

Two for the Road

The Lucky Ones

By Natalie Cash Petersson

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Taking an airplane from the cradle of humanity to a crib in Manhattan, 2-year-old twins, Mintesinot and Betelhem, have made a journey that will forever alter the course of their young lives — and our own. My husband Mark and I traveled to Addis Ababa in late February to complete an adoption that was more than a year in the making and to bring home our new children. On paper, Mark and I couldn't be more different: he, a 55-year-old white American male, former hippie, raised in Massachusetts, and me, a 39-year-old black American female, former debutante, raised in Texas. Together though, none of it mattered and signing the final paperwork, we looked forward to raising children who would celebrate our family's diversity.

Each year, approximately 2,000 Ethiopian children are adopted internationally; a drop in the bucket for the estimated 5 million orphans left behind. In the United States and Ethiopia, people rush to tell us we're doing a great thing and the twins are so lucky.

It is no small task keeping my eyebrow from shooting up to my hairline, but I smile graciously and protest gently. How do I explain years of infertility without startling strangers? Or how I longed with all my heart to be a mother? How having children together was one of the strongest desires for our marriage? How these children have given us the gift of family?

Spend two minutes with our daughter Beti and she will have you on the floor laughing — whether or not you speak any Amharic, Sidama, English — or use any language at all. Our son, nicknamed Minot, is the eldest twin and the more reserved of the two. He takes longer to investigate and assess a situation before he

joins in — unless of course you are playing music because the child cannot resist dancing. Tales of their daily activities and development are a constant source of amusement and amazement for all our friends and family.

In the face of so many celebrity adoptions, I'm sure many of our African friends wonder if these orphans are truly loved and not brought here as curiosities with no connection to their homelands, or used as domestics when they're older. All of those doubts and questions evaporate once you see an adoptive family with their new children, and we're no exception. Holding their soft brown bodies close while they fall asleep, listening to them breathe, I could not love them any more if they came from my womb.

Are we equipped to raise these children with a strong sense of who they are and where they come from? Our desire for the children to maintain ties to Ethiopia is one of the reasons we adopted a sibling group instead of a single child, so no matter how far their travels in life take them, they will always have each other, a real part of Ethiopia, with them for the rest of their lives. We look forward to bringing them back to their homeland many times in the years to come and visiting with the Ethiopian friends who have adopted us as family during our stay. In so many ways, it feels like it was meant to be.

As for whether there's any luck or fate at work in adoption, almost everyone I know who has adopted speaks of signs and coincidences that cannot be easily explained away. The twins were born on the same date, November 28, as my grandfather — himself also a twin. They were born the exact day two years ago that my 90-year-old grandmother passed away. I never discussed my struggles with infertility directly

with her and yet I know she was aware. I'm convinced she did not leave this earth until she was satisfied that I would be a mother in time. And I'm sure the impish gleam in Beti's eye comes from her as well.

My grandfather's father always used to say, "it's one thing to pull yourself up by the bootstraps; it's another thing entirely to reach back and help somebody else." So have we helped them or have they helped us?

Author and adoptive mother Sallie Tisdale writes it best: "Adoption is not rescue, not exactly, and yet I saved the lives of these children. Writing that, I feel no sense of nobility





THE EXTENDED Cash Petersson family celebrates Easter in traditional Ethiopian attire. Below, twins Mintesinot and Betelhem enjoy a fun trip to the beach.

or virtue, nothing lofty at all. I saved the lives of my own children, which is a selfish act. I saved them for myself.”

I cannot write it any simpler than that. We are the lucky ones.

Natalie Cash Petersson is mom to 3-year-old twins, Mintesinot and Betelhem, whom she and her husband Mark Petersson adopted from Ethiopia in March 2007 through Wide Horizons For Children. The family resides in New York City. This article was previously published in Parent’s Corner, a quarterly magazine published in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia that Cash Petersson contributes to regularly.

