

RUTH LATTA

Brownie and Montgomery

WHEN IN NEW DELHI in the mid-1970s, Cameron and Beata McKinley adopted their son Moe. The nuns had named the baby Mohandas after the great spiritual leader, Gandhi, because they hoped he would become a prophet and saint, and because his skinny body resembled the fragile figure of the father of India.

When Cam and Beata first saw their boy, he was a healthy one-year-old, with brown eyes, a winsome smile and a vocabulary of sounds. The other orphans, all older than he, had made him their pet, but if he had been left in the home for abandoned children his future prospects would have been limited.

Cam's first action, once the baby was settled in, was to go to his office at the High Commission and cable the good news to Beata's sister Gunda in Bonn, Germany, and his mother in Kingston, Canada. Gunda responded with an ecstatic phone call and a parcel of hand-knit baby wear which was far too hot for the climate. Beata laughed and shook her head.

"It's not the gift, but the thought," Cam reminded her, as they leaned over the crib, watching their son sleep. "Mum will probably inundate us with itchy little sweaters too."

But Mrs. McKinley did not. She wrote, saying she was very surprised to hear they had adopted an "ethnic" child, but was sure they had already considered the potential problems.

Reading these words, Beata's blue eyes turned icy. She reached for the spoon that Cam was using to feed Moe his mashed banana and took over the job, with much tender baby-talk. Later Cam burned the letter.

His mother had always said, with pride, that she and Cam could discuss anything, because they were friends as well as being mother and son. Her husband had died on the Normandy beaches; Cam knew his father only as a handsome image in a silver frame. As soon as Cam was old enough to go to school, his mother had gone back to work to make sure her only son lacked for nothing, and certainly he had never felt deprived, growing up. He had sailed, gone to camp, joined the Scouts, been on school trips. He got into Queen's University easily, and spent his junior year abroad, in France, although it almost broke his mother's heart to see him go so far away.

"I'm sitting at your desk writing this letter, surrounded by all the things that bring back memories—your lacrosse stick, your football helmet, your yearbooks on the shelf. I brought Brownie and Montgomery out of the closet and have them here on the bed, because they bring back so many precious moments from days gone by. They're looking at me now with their beady eyes and saying, 'Don't cry. Cam is just fine. He's probably strolling beside the Seine with a pretty girl. But he'll come home in May, pursue his studies and go on to a brilliant career. Someday, he'll meet a nice Canadian girl and settle down—and maybe we'll have playmates in the future.'"

On receiving this letter, Cam had cringed. Imagine, his mother hauling out his old teddy bears and putting them on his bed! Was she losing her mind? He had heard of menopause, of middle-aged women becoming unstable. After much soul-searching, he decided that her women friends were better able to support her through this stage of life than he was. He finished his year in Paris, and on returning to Kingston, found his mum quite her usual self, busy with church and school. He put Brownie and Montgomery back into the cupboard.

As far as he knew they lived there still. They sprang to mind with the arrival of Moe. Western toys were hard to obtain, and the only plaything that had come with him was a rag doll which the sisters had made. He cuddled it tightly, sucking his thumb, looking up at his parents with thoughtful eyes.

Cam had never known that parent-child love could be so intense. He and Beata adored every detail about their son, from the indentation of a dimple to a lock of hair curling over a tiny ear. Like any diplomat, Cam was often out in the evenings dining for his country, but he made sure he was at home at the baby's bedtime. It seemed incredible to him that at one time he hadn't especially wanted children, and had agreed to the idea of adoption only for Beata's sake. When they learned that she couldn't have children, because wartime childhood malnutrition had affected her reproductive system, she wept for days. "I've failed you," she said. "If you want out, I'll understand." Cam told her not to be ridiculous, that she was everything he wanted.

When Moe came into their lives, however, a new dimension opened up. The small hand clutching Cam's finger sent a current all the way to his heart. Every night, he read to Moe or told him stories. Of course, the baby was too little to understand, but both Cam and Beata agreed that the loving attention and flow of words would be good for him. Moe gurgled and pointed to the pictures of the three little pigs or the three bears, then drifted off to sleep.

One evening, Cam told him about Brownie and Montgomery. Brownie was a brown and white bear with a red button nose, and was cuddlier than Montgomery, who was khaki-coloured, and resembled Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery in Cam's war books. When Cam was in the third grade, he decided that he was too old to play with bears. If his friends at school ever found out that he slept with them, he would never live down the disgrace. One afternoon he'd propped the animals up against his pillow and sat down in front of them for a heart-to-heart talk. He assured them that he loved them very much, but that he was too old to play with them, and had to put them away now. "I'll never forget you," he vowed, "and if I ever have a kid of my own, I'll pass you on to him."

