

COMMENTARY / Happily Ever After, It Seems

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Abstract (Abstract): If you were looking for hopeful signs of a happy ending to the tangled Smiley-Russini-Propp adoption-abduction legal mess, you didn't have to look much farther yesterday than the broad smile on the face of [Young Matthew Propp].

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Matthew Propp also seems ready to embrace his new-found biological family. It is clear he was raised by loving parents and just as clear that he was missed dreadfully by loving parents.

Full text: If you were looking for hopeful signs of a happy ending to the tangled Smiley-Russini-Propp adoption-abduction legal mess, you didn't have to look much farther yesterday than the broad smile on the face of Matthew Propp.

The young man known only as Baby Boy Gardner in papers filed in Family Court back in 1979 lit up when Barry Smiley, the man charged with kidnapping him 20 years ago, entered a Kew Gardens courtroom just before noon.

A few minutes later, Matthew Propp, 22, embraced his biological father, Anthony Russini, after the judge set a court date for next month.

For Russini, the past 20 years have been an agonizing ordeal. He and his family scoured the country looking in vain for the boy they called A.J., unaware that the couple who wanted to adopt him had spirited him away to a new life in New Mexico.

Matthew Propp knows all that now, too. But that hasn't changed his affection for the Smileys.

"I am 100 percent behind them," he has asserted in interview after interview.

He repeated that again yesterday outside the courthouse on a sun-splashed sidewalk alongside Queens Boulevard, where he was surrounded by reporters.

Matthew Propp also seems ready to embrace his new-found biological family. It is clear he was raised by loving parents and just as clear that he was missed dreadfully by loving parents.

"No one wants anyone to have to go to jail," I was told by one senior court officer. Matthew Propp has impressed hard-bitten prosecutors in the short time he has been here.

"He's a mature young man with a great personality," one of them said.

Thus this security guard at a New Mexico hospital seems to hold the fate of the only parents he has known in his hands.

"It's really up to him," a prosecutor told me. "Unless, of course, he changes his mind between now and the next court date."

Acting Justice Joseph Grosso, who is an adoptive parent himself, told Smiley to come back April 25.

But as malleable as young Propp appeared to be yesterday, Manhattan lawyer Frederick J. Magovern, who represented Anthony Russini and natural mom Deborah Gardner in the original court case in 1979, was just as unforgiving.

"Those people deserve more than just a slap on the wrist," he said yesterday. "I don't know what the district attorney is going to do, but Mr. Russini and his family are torn over this. They have suffered greatly, and they are hurting.

"The Smileys did an awful thing to that boy. That's what this criminal case is all about. Now they are using him

in an effort to avoid the consequences of their actions.

"That Matthew loves them and is loyal to them is admirable. But it misses the point-and that is that his entire life has been a fraud because of what happened to him as a baby."

I can only imagine the flood of emotions that must have flowed through Anthony Russini yesterday. Here was the son he had lost almost at birth sitting alongside him. Over there in front of the judge was the man who had stolen that son from him.

At times, Russini seemed to be overwhelmed. He sat with his sister and brother in the fifth row of the courtroom for several hours, often with his head bowed and his hands supporting his chin as though trying to comprehend the terrible hand the fates had given him.

Young Matthew Propp has said he wanted to settle this tangled family mess in private, but he has already made the rounds of the TV networks. Who would be surprised if a book and a movie are in the making?

"He was a baby when all this happened to change his life," said one official. "He's a man now, and he is allowed to make his own judgments.

"If I were to guess, I'd guess this story is going to have a happy ending."

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