

Diane Pennington: My name's Diane Pennington.

Jena Heath: Diane, tell me about your experience of adopting Emi. What led you to the decision? If you don't mind telling me how old you were and what the circumstances were like and how it all went.

Diane: I don't have a short version, so I'll just tell you. I was a product of television when there was always some sort of a needy children thing going on when I was growing up. I was really touched by children without parents in other countries. As long as I can remember, I had wanted to adopt, in addition to what I assumed would be natural-born kids. I lived in New York City. I was a musical theater performer for about twenty-five years. I made my living in New York. I was always moving around. Building a natural family like that is difficult at best. When I got into my forties, I went back to school to finish my undergrad that I never had finished. I switched to a degree in psychology for special populations. While I was doing all of that, I really started contemplating where I wanted my life to go. I really want to be a mother. I really want to adopt.

I started researching all of the different options and looking at different countries. I heard all kinds of horror stories about adopting from Russia and from South America. When I was growing up, my parents were very influenced by all things Asian. My house had a lot of Asian décor in it. My dad travelled quite a bit for his work. I grew up with a lot of Asian influence and respect for the culture. I thought I need to adopt from a culture that I know I can embrace, aside from some of the political things and all of that. I was about forty-five when Emi came home. It took me almost two years to go through all the paperwork. I had started the process. In fact financially, I was doing it incrementally and wondering where the next piece was going to be coming from. I was in the waiting process at this point.

My dad came to live with me. He was elderly. He wasn't doing well. He came to live with me. My sister also came. We took care of my dad. I remember having a conversation with him one night. I said, "Dad, I just don't know how I'm going to complete this adoption process." He said to me, "I've left you money in my will." I said, "Hold it right there, Dad. Hold it. I don't want to hear that. I want you around. I want you to know this baby. I want you to raise her and teach her all of your rotten habits, how to be a Pennington and all of that." The next year my dad passed away. I don't know if he knew. [emotional] I can't talk about it without crying, so I'm just going to cry. Sorry, Emi. It was one of those synchronistic things where the amount that he had left me was the amount that was needed, not exactly. It was one of those "wow" moments. I was able to complete the adoption. Within the next year, she came home.

Emi's dad -- you can't make these kinds of stories up. Emi's dad and I had met while I was mid-adoption process. He said, "You're adopting?" I go, "Yeah. It's going happen. You can come along for the ride or not." He did, kicking and screaming at first. He went with me to China. I continued as a single adoption. When we went to China, he was there. He went through everything. He was there and held her the first night and all of that. He fell in love with her. After she came home, we were together for about a year and a half. We decided

that we weren't going to stay together. Her dad has been very, very committed and very in her life ever since then. Her dad lives in Carmel, New York. She goes and spends summers with him. We have a very interesting family constellation. Anyway, we came back. We were living in Carmel, New York. The whole thing of being in China and having a child handed to you and all of that waiting up until that moment in time, you can't get ready for it. Then all of a sudden, you have a child. They hand it to you. Here's your daughter. It felt very natural.

Jena: How old was Emi?

Diane: Emi turned a year old the day after we got home.

Jena: What was your family day, your gotcha day?

Diane: It was June 11th, 2002.

Jena: Those initial first years are one kind of experience. For those of us who have younger children, can you give us some forecast? Can you help us out here? What are we looking forward to?

Diane: I don't want to be negative. The things that I remember the most are the hard things. The good stuff, I can look back on the video and I go, "I remember that. That was so cute," seeing her dancing. She'd have the music on. She'd be dancing to *Mickey Mouse Club* or something, a lot of the cute moments that we managed to capture on video. There was a gap when I didn't have a video camera anymore. What I remember is, "Oh, my gosh. My back hurts so badly," when I'm carrying her and bouncing her in the middle of the night trying to get her back to sleep. I thought, "I am too old for this." [laughs] There have been many times when I have thought, "What was I thinking that I could do that at this age?" The truth is I don't think of myself as old. I joke about it, but I really don't think of myself as old. I'm a little older than her friends' parents. People have called me, "Is this your grandma?"

Emi Pennington: No, because you were in car. My friends didn't actually see you because the windows were tinted. My friend asked me if that was my grandma. I'm like, "Nope. That's my mom." They're like, "Oh, your mom's pretty."

Diane: Nice save. [laughs]

Jena: Does your mom being a little bit older, has that been something that you're aware of and makes you feel a little self-conscious?

Emi: Not really. My friend Jolie, the other Asian that was adopted, her parents are in their sixties. I'm not really self-conscious, and they're really sweet.

Jena: What would your version of this story be? What's your story? Do you have any memory at all of China?

Emi: No.

Jena: Have you been back?

Emi: Nope.

Jena: Do you have any interest in going back?

Emi: Maybe when I get older, much older. I want to go visit France and everything before I visit China.

Jena: You're interested in seeing the world. China isn't necessarily number one on your list just because you were born there?

Emi: I don't know. I've been wanting to go see the Eiffel Tower since I was little. I didn't think much about China when I was little, so I don't know.

Jena: How much do you think about being adopted? You're obviously very close to your family. Do you think at all about your biological parents?

Emi: That's one reason why I might want to go back to China, to see where I got my genes from. Other than that, I don't think about them. When I tell people I'm adopted, they're always like, "Aw." I'm like, "Okay, whatever that's supposed to mean." I guess I'll take it. Every person that I tell that I was adopted, they go, "Aw." I'm used to it.

