

'Birth moms' like Gina Bruystens understand that when a woman gives up a child for adoption, the control is all hers.

NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR MY BABY

By Lisa Belkin

In the three weeks since her baby was born, Gina Bruystens, 23, has feverishly, defiantly and exultantly done all the things she could not do when she was pregnant. She has pierced her ears, adding one more hole to the right side and two more holes to the left. She has also dyed her hair, using a bottle of 40 percent peroxide solution that she found at Hot Topic, a punk boutique near her home in Cucamonga, Calif. The goal was white streaks, but instead it all turned a rusty pumpkin orange, an accident she likes enough to keep.

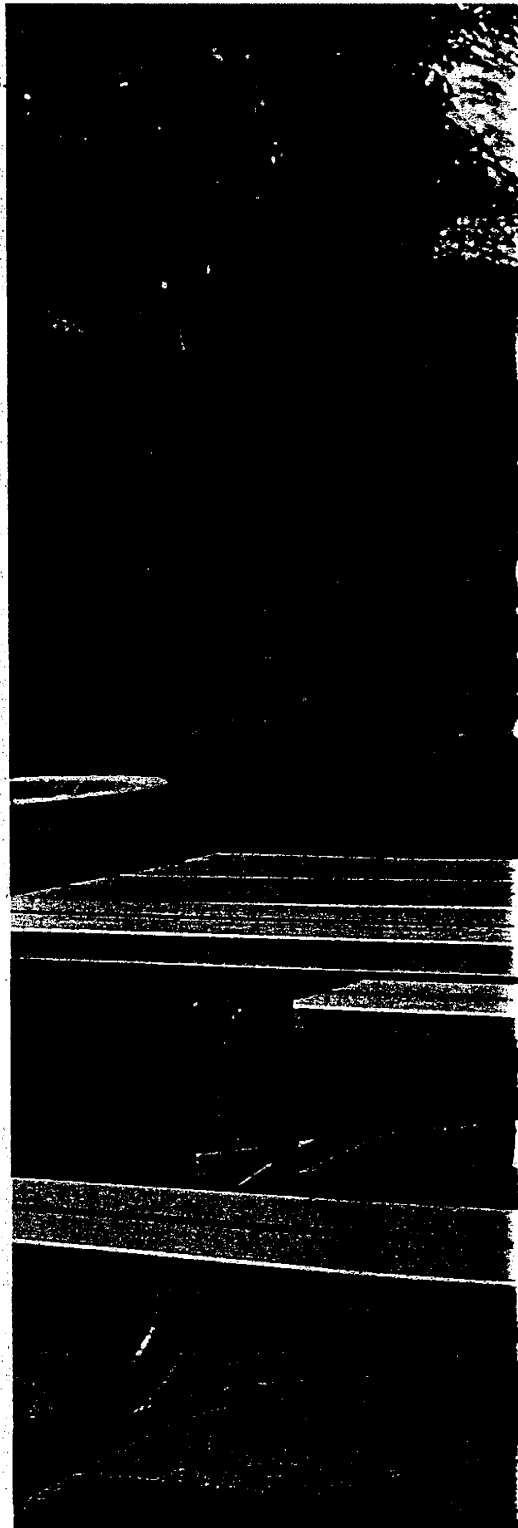
Now she is considering a new tattoo. She already has one on her right shoulder, a picture of Bamm-Bamm of "The Flintstones" and the name Andrew. It is a tribute to her 5-year-old son, who somehow managed to break a fish tank with his head when he was still a toddler. She imagines a companion image for her left shoulder, a bouncy newborn and the name Michael. He will stay forever a baby on her body because he lives 3,000 miles away in Massachusetts. In early January, Gina gave the boy up for adoption.

Gina's mother, who spent months trying to get her daughter into keeping the child, is appalled at what the young woman has been doing lately — the Halloween hair, the pincushion ears,

the scrapbook etched on her skin. "She's trying to play the part," she says, sitting in the kitchen of her comfortably cluttered four-bedroom ranch while Gina readies herself with a curling iron down the hall. "She's out of control."

