

Isla On Placement Day

I decided to walk to work today. My counsellor reminded me that it's good for stress. It's so pretty outside - the sun is out but it's colder than I thought. I stop at a bench to rest my bag and put on my jacket. There's laughter - and look up to see a little girl playing at the park across the way. My gosh, she's cute...probably no older than six...and giggling like heck as she comes down the slide. A young woman at a nearby bench watching her. The girl's joyfulness makes me smile. "Mommy, Mommy watch me!" She runs to the top of the slide again and takes off, squealing the whole way down - her mom cheering her on. Whoa. My heart drops to my stomach, my brain floods with memories. This is the same park Sam and I used to come to when we lived with my mom. Sam loved running around the playground - stopping and starting, stopping and starting. My mom and I would look up to see her crouched down - usually picking up her next treasures. Once Sam had decided on the shiniest rock or prettiest leaf, she'd run over to us, shouting about how beautiful it was and hand it to her grandma for safe keeping. Sam would be off again, full speed toward the playground and her next adventure. I wish I'd remembered to save those treasures after mom died.... Mom always packed snacks for our days in the park - she took such good care of Sam and me. I felt so numb a lot of the time in those days - kinda like I do now. I was so lucky to have mom there to do so much for Sam when I couldn't.

Uhghh- there you go, Isla, daydreaming again. I do that pretty often...get caught up in the past and lost in my thoughts. It's part of what goes on with my mental health condition. I have to remind my brain to focus *all the time*...until I forget again - and find that minutes, sometimes hours, have passed without me even knowing. Speaking of...I'm going to be late for work if I'm not careful. And I can't afford to lose another job. Time to pick up the pace, Isla! I put my head down and focus on getting to work, one step at a time. It doesn't take me long to get there and as I push open the door to the post office, I hear my co-worker shout, "Morning Isla! Looks like you just beat the rain." I glance over my shoulder and see the sidewalk sprinkled with rain drops. (Whewph!)

As usual, Erin begins our morning with her non-stop chatter. I try to sneak past her to put my things away, but Erin's too quick, and pulls me back to ask about my weekend. I mumble something about laundry and an appointment and suddenly think about Jennifer. Jen's been my counsellor for 8 months now. She's been super supportive through this process... with Sam's adoption transition. Today is a big day, actually. THE big day....placement day. The day I've dreaded but also wanted for a long time now. Ahghg, Isla. How can a mom say they WANT this?!! But I do....because it's what's best for SAM. And I will do anything for her...even this...if it gives her a good and stable life...something that I can't do.

Jen and I met yesterday to talk about today and what kind of support I might need. It's weird to think how comfortable I've gotten talking to her. At our first few meetings, I didn't want to share at all. I mean, her questions about my childhood and parents made me really uncomfortable. She could kind of tell that I wasn't cool about it though. She kept reminding me that our meetings were a "safe space". And then she shared a big secret of hers - that she's a birth mom too - and placed her baby for adoption when she was 19. I'm pretty sure that's the reason why my social worker recommended her. It did make me feel more relaxed - like she wasn't going to be all judgy. You know how some people can be....

I don't like to talk about my personal life with *anyone*. Most people don't understand what it's like to live with mental illness, and they *always* seem to have opinions about it. With Jen, it was maybe our

fourth or fifth meeting before I shared stuff about the real struggles I have. Jen helped me understand that placing Sam for adoption was a decision I made because I have a mental health condition - something that's not my fault, but that means I struggle with daily living. I'm a mom who needs support, who can make the best choices for my child. That's why I decided that Sam should be adopted. I didn't want Sam's childhood to be like mine, or for her to have to live with all the problems that my mental health issues cause. I want her to have a positive, stable environment to grow up in - that's what every parent wants for their kid, right?

Ack. Did it again. I gotta stop getting lost in my thoughts - but that's probably going to be hard today. And...Erin is *still* talking about her weekend. It looks like it's going to be a slow day at the post office. An elderly woman comes in and I help her pick the right box for a gift she's sending her grandson. She talks about him the entire time. "He's the first in our family to go to college" she says. "We're all so proud!" "He's such a smart boy". She gushes about his accomplishments - and I can't blame her. Erin processes the transaction, and I give the lady a wave as she leaves. I always smile politely at customers, no matter what I feel like - but I feel so drained today.

