

Anonymous Storyteller 1

Today is my 46th birthday and as such it is 46 years since I 'left' my birth family and began a life that will never know what it is like to have nature and nature all wrapped up in one familial package. That, I have come to realise, is a gift that is stolen in the act of adoption.

This is my story.

It begins in New Zealand in 1963 where my Catholic parents were young lovers. Due to a range of complicated reasons that are not my story to tell, when my mother became pregnant she left for Australia on a 'working holiday' and, following the advice of a friend, arrived at the Mercy home for unmarried mothers at Waitara in Sydney. She remained there until my birth at the Mater Hospital in North Sydney in autumn, 1964. Three weeks later, the statutory 21 days, I was taken from the hospital by my adoptive parents to their home in the Sydney suburbs.

I was their first living child. Two years before, my mother had given birth prematurely, due to blood pressure complications, to a girl, but she had died shortly after birth. My mother had nearly died as well. She was told that she should never give birth again as it was likely she and another baby would die. They were told to adopt. And so they adopted a girl to replace the one they had lost, even naming me with the same first and second names. However, only a few months later, my mother did fall pregnant again. Again the complications arose and six weeks before the due date my mother and baby brother were fighting for their lives. They survived. Three years later they adopted again, another girl. The family was complete.

My young childhood was very happy. My parents, following the guidelines they were given at the time of adoption, always told me I was adopted and I never remember it being a revelation – it was always something that was part of me yet, at the same time, set me apart. I remember as a kindergarten child boasting that I had 'three' mothers, 'my mother at home, our lady in heaven and the mother who gave birth to me'. Looking back, I realise I was trying to make sense of what seemed my unique position. I didn't feel comfortable about it but tried to turn my situation into a positive.

My other memories of my pre-teen years in relation to adoption are similar. It was a 'thing' I carried with me and its importance ebbed and flowed. My strongest memories of 'its' importance are looking in the mirror at my hair colour, my nose, my freckles – all features that distinguished me from my 'family' and wondering where they had come from, who they belonged to and what would it be like to look at someone with the same features.

Once I became a teenager my yearnings to discover where I was from drew stronger. I often thought I was a "UFO" flinging about in space, with no connections to my environment. Apart from my physical appearance my personality was emerging as different from the relatives around me. I had an inquiring mind and was always asking questions, whether at home or at school. I was argumentative – 'could argue my way out of a paper bag', my mother said, and my humour was satirical and sarcastic, unlike the raconteur style of long story telling that all my cousins seemed to share. At the time I never put these differences down to my adoption, I just thought I was different, wrong, a misfit and so plummeted my self esteem.

Around the same time my family life became troubled. My father was a World War Two veteran, in fact he was old enough to reasonably be my grandfather, and following a series of family calamities he suffered, what I now believe would be termed, post-traumatic stress disorder. A sensitive, artistic man, his war experience had scarred him deeply. In fact, the war never ended for him, he drew and redrew war vistas from his time in New Guinea, we grew up on a diet of old war movies and when travelling in the car listened to tapes of "Hits of the War Years". It is still a wry source of pride for me that I am rare among my generation for knowing all the words of such classics as "Knees up Mother Brown" and the "Quarter Master's Store".

And so, 30 years after the end of the war, Dad succumbed in a nervous collapse. He became too unwell to work and took to spending the day in bed. Noise, even conversations, became painful and for most of my teenage years we lived in a semi quiet as once Dad's 'ears hurt' he would become angry and mildly violent. For me, the inquiring one, the problem was obvious, Dad had had a nervous breakdown related to the war. But not so for everyone else. My mother and the doctors all treated each symptom individually, the ear problem was a result of the war guns, the inertia was depression. These days a quicker diagnosis would have been made and probably spared years of pain. It was around this time I discovered some old papers kept by my father including one from an army medical doctor that diagnosed him as mildly schizophrenic'.

That was the first time I felt bitter about my adoption. Here I was in a very dysfunctional family situation and yet years before 'they' had known the man they gave me to was mentally unwell. 'How dare they'.

As soon as I could I left home to attend university. I felt I could no longer stand the helplessness of my family, their lack of organisation and general different 'ways' of doing and being to myself. Yet I was very much the dutiful daughter. I read once that adopted children often go one of two ways, they either become difficult, challenging their adoptive parents by bad behaviours as if to say "will you still love me or will you give me away too" (that was my sister), the other way, was me. I was the 'perfect' child, too fearful of doing wrong in case, once again, I was to lose my parents.

Back then the adoption secrecy laws were still strict, but I knew that when I turned 18 I could get non-identifying information about my birth family. I had also learnt that my parents would have been given an adoption order that would have contained my birth mother's name. One night, I tentatively asked my mother about this. Yes, my parents had been open about my and my sister's adoption but I always instinctively knew it was by no means a preferred subject of discussion. My mother once said to me she often forgot I was adopted and it was as if I truly were her child. She would have preferred that I forgot too – but that wasn't possible for me. And so it was a taboo subject, one that was only brought up in a necessary or uncomfortable environment.

