Waiting for the Call
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Baby Can’t Remember
How to Sleep

Gracie, from the very beginning, was a championship sleeper. She floated into slumber each night with enviable ease, sleeping soundly, albeit with both eyes only partway closed. Not for her the long prelude of stories and songs. If she was sleepy and found herself in the bed, she slept.

Lucy, on the other hand, was never a big sleeper. Carol and I had dutifully researched infant sleep patterns before adopting her, but she seemed to come with her own (unpublished) instructions. After a nice warm bottle and a somewhat extravagant amount of singing and rocking, she would usually go to sleep. She just wouldn’t stay asleep. After a few hours, our bright-eyed three-and-a-half-month-old would wake up ready to party. She didn’t care much about the midnight bottle. She just wanted to play.

Nor did she nap much. Oh, she would doze off in the Snugli for a few minutes, but she had little aptitude for the long morning and afternoon naps the books had forecast. By eighteen months, no bed could hold her. She would scale the bars of her crib and drop to the floor ready for action. By age three, naps were a thing of the past. She had finally learned to
sleep through the night once we quit running to her side at the first yelp. But she could not get to sleep until we had all but sung ourselves hoarse. Once, a worn-out babysitter, having rocked, sung, and patted well beyond what must have seemed to her all reasonable limits, asked a wide-awake Lucy, “How long does this go on?”

“Until you get tired,” was Lucy’s perceptive reply.

Perhaps it was coincidence. But it was almost as if Gracie, who Carol had adopted, inherited her ability to sleep well, while Lucy had absorbed a kind of fitfulness that I sometimes felt I had inherited from my mother.

That last summer in Madison, the summer of Lucy’s fourth year, her restless energy seemed to reach new heights. Each week I had traveled down to Chicago to teach my classes. By the time the academic year ended and I came home full time, Lucy was furious. I had left her too many times. Whenever I reached out for Gracie, Lucy walloped her or tried to clamber over her into my lap. She threw tantrums. She refused to cooperate.

Perhaps, I thought, we needed some alone time. One Saturday morning she and I said good-bye to Gracie and Carol and went to the Farmers’ Market. She loved our private outing and, expansively, chose for me a pair of handmade earrings from a street vendor. I paid for and accepted her gift with many thanks. It was a magical morning, but Lucy was not about to forgive me that easily. Back home the tantrums, the jealousy, the anger continued.

What to do now? I talked to a therapist who had been helpful to me in the past. “You need to tell Lucy the story of her adoption.”

“She knows the story of her adoption,” I protested. We had consulted those books, too. We were the conscientious sort of parents who make adoption story scrapbooks and page through them with loving recollections of how this particular family came to be.

“Well, tell it to her again, and make it as rich and detailed as you possibly can.”

Coming, as I do, from a long line of storytellers, and with the creating and teaching of autobiography a cornerstone of my life’s work, I didn’t need to be persuaded of the healing power of narrative. So, weaving together all that I knew and what I could imagine, I made a story for Lucy. During a quiet moment, I told it to her.
I told her about Maria Chacpa, the nineteen-year-old mother who had birthed her alone in her one-room house in the mountains of Peru, naming her Maricruz. I explained that this mother, young, poor, and single, knew she needed to find a family who could care for her baby and decided, at her Aunt Esperanza’s suggestion, to travel to Lima to arrange an adoption.

“Two months after Maricruz was born,” I said, “Esperanza, Maria Chacpa, and Maricruz boarded the bus to Lima. Maria Chacpa carried the baby on her back in a blanket. She also carried a change of clothes for herself and the baby and food to eat on the way. The bus was small and the ride bumpy. People of all ages were crammed onto the bus. There were even some goats and chickens. All the women carried brightly colored woven blankets filled with food, clothing, artwork, or, as in the case of Maricruz, children.” Although I couldn’t know with any certainty how mother and baby had made this trip, I fashioned the story based on what seemed likely.

I told Lucy how, back in Chicago, Lucy’s two moms had begun to prepare to bring a baby into their family. Here I emphasized, as adoptive parents regularly do, the intentional and loving welcome in store for her. Our hope, I suppose, is that the deep purpose and love with which we greet our children will soften the pain of that first abandonment. And perhaps it does soften what it cannot erase. I told of the excitement with which we boarded the plane, the thrill we felt when we held our daughter for the first time. She heard how she had been named Lucia Maricruz, keeping the name given her by Maria Chacpa and adding one from her two new moms. The story of our two-month sojourn in Peru to complete the adoption ended with our safe arrival back in Chicago, where we would “live together as a family forever.”

Lucy listened deeply. “Lucy,” I said quietly, “you can hear that story any time you want to. All you need to do is ask.”

“Right now.”

“You want me to tell it again right now?”