I love my job here. I keep things tidy and restock the post office supplies. Sometimes I have to organize the parcels in the back too. The door rings again and Erin greets the next customer - a man with a toddler. I stand with my broom watching his kid run around in his rain boots. He's smiling and laughing and grabbing everything in his reach. So much for my tidying! Erin puts through the transaction, the dad looks at me apologetically, picks up the boy, and heads out.

Erin looks at me and continues her chatter. "Awww, did you see that baby? Too cute with the rain suit! Can't you wait to dress up your own baby like that???". My stomach does a back flip and sinks. She doesn't know about Sam. Very few people in my life now know about Sam. (Sigh) This isn't the first-time it's gotten to me. A few months ago, I was at the pharmacy picking up my prescription. The woman in front of me was holding the world's chubbiest baby. Its eyes were the size of loonies. The baby squealed and waved its puffy marshmallow arms toward me as if to say hello. The woman turned around and chatted with me as we waited. We shared our plans for the upcoming holiday and talked about ordinary things like the weather. I asked her how old her baby was, and she said 8 months. "Do you have any children", she asked. My stomach dropped to the floor and my breathing did that shaky thing that happens before I start to feel dizzy. Thankfully the pharmacist called for the next customer, and she was gone.

[Loud sound] "You OK back there?" "I'm ok!" Oh Erin. She's chatty AND clumsy. I turn around and rest against the counter. On slow days like today, I just stare out the window and watch the people walk by. Every time I see someone walk by with their kid, I can't help but think of Sam.

[Background story] I love her sooo much - and I miss her every. single. day. I'm always thinking about what she's doing or wearing...if she's eaten...and if she misses me too. It makes me happy to think about her - but it hurts a lot too. When she was born, I couldn't imagine ever being apart from her. We had six good years living at mom's. I mean, I still struggled with being consistent when it came to looking after Sam - there were lots of blanks in my life then when I'd just lose time to nothing. But Mom would always pick up where I couldn't. It wasn't easy for Mom, I know. She had a tough childhood - an abusive, alcoholic father- and she struggled with depression. Mental health issues seem to run in our family, I guess. But somehow, we made it work, her and I - mostly. Then she died. And that's when things really got bad.

My heart breaks when I think back to those days. The first time she went into care? I didn't think I would survive. It happened after the school requested a wellness check – I guess Sam had been showing up to her Grade 1 class in dirty clothes...with no lunch. With mom gone, I guess I had slipped into depression, without even knowing it. At a certain point, I just stopped getting out of bed. It's really fuzzy in my memory, when I think back...but I'm pretty sure there was an entire week when I didn't leave my room. Sam would bring me snacks...and check in on me. I remember I was working as a cleaner at local grocery store. They were nice people, but eventually they had to lay me off, for not showing up. When Sam was removed for the first time, I was beside myself. I couldn't figure out what was going on. The social worker told me that I wasn't well and needed to get help. All I could think about was getting Sam back. I admitted myself to the hospital for a 6-week treatment program. They said that I needed to do that. And they were right. It wasn't until the fourth week that I realized what had happened. Sam had been removed due to neglect. My heart shattered. I couldn't believe I had done that to Sam. After I was discharged from the hospital, a social worker met with me. We talked through all the possible options. Without hesitation I told the worker I was determined to get better and to be a good mom to Sam. I didn't know then how brave I was going to have to be...to be the parent Sam was going to need me to be.

Today is a day I just keep thinking about Sam. Erin's a bit annoyed with me, cuz I'm not listening to her story's the way I normally do. But I can't help it. Today is today. My workday finally ends, and I rush to get my stuff together. Sam's supposed to call tonight before dinner. It's important that I'm not late. I grab an umbrella from the break room, shout bye to Erin, and hurry home.

I make good time and it only takes me about 15 minutes to get there. As I pull off my jacket, I glance at the clock. 4:25PM. Time for some deep breaths Isla – Sam's going to call any minute. I pace between the living room and kitchen. Way too nervous. I sit down and try to calm myself. Nope - it doesn't help. Back to pacing. I can't help but think.. Was relinquishing my rights the best decision for Sam. There have been so many times I've wanted to call my social worker to tell her I'd changed my mind. I would grip my phone tightly, intensely staring at the numbers unable to dial the number.