The question about the adoption order was thus a very loaded one and the answer like a canon blast. Yes, said mum, they were given the order but had burnt it shortly after bringing me home. She did remember two things: my mother's name and the fact my parents were New Zealanders.

I rolled my mother's name around in mouth – it felt strange but the greater shock was my heritage. For several years, in my search for an identity,

I had imagined I had Aboriginal ancestry. Certainly my Celtic looks were not indicative but I had a flattish nose and that was the key to the imagined past I had created. I think it was also my way of identifying with “the other”, the marginalised. But now all that was gone and I was actually from somewhere else – from islands across the sea that I had rarely thought about. I was resentful that I had never been told this and, unless I asked, I never would have been. I had been allowed to create imagined ancestries for myself, another favourite was that I was the descendant of an Australian bushranger – again identifying with the outsider. Would it have really hurt for me to have known my true heritage?

With this information I wrote to the Catholic Adoption Agency, seeking further non-identifying information, which was all that I was legally allowed to acquire. It came a few weeks later, my mother's description of herself and her family and my father's occupation and physical description. A father, it was the first time I had ever really thought about 'him'. My life had focused solely on the 'woman who gave me up'. I had never thought of the other person involved.

That was it, there was nothing more that I could do. The law allowed no more. And so, for the next seven years I continued as I had, carrying my adoption with me as that something extra, but this time, with some knowledge, albeit little, of my true self.

Then at the age of 25, two years after I had married, I came home from work on a Friday afternoon. There was a letter addressed to me with the letters CAA stamped on the back. For a fleeting second I thought Catholic Adoption Agency but immediately dismissed it, I had thought similar things with unfamiliar letters many times before. The yearning was always there. But this time the letter was from the agency and it told how they'd had been contacted by my birth mother and that, having kept my letter from seven years previously, they had tracked me down. She was seeking contact, did I want contact?

I not only burst into tears but let out what I recall as the most primal of screams that came with words that I repeated over and over: “my mother wants to find me, my mother wants to find me”. It was only after that I realised that no matter how much love and care I had been given in my life, it was always dwarfed by the fact that my mother 'didn't want me'. I was never told that – in fact my parents had very kindly said I was given up because “she couldn't afford to keep me”. As a child I had always taken this to mean that I would have grown up without shoes if I hadn't been adopted, running around in rags like the images of children from the Depression. And this was perhaps how I was meant to understand it. As an adult I knew “couldn't afford” was not material but social, moral and religious.

The day I received the letter was 25 years to the day since I was taken from the Mater Hospital as a three week old baby.

I wrote back saying yes I too wanted contact. They had said they would let my mother know and she could send a letter through them. After weeks it arrived, a very long letter in a small and very neat cursive hand. There was so much to tell. After returning to New Zealand after my birth my mother and father had, after a while, restarted their relationship and married. Four years after my birth they had another daughter, my sister. They divorced 18 months later and as I learnt, had held a very acrimonious relationship ever since. My father, at that time, was working overseas, although like my mother, her second husband and my sister, was based in New Zealand. I now know that neither of them really recovered from giving me up...the reasons they hadn't married and kept me at the time were numerous and complicated. It was not a clear cut, straightforward decision but a very vexed, emotional one, the scars of which both continued to carry amidst, I believe, blame for the other.

My mother had given her address, just in case I wanted to write back. Of course I did. I wrote back, outlining my life and myself and, after a little hesitation, giving my address. I stopped at my phone number, a little too personal, too close. It didn't matter. A week later, on a Saturday afternoon I answered the phone to hear, “Margaret, it's (her first name)”. My first thought was, “she has a deep voice, I'd always wanted a deep voice”. I remember nothing else of the call. In fact I now recall little detail of the next few months, it was such an emotional whirlwind. My sister also wrote and rang. My father did not know I had “been found”.

Two months after the phone call my husband farewelled me at the airport - I was on a plane to New Zealand. I had not wanted my husband to come with me. My adoption had always been “my thing”, “my problem”. I continued to carry it with me in this way. It was mid- winter and as the plane crossed the bottom of the North Island towards Wellington I gazed over the snowcapped alps of the south island, bordered by the sea on either side. It was so crystallizingly beautiful. I cried. This is what I had been taken from, this is what I had lost. I had always had a love of mountains and the sea and now here were both in a resplendent togetherness that never occurs in Australia.

Another moment of memory: arrival. As I came through from customs my sister approached, I noted her idiosyncratic walk (some call it a waddle) – the same as mine. Her partner came behind her, then my mother's second husband. He hugged me, nobody else breached personal space. Behind them stood a woman, face hidden in large dark sunglasses. My mother. “Hello”, we each said. “How was your flight?” she said. “Great, thanks”.

We moved to separate cars. My sister and partner went in one and I sat in the front seat as my 'natural stepfather' drove. He too asked how my flight had been. My mother sat in the back. For the duration of the 40 minute drive to their house I talked incessantly, nervously. I did not want silence – it would open the yawning years that had passed.

