. The incident broke the tension – perhaps Grace had even done it on purpose. We will never know.

Soon Grace was smelling as sweet as before and the moment of her departure was upon us. The suitcase had already been packed, now all that remained was for us to put on her coat for one last time, gently easing reluctant arms into the sleeves and zipping up the front. David and Kerry strapped her into their car seat and wrapped the pink blanket around

her legs. She seemed completely content. Setting her briefly on the floor, they both turned to us and gave us each a hug.

“Thank you so much – you have made this week so easy. We will make sure she knows what you did for her”.

We bent down to Grace for one final kiss. Then David and Kerry picked her up and carried her out of our home and to her new life. The door closed and we heard a car drive off. We didn't look back.

Support for Leicester/shire adopters and foster carers can be found at:

www.howtobeapenguin.co.uk



How to be a PENGUIN