What Liam Knows

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Anne Hoffman peered over to the phone. It was 2016, and in those days, she jumped whenever the landline rang.

Her husband, Sal Paolozza, a middle-aged Italian immigrant, returned to their suburban Philadelphia home, where their six-year-old adopted son, Liam, was busy playing with his au pair. Sal turned to his wife.

“Let’s go walk the dogs,” Sal said. He was speaking in code. Anne understood, but Liam did not. The boy watched his parents leave the house. He didn’t understand the situation at hand—or did he? It was hard to tell. Liam was a smart boy for his age, who often pretended he didn’t understand, when in reality, he knew more than anyone realized.

Outside, Sal relayed to his wife the details of his latest conversation with their lawyers. They never spoke about the case for Liam’s custody in the house. That year, the five-year case against their son’s birth mother would finally come to a close.

The couple had never thought about adoption—they wanted to have biological children. After being unable to conceive, Anne decided it wasn’t in God’s will for them. They would do something different with their lives.

During Christmas time, Sal and Anne were watching TV when they saw an advertisement about fostering children.

“They foster a child,” Sal said.

Anne said no. If they fostered a child, she knew she’d fall in love.

“Then let’s adopt.”

“No,” she repeated. “I want a biological child. I want a child who looks like me.”

“But if we raise the child,” Sal argued, “they might pick up on our traits, our likeness. We will raise them based on our own morals and beliefs. Isn’t that enough?”

The couple agreed to apply for adoption, specifically for a white child—a child who would look like them. Two years passed; no child came.

“Well,” Sal said, “What if we put in for a Black child?” They knew a Black child would never resemble either of them.

They checked the box anyway.

A week later, they received a call. Come pick up your son.

His name was Liam, chosen by the biological mother. The couple decided to keep the name to honor the mother, but also because it was pronounced the same in every language they spoke. No European would be unable to pronounce “Liam.”

There was no nine-month pregnancy. No preparation time. They received the call and just like that, they had a child. A life had been placed into their hands overnight, along with all the bundled-up joy, excitement, burden, and anxiety of parenthood.

The Paolozzas had waited two years for a child but never set up a baby room, bought any clothes, or prepared anything at all—they were afraid. “Never prepare the child’s room,” they’d been told. “It’ll only make the situation more traumatic if it doesn’t work out.” A neighbor brought them a twenty-year-old crib from her garage, and that was all. They prepared Liam’s room in four hours.

About a month later, they received another call.

In the state of Pennsylvania, birth parents have thirty days to revoke consent of adoption. Liam’s birth mother called on the thirty-first day; her lawyer said she messed up the dates.

Anne screamed and cried, not wanting to give her baby back. But Sal remained calm and stoic, sitting her down to explain, “It’s the right thing to do.”

They went to the agency with baby Liam and waited, but the mother never showed up. She said she wanted her baby but never arrived. The Paolozzas decided to fight for their son.

The court case lasted for five years, leaving the family in a torturous limbo no parent could ever imagine, having their son but not really having him. Liam lived with Sal and Anne and attended school throughout the duration of the case. All the while, he had no official papers. His adoption wasn’t finalized. The family couldn’t leave the country at all and needed permission to travel with Liam. Sal dealt with the lawyers while Anne managed everything at home. She lived in constant fear of the landline—a call that someone was coming to take her son away.

Walking in the streets, if she saw a woman who resembled Liam’s birth mother, she tensed up, fearing that she would approach them.

The history of Liam’s birth parents unfolded in the court case. They weren’t married, nor were they ever together. Liam’s father was married to another woman. As detail after detail surfaced, the truth became clear: Liam’s birth mother wasn’t interested in having her son back. She wanted her son’s father back.

Anne and Sal won the case for Liam’s custody. He had to appear in court with them in order to finalize the adoption. They pulled Liam out of school early and brought him to the courthouse. The family faced the judge, who’d followed them throughout the five-year case. He shed a tear as he leaned over to look at Liam, sitting between his parents.

