

## HERE IN MY ARMS

October 2008

[Video begins with a view of an empty baby buggy.]

[Music begins: piano playing “Here in My Arms”]

**Tony Kahn:**

For over three years my wife had battled infertility, with injections, operations, and drugs. If nothing happened by the time she turned 40, she promised herself, she’d end the struggle of trying to beat the odds and bear a child.

[Soft background sounds of a party, people talking, clapping, etc. This continues under the narration.]

That spring, on her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, she learned she was pregnant for the first time in her life. But the pregnancy was weak and started to fail. We followed the blood tests closely and watched it slowly fade away. It seemed clear, now, if we were ever to have a child, it would have to come from someone else’s arms.

[As video shows a picture of a birthday cake, we hear the singing of a birthday song, “How old are you now?” ... laughing fades to echoes. Then we see views of older family photos and heirlooms, and a form being filled out.]

**Harriet Reisen:**

They wanted to know all about your childhood, about your family relations...  
[her voice continues in low tone under Tony’s narration.]

**Tony Kahn:**

That September, Harriet applied to an adoption agency, and started filling out the forms for the home study required by state law. From now on, we realized, our private lives wouldn’t be so private.

[We view stairs, and hear the sound of footsteps walking up them. Then we glimpse the offices of a large bureaucratic office pool, followed by views of children’s photos, including some of Tony as a boy.]

Soon after we had our first interviews at the agency office. I resented the right of strangers to judge my fitness as a parent. The only thing that kept me going was my wife’s undeniable desire for a child.

[Tinkling music begins under narrative.]

Competition for children was intense and I worried about making a good impression. My own childhood had not been particularly happy or secure. What was I supposed to say about that?

[The next scenes are views of birds flying, and swing sets in a park, accompanied by sound of birds cawing]

It was hard, after those interviews, not to envy biological parents. No one asked them to make a case for their child. They just made love. We not only had to prove we were fit to be parents, but specify the kind of child we'd want to raise. Half the time, the process felt like an inquisition, half like a shopping expedition.

That December, as part of the home study, the social worker from the agency visited us. Harriet spent a week cleaning the house from top to bottom. I bought the richest cookies and cakes I could find. Maybe sugar would speed things up, I thought.

[We view Harriet's hands at a table laden with desserts, accompanied by subdued conversation.]

We told the social worker we decided we wanted to adopt a white, healthy, newborn baby from the United States. She told us we might have to wait seven years. Her agency specialized in foreign adoptions. If we were in a hurry, it would really be up to us to find the child.

Find a baby. How?

[Violin music begins and continues under the narrative.]

We soon learned there were a lot of ways. You could advertise in a paper. You could work through a lawyer. You could ask all your friends. We also learned that whatever the source, most of the babies fell through.

[Now we view scenes of a quiet room. We hear a piano lullaby, and then the phone rings.]

A friend told us of a woman who was due in two weeks. Three days later she rejected us because of our religion.

Some acquaintances found a baby in Louisville they decided not to adopt. They left the country before giving us the number to call.

[Telephone rings, and we view the hands of someone answering followed by her taking notes.]

An agency in Massachusetts offered us a little girl fathered by the guard of a mental institution where the mother was a patient under heavy medication. This time we said no. Another agency in Miami wanted a picture of what the child's room would look like, and Harriet redid her office in wicker and lace, for a baby girl. We found out later the agency had gone bankrupt and taken our deposit of over \$1,000.

[We view the empty baby carriage again.]

**Harriet Reisen:**

I wrote to everybody I knew. I just gathered my address books. . .

[Harriet's voice is heard under the following narration]

**Tony Kahn:**

That fall, Harriet made plans for a three-week vacation in India. Before she left, she cast one last net for a child. She felt hopeful.

**Harriet Reisen:**

...and I think I did have a feeling that kid is coming and that kid is coming sometime in the fall, probably, just because there's so many feelers out there. One way or another, you know, I was going to be celebrating Christmas and the New Year as a parent.

[Telephone rings, and we again view the hands of someone taking notes. In the next segment, we see Tony as he is now, talking to us directly.]

**Tony Kahn:**

A few weeks later she got a call from a friend in New York who had just heard of a possibility in Mexico and gave us a number in Guadalajara to call. A woman named Denise answered. She told us she was taking care of a young unmarried woman from Oaxaca, who had decided to give her child up for adoption when it was born in six weeks. It was a contact like many we'd had – exciting, but uncertain. Denise told us there were other people interested too and we had no idea whom she would choose or who she really was.

[The phone rings, and we see more paperwork being filled out. A long telephone cord reaches across the room.]