Gina, on the other hand, says her mother has it backward. If she has learned anything over the past nine months, it is that she is in control. In that way, she is typical of the 1990's birth mother, or "birth mom," as she calls herself. Time was when surrendering a child for adoption was a desperate choice made by young women, girls really, who were victims of circumstance. But there is nothing desperate or directionless about Gina. She could have chosen an abortion. She could have opted to keep her baby. Her decision was not desperate but deliberate. It was not about helplessness; it was about control.

"The big surprise, both to the birth mothers and the adoptive couple, is that, for the most part, the birth mother is very much in charge," says Judy Greene, who has been director of birth parent services at Spence-Chapin Adoption Agency



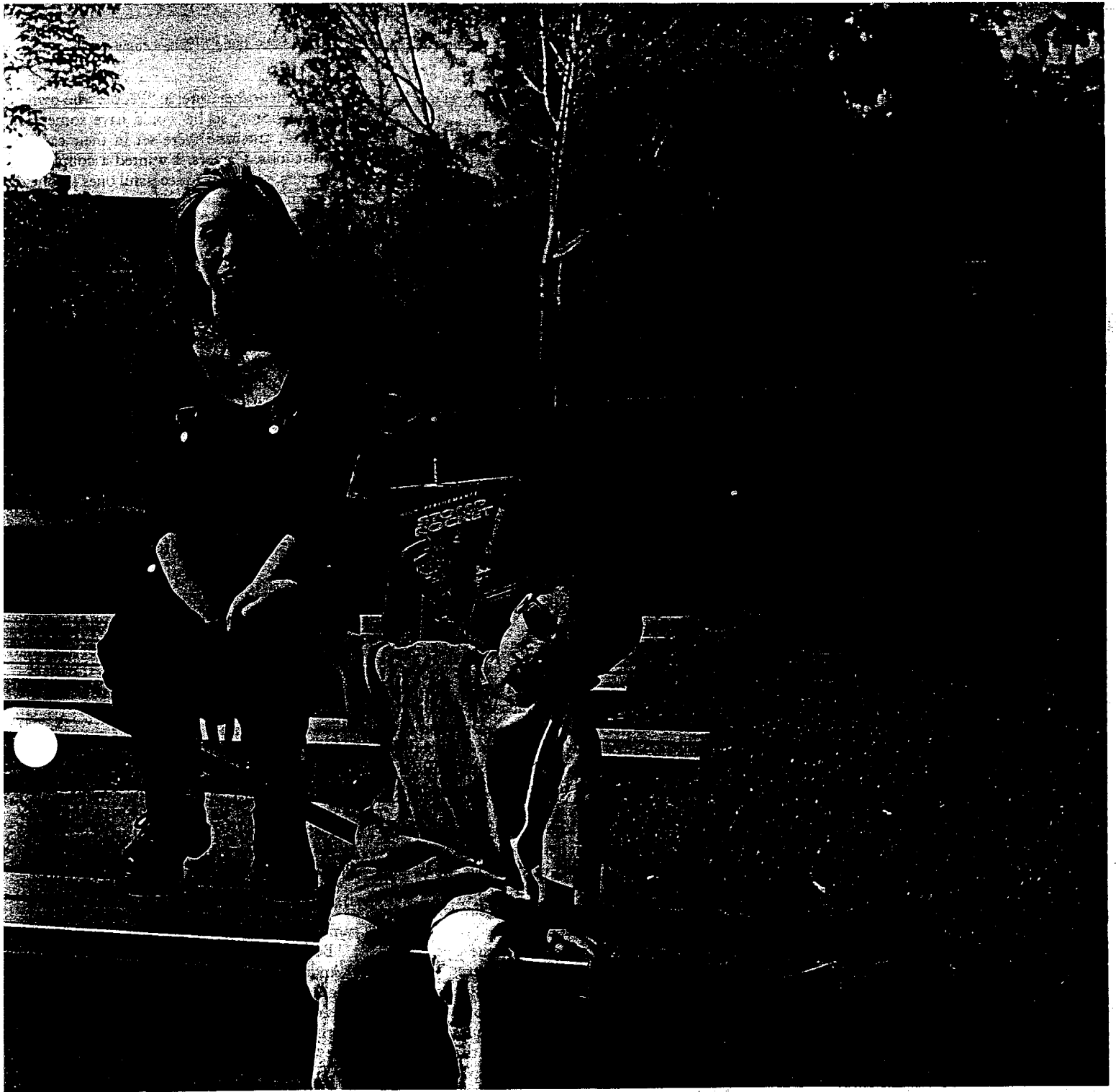
A new breed: Gina Bruystens, unlike previous generations o