Suddenly I can hear Jennifer in my head. "Isla, remember the self regulation strategies we covered." I sit down on the couch. This time I close my eyes. Deep breaths. Clear your mind. As I exhale, some of the stress slips away. I start quietly chanting to myself, "You made the right decision. You made the right decision."

About two years ago my mental health got worse again. Some days I'd get home from work and go straight to bed – Sam was Grade 3. She would come in from school and...well to be honest, I don't know what she'd do. I was spending a lot of time inside my head, the dark hole of time. Other days, I couldn't stay still and would talk a mile a minute. Sam begged me to slow down or stop. And I'd just be cranky and snap at her, poor thing. Time kept slipping away and so was I. After a while, I lost a lot of weight and when I looked in the mirror all I saw were dark circles under my eyes and hollow cheeks. One day when Sam got in from school, I asked her how she was doing. She looked down at her hands and said, "I'm fine, but I'm worried about you, and I'm hungry and I need new runners – everyone else has new runners – why can't you take me for new runners? I don't want to look after you anymore, Mom...". I remember how shaky her voice was. She looked up at me with tears pouring down her face. My heart started breaking all over again.

I'd had Sam back at home for almost a year then. I think I'd convinced myself we were doing pretty well, but it was a lot for Sam - too much. I didn't really understand how much she was doing around

the house...cleaning, laundry, cooking – she was only eight years old. I realized later she'd ended up taking the place of my mom in my life...and was taking care of me when I should have been taking care of her. Seeing her get upset like that... made me realize I had to do something – something solid and stable, for Sam's sake. The next day I reached out to my social worker to start planning for Sam to return to care.

[Phone rings] It's Sam! I run to pick up the call "Hello?". "Hi Mom, it's Sam!" With those four words, I relax. A part of me didn't think she would call today – and I keep wondering if she's going to be upset. But Sam goes on to talk about how she's settling in. She has organized all her stuffies, her clothes have been put away, and it sounds like they're just about to eat dinner. Hearing Sam's voice fills me with joy and relief. She mentions how excited she is for our visit in two weeks and asks me to pack her favourite cookies. As she continues to chat though, I start to feel sad. I miss her a lot. Talking to her now... just reminds me of that. "Mom...? Are you still there?" Sam whispers. "Yes Sam, I'm here. I'm just a little tired after working today." Sam tells me she understands but gets a bit quieter for the rest of the call. Our call ends pretty soon after that. We say goodnight. I tell her I love her, and I can't wait to see her.

After our call I skip dinner and go straight to bed. But my night is spent tossing and turning. I can't stop thinking about how this has come about. And wondering if I've made the right decision. The second time Sam went into care, I knew that she needed to be in a stable home. I've never told Sam, but I also spent time in foster care when I was young. My mom had always struggled with depression and after my dad passed away, Mom just didn't know how to live without him. She slipped into a really bad depression. I remember her telling me that I was going to have to live somewhere else for awhile...and feeling scared, but also relieved. Somehow my mom was able to manage her depression enough to look after me again. I returned home and we made things work. Our lives weren't perfect by any means - but she was always someone I could rely on. In a way that I know I haven't been able to do for Sam. Experiencing depression so often...for me that means I'm unable to be there for Sam, no matter how much I want to be. I know some people are able to do it, but the severity of my condition just won't let me. The decision I have been in control of is to place her for adoption so someone else can be what I'm not able to be. She deserves that - and if I can't take care of her myself, at least I can give her a life with people who can. Give her the chance of having a home with parents who will make pick up... show up for school concerts...make sure she goes to school with food and clean clothes. It kills me that my condition doesn't let me do those things, no matter how hard I try or want too....but the reality is, it just doesn't, and I can't compromise Sam's childhood hoping I'll get better one day.

The sound of birds pulls me out of my thoughts, and I groan as I see the sky outside my window begin to lighten. I remind myself that Sam is safe. That I will see her soon. Thomas and Blair are watching out for her now. And that is what's best for her. She is safe. I keep repeating those words until they sink in, until I believe them again. My eyelids get heavy, and I know I'll finally sleep. I understand now that I'll always be her mom, but that I just can't be her parent. Thomas and Blair will be there for her now. We all want what's best for Sam – and we're working together to do that.