

Meredith S Grant

Monash Adoption Story Teller

(To An Adopted Child)

*Not flesh of my flesh
Not bone of my bone
But still miraculously
My own.
Never forget
For a single minute,
You didn't grow under my heart,
But in it.*

Fleur Conkling Heyliger

(From an Adopted Child)

*Lost without identity
No family tree to fit,
Feeling like an outcast,
I wonder what family is.
Filled with doubt and anger
My origins I need to find,
You need to know
Never question my love,
For it's all I have ever known.
But please understand,
The need to search,
My family,
who remains,
unknown.*

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My adoption story reveals a never ending emotional rollercoaster, a misguided tour through a life full of uncertainties, resentments, and unknowns and to some degree a place where I have accepted my place, however will continually yearn for true identity. Forty-six years ago my adoption journey began, a journey that will continue a lifetime; in reflection I now consider this journey my path, my sojourn, my purpose.

More recently I have come to appreciate how adoption plays such a major role within my life, how it has brought many different emotions to both myself and my family; emotions that can, and have changed my thoughts and feelings on a daily basis, sometimes leaving me feeling elated that I am fortunate enough to have experienced adoption, and yet at other times be left with the thought where I wish I could have experienced a

'normal' family upbringing within biological origins.

Now as both an adopted child and adoptive parent, I am more accepting towards adoption matters; but I am also more opinionated and cautious. My adoption story covers both journeys through adoption as an adoptee and adoptive parent; two very closely linked partners, yet two very different experiences. My experiences thus far (and I emphasise 'thus far', as adoption is forever, a constant wheel of movement, thought and change, something that will never cease in those lives affected), have brought many mixed emotions, some life changing, some which could easily be dismissed and forgotten, while some carry so much importance it's hard to comprehend why.

Where it began:

At just five days old I was reluctantly relinquished by my birth mother and "admitted" to the Methodist Babies Home in South Yarra Victoria. Named 'Jane' I apparently settled into what would become home for the next two months of my young life, a time we recognise today as one of the most important times for attachment. What happened in those first five days of my life prior to admission to the babies' home is void. A time where as a newborn baby I was left within the hospital's nursery, my cries going unnoticed; an orphan left with an uncertain future. So who fed me, bathed me, nurtured me, changed me or cared about me in that time remains a mystery, and could this short period of my life be the cause of so many insecurities felt throughout the past forty-six years of my life, and perhaps for years to come?

Just five days before Christmas 1965, my adoptive parents (who for the purpose of this letter I would like to clarify I prefer to call 'my parents', rather than 'adoptive', as let's face it, they are the only two people who have parented me), took me home, where I became little sister to my brother two years my senior (also adopted).

Under a 'closed adoption,' arrangement I was legally adopted through the County Courts of Melbourne in April 1966, where my parents gained all legal rights to me as they would have a biological child, and so instead of who I was named as on my original birth certificate by my birth mother, I now took on a whole new identity given by my parents, changing my birth certificate forever. This change also meant that my birth mother surrender all rights with regard to my existence; signing the consents for my adoption order now meant that she would never learn where I lived, who my parents were, what name I had; in fact it meant she would never learn anything more about me in its entirety.

Placed under a closed adoption arrangement, the adoption laws in place at the time also potentially promised my parents that no identifying information pertaining to my adoption would ever be released; a promise my birth mother should have also been made familiar with. In 1984, the Victorian Adoption Act underwent significant changes, and with these changes saw the rights of birth mothers and the affects placed upon them following the relinquishment of their babies' being called for change. The change which then came about meant closed files could now be opened to gain non-identifying information on affected parties (the adopted child and birth parent/s).

This change did not sit well with my parents; a promise was a promise, and how could it be broken? My parents now faced the challenge they thought never possible – the fact that identity could be disclosed, and that my birth mother could now try and find out about the child she gave up. My parent's now were filled with dismay, and lost all trust in the system. They literally lived in fear with the thought they may lose me if my birth mother made an attempt to play a role back within my life. Their fears were not immediately recognised by me, not until many years after when my birth mother did make an attempt to contact.