“Yes.”

I began again. About a third of the way through the story, Lucy popped Peter Pan into her tape player and began to page through the accompanying picture book.
“Shall we finish the adoption story another time?”
“No. Both at once. I want to hear both.”

So I told the story of her adoption in one ear, while with her other ear she listened to the tale of Peter Pan, the lost boy, the boy without a mom, the boy who wants a mom so badly he teaches a young girl to fly off to Neverland with him. From time to time, I paused to ask Lucy to supply a name, a destination, or some other piece of the story. In truth, I was checking to see if she was really listening. Each time she responded instantly. She was right with me, listening intently to every word, even as she was right with Peter Pan, off in the magical world of Neverland.

After the story, Lucy appeared more relaxed and happy, even peaceful. But over the next two weeks the angry tantrums and jealous rages toward her little sister continued. Once Lucy lay on the floor kicking and crying. As I approached her, she jabbed her legs in my direction, trying to kick me. “It looks to me like you have a lot of kicks in there,” I said, firmly grasping each ankle. “I’m going to help you get them out.” Moving in concert with her, I bent her knees up toward her chest and pulled them back in the kicker’s version of riding a bicycle. She looked surprised for a moment and then began to laugh. Within minutes, the storm, with its anger, was gone and she had returned from her baby tantrum to her four-year-old self. I was astonished. This was one of a hundred strategies I had tried at such moments but the only one that had ever worked. Yet the significance did not yet register with me.

About a week later, in the midst of yet another intense tantrum, I popped a pacifier into Lucy’s mouth. She spat it out. I had tried holding her to calm her, but she was all right. Suddenly, I remembered. “Lucy, you are very angry,” I said. “I am going to lay you down on the floor and help you get your kicks out.” As I began to join her in her kicking, Lucy’s crying evolved into a combination of crying and laughing. Soon she was simply laughing. Within a matter of moments, she had left her rage behind. I began to slow the kicking and then moved into a gentle scissors kick.

Lucy was calm, but where had three-year-old Gracie gone? I found her curled up with her special pillow on the screened back porch, sucking her finger. She ignored me. “Gracie, I know it’s scary for you when Lucy has these storms. I just want you to know that I can take care of
Lucy and I can take care of you.” This was another story, one I hoped was true. It often seemed that even two moms weren’t enough. She put her head on my leg and continued sucking her finger as I stroked her hair. Lucy walked into the room and snuggled onto my other leg. She began talking sweetly to Gracie. I sat for a long time, holding these two precious girls, stroking their hair, speaking soft words of love.

We could see that Lucy sometimes got stuck in a baby rage, a rage that carried her back to a wordless infant fury. And when the rages swirled around her, Gracie retreated into a private world of her own, waiting for the storm to pass.

It was the day before our Chicago neighborhood’s stupendous block party, and we had traveled down from Madison to be part of it. I was weeding and edging the front yard. Lucy and Gracie, on their tricycles, pretended to travel to various destinations—New York, Milwaukee, New Jersey. Lucy carried a small notebook. Suddenly, Gracie snatched it.

“Gracie, NO!” Lucy shouted. “That’s my directions to Peru, and I can’t remember how to get there.”

“Lucy,” I asked, “does that little notebook have your directions to San Martín?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Gracie,” I explained, “that paper is very important to Lucy. It tells her how to get back to the village where she was born. You must give it back.”

Gracie handed it over, and calm was restored.

That night Lucy could not sleep. The noise on our block was deafening, as our excited neighbors decorated their houses and checked out the sound system for the next day’s fiesta. Carol and Gracie were sound asleep by 9:30 despite the commotion, but Lucy and I could not rest. We walked the block at 10:15, admiring the decorations and enjoying the warm greetings of various neighbors. We went back inside and read books. At 11:15, Lucy was almost beside herself with exhaustion, but still she could not sleep. I had tried singing to her, rubbing and scratching her back, and lying quietly beside her, but despite my efforts, she only grew more agitated. Finally I asked her if she would like me to kick her legs. She nodded and then fell asleep in midkick twenty seconds after I began.

The next day, while Carol took the girls to the end of the block for
pony rides, I called the therapist again to describe Lucy’s anxiety. She suggested that Lucy felt angry with her mother for giving her up for adoption. “Tell her the story again. And this time you must tell her that her mother loved her and was sad to give her up.”

The therapist offered insights about Gracie, as well. “Whenever Lucy has a tantrum, Gracie goes back to the orphanage. You cannot let her get lost. You have to help her stay in touch with her own story. She has less of her birth mother in her since she spent no time with her after birth. She will let you know what she needs to hear. But she needs her own birth story, including the loneliness and anger she felt as she waited for you in the orphanage. She needs that lost part of her story.”

