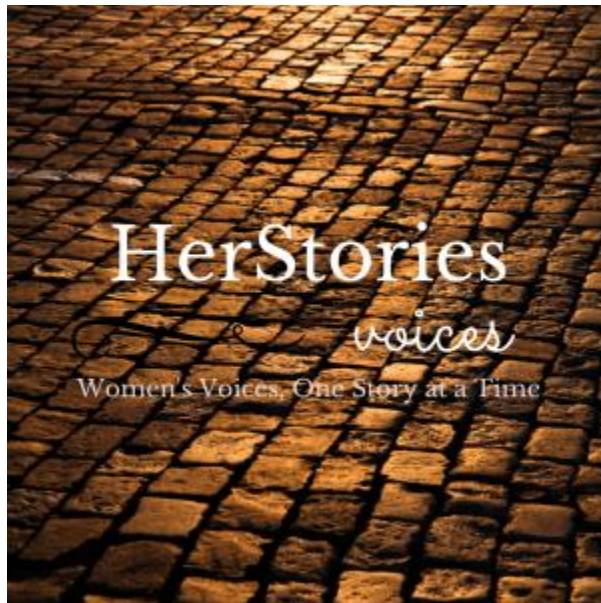


This week's HerStories Voices column is about learning good news that brings back tough memories.



[HerStories Voices: One Child - The HerStories Project](#)

I clutch my cell phone. It reveals what looks like a black and white peanut, or a shrimp, or a tiny alien – if I didn't know better. My daughter just texted me a picture of her sonogram, and it's a girl. On the train while riding to work, I cup my granddaughter in the palm of my hand. And I start sniffing. The woman behind me taps me on the shoulder, offers me a tissue and asks if I'm all right. I assure her my tears are happy, that I just found out I'm going to be the grandmother of a baby girl. "Oh, how exciting for you," she says. Then comes the inevitable question as our train lunges forward: "How many children do you have?"

For more than a quarter of a century, this question has clawed at my mind like a rake against a dusty, leafless ground. I haven't been able to answer without squirming. I shift in my seat. I can't tell this well-meaning stranger how hard it is for me to answer her.

To begin with, I never saw my own daughter at this stage of creation. I never knew the sex of my baby because I never went for tests. No, I can't let the woman behind me on the train know that when I was pregnant, my marriage was its own Third World country – unstable, violent, abusive, toppling. I froze in the middle of that turmoil. I never made a doctor's appointment until I was almost due to deliver. I ripped out the Yellow Page listings for adoption agencies and hid them under my bed, just in case I didn't keep the baby. I didn't talk about it. I bought bigger clothes while my friends and co-workers, aware of my history of yo-yo dieting, assumed I was in a fat phase. It was easy to hide from my parents and

close friends because I had moved several states away after college, and I didn't schedule a visit home after my fifth month.

My daughter was born healthy by an emergency Caesarean two weeks past her due date, after my toxemia caused my blood pressure to spike at 150 over 100. Lifted calmly from her womb-spa, my baby was smooth and silent. She looked Yoda-old and wise, as if she sensed that she belonged even though I had kept her existence hidden. We looked at each other, alone at night in a bare white hospital room smelling of baby wipes. I placed her between my knees, and in the valley of the bed sheets, I knew I could not give up this eight-pound-four-ounce bundled mummy in a pink knit hat. I didn't know how I would raise her, but I had spent enough nights at Al-Anon meetings to have memorized the "one day at a time" mantra. I couldn't imagine the next 24 years, but I could manage the next 24 hours. My baby spent her first night home in my underwear drawer while I dialed my parents and close friends to tell them the news and ask them to forgive me for not telling them sooner.

Three years later, I was divorced. I was broke. My car was repossessed. I filed for bankruptcy. But my little girl and I were a team by then, and nothing would separate us. Friends brought bags of groceries and called with employment leads, and my daughter's grandparents paid for day care so I could work at a better job. At the same time, my daughter started to talk about another little girl with her in a place where she lived before she was born. I had heard and read about other young children talking about life-before-birth. My daughter's recollection of "the other girl" stuck in my mind. Was I supposed to have had another child? Was there another baby in that place before birth, calling my name? My daughter stopped talking about the other girl by the time she was five, and settled on being an only child in a household of two.

Fifteen years later, remarried, when life had the harmony of a Barbershop Quartet, I wanted to find that other girl my daughter had referred to long ago. I tried to get pregnant but couldn't. Publicly, I joked about it and said, "I guess you can't teach old egg new tricks." Privately, I felt guilty about having considered giving up my daughter for adoption, and I thought my inability to get pregnant meant that I didn't deserve another child. I envisioned babies coming and going, to and from the land of life-before-birth, and telling each other, "Skip this mother and move on. She was too screwed up the last time."

My second husband and I tried to adopt a child. We designed a glossy brochure about our lives so that birth mothers would choose us from among all the waiting couples. With a little photo-shopping to color our hair and wipe away wrinkles, we hoped we would show well to the young women making decisions about choosing parents to raise their children. Our case worker had encouraged us to market ourselves, so we were sure to include

pictures of our daughter's birthday parties and trips to Disney. One morning, while waiting on the adoption list, I shot out of bed with the conviction of a cattle prod. I sensed that a birth mother was about to choose us. I hauled the crib, changing table, dresser and rocker into the would-be nursery, picked a carousel horse wallpaper print from a catalog, and asked my friend to sew neutral-green curtains and pillows. My intuition was right. The next day, the adoption agency called to say that a birth mother had indeed chosen us from the parents' list for her baby who was due in three months.

Room ready, day care chosen and notice given to my boss, we waited. We chose a name for this baby – a boy would be Jesse and a girl would be Jennifer – both with a strong initial J that looked as sturdy as a soccer player or as graceful as a ballerina. We got the call when the baby was born. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," our case worker said in her scripted way. After giving birth, the biological mother had decided to keep her child. I flashed back to my own despair and hopelessness a decade and a half earlier – remembering how I needed to know during my pregnancy that there was an escape hatch if I couldn't take care of my baby – then knowing when the baby was born that this child was mine. I grieved for the loss of Jesse and Jennifer. But I understood.

Our agency case worker had warned us that adoption would be a roller coaster. I had buckled up my Type A personality and braced my peri-menopausal emotions for the uncontrollable ride. But after six years, we couldn't stomach the ups and downs. I never said this aloud to anyone, but I sometimes wondered if this was my punishment for almost giving up my daughter and denying my family and friends the joy of my pregnancy and birth.

The woman in the seat behind me is distracted for a moment by the announcement that our train will be delayed, but she quickly turns back to hear my answer to how many children I have. I could explain that my fears during pregnancy made me wonder if I needed to give up my child for adoption. Or that I wanted more children and waited on an adoption list for six years, but that the birthmothers who chose us decided to keep their babies.

Instead, I simply smile back at this curious stranger, because none of that history matters now. Today, a new baby is on her way into my life. I see her outline floating in the shadows of my phone. In my mind, I trace the letters of a text message back to her: "I love you already. I can't wait to meet you." My guilt is gone, erased by a text message telling me that I am worthy of a granddaughter. A text message telling me that my daughter loves me and wants to share this baby with me. A text message telling me that there is no punishment for whatever I may have considered doing years ago. A text message letting me know that the other girls in the land-before-birth took a vote and decided that I would make a perfect grandmother.

In a flash, I answer the woman behind me on the train. “One child,” I say, without flinching. “I have one child, my daughter.”

Gloria Barone Rosanio is a writer, wife, mother and grandmother living in New Jersey. She wrote a children’s book about her daughter and reads it to her granddaughter.