Moe's eyes seemed full of understanding. Beata, who had been folding baby clothes and listening to the story, wiped her eyes on a diaper and told Cam he was wonderful and that she did not deserve her present happiness. As the baby looked on, Cam took her in his arms and patted her shoulders. Her father had died in the snow somewhere outside Moscow and her mother had been killed by an Allied bomb. Raised by an aunt and uncle, Beata had become a secretary, dreaming of leaving Germany for a new life. Cam had met her when "External" posted him to Bonn, where she was a foreign national working for the Canadian High Commission.

“Son, are you sure you know what you’re doing, marrying a German girl?” his mother wrote in her slanted, schoolteacher script. “I know West Germany is our ally now, and all those Nazi scientists are working in the US space program, but twice in this century, Canadian boys gave up their lives to put an end to Germany’s plan to dominate the world. Your father must be rolling over in his grave.”

The letter arrived after their wedding and would not have deterred Cameron had it come sooner. He made sure Beata never saw it. Now, as he held her in his arms in the hot Indian night, he began to talk about having a family photograph taken. Beata brightened and spoke of sending copies in their Christmas cards to their friends.

He and Beata had celebrated the Yuletide in various parts of the world. When in Europe they went to Gunda. On their first Christmas back in Canada, they had spent the holiday with Cam’s mother. Sadly he noticed that she was getting too old to prepare a turkey with all the trimmings; she became as prickly as holly before the day was done. After that, when they were in Canada over the festive season, Beata cooked dinner at their Ottawa apartment and invited his mother along with some other guests, and the occasions went smoothly. Future Christmases, Cam knew, would be great fun. He looked forward to Moe’s reaction to snow.

On several previous occasions in his life, when Cam had been unable to get home for Christmas, his mother had wept into the telephone, pouring out her loneliness at his absence. He dreaded having to tell her that they couldn’t come home this year and show off the baby to her. To his great relief, however, she spoke brightly of upcoming get-togethers with cousins. She thanked them for the photograph, remarking that Moe looked like a cute wee mouse. They were wise, she said, not to bring such a young child into a cold climate when he was not used to it; it might endanger his health.

Despite her cheeriness, her voice sounded old, and he was sorry that they could not all be together. “Perhaps I ought to put in a request for a transfer back to Ottawa,” he said to himself.

In January came an unexpected development. Cam was summoned back to Ottawa for some special meetings. It was hard to leave Beata and Moe.

"We'll be fine," she assured him as they kissed goodbye. "The baby and I will be company for each other." As Cam got into the limo for the airport, she stood in the doorway of their residence, raising her thin pale hand in a wave, while Moe flapped his arms.

When Cam's meetings ended he drove down to Kingston. In a complicated world, it was reassuring to sit in the living-room of his boyhood home where nothing had changed. The cuckoo clock still called out the hour. Probably Moe would be as fascinated with it as Cam used to be. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, forty years out of date, still stood on the upstairs landing. Mother served roast beef and mashed potatoes on the familiar Blue Willow china.

At 9:00 p.m., with boredom nipping at his heels, he began to stretch and yawn. He watched his mother's chin move up and down as she monologued about relatives, church, and the retired teachers. She liked to know that he was healthy, happy and advancing in his career, but his life was too exotic for her to comprehend and she didn't seem very interested. He pleaded exhaustion and went upstairs—not to his old room, where his mother had set up her quilting frames—but to the spare room with the lumpy mattress.

He fell asleep thinking of Beata and Moe, and how he would be with them again in a few days. The next morning, the sun shining through the lace curtains reminded him of childhood mornings in his little bed with the railings, with Brownie beside him on the pillow and Montgomery on guard near the footboard. Then he smiled. Why not take them back for Moe? There was room in his luggage.

He padded down the hall to his old room, now a museum to his boyhood. Carefully avoiding the quilt contraption, he opened the closet door and looked up at the shelf, expecting to see two pairs of beady teddy-bear eyes gazing down at him.

No eyes stared down. On the top shelf were boxes which contained his Hardy Boys series and other boyhood books. The bears were nowhere to be seen. They had to be around somewhere, though. Mum had saved everything else, including his lacrosse stick, his stamp collection and his red leather Queen's jacket. Probably she had put them in a plastic bag to protect them from dust.

He joined her in the kitchen, where she was stirring oatmeal at the stove, and after kissing her cheek, he asked about Brownie and Montgomery.

“Who?”

“My old bears.”

As he spoke, she let go of her stirring spoon. It disappeared beneath the surface of the porridge, which bubbled with a dozen sucking mouths. He reached for a spatula and managed to fish out the big stainless steel utensil, then wiped it off and handed it to her.

“Imagine, you thinking of those old dust-catchers! They aren’t here any more, Son. I’ve been trying to clear out some clutter, and when the church asked for used toys at Christmas, I gave them away. They’re in the hands of some needy child.”

Suddenly Cam felt as if he were in Grade Three. How could she be so casual in disposing of Brownie and Montgomery? As she ladled out his porridge, he decided not to request a transfer back to Canada anytime soon.