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## Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

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### Hard Truths of Some Adoptions

By **LISA BELKIN**

Illustration by Barry Falls

A friend, an adoptive mother, said to me recently, “I have faced the fact that my daughter is only mine because I have more money than her birth mother.” That is a simple reality of adoption, she says, and yet it is so rarely spoken aloud.

Another common reality of adoption, particularly of older children from certain countries, is that almost overnight a child’s world changes completely — and sometimes, for the luckier ones, that world was one where she loved and was loved. That is one of the themes in the PBS documentary “*Wo Ai Ni, Mommy (I love you, Mommy)*” (available [online](#) until Nov. 1.)

It is also a lesson learned by KJ Dell’Antonia, who writes about family for places like Slate’s *XX Factor*, *Babble*, *Parents* and *Wondertime*. As an adoptive mother she watched the PBS film with recognition and chills. Her daughter already had a family back in China, she writes, and money was just one of the reasons the little girl is no longer theirs.

#### **ADOPTING A CHILD WHO ALREADY *HAS* A FAMILY (BUT STILL NEEDS ONE)**

By KJ Dell’Antonia

“I want to go home.”

It doesn’t really matter what or where home is, especially not if you’re a young kid, parted from your culture and country and navigating a world where nothing means what it once did. Whatever home is to you, when you’re miserable, when the world is hard and uncomfortable, the craving is universal: I do not want to endure. I want to go home.

When my daughter, adopted at nearly 4 years old from China but from a largely English-speaking home, first came to us, she said those words loud and clear, and she said them often. When you watch Sui Yong, the 8-year-old at the center of PBS’s documentary “*Wo Ai Ni, Mommy (I love you, Mommy)*,” adoptive mother Donna Sadowsky can’t understand the phrase, spoken by her daughter in Chinese — but the viewer can read the subtitles, and Sadowsky can read the rest: the tears, the tone, and the defeated little body curled up in the bed.

In adoption parlance, “Faith” Sadowsky has “come home,” but the Sadowsky house isn’t home for Sui Yong.

When asked by her daughter — later — why she wanted a child from China, mother Donna Sadowsky says she told the girl that “I needed a daughter, and you needed a family.” It’s not an unusual line; in fact, it’s fairly standard. It’s as good a way as any of making sense of the many forces that bring together parents and children in the adoption world. But from that child’s point of view — and from my own daughter’s — it isn’t true. Like many of the older children adopted from China now (and most Chinese adoptions now are of children older than 2 years) Sui Yong, now Faith, and my daughter already had families. Loving, close, treasured families. Families they couldn’t keep.

My daughter Rory lived with her foster parents from infancy. They took her in from the orphanage at 2 months old, in what was at first a simple foster family and grew gradually into a larger foster home. She was their first foster baby; she slept in their bedroom for the first year of her life. She loved them, and they her. They were unquestionably her family.

The most common view of adoption is the situation described by Donna Sadowsky: children who need families. Children in institutions and orphanages, with no future other than aging out of the system. It’s to China’s credit that it (with the help of many charitable institutions) has undertaken to change the first part of that equation. It’s impossible to get a figure on how many of China’s abandoned children are cared for by foster families, but anecdotally, I would estimate that perhaps a third of the families I know who’ve adopted within the last year have adopted a child who could already point to people he or she called Mama and Baba.

But even the most loving foster home can’t alter the second half of the problem. These children still need families because three out of every five children adopted from China in 2009 were what’s considered “special needs” children: children with a medical issue ranging from the mild and correctable (a cleft lip for my daughter, a club foot and other issues for Sui Yong/Faith Sadowsky) to more serious issues. Most Chinese are united in saying that these special-needs children have no future in China. In the documentary, Sui Yong’s foster father says that because of her disability, she would never find a job. When a friend of mine adopted a child with albinism, the foster mother said they longed to keep her — but that her glowing, beautiful foster daughter would never find anyone who would marry her or be able to create a family or life on her own. “We would support her,” she said, “but when we are gone, then what?”

For some of those children the answer to “then what” is adoption. In the long run, those kids are the fortunate ones. NPR’s Scott Simon has just written a beautiful book, [“Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other,”](#) in praise of the long run. It’s a love song to a miracle, the story of how he and his wife came to adopt two baby girls from China, interspersed with stories looking back at adoption in the lives of the people around him: adult adoptees, a college student adopted from

China in the 1980s, fellow China adoptive parents and parents who fostered and adopted teenagers in the United States. Not every story he tells is one with a cleanly happy ending (or even a happy middle), but it would be hard to argue that any adult or child in the book's life wasn't changed for the better by adoption. On questions like whether China should care better for its children or African children should be raised on their own continent or black children brought up in their own community, he is practical. These are not cultural talismans we are talking about, but children. And children need both families and futures.

But what Scott left out is what "*Wo Ai Ni, Mommy*" addresses head on: the short term. What if, to give a child both a family and a future, you have to rip her away from a family she already loves? In the long term, Rory was lucky. In the months after she came to us, she definitely didn't feel that way. Over and over again in the past year, my daughter has buried herself in her bed, screaming for her mommy, and we both know that I am not the mommy she's crying for. You can't watch "*Wo Ai Ni, Mommy's*" Sui Yong turn into Faith Sadowsky without being aware of all she loses in the process. Neither my Rory nor Sui Yong would have voluntarily given up her family for any amorphous future. But you can't deny the brutal truths that awaited both girls.

No matter what lofty proposals we may make for pushing China towards a society that's more accepting of differences, it would take a more optimistic soul than most to believe that things will change enough in the next decade for either Rory or Faith to have found in China the education, career and family life that they're likely to gain as our daughters. Their adoptions are at once loss and gain, with the added paradox that having been raised by a loving family will make it easier for my daughter to love me, and if she can, with my help, bounce back from the trauma of losing that family, she'll emerge as a stronger, more self-confident and more empathetic person. It's a contradiction that adoptive families have to embrace. In Simon's book, we see the blessing; in "*Wo Ai Ni,*" the tragedy.

The miracle of adoption isn't just the creation of a family from disparate, distant people. Adoption is a phoenix; a miracle that arises from the ashes of despair. A baby is abandoned, a family lost and a whole new world gained. Like nearly everything else, an adoptive family is born of both joy and pain.

I loved Scott Simon's book. When I asked him about it, he said several times that he hoped to open a door into adoption, and he's done that. His is the book for parents on the fence, for couples ready to abandon fertility clinics and families ready to extend themselves still further into the world and for their extended families, who don't yet understand what adoption can and will mean.

But "*Wo Ai Ni, Mommy*" is mandatory viewing. While Simon took the long view, filmmaker Stephanie Wang-Breal laid bare the rocky places and complexities that lie between here and there, and without an honest acceptance of those shoals, we can't cross them. The children we

bring “home” can want to go home, and we as parents (and friends, teachers, grandparents) can grieve for that, and be frustrated by it, and struggle with it ourselves, even as we help them through it — and still get to Scott Simon’s happy ending.

Children who have a family can still need a family, and if they’re really, truly lucky, may end up with both: a family here in the United States, where whatever our remaining issues surrounding race and class and physical differences may be, they’re not the road blocks they represent in many other countries; and a family in their first country, a link between past and future and an incentive to go back and cement that tie. If they can learn to accept and even draw strength from that complexity, both Faith and Rory may one day be in a position to make the changes that are so obviously necessary in a world where not every loving family can offer its children the future that they deserve.