for 12 years. It is the birth mother who chooses, she explains, while the couples wait to be chosen.

"These are not like the women of 20, 30 years ago, where things were done to them," Greene says. "And they come away from the experience with very different feelings."

In that way, the stripes in Gina's hair can be seen as a demarcation line across her life: before Michael, after Michael. "I'm responsible for me," she says, carefully tucking an orange curl behind one ear. "I can make my own choices, and I'm not going to let anyone else tell me what to do."

Lisa Belkin is a contributing writer to the magazine.



...se the adoptive parents of her unborn child. Above, she is with her first son, Andrew, who is 5.

There are no exact figures on how many infants are relinquished for adoption each year. The most often cited estimate, from a 1989 survey by the National Council for Adoption, is that nearly 25,000 babies in the U.S. are adopted by nonrelatives. In 1970, by contrast, some 75,000 babies were put up for adoption. In general, before 1973, 9 percent of all children born to never-married women were given up for adoption, compared with 2 percent between 1973 and 1981 and 2 percent in the period from 1982 to 1988.

In the 10 years since then, the percentages

seem to have continued to decline. But although this statistical trend is continuing, everything else about adoption has changed, and that includes the women who become birth mothers. One study, by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, found that the older the woman and the higher her level of education, the more likely it is that she will choose adoption for her out-of-wedlock child rather than keeping the baby herself.

"The average age of our birth mothers is 26," says Carol Gindi, executive director of Adoption

Network, a Southern California organization that has matched 600 birth mothers and adoptive couples over the last five years. "Many are in their 30's, and we've had several in their 40's."

Gina Bruystens was not quite 23 when she joined this group. She had been dating Michael's father for several months, she says, but when she told him she was pregnant, he denied that the baby could be his. The first branch on her decision tree was abortion, which she could not bring herself to do.

"If I had an abortion, I honestly thought I

ink that he is just starting to go through puberty and is scared. I'm glad to know that other parents are experiencing the same thing." "I had some kid-free time last

It was the first time in her life when Gina had something that so many people wanted. Sitting cross-legged on her bed, she separated the applicants into two piles — those whose lives she might consider changing, and those who would have to look elsewhere.

would commit suicide," she says. "Somewhere along the line, it would get a hold of me and it would probably suffocate me." Her parents and grandparents are Mexican, and she was raised in a Roman Catholic home. The hell she fears is not the one that comes after death, she says, but the one that is built of regret here on earth.

Having rejected abortion, Gina then thought about keeping this baby. That is, after all, what she had done when Andrew was born nearly five years ago. But looking back, she realized that although she did keep Andrew, she had never *decided* to do so. From the moment she learned she was pregnant that first time, she says, she had assumed that since she did not feel prepared for a baby, she would not actually have a baby. For nearly the entire pregnancy, she was certain she would miscarry. During labor, she was sure he would be stillborn. When he contracted meningitis at the age of 2, she stood by his bedside and thought: "This is it. I wasn't meant to be a mom."

But she was a mom, a single, struggling mom, who knew she was not ready to do all it takes to care for a second child. "It wasn't that I didn't want him," she says of her decision to relinquish this second baby for adoption. "It's that I could not have him."