That night, full of candy that had rained down from the piñatas and worn out from dancing, Lucy fell fast asleep by 10:00. Three-year-old Gracie, carried inside over her protests, partied on alone. At 10:30, with Lucy asleep beside her, she danced on the bed, punching her fingers into the air and singing along with the music blasting from the street, “Do it, do it, do it!”

On Sunday, tired but happy, Lucy and Gracie were playing quietly in the living room. This peaceful moment seemed an opportune time to follow the therapist’s advice. I sat beside Lucy. “I want to tell you something about Maria Chacpa,” I said. Gracie continued playing, but she glanced toward me, and I could see she was listening, too. Lucy climbed into my lap. I held her like a baby as I began to tell her how sad Maria Chacpa was to tell her good-bye.

“Why?” Lucy asked with surprise.

“Honey, she loved you so much.”

“Tell me my story,” Lucy demanded. And so we began again.

I added new details. I told Lucy how her mother had named her Maricruz Fiorella, the name of a young woman she had watched in a Mexican telenovela (soap opera). Maricruz Fiorella was the star, the one everyone most admired. Maria Chacpa chose this name for her baby because she wanted her girl to have a life as wonderful as the one the character on the program enjoyed. In truth, I do not know why Maria Chacpa chose this name. I only know that the translator laughed with delight when she heard Lucy’s birth name and explained its origin. I imagined Maria Chacpa in front of the television, perhaps in the home of an aunt or cousin, watching
the unfolding story of the beautiful Maricruz Fiorella as her own belly swelled with her pregnancy. Years later, while traveling in Mexico, I would learn that the telenovela was called Quinceañera and that the character Maricruz Fiorella was a maid. But I knew none of this then.

I continued relating how glad Maria Chacpa had been to see Lucy once again at the courthouse when we finalized the adoption and how she had held her and given her a bottle. How we all went to lunch afterward and then drove Maria Chacpa to her friend’s home. I recounted Maria Chacpa’s final instructions, “Take good care of her. Just don’t make her cry.” I explained how we went at once to develop our film with double prints. Three hours later the photographs were ready, and our attorney, Ana Maria, delivered a set to Maria Chacpa, identical to the ones in our adoption photo album.

Lucy looked at me in wonder and amazement. “Maria Chacpa has those same pictures?”

“Why, yes, honey, they are a great treasure to her. She thinks of you every day.” Lucy looked at me and let out a deep breath. “Your birth mother took those pictures back to San Martín and showed them to all her friends.”

Lucy looked at her sister. “Now tell Gracie’s story,?” she demanded.

“That story belongs to Gracie. We can tell it if you want to hear it, Gracie, or we can go eat lunch.”

“Tell my story,” said Gracie. And so I did. Because we never met Gracie’s mother, because she disappeared without a trace soon after Gracie was born, this was a sparser tale, constructed out of details passed to us by the folks at the orphanage.

As she sat on my lap, I told Gracie of the young woman in Lima who came to the hospital Sergio Bernales to give birth. Her name, she said, was Elba Rosario, and she was nineteen years old. On April 11, 1990, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Soon afterward, she left the hospital. I described this disappearance as a plan, emphasizing the woman’s belief that the hospital would care for her baby.

Gracie, who didn’t yet have a name, began waiting, first at the hospital, later at the orphanage. There were many other babies in the orphanage and not always enough workers to pick the babies up as often as the babies would have liked. “Sometimes,” I said, “Baby Gracie was lonely,
sometimes she was angry, and sometimes she was bored, wondering when her life would really begin.”

“Why?” asked Gracie.

“Because even though the workers at the orphanage fed you and took care of you the best they could, they were too busy to give you the attention and holding that you needed and wanted.”

I described our preparations for her in Chicago, Carol’s trip to get her, and the moment they met. How Mama-Carol held Gracie in her arms and said, “Her name is Gracia Esperanza. Grace and Hope.”

I added more details about the two-month wait in Peru for the adoption to be completed and then told of our meeting in Chicago. “At the airport, Lucy and Mama-Jackie met Mama-Carol and the new baby. Everyone hugged and hugged. And that is the story of how Gracie came to be in our family forever.

“Mama-Carol can tell you that story again. She can tell you more than I can about what your time together in Peru was like because she was there.” Gracie looked pleased. Carol came in, and we all sat down to lunch.

That afternoon we went swimming. Lucy announced that she wanted to be my baby. I carried her around for ten or fifteen minutes at the public pool. She enjoyed all this babying to the hilt, spicing her four-year-old chatter with “gagagoogoos” and crawling or walking with stiff legs, when I sat her down while I showered. As we headed toward the parking lot, my beach-towel-blanketed baby wrapped her arms around my neck, looked deep into my eyes, and pronounced, “You’re my mama, FOREVER.”