“Liam,” he said. “You are now officially,
Liam Samuel Paolozza."

Anne had never seen Sal cry. But that day, he let out a guttural, choking gasp, stunning both his wife and son. He hovered over Liam, burying his face in the boy’s shoulder to maintain his pride, so no one could see him cry.

Anne had been crying for the past six years—she was nearly all cried out. To her, it was the day she gave birth—the most beautiful day of her life. After years of stress and uncertainty, fighting to keep their son, Liam was officially theirs.

The family celebrated, spending a whole day in the city. They went to lunch, enjoyed the holiday scenery, and bought Liam whatever he wanted.

The initial paperwork alone had been a nightmare. Anne and Sal weren’t U.S. citizens at the time, which only made the process more difficult. They met while both living and working in Canada. Anne was born and raised in Montreal. Sal immigrated from Naples. They married in 2003, five years before they followed their dream of starting a new life in the United States. To adopt Liam, they had to contact the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for their required clearances. They had to prove they were financially stable and that they weren’t criminals. Then, they had in-person interviews.

“Will you introduce him to his culture?” the agency asked.

“Yes.”

“Will you make him aware of his race?”

“Yes.”

“You sure you want to adopt a Black child?”

Anne and Sal didn’t understand. Why would a Black child be a problem? Today, more than 40% of adoptions are transracial in nature, according to an article in Time (Valby). Anne and Sal weren’t American. They didn’t understand the history of discrimination in the United States. Race was never an issue for them in Canada. Anne never would have imagined that, nine years later, her son would be isolated on the playground for the color of his skin.

Anne picked Liam up from school as she would any normal day. She’d always ask, “How was your day?” and receive the typical, passive response, “Oh, it was fine.” Still, she asked, “How was your day?” Liam began to cry. He cried so much that his mom had to pull over and park the car. He explained the story—he and his two Black friends were playing when a boy came up to them and said, “We don’t play with Black kids. No Black kids on the playground.” Anne was shocked, revolted. It was 2019. They’re nine years old. Where were they learning this?

Anne always taught her son how to handle situations on his own, but this time she saw a need to get involved. She went right home and called the mother of Liam’s friend, one of the other Black boys he was with on the playground. The mother remained calm and sighed.

“Annie,” she said. “Welcome to our world.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Listen,” the mother said, “this is our life.”

Anne never could have understood the situation African Americans face in the U.S., until she experienced it herself. The three mothers emailed the school principal together and arranged a meeting.

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Liam went home and told his mother.

“What did you say back?” she asked. Liam shrugged.

“I just walked away.”

None of the boys put up a fight that day on the playground. They didn’t push or shove, yell or argue their case. Instead, they remained silent, turning and walking the other way. Their mothers had all taught them the same lesson—never fight a white kid, because you’ll always wind up guilty. You’ll always lose.

Liam knows his parents are white. Anne wishes to do related to his identity, his parents allow him to do so—from exploring his African heritage to choosing his haircuts.

“Mommy,” he used to say. “You’re not getting my line right.” He’d point to his hairline just above his forehead. He goes to a barber now, where he dictates how he wants his hair cut. Anne allows Liam to make choices based on what he knows about himself, his identity and his culture, which she knows she can never fully understand.

In an essay titled “The Transracial Adoption Paradox,” Richard M. Lee writes that the process of cultural socialization for transracial families is complicated by the apparent racial and ethnic differences. African American adoptees whose parents promoted their child’s race isn’t sure Liam understands yet what adoption means, but of course, the differences are clear.

At a young age, he’d ask:

“Mommy, where am I from? Am I born in your tummy?”

“No,” she’d say. “But you’re born in my heart.”

Cardell Jacobsen, a professor at Brigham Young University and an adoption expert, said in a BYU newspaper article that identity issues often arise for Black children who grow up in white families (Moore).

Allowing Liam to self-identify was always of the utmost importance. Liam joined a club at his school called Sankofa, which means, “returning to your roots.” The group meets to discuss topics and issues relevant to African American children their age. Anything Liam had a more positive adjustment and identity development.