When she told her parents of her plans, she says, her father, who works in a warehouse, was calm and supportive. Her mother, who works in an insurance office, was emotional and disapproving, urging her to keep the baby. "I told my mother, 'I have to do what's right for me, not what would have been right for you.'"

Using the Yellow Pages as her only guide, Gina called Adoption Network. Within two days a representative from that office had arrived in Cucamonga to meet with her, and within a few weeks Gina received a stack of 31 applications from couples looking to adopt a baby. Each contained a photo of the hopeful couple photocopied on a carefully chosen piece of stationery — hearts, rainbows, flowers — designed to catch her attention. Under the photograph was a letter, addressed to whom they wanted Gina to be, everything from "Dear Birth Mother" to "To the Woman Who Could Make Our Hopes and Dreams Come True."

It was, as she tells it, the first time in her life that she had something of such value, something so many people wanted. Sitting cross-legged on her bed, she separated the applicants into two piles — those whose lives she might consider changing and those who would have to look elsewhere.

"I didn't even read the ones from people who

already had babies," she says. "They know the joys of that already. I wanted to give someone else the chance, who hadn't had it before."

THE DAVE & BUSTER'S RESTAURANT IN THE Ontario Mills Mall near Cucamonga is a 60,000-square-foot restaurant-arcade — an experience in sensory overload so huge that first-timers require a map. Andrew, however, is no first-timer, and he races gleefully from the M-4 Flight Simulator to Power Home Run Derby, where the bat is taller than he is.

Dave & Buster's is where Gina was working, repairing arcade machines on the restaurant's midway, when she first learned she was pregnant. Two months into her pregnancy, she was fired. "I was late too much," she says. "I was sick all the time then, but I didn't tell them why. They were nice about it, but they fired me."

For a while she earned extra money baby-sitting and "couch dancing" at a nearby strip club, where she went by the name Ginger. The baby-sitting earned her only \$100 a week. The nude dancing could bring in as much as \$400 a night. "I did it because it was good money," she says. "I challenge anyone to tell me there's something wrong with that." Eating little but fruits and vegetables, she stayed thin enough to dance into her fourth month.

Spurred on by the knowledge that she would soon have nothing but her savings, she made a final selection from the pile of applications. She chose a Mexican husband with a Caucasian wife. Her baby, she knew, would have a similar genetic makeup, "so however he turns out, people wouldn't question his heritage," she says.

That pairing didn't last long, however. The couple, while initially enthusiastic, began to waver. "They kept asking a lot of questions about me and my life," she says. "The same questions over and over again, like they didn't like the answers." More important, they couldn't help her pay the \$700 monthly rent for the apartment where she lived. "I was going to lose the apartment," she says. "I couldn't keep waiting around for them."

The stack of letters in her bedroom made her certain that she could find someone who could better meet her needs. When she went back to that stack, it was with not only a new sense of urgency but also a more specific sense of what she was looking for. The first couple, she decided, lived too close. "They were 45 minutes away from here, and I didn't know how I would feel years from now," she says. "I didn't want to become one of those crazy women you read about who stand out in the schoolyard stalking their kid."

Among her other criteria: "People who owned their own home, so he would have someplace permanent, and who were set in their careers. Not just jobs. Careers. I wanted a couple that had careers, and pretty successful ones so one of them didn't have to work."

In the end, it was Andrew who selected Jamie M., a vice president in an advertising agency, and her husband, also named Andrew, an executive in a family-owned business. (The couple requested that their last name not be used.) Their photo showed them sitting on the beach near their home in Massachusetts with their golden retriever and miniature schnauzer. The little boy saw the picture and was smitten with the dogs. His delight led Gina to reread their letter, which ended: "You hold within you a miracle and a gift. We will nurture, love and mold your miracle. Your precious gift of life we will all be proud of. We hope you will want to meet with us, and then we will be able to tell you more about our desire to parent in person." She called them soon after, and the conversation lasted more than two hours.

"We clicked," she says. "Just like that."