Jena: What do you think they mean by that "Aw?" What do you think they're trying to express?

Emi: Like, "Aw, she's adopted?" I don't know.

Jena: Is it correct to say that people's questions and reactions are actually what's annoying, not the fact of being adopted? Do you know what I mean?

Emi: Kind of.

Diane: Especially when you see us together.

Jena: I was going to ask about that. What's that like when people see you together? How has that changed? What's it like for you, Emi?

Emi: Usually every Friday, we go to this Asian market. We go get our pad thai on. When we walk into the market, everyone stares at us. They don't give us chopsticks because she's white. I guess they don't think she knows how to use them, which is dumb.

Diane: Since I taught her. [laughs]

Jena: What about from people who are not Asian? Do you get much reaction from people who are not Asian?

Emi: Not really. They become my best friends usually.

Jena: The reaction to your having a mom who's not Chinese, you're usually feeling it from the Asian people at the Asian market?

Emi: That's the only place. Other than that, I'm over at my friend's all the time. We just hang out.

Jena: What's it like for you when you're out with her? What's it like to not be given the chopsticks? I'm curious about how that's changed as she's gotten older.

Diane: Actually when she was a baby, people got it more. That was when there was more frequency of adoption. It was more in the news. People go, "Oh." You could see them connecting the dots. "Doesn't look like her. She's holding the baby. She's treating her like a real child and fussing at her. That must be her mom. She must have been adopted." I kind of enjoy watching people go through that whole process, sometimes is fun. I got all of the stupid questions. "Is this really your child?" "Yeah, I just changed her diaper." More importantly, the other questions are like, "Is your husband Chinese?" I realized that could be. Over the years, people have gotten more used to it. I've noticed on the other side of things, especially at school with your friends and stuff when we'd be going to some sort of something together and we'd walk up, I could see her friends trying to put it together.

Emi: Then they're not my friends because all of my friends know that I'm adopted.

Diane: That's changed too because we've been here long enough that everyone has known her for a while. It's become a nonissue. I get, "Is that your daughter?" a lot still. I just try to be gracious with it now. My interior monologue is, "Really? Really, you went there?" Talking about the birth parents, I'm in a very different place than she is. I have always been deeply aware of the fact that someone couldn't keep her. Someone gave birth to her. She was then entrusted to me and her dad. I feel very strongly about that. I put myself in her shoes often.

Jena: In the birth mom's shoes?

Diane: In the birth mother's shoes and think, "Wonder what she's thinking now." I wonder if Emi has any other birth siblings. We've talked about it over the years. I haven't pushed, right?

Emi: Mm-mm.

Diane: I've said if there's ever any point in time when you would be interested in learning about your birth family, if there's any information we can get -- it's the disappointment of that that I want to be really up front with her. It may or may not happen. I've been saying since she was a baby, I hope at some point in time that there's a voluntary DNA registry that is such that at some point in time she could put her DNA and then if they ever found a match, then we could pursue that if she wanted to at that time. I think it's important if she was ever able to either discover siblings or look in the face of her birth mother and go, "That's where that came from." I want that for her. I don't feel threatened by it. Of course, it's in all in my imagination so the reality of it may be very different. I saw a film -- I'm trying to remember what it was -- where the adopted mother went through that whole process. They did find her birth family. I was paying close attention to her mother in the background, stepping back and watching, seeing what that was like for her.

Jena: For the adoptive mother?

Diane: The adoptive mother to see her child connecting with the birth family. If at some point in time she wants to pursue that, I will be very supportive. We will go where we need to go to learn.

Jena: How do you feel about it?

Emi: One reason why I don't want a DNA test is because they have to stick you with a needle.

Jena: They can swab the inside of your mouth. They don't have to stick you with a needle. You just take a Q-tip.

Emi: Does it have to go all the way down?

Jena: No. It's not like a strep test. They swab the side of your mouth. You send it off in the mail to 23andMe, which is a place that does DNA testing. If this helps your thinking at all, I've talked now to a handful of families who have in fact found birth families and verified through DNA testing.

Diane: On their end, they voluntarily...

Jena: I'd be curious to know how you feel about this, Emi. There are parents who start searching almost as soon as they bring their child home. Their belief is, "If I wait, the trail could go cold," in terms of if there was a finder identified in the documentation, the person who found you, depending on where the child was. If that finder can be verified, it's not always a road, but it can be. One family I heard from is from The Netherlands. The mother contacted me from China. They were in the village of the birth parents. They had verified through DNA testing. They spend part of their summers with their daughter's birth family. She said, "Do you think you'd be interested in our story?" I was like, "Uh, yes." [laughs] They were still in China. All this is to say, your view of it is one way. What is your view of

it? How does it feel for you, the idea of potentially looking or finding? It doesn't sound from what you said before like it's something you really want to do?

Emi: Right now, it's not. I don't really think about it ever.

Diane: You're more worried about school and boys.

Emi: Totally. I'm boy-crazy, a lot of boy-crazy.

Diane: She's fourteen.

Jena: Do you have any fears about it? Is there anything that gives you pause, that makes you feel anxious about potentially finding? What would it be like to have siblings that you didn't know?

Emi: I've been wanting at least a little brother or something. I thought it would be really cool to have a little brother. You sass back. [laughs] Plus, not a younger, little girl because then she'll take my spotlight. So, no.

Jena: The idea of siblings is kind of appealing, intriguing at least.

Emi: Yeah.