As Anne sees Liam spending more and more time with African American friends, she also sees that he has a lot of Italian friends.

Anne has never seen a people more proud of their nationality than the Italians. Liam mirrors his father’s pride, which Anne says Sal never needed to force onto Liam—it was already there, from father to son. Liam recognizes his father’s outspoken, unwavering pride in his country. He sees his name, Paolozza, and that is enough for him to know—he’s Italian. At nine-years-old, Liam chose his identity, an Italian African American.

In the Paolozza house, God is the center of daily life. But Anne and Sal never introduced religion to Liam. The family is grateful,

“He hovered over Liam, burying his face in the boy’s shoulder to maintain his pride, so no one could see him cry.”
and they know to whom they are grateful, but that is all. Their faith in God is strong, without need to clarify, “Mommy is Jewish, Daddy is Catholic.” Liam has never been to a church nor a synagogue, which Anne regrets. Not that it’s too late, but they’ve focused on other aspects of Liam’s identity.

Anne and Sal are open to their lack of understanding and try their best to learn from the parents of Liam’s friends. But Liam will still say to his mother, “You don’t understand. You’re white. Everyone at your school is white.” Anne teaches Spanish at a private, Catholic all-girls high school just outside of Philadelphia.

Anne reminds him, “Yes, I’m white, but I’m also Jewish.”

Jews are an invisible minority. Liam has it harder as a visible minority. However, Anne’s mother was raised more culturally Jewish. She spoke frequently about their ancestors during the Holocaust, but her father would always change the subject. It wasn’t until college when Anne began to educate herself on her own identity. In Europe, Jews were the persecuted ones. In the United States, it’s African Americans who were freed from slavery only to suffer for years—and are still suffering—from discrimination, hate, and blatant ignorance.

Anne wants to teach her son how to emerge stronger from his experiences. After all the family has been through, they’ve only grown stronger. Sal and Anne are lucky to have many supportive friends and family, but it’s their family union that’s the most important. As long as the three of them—Anne, Sal, and Liam—are happy and healthy, getting along and planning for the future, then nothing else matters.

But Anne has one regret.

“It’s a shame we’re old,” she’d say. She always spoke to him like an adult. Sometimes he needs to be the one to throw his hands up and say, “Mom! Stop! I’m only nine!”

“Liam!” she said when her son got into the car. “What are you doing?”

Liam said, “You know Mommy, he came and said he wanted to play with me. I figured I’d give it a try.”

She knew she shouldn’t fight it. She felt proud of her son, but also, as a mother, still concerned—she didn’t want her son to be a pushover.

“That’s great, Liam,” she said. “But you do understand what he said was wrong?”

“I do understand,” he said. “But I’m trying to move forward.”

Anne never babied Liam. She always spoke to him like an adult. Sometimes he needs to be the one to throw his hands up and say, “Mom! Stop! I’m only nine!”

Anne is terrified for her son, but she always speaks. When someone makes fun of her, she laughs it off and thinks, “How many languages do you speak? Did you leave everything behind at age 38 and come to a different country?” Sal is a successful, self-made businessman. Anne teases him about his thick Italian accent, but it doesn’t bother him, and why should it? He’s successful. He’s educated. He knows his worth. Liam’s parents want him to be able to walk away from people’s ignorance and stupidity, and still feel comfortable in his own skin.

Anne and Sal have traveled all over the world, as someone who is different, understand the position he’s in as a Black boy in the United States, as someone who is different, and white. There are other issues, sure—Jews and Muslims, for example. But no other country?” Sal is a successful, self-made businessman. Anne teases him about his thick Italian accent, but it doesn’t bother him, and why should it? He’s successful. He’s educated. He knows his worth. Liam’s parents want him to be able to walk away from people’s ignorance and stupidity, and still feel comfortable in his own skin.

Two days after the white boy whispered “I hate you” in Liam’s ear, Anne pulled up to the school to see the two playing together on the playground.

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