IT IS LUNCHTIME, AND ANDREW HAS RELUCTANTLY left the arcade area to join his mother in a Dave & Buster's booth. Waiting for his fried mozzarella sticks, he proudly writes the letter A over and over on a piece of paper.

"Great," says Gina. "Now make an N. Up-down-up, remember?" I ask her if she would rather not talk about the adoption while Andrew is within earshot, but she shrugs the question away.

"He knows all about it," she says, then turns to the boy.

"Why did baby Michael go to live with Big Andrew and Jamie?" she asks.

"Because they didn't have a baby," he answers.

"Why did baby Michael grow in Mommy's tummy?" she continues.

"Because Jamie's tummy was broken."

Andrew was with Gina the day she first met "big Andrew" and Jamie in a waiting area at the offices of Adoption Network. It was two weeks after their initial phone conversation, and by that time Gina's experience with the first couple led her to tell this couple the worst about herself from the beginning. "I didn't just want to blurt everything out, but I wanted them to know so if they disapproved, I could move on," she says. So she mentioned that she had hurt her back dancing.

"Oh," Jamie asked, "what kind of dancing do you do?"

"They took it well," Gina remembers.

Andrew says, "We were taken aback, but later I said to Jamie: 'What did you expect? A concert pianist?'"

Then Gina told them her other big secret — her history of manic depression. She has been under treatment for the condition on and off since she was 17 but had stopped taking her pills a couple of years before she became preg-

ound myself checking out men in the grocery store instead of the produce. I'm wondering if after four-plus years I'm starting to show signs of desperation." "When n

nant because she didn't like the side effects. The news jolted the couple, but they quickly accepted this fact, too. "If you were to look at my genes, they're not perfect either," Jamie says.

"You can't worry about it until it happens," Andrew says. "Mostly, we were impressed that she told us. Our pediatrician said, 'You're incredibly lucky, because a lot of birth mothers will just say that everything is fine.'"

By the end of the meeting, both Gina and the couple had agreed to go forward with the adoption, although both sides knew that state law allowed either party to back out for any reason at any time until the final postpartum papers were signed. Once again, it was little Andrew who sealed the deal. The couple were entranced by the polite, happy boy who provided them a glimpse into their own child's future. And Gina was touched by the affectionate way these strangers treated her son. "They'll be good parents," she says.

By the time Gina called them, Jamie and Andrew M. had been searching for a baby for nearly six months. When they first signed on with Adoption Network, they had been told that six months is about as long as it takes to match a couple with a birth mother, and as time passed and their phone did not ring, "we began to wonder what was wrong with us, why we weren't being chosen," Andrew M. says.

When they finally matched with Gina, therefore, left Andrew and Jamie thrilled but wary. They were relieved to finally be wanted but worried that the choice would be short-lived. Their shorthand phrase was "the reserve" — their reminder to themselves that the arrangement could easily fall apart and that they needed to keep some of their emotions in check so that they did not fall apart, too.

Their formal arrangement, consistent with California law, involved payment of \$400 a month and some medical bills during the pregnancy (there was also a \$12,500 payment to the California agency and \$6,000 to an assisting agency in Texas). But the informal reality meant that they became a part of the young woman's life. She called, often in tears, describing her latest difficulties. By the time she hung up, she felt better, pleased that this pregnancy provided her with two extra sets of sympathetic shoulders. Across the country, however, Andrew and Jamie were shaken by these conversations.

Early on, for instance, Gina sobbed that none of her clothes fit and she could not afford to go shopping. Andrew and Jamie shipped a box of brand-new maternity clothes the next day, along with a small stuffed golden retriever for little Andrew. Later problems were less easily solved. Gina's mother, they learned, was still urging her to keep the baby. She had even talked of going to court to claim custody, in keeping with California's recognition of grandparent rights. "We hung up and tried not to panic," Andrew says.

Come November, Andrew and Jamie had something else to worry about. Gina, now in her seventh month of pregnancy, had begun to lose weight. The baby, her doctors said, was failing to grow, and Gina's cervix was beginning to dilate. She was ordered to stay in bed, which meant she could no longer baby-sit for extra money. Nor could she responsibly take care of Andrew.