“Yes, Lucy love, I’m your mama FOREVER.” I hoped that deep in her heart she could begin to believe it.

Unfortunately, an hour or so after Lucy declared our forever connection, I had to say good-bye for another few days as Carol and the girls headed back to Madison. I returned on Wednesday afternoon and picked the girls up at preschool. Lucy appeared quite matter-of-fact about my return and then, at our house, threw a major tantrum about getting out of the car. She struck out at Gracie and me, then remained screaming in the yard as we went into the house. Little by little, she calmed herself. After ten minutes, I saw her picking raspberries in the backyard. Soon she
came inside. Yet at suppertime Lucy, who was usually attached to me like one of those little sticktights you pick up on your socks when you walk through a field in August, did not want anything to do with me.

“Go away,” she said firmly. “I want to eat by myself. Gracie can stay. But not you.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll be in the next room.” After a few minutes, I was invited to return. I could come back to Lucy. But only at her bidding.

At bedtime, Lucy was full of what looked like good cheer. She seemed to want to party. I was reminded of the almost manic merriment with which she greeted Carol and me in the middle of the night when we were first together in Peru. We thought then that we were being worked, but, happy to be at her beck and call, we didn’t mind. It was as if she were determined to charm and distract us so that she would not have to sleep—a tactic she had never entirely abandoned but one I hadn’t seen in such force in some time.

I offered to tell her a story. That was how my mother always calmed me. “Tell about Casper,” she said, requesting a story from Carol’s repertoire.

“Mama-Carol tells that story. Let me see. I’ll tell you a story about when I was a little girl.”

“Tell a story about when I was a little girl. Tell my adoption story.”

“Is that what you want to hear?”

“Yes.”

This time, when the story ended, Lucy had questions. “Where is Maria Chacpa now?” she asked.

“Well, honey, she was planning to go back to San Martín. I think it’s likely she’s there, but I can’t be sure. It’s possible that she returned to Lima. I’ve written her a couple of letters, but I’ve never heard from her. I don’t know whether she got them.”

“Will she have other babies?”

“I don’t know, but I imagine so. She was very young when you were born—only nineteen.”

“Will she take the other babies to Ana Maria to be adopted?”

“I don’t know. She might.” Behind that question were the unspoken, unspeakable questions: “Am I the only one she gave away? Will she love some other baby more than me?”
“She doesn’t have money or much family or many resources. It’s almost impossible for her to take care of a baby,” I said.
“Let’s find her,” Lucy said eagerly. “We could go to Peru and find her and she could come and live with us. We have plenty of food.”
“Oh, honey,” I sighed, “wouldn’t that be wonderful?”
“Will we go to Peru?”
“Someday when you are bigger.”
“Could I go by myself?”
“Do you want to?” I asked, surprised. Lucy nodded. “Would you be scared?” I asked. She nodded again.
“Maybe,” she suggested, “Gracie and I could go by ourselves when we are bigger.”
“Of course you can if you want to. And if you decide it is too scary to go by yourself, Mama-Carol and I will go with you.”
“We could all go!” Lucy exclaimed with delight and relief. She thought for a moment. “I want to sing Maria Chacpa a song.”
“OK,” I said, “what do you want to sing to her?”
Lucy answered with our family’s well-worn adaptation of “Normal American Boy” from *Bye Bye, Birdie*.

*We love you Maria Chacpa,*
*Oh yes we do.*

I joined my voice with hers, fighting back my tears.

*We don’t love anyone,*
*Like we love you.*
*When you’re not near to us,*
*We’re blue.*
*Oh, Maria Chacpa, we love you.*

I was all choked up, but Lucy laughed with pleasure. “Now,” she said, “let’s sing to Elba Rosario.” This was the name by which we knew Gracie’s birth mother.

“OK,” I said again. I marveled at her ability to navigate her way through this terrain of rage, grief, loss, and integration as she enfolded each of the birth mothers into our family and her circle of love. We sang
to Elba Rosario. And then, one more round, this time to both birth mothers and Gracie together.

_We love you Maria Chacpa and Elba Rosario and Gracie,_
_Oh yes we do . . ._

Now everyone she needed to integrate into her family had been sung together into a necessary whole, sung together with the song we used to enfold one another—especially when we were about to be parted. At last her work was done for the night. She curled up against me and let me sing her to sleep. At nine-thirty, well past her usual bedtime, I felt the tension and constant motion leave her muscular little body.

An hour and a half later, just as Carol and I had turned out our light, she awakened, sobbing. We both leaped from the bed. Carol took her in her arms. Huge sobs wracked her little barrel chest. Carol sat on our bed with her and rocked her with her body. “It’s OK, Lucy, baby, your mamas are here.”