Fortunately as children my parents decided that both my brother and myself should always be aware of our adoptions; their honesty as hard as it was for them at the time paid off when adoption laws changed affecting not only any new adoptions from that date, but all existing adoptions prior. Sadly my mother found it necessary to contact the registers, notifying them of my brother's death in 1982, just in case his birth mother decided to try and pursue contact, a fact we will never learn of.

Faced with the loss of my brother and left the only child of the family, it's understated to say my parents were over vigilant with protection. So here not only the insecurities of my adoption affecting me, but also affecting my parents became a noticeable issue within our family status. I began to resent my adoption, wishing I had a family with lots of siblings, wishing I had parents who were tough, rich and who loved life instead of being affected so deeply by grief. The time of my brother's death was one which I endured some of the toughest lessons in life and from being adopted; a time where my self-worth was put to the test. Relatives had insensitively suggested my brother's death would not have impacted upon me as much as it would if we were biological siblings. I was sixteen years of age. My best friend at the time even suggested it didn't really matter as she never liked him anyway. My life was turned upside down. I loved my brother; I didn't know then how that stacked up against loving a biological sibling, but know as an adult I now there is no comparable difference and how dare anyone suggest otherwise.

In 1993, and twenty-eight- years of age, I received a letter sent within a blank envelope. Inside contained a letter which described it contained a sensitive matter and that I might want to read it in privacy. The letter had been sent by Community Services Victoria (CSV), from there Adoption Information Service. I remember reading through this letter, it disclosed the fact I was adopted and that I might however be unaware of this particular issue. I was outraged to have been sent such an insensitive letter, addressing such a personal matter. At the time I remember thinking thank God my parents had made me aware of this issue, and couldn't help thinking of how many people had received such a letter who didn't know? The letter affected me so much so I almost lost focus why they found it necessary to send it in the first place. My birth mother had contacted the department hoping to make contact with me.

So here I had an opportunity to have some very important unanswered questions resolved. I finally had a very real chance to find out why my birth mother relinquished me. I needed her verification on the story my parents had been given, and lucky I did because the stories were vastly different.

The decision to allow contact with my birth mother didn't come easy, I felt torn between my loyalties and still do experience this very draining affliction. Keeping in mind my parents feelings as first priority, I made a decision back in 1993 based more on their needs than mine, where I allowed contact via written correspondence only, dismissing any real chance of a physical reunion. My decision was influenced greatly by my parents and even though I have always put their needs before my own, I still resent the fact I was never given the freedom or allowed the right to make my own informed decision without feeling guilty.

The first letter I received from my birth mother explained the circumstances surrounding my adoption. At just nineteen years of age with already a two-year-old to care for, coupled with a father who did not hang around following the news of the pregnancy, along with my birth mothers own mother also being pregnant at the same time, my life was to take the toll of those times of hardship; I became the victim and sent out into a unknown world for a chance of better life.

Throughout the past 19 years my birth mother and I have maintained contact, both gaining an appreciation of one another's lives. I have found I have siblings yet I am not interested in meeting them, nor am I interested in meeting my birth mother; why? I still cannot honestly give an answer to. I don't want to replace the family I had as a child, I especially don't want to replace my brother. I often feel that inviting my birth mother and her family would only bring unnecessary complications to my life that I don't need. I know my birth mother and some of the siblings would be anxious to meet, but there is something that holds me back from letting this happen. Sometimes I feel these people are merely strangers to me; I don't really know anything about them other than what they have told me through their letters, and vice versa. There is a lot left unsaid about me that I have not shared with them, as I am sure they have not shared with me. A picture on paper is possibly more enticing than the real thing. My dilemma whether to meet or not has been a huge factor surrounding my adoption, something I just can't seem to get my head around quite properly.