But the calls continued. Nearly every other day there was some question Harriet

needed to ask Denise, or some fact Denise needed to discuss with Harriet. No connection we had ever had had lasted as long as this link to an unborn baby 2500 miles away. I started referring to it as our umbilical cord to Mexico.

It was odd. Since the beginning, we'd been expecting to find a white, domestic child. Instead we'd found a baby of another culture, another country, and another race. A chill went down my spine. Was it the fear of the unknown, or after three years of looking had I finally felt the touch of a child?

[We see a two-story white frame house, an empty park bench, and empty swings in the snow. Then we hear airport loudspeaker sounds. In the next segment, we see a drawer opened, full of old documents. A file drawer is also open, also full of documents. We see someone being finger printed, a copy machine spitting out copies, and a document being notarized and sealed.]

Denise had told us that if we were interested in this baby we'd have to hurry. By the time it was born, we'd need over fifteen documents required by Mexico and the United States. We'd have to supply official copies of our birth certificates, our marriage license, the agency home study, our medical exams, our tax returns for the last three years. We would need statements from bankers, friends, doctors and the FBI that we were not criminals or paupers or bigamists, or secretly fertile and planning to have a baby of our own. We'd have to have each document copied three times, each copy translated into Spanish and notarized, each notarization stamped with the state seal of Massachusetts, and certified by the Consulate of Mexico. It was hard to remember, sometimes, that beneath all the paperwork lay a child. But would the child be ours? Denise had given us no assurances.

[Next we view some suitcases sitting by a door, along with a baby blanket on knitting needles.]

In the beginning of October, Harriet left on her three-week trip to India. The baby wasn't due for a month, and we'd stopped talking about our chances...but I noticed she'd started a baby blanket.

[Sound of car honking, followed by a scene with a tower of documents a foot high.]

The next two weeks went quickly. Several documents still had to be translated into Spanish, and all the documents had to be certified and sealed. Then ... it was done. A tower of paperwork ninety documents tall and as heavy as any baby ever born rose from the middle of my desk. There was nothing left to do but wait.

[Soft, Mexican guitar music begins playing softly. Next we see Tony's hands as he looks through a number of photos of his childhood years. After this, Tony as he is now looks at us again.]

That evening I looked at some pictures of my childhood. By coincidence it had been spent in Mexico. For five years we'd lived there as American aliens, forced to petition the state for the right to rent a house, or go to school, or board a bus, and to experience almost daily mistrust for how we looked or where we came from. The prospect of adopting a Mexican child had reminded me of those times and of the strength I had drawn from my family.

Little by little, I let myself feel for this unborn child what I think Harriet had felt for every child we'd come across, the longing to give it love and a welcome in this world. I wondered what I would do if this, too, turned out to be one more baby that faded away.

[After more looking through old family photos, the light is turned out. It fades away slowly.]

The following night Denise called from Mexico. "Congratulations," she said. "You are the father of a baby boy." He had been born a week early, but was in perfect health. The sooner we could get to Guadalajara, she said, the sooner the adoption could begin. Tentatively, we set a date three days after Harriet returned from India.

It was only after I hung up that it hit me: she picked us after all! Somewhere in this world, I had a son.

I wanted to celebrate, but with whom? Harriet was out of reach, 7,000 miles to the east and my boy was 2500 miles to the south. Some friends took me to dinner at a Mexican restaurant.

[We find ourselves looking into a dark house. Then we see a lovely lighted room with a table on which sit two wine glasses and a little paper cup full of red wine. A bouquet of fresh flowers complements the wine.]

When I got back that night, I looked at a clock. It would be 9 p.m. in Guadalajara and 10 a.m. in India. Not too late for a little toast.

"To my family," I thought. "Be safe. Be well. Be careful. Tonight, you cover the world."

## *Here in My Arms: An Adoption Story - Part 2:*

[We see a smiling woman, Harriet, and then piano plays “Here in My Arms.” Then a plane is seen landing (and we hear the landing sound). Tony as he is now looks out at us when he first speaks]

### **Tony Kahn:**

Three days after Harriet returned from India, we landed in Guadalajara. Our luggage bulged with diapers, advice books, baby clothes, blankets, a car seat, a portable bed, and a snuggly, all bought or borrowed at the last minute. Back at home, friends were putting the finishing touches on the baby’s room.

[A montage of scenes accompanies this section: A baby’s room (in which hangs a sampler with “Andrew” embroidered on it), the stamping of documents.]

We decided to call him Andrew. The sooner we knew his name, Denise had told us, the sooner his mother, Margarita, could register his birth and say “goodbye.” I tried to imagine her writing a foreign name she’d probably never heard, and might repeat for the rest of her life. Margarita was Indian, Denise had told us; the father, of mixed blood.