Lucy was crying as if her little heart would break. There was a desperate edge to these painful sobs, as if she were searching for someone, something. “You’re so sad, honey,” Carol murmured, stroking her hair, “It’s OK to be sad. Do you want Mama-Jackie? She’s right here.”

Lucy, whose eyes had not yet even opened, sought me out by smell and touch and crawled into my arms. She snuggled against me and stopped crying. I carried her back to her bed. As I settled her in, she clutched at me. I lay down beside her. My hand brushed her cheek. Her face moved toward my fingers in the instinctive rooting motion of a tiny baby searching for the nipple. I cuddled close and held her tight. She clung to me and settled again into a deep sleep.

The next morning I sat at our cherry dining table drinking tea and looking out at the birds busily harvesting berries in the backyard. Lucy walked stiff-legged to the top of the stairs. “It’s Baby Lucy,” she announced.

I knew this already, for that stiff-kneed walk always signaled the return of the baby. “Come on down here and crawl in my lap, Baby Lucy.” She toddled down the stairs and into my arms. I cuddled her up close and we talked baby talk to each other. Lucy, not usually much of a cuddler, was all snuggles that morning.
“You woke up crying last night. Do you remember?”
She did not.
“I thought maybe you weren’t completely awake. You were so sad. So sad. You cried as if your heart were breaking.”
She said nothing, but she was listening closely.
I invented an explanation, the best one I could think of. “I think maybe you were mad at me yesterday for going away when you need me with you so badly right now. Were you mad at Mama-Jackie?”
She nodded solemnly.
“Baby, I’m sorry I had to be away when you needed me here so much. I love you so.”
From upstairs, I could hear Gracie beginning to stir. After a few minutes, Carol, who was on her way to work, carried her down. “You have another baby,” she told me.
With a grumble, Lucy moved over to the leg I always told her was hers and made room for Gracie, who climbed into place and cuddled close. Later that day I would hear from Carol how Gracie had come to the top of the stairs, looked at Baby Lucy in my lap, let out a whimper, and run to our bed. She had burrowed under the covers and begun sucking her finger. Carol scooped her up. “Come on, Baby Gracie. Mama-Jackie has room for you, too. Come in my arms and let me carry you down to be her baby.”
After a few more minutes of cuddles, we moved to the kitchen to start breakfast. “Tell Gracie’s adoption story,” Lucy commanded.
“That story belongs to Gracie,” I replied. “We tell it when she wants to hear it.”
“No. I don’t want it,” growled Gracie. Unlike Lucy, she liked to ease into the day.
“Then tell my story,” said Lucy, coming by this indirect route to her real agenda. “I want to hear mine.”
“You want to hear it again? OK.” And so, for the third time in five days, I told Lucy’s story. At its conclusion, Lucy began to sing again what she had selected as the ritual song for bringing Maria Chacpa into our family. Gracie and I joined in as the Rice Krispies snapped, crackled, and popped a gentle percussion. It was a satisfying moment, and one I suspected I had better enjoy, for if the past held any clue to what lay before us the next storm was already gathering on the horizon.
I scrambled all that summer to give Lucy the narrative tools with which to shape her own story. It occurred to me to wonder whether I was leading her where she needed to go or simply where I imagined she needed to go. Or, worse, someplace I needed her to go. Yet she persistently returned to the subject of her adoption.

One weekend our family attended a Peruvian picnic. Entering the park, we saw the Peruvian flag waving over a crowd organizing picnic tables and choosing teams for a soccer game. Peruvian music blasted from a loudspeaker. About two-thirds of the families at the picnic were Peruvian. The other third were families like ours, with American-born parents and Peruvian adoptees. We enjoyed the gorgeous weather, the friendly people, the delicious food, the music. Driving home, we asked the girls what they thought of the event.

“Good,” Lucy pronounced. Then, after a moment, she added, “One of the women looked like Maria Chacpa.”

Surprised, I followed her lead, “Which one?”

“The one with the headband,” Lucy replied.

“Yes, she did look something like Maria Chacpa,” Carol agreed.

Neither of us had guessed that Lucy would go to the picnic looking for her birth mother. But she did. And in her determined fashion she found her.

When a friend was leaving for Peru at the end of August as a Fulbright teacher and scholar. I asked whether she would be willing to carry a letter to Peru for Lucy, explaining that the mail is unreliable and we had no address for her birth mother. Characteristically, she offered more than I asked, promising to find someone from Tarma who could try to get the letter to San Martín and to deliver a copy to our attorney, who might know Maria Chacpa’s whereabouts.

I hung up the phone and told Lucy.