Throughout my childhood adoption never really played a significant role in my life, I always felt loved; I had a family, a brother, pets, holidays, and friends. Adoption was something to brag about to my friends, it was an issue no one really understood, including me. It was a time of ignorance where I placed my parents under unwanted attention. But as an adult the issue of adoption raises many questions a child would not normally contemplate, and now as a parent to an adopted child I have the opportunity to step into my mother's shoes and truly understand the emotional resilience required to get through every day. Every day there are issues whether it be your own or your child's. Most people are accepting and show a genuine interest in our daughter's adoption; however we have found the need to be careful with disclosing a lot of details surrounding her adoption, due to circumstances which have evolved since her Adoption Order. We have already endured the threat of a birth father wanting to gain parental access; a birth father who was otherwise carefully not named at the birth due to his abuse of alcohol, drugs and human life, and we wonder how his approach could have even been acknowledged with no formal proof of parentage. A slip in the system? Possibly, but none the less it placed an enormous amount of stress on our families security, something we should not have had to endure.

My daughter was placed for adoption here within our country, her birth mother relinquished her because she felt she was not mature enough to raise a baby. I am so proud of my daughter's birth mother for making such a huge and responsible decision. I am so proud of the fact that in today's society she didn't take the easy option and live off benefits as a single mother for her own gain. My daughter's birth mother, as my own put their child's needs before their own and that is a massive sacrifice.

In saying I am proud of my daughter's birth mother, I would be remiss if I didn't say there are also disappointments. Along with those disappointments come mistrust and the need to live a very tight family life that involves some basis of secrecy.

Our journey to become adoptive parents was nothing short of exhausting. After finding out our first baby carried an unbalanced chromosome translocation, he was delivered stillborn. We experienced countless miscarriages before we decided enough was enough. Firstly, we pursued donor assisted conception, and were lucky enough to successfully become parents to our son. Further treatments for more children failed leaving us with the options of inter-country adoption, permanent-care, foster-care and finally local adoption in order to have any more children. After attending information sessions for all of the above, we finally agreed to go ahead with local adoption.

The process was lengthy, it was discouraging and at many stages we were reluctant to continue. We found that information sessions held for prospective adoptive parents to be disheartening, where they noticeably had no intention of encouraging people to go forward, and there's little wonder why so many people who might otherwise see the local adoption process through, decide against it. There is a strong need for more encouragement, to let people know there is a very real chance for them to become parents through adoption. Yes, there are limited numbers of babies relinquished for adoption within today's society, but the bottom line is there are still babies placed; in fact on average there are still between 60-70 local adoptions taking place each year throughout the states and territories of Australia.

Already parents to our own biological son, we found many of the questions and stages throughout the process irrelevant – we were already parents – why was there a need to prove we could parent another child purely based on the fact it wasn't ours? We were led to believe that because we already had a child our chances of being chosen by birth parents would be limited. We were told most birth parents chose younger couples, couples without children for it gave their baby a place to be special; we already had our own child and we were fast approaching forty-years of age. The process took two years from the first point of contact until we were approved to become potential adoptive parents. To our total astonishment, almost a year to the day we were approved, we received news of being selected as parents to our daughter. We had less than a week to prepare for our daughter's arrival.

When we first met our daughter at seven weeks of age, it felt right, she was meant to be with us. Our daughter is the most highly spirited child I have ever known. She is beautiful, clever and determined for such a young age. She lacks no part of self-confidence, yet at times I can see many traits in her as myself. She shows signs already for acceptance in a life that lacks absolutely no attention. She is in constant need to be the centre of attention, to prove herself, to remind us she loves us, and in return know we love her. She is a member of our family we could not imagine being without. She was placed under an 'open' adoption arrangement, and at her tender age she already understands the fact she came from someone else's tummy.

As time goes on, my experience as an adoptive parent has changed numerous times, and I believe due to my own experiences with adoption it has helped understand and accept many issues we have already needed to face. Contact with my own birth mother continues to be an ongoing journey, and who knows what might be in the future. Being adopted and being an adoptive parent has helped me see all perspectives of adoption. I have been able to rationalise the different points of view necessary to understand and accept life within adoption. I consider myself one of the lucky ones.

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