My sister and her partner had arrived and we all sat in the lounge room, looking at each other. My sister's partner decided to break the silence. “How was your flight?” he said. That was it, the bizarre situation overcame me and I replied in mock sarcastic anger. “It was great and that's the last time I'm answering that question.” Everybody laughed and, for the first time in my life, my humour had a home. As the week went by I met numerous aunts, uncles and cousins and I very quickly fitted in to the freeflowing conversation punctuated by quick witted comments, jibes and friendly sarcasm. No longer did I feel ashamed that my sarcastic humour was, as I had often been told, “the lowest form of wit”.

Prior to this reunion I had only wanted to meet people that looked like me. It was a shock, but a wonderful one, that so many parts of me came from these people. Not just my humour, my sense of social justice, my left wing views, even a love of geology. A myriad of things, little and big, that made up me echoed in these people.

But still my father didn't know. My sister arranged a meeting with his brother. My looks came more from my father's side which brought immediate familiarity. And again, there was a similar humour. I felt at home.

On my last day my sister, who was at university and still living at home, received a phone call from my father. I stood next to her as she took the call. He was unhappy overseas and was going to return earlier than expected, in fact, the next week. I flew out that afternoon, knowing that within just days, my father would be back.

About 10 days later my sister called. She had told our father the night before and he wanted to speak with me – was that alright, he wanted to know. Yes, of course. She would ring and tell him and then I could expect a call from him. He rang almost straight away. It was like speaking with

a long lost friend. We had so much in common, our interests, our politics. We spoke for an hour. And this was the person that until the age of 18 I had not thought about.

From the very start my parents knew of the renewed contact – in fact they had known before me. The CAA had first contacted my home address which had been on my letter seven years before. Mum had passed on my current address...but she didn't tell me. Perhaps she hoped the contact would never happen. But of course it did and although it was and has been uncomfortable my parents were always supportive. When members of my birth family came to visit they stayed with us at the family home. Nobody really wanted to be in this triangular situation but that's how it was and we all dealt with it as best as possible.

In the December I met my father, travelling again to New Zealand. I spent the week with him and met more relatives, this time from his side of the family. My sister was constantly with me and we formed a very close relationship. Although there are differences we are very similar, just like many sisters are. But we did not share a past.

For the next six years my relationship with my New Zealand family flourished. There were many trips both ways across the Tasman and meetings between my natural and adoptive families. I began to develop a new personal strength. I was finally learning about myself, where I was anchored. It was wonderful. Of course it was hard at times, there was so much sorrow and pain to be overcome, but to me it was all worth it. I was like a stunted tree that had been given water and nutrients and I could grow. Then my birth father's health began to fail. A very active man, he hated the loss of mobility and was forced to give up his job. A few months later he committed suicide.

This remains the most devastating event of my life. As much as I love and get on with my mother and sister, it was my father who was truly a kindred spirit and I had only had six years with him. But, as I told myself, six years of adulthood with the conversations and understandings that adults can come to, was probably far better than having a father die at the age of six, when the memories would be slight without little meaning. But, if only...

That was 15 years ago. Since then my adoptive father has also died, at the age of 83, but all other members of family are alive and well. The visits across the Tasman have become less frequent. Not through any lack of desire but through children and other demands. What we have now is probably very close to the situation that many New Zealand families are in when one member lives in Australia: weekly phone calls, birthday and Christmas presents and a general feeling of comfort, support and love.

In my Australian family the trajectory has probably been what it would have. I am still close to my mother and a dutiful daughter, my sister and I never got on and we only come together for family occasions and my brother and I have a comfortable, enduring relationship. My children have easily accepted their multiple relatives and I envy their matter-of-fact attitude to adoption. It is no different for them than if a family had been altered by divorces and remarriages.

This, as they say, has been a "successful" reunion. And it has and I feel so very fortunate to have so many who love and care for me, to have had the opportunity to find myself amongst my family, but I do have bitterness.

I am bitter that a society could force a young, healthy couple to give up a child and give it over to much older parents, one who already had a history of mental illness. I have quite truly never been angry with any of my parents – they were victims too of the society and religion of the time. This society told my birth parents that they were wrong and shameful and did not deserve their child. It told my adoptive parents that they had a right to take another's child. And left in the middle was me.

I am still in the middle and know I always will be. I will never ever know what it is like to have the comfort of a shared past all wrapped up in the same family that echoes my looks, my quirks, my interests. What must that feel like?

So that's how it is and always will be. Some years ago I realised that, when the subject came up, I no longer told people "I am adopted". No longer was it a badge I wore of my difference. I had begun to say "I was adopted". My adoption was an event that happened to me a long time ago. It took me until about the age of 40 to come to terms with its consequences. It stole 40 years of my life. 40 years when I could have been developing as a person and achieving but instead was bound by a mist of uncertainty and angst. The legacy of my adoption, although softened over time, will never leave me. I am now of two families, my New Zealand family and my Australian family. But I am not completely of one or the other. I never will be. That was what adoption has meant to me.