“OK. Great!” She grabbed colored markers and paper and set to work. She invited her sister to join her, and Gracie, who loves art projects, happily complied. Soon Lucy had the two of them singing, “We love you Maria Chacpa and Elba Rosario, Oh yes we do-ooo,” as they busily colored and drew. Within minutes, Lucy presented me with a brightly colored abstract shape, a construction paper flap pasted over it. Lucy explained that you could lift the flap for a surprise.
“Beautiful!” I said. “She’ll love it. Would you like to write her a letter?” Lucy nodded. “Yes.”
She began dictating immediately, the words tumbling out.

August 1, 1993
Dear Maria Chacpa,
I love you. There is so much I like in Madison. I like everything. I like you too. Best of all, I like you very much. I like my raspberries outside in my garden. Everything in Madison, I like. I got a drink of apple juice on the way home from the farmers’ market. I have a nice house in Chicago. I have a nice garden, there’s so much, there’s flowers. I like all my neighbors. I like ponies. Someday, when I get bigger, I want to ride a horse all by myself. I love you very much.
Love,
Lucy

I read Lucy’s dictated note back to her and she approved. I wrote one of my own to enclose. I invited Maria Chacpa to write us back, assured her that Lucy was doing well, and expressed my hope that she, too, was well. As I sealed up the packet of letters, artwork, and Lucy’s school photograph, I felt a little bit like I was preparing a message in a bottle. I couldn’t know if our missives would ever find Maria Chacpa.

With the letter sealed, we hit one of those good patches that I always hoped were the way it was going to be from now on. I wanted Lucy’s pain and worry to be something we could fix. For the moment, it seemed so. Lucy’s face relaxed, and she grew more peaceful and happy.

When I asked her to brush her teeth or wash her hands or pick up her toys, she said “OK” and went and did it. She seemed older, like children do when they have been raising hell and then suddenly take one of those giant steps forward. Of course, easier times are never a destination, just a stop on the journey.

One hot afternoon, the girls asked if they could get out their watercolors and paint each other. They had had a rollicking good time doing this once before, but the washable watercolors ended up rubbing off on the furniture. “OK,” I agreed, “but you must take a bath as soon as you finish.”
They agreed, but when they finished painting Lucy threw a fit. Once Gracie was clean and dry, I dunked furious Lucy into the tub, becoming pretty thoroughly drenched in the process. Ensconced in a towel and sucking a pacifier, she still raged at bath’s end, picking on Gracie and yelling at me. I was baffled.

“Lucy,” I said in exasperation, “you cannot be this angry about the bath.” Lucy usually enjoyed baths and calmed down in the water. “What on earth are you so mad about?” Even as I asked, I wondered if I was ascribing too much meaning to her bath resistance. It was not as though she was ordinarily an easygoing child. But if I was imagining a larger significance, so was she.

“I’m mad because you didn’t meet the bus,” she shouted.
“What bus?” I asked, confused. There was no bus to preschool.
“The bus Maria Chacpa brought me to Lima on.”
“Well, that makes sense. You needed me to meet the bus. And, honey, if I had known you were on that bus, I would have been there.”
“And I’m mad because I didn’t grow inside your body,” she was still yelling out her answers, but there was less steam behind the words now.
“Of course you are.” I ventured a pat on the back and then a hug. “I would have loved to carry you inside my body. Honey, we can’t go back and make it different, but we can imagine what it might have been like if you had grown inside me.” I helped her get dressed and we moved to a table on the screened back porch. I pulled out some art supplies for her and for Gracie.

Lucy began drawing on one of those erasable tablets.
“Why don’t you draw a picture of you growing inside of me?” I suggested.
“I can’t draw that,” Lucy said impatiently. “You draw it.”
And so I sketched myself with the big pregnant belly I never had and Lucy visibly curled up inside me as she never was.
“That’s so cu-ute!” she exclaimed, drawing cute out into a two-syllable replication of my own Southern accent. “Now draw Gracie growing inside Carol.”
Alongside my pregnant figure, I added Carol’s.
“Oh, that’s so cute! Gracie! Look!”
Gracie glanced up and then returned to her own artwork.
Lucy had more ideas. “Now draw you and Carol holding me and Gra-cie as tiny babies,” Lucy instructed. For a moment I started to object that they were not tiny babies at the same time, but this had nothing to do with a linear view of history. I drew as instructed. “Cute!” she pronounced again and again invited Gracie to look.

“Now,” she said with growing authority, “draw me by myself as a tiny baby.”

I drew a Lucy-like baby sitting up and looking at us. But of course that was wrong, for Lucy did not sit up until several months after we had her.

“No,” she said, frustrated by my obtuseness, “a tiny baby, lying down, wrapped in blankets.”

“Oh,” I said, “of course. A tiny baby,” and I drew as directed. By this time, we were drawing on sheets of paper. She held up the picture of the two pregnant mamas and the tiny baby with satisfaction.