[Next we see a passport, little children’s faces, the exterior of a hotel, the interior of a hotel room, hands unpacking a suitcase, a view of a mother and child on a sidewalk. We hear popular music being played on a radio.]

Any one of these faces could be Andrew’s. Denise met us near the exit and took us to her car. She’d found us a residential hotel a half hour away in the center of Guadalajara, near the court offices where the adoption would take place. There was a bedroom, a small kitchen, and a front room for the baby. We should settle in, she said, she’d be right back with the child.

Harriet unpacked while I looked around. A night nurse would be by in a few hours to help show us how to care for an infant. I wondered if a biological father felt as anxious as I did waiting to see his child for the first time. I knew of one major difference: between us and our baby lay not nine months of pregnancy and preparation, but three years of petitions, paperwork and pressure. I could remember every resistance and doubt we’d felt along the way to earn the right to have a child. And even after we’d found the child, every word of warning we had received to reject it if things didn’t seem right.

“Just make sure it’s healthy,” one friend had cautioned. “Just make sure the adoption is legal before you get attached,” said another. It was sad to realize how stacked the deck was against love at first sight. Even now, all I could feel for sure was the fear with which the world so often meets a stranger. Not just a stranger,

but the biggest blind date in my life!

[Next in successive shots we see a door opening to the view of a man and a woman holding a baby basket, then the man's shoes walking towards us, and then a camera sitting on a table. Sometimes Spanish conversation is heard in the background.]

The door opened, and in came Denise with her father, Carlos, a tall, thin man who carried the baby high in his arms. Harriet rushed ahead and Carlos lowered the baby for her to look. He was as Denise had described him: small, lots of hair, and very quiet. I noticed Harriet had left her camera behind. I didn't pick it up, either. Like her, I wanted both hands free to hold my son.

[Next we see coffee mugs, documents, and hands "explaining" documents, while we hear voices in Spanish in the background]

The next day, Denise laid out the plan: we'd get Andrew's adoption decree and passport in Guadalajara and then go to Mexico City for his exit visa to the United States. The paperwork was in order, and a distinguished lawyer stood by to cut through whatever red tape cropped up. With luck, we'd be finished in two weeks.

[Next we see the exterior of a courthouse, followed by the interior of a government office. Much processing of paperwork is seen. Then we see young Tony and Harriet smiling, pointing to Andrew in a baby carrier on Harriet's shoulder; another photo of the smiling new parents with friends follow. ]

Every day we'd go to the court office with our tower of paperwork, giving them the documents they wanted and filling out the forms they required. The rattle of typewriters and the ring of rubber stamps seemed almost musical. Between court appointments there was time for shopping and celebration with Denise and Carlos, and after every official meeting, a chance for congratulations, pictures, and smiles. It seemed almost too good to be true. It was.

[We see a phone, which rings. Then we see humans profiled in shadow, and a man carrying a huge stack of documents. We hear voices in Spanish and English in the background.]

Within a week, the process bogged down. A court appearance scheduled for Wednesday would have to be delayed 'til Thursday. A report promised at the end of the first week wouldn't be ready 'til the second, or maybe the third. And even though Margarita had signed papers surrendering Andrew, the courts kept interrogating her, wanting to know if she'd been paid or coerced to give up her child.

[We see a newspaper with Spanish headlines folded on a table. Then we see the aisles of a grocery store, laden with packages of cookies.]

The two-week deadline for the adoption now seemed impossible. How long would it drag on? Another week? A month? A year? Then, the news got worse. The newspapers had been full of scandal about illegal adoptions. A lawyer had gone to jail. Though our adoption was legal, two social workers would be coming to interview us in our hotel room sometime that week. Once again, I was buying cookies to speed things along.

[We view cookies on a plate and clipboards full of documents, hands writing answers to questions voiced in Spanish, in the background. Among the background comments, “Es bueno, es bueno.” (“That’s good, that’s good.”) “Yo tengo un hermano.” (“I have a brother.”)]

By now, we weren’t afraid of losing time – we were afraid of losing Andrew. After questioning us, the social workers would call in Margarita. And for the third time in ten days, an official agency would make her re-live and defend perhaps the most difficult decision of her life.

[We next see a photo of a young woman being removed from a man’s wallet. Next, we hear a rooster crowing, and hear a folksong being sung in Spanish. We see a bus traveling from a rural area to a large city. An aerial scene of the city follows.]

What if, after all that, she changed her mind? Denise had given us a little picture of her to show Andrew someday, and often during the next few nights, I’d look at it. She was twenty-one. Andrew was her fourth child, and only the second to survive. Her parents watched over this other little boy in a town hundreds of miles away, and Margarita saw him only once a year.

She’d managed to get some training as a nurse, and had been trying to live on her own in the city instead of as a maid in someone’s house. Things had just started looking up for her when she’d learned that she was pregnant, and that the father was already married with a family of his own.

