

Thomas' Journey on Placement Day

Today will be one of the most important days of my life. I turn to look at the clock. 11AM. She will be here any moment. Sarah, our social worker, said she'd drop Sam off before lunch. To be honest, I'm a bit sleep deprived. I've been up since 5 cleaning and organizing. The transition to Sam finally coming home has been a slow one. This isn't the first time Sam's been to our place. For the first few visits, we invited her to explore our home. I remember hearing her tip toe through the hallways, looking at pictures and all our things. I watched her lift Blair's crystal vase and look at the light bounce off it. Blair and I joked that she uses her eyes to inhale her surroundings.

[knock at the door] "Hon, she's here!" I take a few quick strides toward the door, grab the handle and swing it open, grinning ear to ear...just to see the Amazon delivery driver hop back into his car. Disappointed and annoyed, I pick up the package and walk back into the house. Blair emerges from the kitchen and wraps me in a tight hug. He has been amazing throughout this entire process. Blair picks up a picture frame from the hallway table and says, "Do you remember that day?"

In the picture, Blair, Sam, and I are at the park. Sarah insisted on taking the picture. She promised to print off a copy for Sam to keep. Sarah even managed to snap the picture while we were sitting at a picnic table, laughing at a dog chasing a squirrel [dog barking]. The picture was taken at our second meeting. We were all so excited and nervous. The social worker had scheduled the meeting in Sam's hometown – about two hours away. It was also the first time we met Sam's birth mother, Isla. I can recall every detail of that day. Blair and I set out early to meet them. The closer we got, the stronger my fears grew. "What if I do something to upset Isla or Sam", "What if the social worker doesn't think we're a good match for Sam anymore?", "What if no one shows up?". I was a wreck... but I also remember thinking, "I know this is right". "I know that it's stressful and it feels new and weird, but somewhere deep down, I just know it's right..." As we drove into the small mountain town and approached the park, I looked over at Blair. I felt such love for him in that moment, and the deep commitment he had for this incredible life journey we were on. I took a deep breath. We were going to make great dads, I just knew it.

The meeting began with a couple of brief and awkward handshakes. Blair and I sat down at the picnic table, and for the next forty minutes we just got to know each other. I was so anxious. I stuttered each time I spoke. Isla was really nice. She spoke softly, and with obvious love for Sam. Blair and I chatted about our careers and hobbies, and where we grew up. Isla smiled when I mentioned I had family in Winnipeg that I visited regularly. She told us that she was born in Winnipeg, and that her great aunt had a home out there. Sam piped up and said she'd like to visit there sometime. I gushed, "No problem, we can take you anytime!" I was seriously caught up in trying to impress them.... A short while later, Isla got up and said she had to get going because her shift at the post office was about to start. She gave Sam a hug and said goodbye to us all. After being so cheerful throughout the meeting, she looked so resigned and deflated as she walked away. Sarah asked Sam if she was hungry and wanted to grab some food...that was our cue, the meeting was over.

[Doorbell ring] The ring of the doorbell pulls us back into the present. My breathing quickens, and I pull away from Blair. I put the picture back on the table, and for the hundredth time, glance at the baby picture of Sam with Isla that's next to it. This picture was the first things Sam brought home during one of the transition visits, and I want her to see that it has pride of place in our home. With sweaty and shaking hands, I join my partner. After a reassuring arm squeeze from Blair, I muster a smile and we open the door. [Door opening]

As the door swings open, the first thing I see is Sarah, arms fully loaded with binders. She's her usual cheerful self and eagerly greets us. Sam steps through the doorway next. She's clutching her favorite purple backpack close to her chest. I [eagerly] greet her at the door, "Hi Sam, welcome back! Did you need help bringing in your stuff?" With her head hidden in her backpack and eyes looking down, she musters a whispered, "Hi" and shakes her head. Sarah turns to us and mentions that there's another bag in the car. I spring into action and head out to get it. Bag in hand, I walk back into the house. Blair and Sarah have settled on the couch and Sam is nowhere in sight. Blair calls for me to join them.

Sarah puts the binders on the table. She asks how we're feeling. I smile enthusiastically, "We're feeling fantastic". I'm gushing again. Blair grabs my hand and laughs before saying we're doing well. "I just have a few things to cover here", Sarah says, as she flips through a binder. We've prepared for most of what she talks about. We talk briefly about following the foster family's schedule and she reminds us that maintaining the same routine will help ease Sam's transition. She also asks about Isla's phone call today. "We've scheduled it right before dinner" I blurt out. Sarah smiles and asks if we have any last questions. Blair and I look at each other and back at Sarah, shaking our heads. As Sarah gets up to leave, she reminds us, "Make sure to call if you have *any* questions."

We accompany Sarah to the front door and say our goodbyes. Blair walks back to the kitchen to check on the cookies he's making for Sam. Blair and I don't have a sweet tooth, but we know Sam loves them. I grab Sam's bag and head upstairs to see what she's up to. [Stair sounds. knock knock] "Hey, it's Thomas. I have your bag. Can I come in?" No reply. I tentatively push open the door and slowly enter the room. Blair and I just finished redecorating this room to get it ready for Sam. I love how fresh and new it feels. I quickly take in the carefully folded clothes on top of the dresser and see the books that Sam has unpacked. Wow, this is weird, "my daughter's stuff"...that's going to take some getting used to. Sam is crouched on the floor organizing her books and toys. "Hey, I just thought I would bring up your bag and let you know Blair's making cookies. They should be done soon." Without looking up Sam says, "OK, thank you", and continues to organize her things.