As soon as Carol walked in from work, Lucy ran to her with the pictures. “How wonderful,” Carol said. “But Lucy, I, too, would have loved to have you grow inside my body.”

“My feet can grow inside your body,” Lucy told her, “and the rest of me can grow inside Mama-Jackie.”

“That would be perfect,” Mama-Carol agreed.

Lucy actively reshaped her earliest history through these drawings, urging me to create the missing family photographs—the ones that pictured her and her sister growing inside their moms, rocked by their moms from earliest infancy. She calmed still further after the pictures were completed, lulling me, once more, into the fantasy that we had finally told the story or drawn the drawing to calm all hurts. If we hadn’t, it is because our hurts never can be quite that simple, and yet each retelling soothed and calmed if it could not entirely heal.

I suppose I should not have been altogether surprised, on the day in July that began with Lucy and Gracie perched in my lap declaring themselves babies, to find that they had not miraculously matured into three and four year olds while at preschool. When I picked them up that afternoon, Lucy announced that she was a baby and could not walk to the car. I suggested that I carry her and hold Gracie’s hand, whereupon Gracie also sat down and refused to move. She held the position of baby by birthright (adoption right?) and wasn’t about to relinquish it.
“OK,” I said brightly (too brightly). “One of you can sit here in the hall, while I carry the other to the car, and then I’ll come back.” I was glad no other parents or teachers were listening. What if my narrative theories were all askew and I was in reality just one more overindulgent baby boomer who didn’t know how to control her children?

Neither daughter was having any of my idea. Neither wanted to be the baby left behind. I could see only two alternatives. I could drag both daughters kicking and screaming to the car (seventy-five total pounds of active resistance, two lunch boxes, and assorted artwork), guaranteeing a spectacle, or I could sit down with them in the hall until they got sufficiently tired of waiting to walk.

I stood there, feeling frustrated and inadequate. A better mother would know what to do now. A better mother never would have gotten herself into such a pickle. Fortunately, a big-hearted preschool teacher happened along at that moment and put Lucy on her back while I carried Gracie. As we headed at last toward the door, Lucy’s teacher paused to ask whether Lucy might be anxious about anything. “Yes,” I replied, unable to provide details with both girls in earshot, “she’s got a lot on her mind right now. Why?”

“She’s tearing her nails down to the quick and she’s even more restless than usual,” she explained. The restlessness was literal. Lucy did not rest. She was the only child in the class of three and four year olds who never took a nap.

“She’s not much of a napper,” I said. “You might want to let her lie quietly and look at a book. Maybe we can talk about this some more tomorrow.”

Back home I parked the girls in front of a video while I started supper. I could see that they were much too tired to play together without bloodshed. By the time the video ended, the spaghetti was ready and waiting. But suddenly Lucy was enraged, insisting that she could eat only if Gracie were not there, screaming and crying and trying to hit her sister. I sat on the floor and held her in my arms, so she could not hurt anyone. I told her I could see she was feeling angry and sad. “I know you’re having a tough time, honey,” I tried to soothe. But Lucy could not calm herself, and my attempts to calm her only seemed to make her angrier.
“I’m too tired to eat!” she wailed. Spaghetti was her favorite meal, so I knew she was in desperate shape.

“I’ll put you to bed, honey. Gracie, do you want to pet Louise while I put Lucy to bed? We can finish our supper in a minute.” Gracie adored the cat and always sought her out the moment we returned to the house.

I lay down with Lucy and began to sing, but she soon decided she was hungry. “I’m too tired, and I’m too thirsty, and I’m too hungry.” That sounded right to me. It had been days since she had slept well.

While Gracie lay on the floor petting Louise, I fed Lucy, spoon by spoon, like a baby. She calmed. For her second and third platefuls, Gracie and I joined her. After supper, I lay down with her again. Gracie came and sat on top of me. Lucy began fussing. She wanted to be my baby alone. I hugged Gracie tight and told her I was glad she came to join us. I sang to Lucy and held her hand. But, tired as she was, she could not go to sleep. We gave up and went back downstairs.

Carol was late getting home. She was recovering from foot surgery. Because of complications from the surgery, she had to go for physical therapy a couple of times each week. When she walked in at 7:30 from a full day of work followed by the therapy, she took the tired Lucy back up to her bedroom without even pausing to get herself a bite of supper.

I turned my attention to Gracie. “Now where were we?” I asked as I lay down beside her on the living room floor where she had made a nice nest for herself with her pillow and a blanket. “I know,” I said, “we were just getting ready to put on our shoes and sneak out of the house for a walk.”

“Right now?” Gracie, already bathed and in her pajamas, wasn’t expecting this.