[In the following segment we see Margarita’s photo being replaced in the wallet. Then we see the smiling woman we saw at the start of this story – it is Harriet.]

She no longer looked like such a stranger. She’d counted on us to raise and love her baby; we’d have to count on her to do what she thought was best. A few days later, Denise called with good news: the court would give us our adoption decree early the following week. Andrew would be ours.

[Joyful Mexican vocal music accompanies the next scene, in which we see cars and trucks traveling along a busy highway.]

It would be safe for me to return now to a job in Boston. While Andrew stayed with Carlos and Denise, Harriet would come back several days later herself to pull together Andrew's room. Then she'd return for the final phase of paperwork to get Andrew his visa and bring him home.

[We return to Tony as he is now, looking out at us as he speaks.]

Denise told me that parting with Andrew had been hard for Margarita, and she'd cried many times. But all along, she'd known it was the right thing. He would have opportunities she'd never dreamed of and she'd been happy for him: he would be flying to his new home in a plane!

[Here we see a jet plane taking off.]

### *Here in My Arms: An Adoption Story - Part 3:*

[We see video slips of toddler Andrew reclining with his young father; being held by his happy mother Harriet. Then we hear "Here in my Arms" on the piano. Next, we hear seagulls calling, and ocean waves crashing upon a beach and a child calls, "Hi, Dad!" A still photo of Andrew comes into view.]

**Tony Kahn:** I think my favorite picture of Andrew is the one a friend of ours took last summer at the beach. Andrew was almost two by then. And I can see in his face the gentleness and trust I'm sure now he was born with to meet the world.

[We see family scenes. In one, Andrew is bouncing on a friend's knee, in others he plays with a paper bag, investigates a sprinkler, and walks through a room.]

All our pictures of him show a happy outgoing kid, at home wherever he goes. The years of doubt and worry and paperwork seem far away. I look at him and wonder how there ever could have been a time when he looked like a stranger, or we weren't a family.

[A thunderstorm is heard in background, and we hear Harriet's voice: "Carolyn hates these." This is followed by a child's fearful cry. We see Andrew pointing, while someone takes his hand.]

Like parents everywhere, Harriet and I hope that Andrew will always feel loved and welcome in this world.

[Harriet (off mike): I'll come with you. Take my hand; let's go look outside together.]

[In the next segment we see video clips of Andrew in Mexico, walking down the sidewalks of a lovely old Moorish building, swinging, laughing, playing with another child.]

Harriet's already started learning Spanish, and we plan to spend some time in Mexico every year so that it, too, can be as much a part of his life as he wants. Adoption is a word with many meanings. One of them, we hope for Andrew, is that he can be a citizen of the world. Still, we've been told there may be times for Andrew – as there are for other adopted children – when the ground beneath his feet may not feel so sure. Or when he may wonder where, or to whom he really does belong. When some thoughtless person will tell him that because he is adopted, we aren't his "real parents." Or that because the woman who had him didn't keep him, he wasn't really wanted in this world.

[A song is sung in Spanish in the background.]

If that time comes, I hope I'll be able to teach Andrew the lesson his adoption taught me: that we all belong to each other. And that our real families in this world are the people we're given by chance – or by choice – to care for and love. [Scene of grandfather bouncing baby Andrew on his knee. We hear a male voice: "Whoa! Libby, look! Really bouncing!"]

I never thought that more clearly than when our own families welcomed Andrew.

[Scenes of grandparents holding and enjoying Andrew. One of them says, "He does look like Jim – that 's true! Oh, hello Sweetheart! Hello!" Another says, "You can see your father at any time, but you can't see me, and you can't see your grandfather." Then we see Harriet's mother playing the piano.]

Harriet's mother helped pay for some of the expenses of the adoption with money she had inherited from her own mother. Someday, when Andrew asks me who his "real family" is, I hope to tell him it is all those people, present and gone, who helped bring us to him. And all the people in his life to whom he'll open his heart.

[Tony's face looks out at us again while he says:]

And if he ever has any doubt if he was wanted, I'll tell him the story of his

mother, who long before she even met him could feel how wonderful it would be to have him in her arms.

[Here, Harriet holds Andrew and sways and dances with him in the kitchen. A piano plays “Here in My Arms” while Jeannie Stahl sings:]

I waited for you, for my dream to come true  
Now you are here in my arms.  
Now that you're here,  
No more doubt, no more fear.  
Now we are safe and warm.  
Leaves will fall; snow will fall,  
Flowers will poke through the ground  
Spring will come; summer will come  
Everything lost will be found.  
No more waiting for you  
You're my dream come true  
Now go to sleep in my arms.

*Here in My Arms*

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