The most obvious solution — that she move back home with her parents — at first appeared unworkable. Her mother, determined not to bond with the baby, said she could not bear to be that close to the unborn child for that long a time. The adoption agency offered to find Gina one of their "birth mom" apartments, but there would be no room for Andrew, and that fact seemed to have changed Gina's mother's mind. She invited her daughter and grandson back home, where they lived for the remainder of Gina's pregnancy. Michael's birth was a scheduled induced delivery, arranged by Gina's doctor so that the adoptive parents could fly out in time. The night before the baby was due to be born, Gina's mother came into Gina's childhood bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Nervous but determined, she gently told her daughter that it was not too late to change her mind.

"We can make room for him here," she said.

Gina would not be swayed.

"I don't want to make room for this baby," she answered. "I want him to go someplace where room is already made for him."

ON JAN. 6, 1998, GINA BRUYSTENS ENTERED THE Pomona Valley Hospital near Cucamonga, where she received IV medication to induce her labor. The birthing room was crowded: Andrew and Jamie were there, along with Gina's parents, her sister and brother and her son. Gina received no painkillers during the 11 hours of labor, because she had read that "it's not good for the

baby and I wanted to give them a healthy baby." Healthy he was, weighing 7 pounds 7 ounces, and when the nurses handed the swabbed and swaddled infant to Gina, she waved them off and gestured toward Jamie.

"Here, Mom," Gina said, as the baby was placed in his adoptive mother's arms.

She was not sad at that moment, she says. In fact, her emotions were ones of studied distance. "He was like a stranger," she says. "When he came out, my first thought was, 'He's not mine.' I felt so guilty. I still feel guilty that I thought that. I do love him, but I don't think of him as mine. He had light brown hair and he was just so white."

It is the birth mother who fills out the birth certificate, and Gina named the child Michael Joseph after two friends at Dave & Buster's who gave her free meals and game cards when her money was particularly tight. Andrew and Jamie had planned to change his first name, a symbolic, proprietary act of most adoptive parents. But young Andrew, they knew, had started calling the baby Michael in the months before he was born, and so instead they named the boy Michael James. "He thought of his brother as Michael," Jamie says. "We didn't want to take that from him."

The couple stayed just outside Cucamonga for 10 days, caring for their newborn in their hotel room and, in the true spirit of a 1990's open adoption, visiting Gina and her family for dinner. At one point, Gina's mother took Jamie aside and said simply, "I see now why my daughter thinks the world of you." Gina does not know what caused the change of heart — maybe it was seeing how well the new parents were doing with the baby; maybe it was seeing how well Gina was doing without the baby. (Gina's mother refused to be interviewed for this article.) Whatever the reason, she has now made peace with her daughter's decision. "It was the right thing," she said, during our one brief conversation in her kitchen. "I didn't think it was at first, but now I do."

The day before the couple flew back home, they took Andrew to the park and left Michael in Gina's care for an hour. She had never been alone with the baby, and they thought she might need time to say goodbye.

"I apologized," she says of her first and final conversation with her son. "I apologized for not having the things that he needed, for not having the family he needed, for not giving him a father."

She saw the family off at the airport. The next day, they called her from their Massachusetts home. They told her about the plane flight and about how much he ate and slept. Then Gina made one final request: she asked them not to call her for a while.

"You have your son now," she said. "I housed him for nine months. I took care of him as best I could. I had the easy part; now you guys have the hard part. You don't need to check in with me anymore." ■

The Smug Part

AN PLESHETTE MURPHY, editor in chief of Parents magazine, is the mother of one girl, 11, and one boy, 7. She lives in New York City.

"There's an old joke: 'Why does it take 10,000 sperm to fertilize one egg? Because none of them will stop to ask for directions.' Women know men won't ask for help on unfamiliar turf. Without role models for taking care of kids, even the most liberated man can metamorphose into Ward Cleaver."