“Right now,” I said. I tiptoed up to the girls’ bedroom and returned with a sundress and shoes. We got ready quickly and snuck out the back door so Lucy would not hear us leave. With her hand firmly in mine, Gracie led me on a brisk walk around the block, pointing out the moon in the dusky sky, the cats sitting in neighbors’ driveways, the big kids playing basketball in the park. We felt the thrill of escape, confederates on an illicit after-dark walk. I am sure no one wanted to get out of the house more than me. The pressure of the afternoon and the past few days had been overwhelming. As I clung to Gracie’s hand and listened to her
happy conversation, I hoped that what we had to give to each of these precious girls would somehow be enough.

Our escapade at an end, we stole into the kitchen and swore ourselves to secrecy. Carol came downstairs to tell me that Lucy was still wide awake and she had to stop and get some supper before she dropped. She looked exhausted. I wished her swollen stiff foot could be the only thing our family needed to take care of just then.

I headed up to Lucy, who was in bed looking at a book. She glanced up eagerly. “I’ve come to help you get to sleep,” I said, returning the book to her shelf.

“Baby can’t remember how to sleep,” Lucy explained, with an uncanny accuracy.

“I’m going to teach you,” I said, curling up beside her.

Lucy began bouncing on the bed. She displayed a spirited determination to stay awake by any means necessary.

“I’m going to name you some feelings,” I said, as I lay down beside her, “and I want you to tell me which ones you have right now. Sad. Lonely. Mad.”

With each feeling that I named, Lucy nodded her head. “Yes,” she said, “yes, yes.”

“What are you mad about?”

“I’m mad about Gracie. She didn’t share with me this afternoon.” Could it be that simple, I wondered? Somehow, I doubted it. Lucy’s tendency to blame her younger sister for every unwanted emotion was automatic but not, I thought, the real issue.

“Maybe you’re mad at Maria Chacpa. Could that be?” No answer. I worried. Was I helping her shape her narrative or starting to impose one? I tried a less leading question.

“What are you sad about?”

“I’m sad that people in Peru give their babies to foster families.”

“Oh, honey, it is sad. Do you wish Maria Chacpa had just given you straight to me?”

“You could have met the bus.”

“Oh, how I wish I could have met the bus. If they had called me and told me, I would have been there to meet the bus. Me and Mama-Carol.”

“You could have ridden the bus. You could have come to San Martín.”
“And I would have. We would have. If we had known you were there waiting for us.”

“What would Maria Chacpa have said?”

“She would have said, ‘Here is my beautiful daughter, Lucia Mari-cruz. Now she will be your beautiful daughter. Take good care of her. Just don’t make her cry.’ Then we would have taken you in our arms, said good-bye to Maria Chacpa, and taken you back to Lima with us.”

I waited a moment. “Why do you feel lonely?”

“I feel lonely because of all the strangers in Machu Picchu and Peru.”

I thought about this. Perhaps it made her lonely to think of being related and connected by blood and nationality to people she did not know. “It’s hard to be connected to people you don’t really know, isn’t it? Who are you lonely for?”

“For Mama-Jackie and Maria Chacpa.” She paused. “For Mama-Jackie and Maria Chacpa and Mama-Carol.” It somehow made sense that you could be lonely for the mom lying beside you, the one who bore you, and the one downstairs in the kitchen with your sister.

“Oh, sweetheart, it’s so hard when your own mamas and the mama you grew inside of and were born from are not the same.”

“I wish I could have grown inside your body,” she said softly.

“Oh, baby, I know. I wish it too. But I couldn’t love you any more, if you had.”

“I wish my feet could have grown inside Maria Chacpa’s body and the rest of me could have grown inside of you.”

“Lucy, that would have been such a good solution. Then you could have come from both of us. But in a way you did. You came from Maria Chacpa’s body but from Carol’s and my hearts.”

“I want to be a tiny baby again. I want to grow inside you,” she said, curling closer against my belly.

“You can be my tiny baby,” I promised.

“If I was your tiny baby, what would I do?”

“You would sleep in my arms, I would rock you and cuddle you and feed you.”

“Would I drink milk out of your breasts?”

“Of course, my baby. Is that what you want to do?”

Lucy nodded. She cuddled close to me and nestled into my arms like
a nursing baby. She fixed her eyes on my face with a look of such love as she drank imaginary milk. After a few moments I nestled her head back on her pillow.

“Now, baby, your tummy is all full of warm milk. You can go to sleep.” She curled against my belly as tightly as a cat, as if she would crawl inside my body and be born again. And, like a contented cat, she went to sleep at once. I lay there marveling at the complexity and strength of these ties to her various mothers, the one who gave her life and cared for her for her first two months and the two who had mothered her every day for the past four years. As well, I marveled at our search for the story that would, if only for a moment, quiet our fears and bring us home to ourselves.