

My Own Story as an Adoptee

MY MOTHER TOLD ME that on my first three birthdays she lit a special candle on my cake for the young woman who had given birth to me. She never explained why she did this for three years—no more, no less. I don't remember this private ceremony, but I do remember that there were times in my childhood when she looked at me in a particular way and I knew she was thinking about this young woman, my mother.

Three generations of women from my family have been brought together by adoption. Neither my maternal grandmother nor my mother nor I have given birth to a child. I am the first for whom this was a conscious choice.

My mother was never told that she was adopted. For my grandmother to admit this would have been a public declaration of her own inadequacy, her inability to bear children for her husband. But my mother knew. She had found her birth certificate taped to the back of a painting at her aunt's house. Her name had been Baby Helene before it was Hazel, and when she brought me home she named me Ann Helene.

My mother suffered her own private insecurity at not being able to bring

a child to full term. But by the time she and my father turned to adoption there was no public stigma attaching to those who chose to adopt. In post-World War II America, families that wanted to adopt were carefully screened and represented a kind of model family—one with a mother and a father who really *wanted* to raise a child.

Although it is doubtful that families vetted through this process were actually any better or worse than other families, I was lucky enough to have parents who were loving and supportive and mindful of my development as an individual. They knew that they could guide me, but they also understood that I was not the sum of their parts. I was the product of two young people who had themselves, perhaps, been too young to fully understand the characteristics they had inherited from their own parents and passed on to me.

My adoptive mother and father were offered very little information about my biological parents. She was nineteen and from a big farm family of English and German descent. He was athletic, a college football player from a family of means. Their parents felt that this was no way to start a family.

My mother cried whenever she told me this story. She knew it could not be so simple. I did not. The story of that young couple sounded like the plot of a movie to me. I liked being part of this soulful story of ill-fated love, of having a mysterious past, of not being related to my family, of being my own person.

When I became sexually active, I imagined that if the worst happened I would do as my mother had done: go off to another town to a home for unwed mothers and return with a story about a kidney infection, or about an Aunt Betty in Sandusky who needed my care. This is what young women who got caught in this unfortunate situation did. Almost every graduating class had a girl who disappeared. Everyone knew where she had gone, and that she had most likely been told, "If you love your child you must give it up, move on with your life, and forget."

It never occurred to me that those girls may not have forgotten, that it might not have been so easy for them to just move on with their lives. But then I had never gone through pregnancy and childbirth myself. And I had never heard the story from a woman who had surrendered her child.

Then something happened that forever changed my understanding of adoption. In 1989, I was attending the opening of an exhibition at the Mary-

land Institute College of Art, where I had been teaching for seven years long after I arrived, I noticed a woman who looked very familiar. I had a faint and clear memory of having recently talked to her but I couldn't remember where or when. I asked several people if they knew who she was but no one did, so I continued to look at the exhibition.

Later, this woman walked toward me from across the room and with her introduction said, "You could be my long-lost daughter. You look like a perfect combination of myself and the father of my child." I said, "I don't know what you're saying to me. I *could* be your daughter—I was adopted." There was a long silence and I saw her start to react as I had. I actually we compared dates, but they were one year and one month apart. She kept asking, "Are you *sure* about your birth date? Sometimes records can change." But I was sure.

We continued to talk. She asked me if I had looked for my mother. I responded that I didn't know if I wanted to invade her privacy. I said, "When you gave up a child for adoption in 1949, you didn't expect her to come knocking on your door forty years later." And she said, "You should find her. She probably worries every day about what happened to you and whether you've had a good life." I could see in her eyes that she was speaking from her own experience, and the thought that my mother might have the same sense of loss was shocking to me. I felt guilty and empathetic all at once. Why had I never considered this possibility? How could I not know? How could everyone not know?

I continued to listen, realizing that I had never heard the story of adoption from the perspective of a mother who had surrendered her child. It seemed incredible to me that after forty years of life as an adoptee I was hearing the other side of the story for the first time. As I listened I finally understood why this woman seemed so familiar to me: the image of the two of us talking had been in my dream the night before we met. I went home and wrote down every word of our conversation. I started to wonder if my mother's worrying had caused the dream.

A year later, the woman I had met in the gallery had separated from her husband and was living down the block from me. I began to wonder if she really was my mother but had not told me because I seemed ambivalent about a reunion. Had she left her husband and home to be near me?

My parents had always been very open about any information they had surrounding my adoption. There was a file in my father's cabinet with "Ann" neatly printed in my mother's hand that contained all of my original paperwork. As a child, I periodically opened that file drawer as slowly and quietly as I could to look at the papers containing my original name, a carbon copy of a letter on tissue-thin paper from the minister of our church congratulating my parents on their recent adoption, and records of what I had been fed during the three-month waiting period before my parents could take me home. Now I returned to that file for the name of the adoption agency. I needed to know what information I was entitled to. I needed to know if *this* woman was my mother.

The man at the agency informed me that because I was born in Ohio before 1964, all I had to do was fill out a form, send it to the Department of Vital Statistics, State of Ohio, and the department would send me a copy of my original birth certificate. After all the stories I had heard about sealed records and professional searchers, it never occurred to me that I might be able to get a copy of my records with just a phone call, a notarized piece of paper, and two forms of identification.