I place the bag down and stand there, waiting for her to look up. She doesn't. Why is she so quiet today? On our last visit she gave us an animated performance about her favorite colours! I decide to give her some space. "Well, OK. I'll be downstairs if you need anything." My smile fades as I close the door. I feel so discouraged. I don't know what's wrong. Is she upset? Scared? Is it something we've done? I head to the kitchen, flustered and confused - and immediately vent my concerns to Blair. "I can't stop wondering if we're moving too fast. Maybe Sam's not ready! Maybe I'm not ready...." I look to Blair for an answer.

The oven timer goes off. Instead of replying, Blair turns, opens the oven door, and pulls out the cookies. He puts the tray in front of me and instructs me to have one. I carefully lift it off the hot pan and let it cool before taking a bite. The warm, chocolatey cookie melts in my mouth. Although I've never liked sweets, this cookie proves to be a great distraction from my feelings. I gulp down another while Blair cleans the kitchen. I prop my elbows on the table and hide my head in my hands. Everything is fine. I'm just overreacting as usual. Sam's probably just tired from the move. I hear a pair of soft footsteps behind me and turn to see Sam. "Hey Sam, how's it going? Can I get you a cookie?" I say all of this while gesturing to the tray full of freshly baked cookies. Sam approaches the tray and stares blankly at the cookies. She shakes her head as if to say no, and asks for a broom. I point toward the walk-in pantry. She retrieves the broom and retreats up to her room.

Something is seriously wrong. Sam loves sweets. Both Isla, and Sam's foster mom said she was obsessed with cookies. And what does she need a broom for? I vacuumed, mopped, and waxed her floor before her arrival. Before I can say anything, I hear Blair tell me to relax. "She's fine, she just needs time. Don't worry." But I can tell Blair is worried too. We've been married for over 10 years. I know when my partner is saying stuff to convince himself. I decide to let it go. We all skip lunch. Sam stays hidden in her bedroom. Blair heads into the garden – his happy place. And I sit down in the living room and turn on the TV. It's only 1PM but I'm exhausted.

(Suddenly, I hear) "Thomas wake up! It's almost 4:30. Sam's going to have her call with Isla soon!". My head rocks back and forth as Blair shakes me awake before retreating back to the garden. "I'll be back in a minute!" Blair yells from the back door. I sit up on the couch and finger comb my hair. Ugh. I must have fallen sleep. I find the remote and turn off the TV. I slowly head toward the kitchen and sit down on a stool. Sam's door open and shuts, and I hear her make her way down the stairs to the kitchen.

All of a sudden, I'm overcome with fear. Isla's going to know something is wrong when she speaks to her daughter. We've spent months discussing our openness plan. Phone calls, visits, birthdays, and milestones.. we've planned out all of it for the next year. Blair and I wanted Isla to know she would always be a part of Sam's life. What if she thinks we've done something wrong after this call? Isla's been doing so well with her treatments and she's in a much better place right now. On a recent visit, she told us about her new apartment and job. It all sounded like it was going really well for her. I remember how my heart began to race. "This is it, any minute now she's going to tell us that she's changed her mind". As usual, I had overreacted. Isla was just sharing that things were good right now. She never mentioned wanting to make any changes to the adoption plan.

Sam's in the kitchen now and asks to use the phone. I smile, "It's over there, kiddo. Do you remember the number?" Of course she remembers the number, it's her mom you idiot. She nods and takes the phone to the living room. While Sam's dialing the number, Blair emerges from the garden and sits down beside me. We instantly reach for each other's hands and giggle nervously.

We hear Sam from the other room, "Hi Mom! It's me Sam!". Sam's been home for hours now and this is the first time I've heard her sound.. well...happy. I can't help but feel a bit hurt. A quick glance at Blair and I can tell we're both feeling the same way. For the entire day it has felt like Sam has been avoiding us. She has barely spoken. She stayed in her bedroom and didn't make a sound. It hasn't felt like the same kid we've gotten to know over the past 8 months.

I can feel the doubt about our placement creep back in. This is supposed to be one of the happiest days of our lives. Instead, the day is dragging on and now, (deep breath) I just I can't wait for it to end. I think to myself, "Is this how it's going to be from now on...?" In the other room, we hear Sam asking Isla to bring cookies to our next visit. Blair inhales sharply. Making cookies was Blair's way of welcoming Sam home today. I can only imagine how this is making him feel.

Blair gets up and whispers something about preparing dinner. I watch my partner walk around the kitchen, collecting pots, grabbing food from the pantry and refrigerator. I can tell he's upset. Sam joins us in the kitchen for a moment. She places the phone back on the charger and (PAUSE) returns to her room. Not a word. I get up and try to help Blair with dinner. He waves at me to leave the kitchen. I reluctantly retreat to my spot on the couch. I spend the next hour flipping through the binders Sarah left behind. Maybe there's something in here that could explain why Sam is so subdued. I scan through the list of important events – birthdays, funerals, family trips, removal dates. Nothing explains this. I

start brainstorming solutions. "Should I call Sarah, or the foster parents?" Maybe Sam said something to them. Before I can act, Blair calls "Dinner!".

I hear Sam leave her room and make her way to the kitchen. I get up and follow her lead. We sit down across from each other at the table. Blair places a basket of bread in the center of the table and settles at one end. "Dig in everyone". I immediately reach for a bun and Sam does the same. Our hands collide over the breadbasket. Her eyes lock with mine and we both erupt into laughter. I go in with a silly dad voice, "OK, I surrender! The bread is all yours." She continues to giggle as she puts the bun on her plate. I look over to see Blair's eye roll and smile. But Sam returns to her vow of silence and doesn't look at us. Our interactions feel forced, as we sit eating our meal. I hope this awkwardness is temporary. She did laugh at the dad joke, after all. Maybe she just needs some time. I guess we can only wait and see....