



**Chris and Susannah** with kids (from left) Molly, Kyler and Callan. Courtesy of the family

**T**hey were an hour and six minutes from the hospital when the birth mother changed her mind. She was a young mom, the same age as the first-year students Susannah taught at Eastern University, and she'd had the baby two weeks early.

"We got a call from the agency worker," Susannah recalls. "She didn't really have an explanation. Just: She changed her mind. That was really heartbreaking." She and Chris, along with their older kids, Molly and Callan, huddled at Susannah's parents' house. "We tried to figure out: What next?"

From the time the two began dating, during their senior year at Eastern University, they knew that children — at least three, they agreed — would be part of their future. Chris was quiet and quick-witted; Susannah was social, with a high threshold for hubbub, spurring their friend group on outings to Philly. Both loved sports and valued their Christian faith.

They dated for six years — building careers, working in restaurants to pay the bills — before Chris proposed one December evening, in a light snow, in front of St. Thomas Church on Villanova's campus. "Sue made it known that she was ready to get engaged," Chris says. "I was a slow mover in that regard."

They married on a sweltering July day in 2013; Susannah remembers the moment the church doors closed, after the bridal party had entered, then reopened so she and her father could walk in. "The fact that Chris was still there at the end of the aisle — I thought that was a good sign," she says with a laugh.

Chris was ready for kids, but Susannah wanted to be married for a year before they tried. The timing worked. In October 2014, Chris came home to a pasta dinner with a small package by his plate: a onesie and a note that said, "Hey, Dad, I can't wait to meet you in June."

The pregnancy, aside from some first-trimester nausea, was smooth; the delivery, at Bryn Mawr Hospital, uneventful. "A lot of people say, 'Oh, you're never ready to have kids,'" Susannah says. "But we were ready. We were excited."

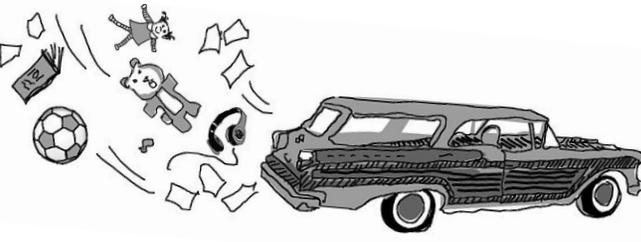
Yes, she felt hormonal spikes, and she sometimes dissolved in

# the parent trip

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**THE PARENTS:** Susannah McMonagle, 37, and Chris McMonagle, 39, of Phoenixville

**THE CHILDREN:** Molly Rose, 5; Callan James, 2; Kyler Caidence, 9 months, adopted April 8, 2021



tears when Chris would leave for work, but Molly was "so good, so easy, we thought: Let's have 500. We fell in love with parenthood from the get-go."

They tried to conceive again — a year of trying on their own, then 15 more months working with a fertility clinic. "They ran every test under the sun, and we were told there was nothing wrong," Susannah says.

She kept her grief private, chronicling it in her journal. But when the doctors began talking about IVF — a lengthy process, the couple knew, and a costly one — they began to reconsider. "Through a lot of prayer and conversation, we decided to do adoption," Susannah says.

Once they made that decision, the journey sped up — a virtual seminar with A Baby Step Adoption in February 2018, an expedited home study, six weeks on the waiting list, then an email in June: "There's a baby being born today. A boy. Only say yes if you can be in Georgia tomorrow."

Two days later, they were checking in at the maternity ward of a Georgia hospital.

"About 10 minutes later, [the nurse] rolled in with this gorgeous baby boy. He had a little hat on. He was peaceful." Immediately, Susannah pictured them as a foursome: running under the sprinkler in summertime, riding bikes. "I could see a whole future together. I never looked back."

But their family didn't feel quite complete. They wanted to adopt again, and when Callan was nearly 2, they got back on the agency's waiting list. This time, it took only three weeks before a birth mother from Ohio chose them. They talked by phone and texted periodically until the message came: "I'm in labor. Yes, you should come out here."

"We packed up the kids and the car," Susannah recalls, with a plan to meet her parents, who live in Ohio, then head for the hospital. Until, just an hour away, the agency's call derailed them.

A day or two later, Susannah texted the birth mother: "We respect your decision. We know this is an impossible choice. We wish you the best of luck." The two continued to keep in touch; sometimes the

birth mother said, "I think I made the wrong decision."

Susannah and Chris felt torn: Should they move on and pursue a different adoption? Should they hold out hope? Was the birth mother being frank with them?

During the last week of October, she reached out once more: "I've made my decision. I want you to adopt him. I'm going to the lawyer tomorrow. Can you come get him?"

Susannah flew alone to Ohio this time; despite COVID-19 restrictions, she and the birth mother hugged when they met. "It was one of the saddest afternoons of my life," she recalls. "I was happy for my own family, and this young girl was entrusting me to raise her son. It broke my heart, and it also confirmed my feeling that he was supposed to be in our family."

Their parenthood journey — that first, quick conception, the long slog of infertility, then the two adoptions — has changed them. "I have such empathy for families," Susannah says. "It's hard. No family gets off scot-free."

Chris thinks about the gifts that come with being a multi-racial family: a more expansive view of people, their differences, and their connections. "Sue and I had to do a lot of soul-searching. We took what was a really tough situation and looked for something good that could still come of it."

And, if they had any doubts, Kyler vanquished them. "The first day we had him home, he was smiling," Susannah says. "A reminder of God's grace, and timing, and that everything happens when it's supposed to happen."

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