



THE FAMILY TREE

A Grandmother's Love Story

Each year when February brings in cold days and we see bright red valentines everywhere expressing words of love, I am reminded of one particular love story and want to share it with our readers. It is about a dear friend of mine whose life has taken a rather uncommon course in the pursuit of love. Her story goes like this...

“Life is what happens when you’re planning other things.” So it was for my husband Ric and me nearly seven years ago, when our 18-year-old son and his 17-year-old girlfriend announced they were going to have a baby. Under normal circumstances, we would have celebrated the news. But, theirs were not normal circumstances.

Will was barely one month into a half-hearted drug recovery process. Sally had come into our home to escape living with an abusive family. They had been instantly attracted to one another, and despite repeated warnings from us, became involved in what was to be a disastrous relationship. Although Will was attending college and working, Sally had chosen to leave high school after 10th grade, with no discernable ambition for the future. In the few short weeks preceding this stunning announcement, their relationship had already succumbed to the stress and confusion of an unwanted pregnancy. So, in searching for the best possible solution to their plight, Will and Sally asked us to adopt the baby.

The next few months were difficult, to say the least. Faced with a monumental decision, Ric and I struggled to put everything into perspective. After all, with four children well on their way to being grown and gone, we were eagerly anticipating the independence of middle age. At that point, our careers were well established, giving us a comfortable income with which to travel and invest. Taking on another child – and a grandchild at that – to nurture and educate for the next 18 years seemed rather daunting in the scheme of things. We had known and read about other grandparents who had serious problems raising grandchildren. Moreover, given the complicated family relationships, we did not fully trust Will and Sally to keep any agreement we might make.

Nevertheless, Ric and I believed that our grandchild deserved every chance we could give him to live a secure and happy life in the arms of his biological family. We also had far greater resources than most grandparents in our situation, and, were in excellent health. So, armed with legal advice and emotional support, after extensive discussions with professionals and family members, we all settled on an adoption plan. Any residual uncertainty we might have felt disappeared with the birth of our beautiful, eight-pound grandchild, Zachary. We welcomed him into our hearts with profound joy and a renewed sense of purpose. Looking back on that day, we could not have possibly predicted that our lives would soon be filled with court battles and family tragedy, punctuated by the constant challenge of dealing with Zac's many developmental problems.

Now, six and a half years later, we are finally able to put it all behind us. Thanks to lots of love and therapy, Zac is a bright, energetic, and truly adorable first grader, who will undoubtedly make his incredible mark on the world someday. Ric and I have flourished in our roles as "second time around parents." It does keep you young! And in spite of it all, we would make the same decision again.

As a result of their experience, my friend and her husband have become tireless advocates for the more than 2 million custodial grandparents across this country. They have many lessons to share with the thousands of 'grands' in our town who find themselves in that blessed time when "life happened while you were planning other things!"

Tips for Re-Parenting Grandparents:

Develop a support system. Many grandparents suddenly becoming new parents have been "out of the loop," so to speak, for years. They do not always know the latest educational and social trends or have the energy to chase an active toddler or ride herd over a rebellious teenager. It is essential to seek out the help of friends, families, support groups, and organizations like The Family Tree, to provide an extra pair of helping hands or some supportive counsel. It is so important to know that you are not alone and there are many families also taking on this special role.

Make the arrangement legal. Properly executed legal agreements are the best protection you and your grandchild can have against the revolving door of unstable parenting. These arrangements should always be made with court approval and the help of a family law attorney. And, even then, be prepared for anything.

Expect the grandparent relationship to change. The role of parent brings with it a very different set of responsibilities than that of grandparent. Sometimes it is sad to realize that you will never know what it is like to be a grandma or grandpa - to spoil a child rotten, serve as a proud companion at Grandparents' Day at school and be able to send home the dear child to loving parents and to the warmth of a stable home.

Don't forget to count your blessings. And, finally while never truly understanding the twist of fate that brings this experience, be thankful for it! Your life will be enriched a thousand fold. Instead of dwelling upon the aches and pains of age, value the motivation you now have to eat well, exercise and hope to live a very long life! And, instead of coffee klatsches and leisurely luncheons, be prepared to spend time chauffeuring carpools, checking homework, and reading bedtime stories. Remember, there will be days when an extra hour of sleep seems the most desirable thing in the world. But at the end of the day, when that little hand slips into yours, once again, all's right with the world!