Just Lucky I Guess

by Ruth Horn Pinkham

Just how important is a name, a title? Does what you call something make any difference in what it really is? I’m not usually a “name-brand snob.” Generic is good enough for me provided the quality is still there. I don’t need to pay for the label. Besides, there’s that old saying about a rose by any other name still smelling sweet. But sometimes a name implies validity, “realness”, belonging and that’s what I thought I needed to really “fit” in the eyes of our son. Boy, was I wrong.

I am in the unusual position of bring an “almost mother.” In lots of ways, it is as good, or maybe even better, than the real thing. While Danny’s mom was recovering from his rather difficult birth, I gave him his first bath, counted all his little toes and fingers and fell even more silly-crazy in love with him than I was before he was born. We’ve read millions of books, him snuggled in my lap and, with both of us being more “morning people” than his mom, I regularly get to enjoy cuddly mornings full of laughs and giggles before work. I have practiced multiplication tables and spelling words, blown noses and cajoled the taking of foul-tasting medicine, just like “real moms” but that’s never how I saw myself.

Sometimes being “almost mother” is woefully inadequate though. I wasn’t the “real” thing, just the “almost.” And if you’re almost married—well, you’re still single, and if you’re almost grown—you’re still a kid, and if you have almost the right lottery numbers—you still have to get up and go to work the next morning. “Almost”, no matter what else it is, just isn’t “IT.” There isn’t even a real name for an “almost mother” so Danny has called me by my first name since he was old enough to call me anything at all. He has two parents, just like lots of kids, a “mama” and a “Ruth,” that’s just the way it is. People understand places that fathers, grandparents, and even stepfathers fit but where exactly on the family continuum does the “almost mother”, the “Ruth” go? I was never very sure, and if I’m the adult and it doesn’t make sense to me, how can I expect it to make sense to him?

That’s not to say that his mother regarded me as filling any position less important than hers with him. He is “our” child, our only son, our one-of-eight. He knows that he’s mine and I love him and would always be there for him but we could never be neatly wrapped into a standard “family package” or fit nicely onto that family tree diagram that is always one of the first pages in every baby book.

That line of demarcation gets even stronger when a child heads off into the “real world”— school. School forms leave room for fathers (or stepfathers or grandfathers, drafted willingly or unwillingly into the “father” role) as well as mothers and all the many variations that come with that. How was Danny going to fit me into the proscribed system when school forms and baby books don’t leave a blank line to fit me on?
His mom assured me that Danny could handle the differences between his family and others but I was always concerned that we just didn’t “fit.” I could vividly remember from childhood experience and adult observation how cruel kids could be when you (or anything about you) was “weird” and I didn’t know what he would answer to the questions that would surely, someday be asked.

One of the delights and burdens of parenthood is the class field trip. Children love them, teachers dread them and parents, under the leadership of the child’s classroom teacher, relive their own school experiences while accompanied by a handful of energetic youngsters. Since I am a teacher too, I know how hard is it something to get those absolutely necessary parent volunteers so I make a point of trying to be available when the need arises.

In the spring of Danny’s first grade year, a field trip to the science museum as planned and other parent was needed. Danny volunteered me and I was willing to go along. I usually teach eighth graders and prefer my charges to be more self sufficient but thought that I could handle first graders for one day. “It will be okay,” Danny assured me, “lots of mothers are coming too. You can do it.”

So, with that kind of recommendation, sack lunch in hand, off we go to school. Danny is bubbling with excitement and I am filled with apprehension. The kids in his class had met Danny’s “real” mother about a month earlier when she took our then-four-day-old baby for show-and-tell so they would know immediately that I am not the “real mother.” Questions ricochet through my head like popcorn popping in the microwave. Will they all think that I am a “mom impostor”? Is being an “almost mother” closer to being a “fake mom” than a “real” one? How is Danny going to describe me to them? How can a six-year-old explain what I have a hard time putting into words? Have we put him in a position that he will have to make something up? You can’t exactly lie about who your mother is, you shouldn’t even have to and besides, he knows how we feel about lying. So, what is he going to do?

The teacher assigned each parent a group of children to chaperone and I got two little girls, a little boy and Danny. I was trying to get to know them and bond our little group together so we were talking while we were waiting for the bus to get loaded and all the last minute paperwork and bookkeeping things to be done.

Esperanza, one of the little girls in our group, turned to Danny and asked the question that I had worried about ever since he started school and that had kept me up most of the previous night worrying. “Danny, I thought that long-haired lady was your mom. How come you have two mothers?”

All my fears dissolved instantly, as well as my scared and apprehensive heart, when he responded with the clear thought and pure innocence that only an elementary student possesses. “Just lucky, I guess.”

And me? Well, he’s mine, I love him and I’m just lucky too, I guess.

Author Ruth Pinkham is mother of eight children. Her blended family includes her two biological children, her partner Della’s two biological children, an adopted child, and three foster children they hope to adopt. They both teach middle school. She wrote this story about their only son when he was in the first grade.

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