When the envelope from the Department of Vital Statistics arrived, I was in the middle of making travel arrangements for a lecture I was to give about my artwork in an exhibition entitled "Parents." I unfolded the single sheet of paper and saw my mother's full name, her place of birth, and her permanent residence in 1949. The right side of the form, where information about my father should be noted, was blank.

I located my Ohio map. The trip I was planning would take me within an hour of the rural community where she was born. So I allowed an extra day and set off through a landscape of corn and bean fields, and an occasional white house and barn, in search of a yearbook picture. I wanted to see what she looked like. I wanted to see if I looked like my mother.

When I arrived I couldn't find the public library, so I went to the school. The halls were empty; students had left for the day, but teachers were still in their classrooms. I could hear the rustle of papers and blackboards being wiped clean. The door to the library was locked, but the teacher in the next room offered to help. He said the yearbooks in the library did not go back that far but there was a chance one could be found down in the main office.

We entered the office and he announced that I was looking for a year-

book from 1948, and the secretaries, principals, and vice principals : to work rooting through their office bookcases. No one asked any qu This is the rural Midwest. When they couldn't find the right yearbo wrote down names of people who graduated that year so I could ca maybe go to their house and look at their yearbook. I felt sick. Thi gone too far—I just wanted to look at a picture.

I tried to leave but a man came through the door and they all toward him and said in unison, "Do *you* have a yearbook from 194 man said, "Who are you looking for?" And they all turned back tow

I had to say a last name. I acted as if I were asking for somebod tried to sound unsure, but he knew the name and he said her whol out loud. And then he said, "She doesn't live around here anyme there's a house with a business out on Route 30 with that same las They might know where you can find her."

I cleared out and started driving. I didn't know where I was head than away from that school. I hadn't wanted her name to get ou wanted to look at a picture. Then I realized I was on Route 30, the rc the business and the people with the same last name.

As I got closer I passed a road with the family name, the farm must have been before I was born. Then I saw the house and the b the sign for the business and I thought, I'll just go in and buy some don't know what. I pulled in, past buildings, past tractors, past co and reached the end of the driveway. But there was no business, ju out front, a number to call, and then a man came out of the barn w had driven too far back into his driveway to pretend I was just around, so I rolled down my window and heard myself say, "I see yo up there on the barn. You wouldn't happen to know someone by tl of Eleanor, would you?" And he said, "Yeah, that's my sister."

Then he started talking. He talked for an hour. He told me about her husband, two boys, and a girl. But what he didn't know was—tl *another* girl: two boys and *two* girls. He talked about growing up on tl the old Victorian house, and the banister they loved to slide down. talked about her and how she was different from her sisters. He sa would much rather spend time in the barn than help in the house." told other stories that sounded familiar.

Finally, he asked how I knew her and I told him my mother had lived around there when she was young and had moved away. She wondered whatever happened to Eleanor. So he went into the house and brought out her address and phone number. And when I left, I drove to the town where she had lived all these years, just to drive by, to make sure she was okay. I had always worried that her family had disowned her and she had lived in miserable conditions. Maybe I thought I might catch a glimpse of her.

It occurred to me afterward that she might get suspicious when her brother told her the story of a woman who had been asking about her. Maybe she had not told her children. She might be living in fear that I would show up on her doorstep next. I couldn't decide whether I should contact her right away or wait. I waited fourteen years.

During the years that followed, I created several autobiographical installations about adoption. Whenever possible I offered space in my exhibitions for members of the community to display their stories of adoption along with mine. I was overwhelmed by what I read. The writings left behind by women in New York, California, Texas, and Maryland were the same. What the mothers had been assured when they signed the papers giving up all rights to their children turned out to be a lie: they did not move on and forget. I think my adoptive mother knew this when she lit those candles. I think three years was all that she could bear. *She* needed to move on and forget.

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Breaking the Silence

You asked me why I agreed to be interviewed and I think it was because you were here, because you came here and it spoke to me—that's all. There's still that voice in me that says, "Who would be interested? No one cared then, why would they care now?" I was abandoned when it was right in everybody's face, so I still believe that nobody cares. My personal struggle is to get beyond thinking I'm not worth caring about. I am here. I do exist. Maybe by adding my two cents I can help other moms who feel the way I do. Maybe they will find someone who cares.

—Suzanne

IN JUNE OF 2002, I began tape-recording the oral histories of women who surrendered a newborn for adoption between the end of World War II, in 1945, and the 1973 passage of *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion throughout the nation. These years were a time of enormous change for young women as barriers to equality and independence broke down. For the young men and women growing up in the postwar years, especially those of the baby-boom generation, this liberation from the past also applied to sexual behavior. And though premarital sex was certainly not a new phenomenon, it became increasingly common among those who had no plans to marry. For women born after 1949, the odds were that they would have sex before they reached age twenty.¹

Despite the increase in the number of young people having sex in the 1950s and 1960s, access to birth control and sex education lagged far behind.