

Clare Graydon

In the interests of clarity, I will refer to my adoptive parents as Mum and Dad. My birth mothers name was Margery or Margie. My other birth relations will be referred to as such. I am an adoptee. I was born in Victoria in 1959. When I was aged 5, my Mum told me that she and Dad had adopted me as a baby. I can remember it amazingly clearly. Her rationale for telling me at that time was that she thought I should know before I started school in case one of the other children told me I was adopted. Dad was out on the farm working when I was told. I realised the significance of this later and will return to this point later.

The information I was given was this: that my birth mother was unmarried and she couldnt get married to my birth father because he was already married to someone else. That my birth mother was 22 years old when I was born, and that she was a nurse. I cant remember if I was told any further details at that time, but somewhere along the line I picked up the information that my birth mothers name was Margery and she lived in Geelong when she became pregnant with me. I cant remember when I got this information but it was all I knew until I was in my thirties.

Mum told me all the things adopters were told to say in those days. That I was wanted. That my birth mother loved me so she gave me up. That I didnt grow under Mums heart but in it. That unlike other children, I was chosen, and that made me special. After that Mum and Dad never talked about my adoption unless I raised the matter. Because they didnt raise the matter, I felt that they didnt want to talk about it, so I didnt raise it either. Like any adoptee, I wondered about my birth mother. Where was she? Did she ever think about me? Was she married? Did she have other children? I was raised as an only child so that possibility was immensely exciting - I might have half sisters and brothers! I found my own birthdays very painful. I would be excited in the days leading up to it but when the day came, I felt depressed and let down. From reading Ive learnt this is common in adoptees. Its as if we expect our mother to reappear and when she doesnt, we are disappointed. Margie had left me an enameled blue cross on a chain which Mum passed on to me. I sporadically wore it round my neck. It was a constant reminder of my adoption. Sometimes I didnt want to wear it (didnt want to think about being adopted) so Id put it away for months at a time. But I always came back to it eventually. At the age of 13 I lost it. It felt like a weight was lifted when that happened and even now when I think of it, Im glad the cross is gone. I cant analyse why that should be and it seems counterintuitive because I think about Margie very often.

One further piece of information I was given was this. The way I came to be placed with my adoptive parents, who were both strict Catholics, was that their parish priest was friends with the parish priest in my birth familys parish. There was a baby whose mother couldnt keep it, and would they be interested in adopting it? They said yes. My adoptive parents were aged 46 and 50 and had been married for 17 years at the time of my birth. They were living in Carrajung in Gippsland at the time. I was born at Yarram, only a few miles away. This proximity was also significant, although I only realised it much later in life. When I was aged three and a half, Dad won a soldier settlers block at Juneee in New South Wales. It didnt have so much as a fence on it. For 6 months we lived in a tent pitched next to our neighbours shearing shed. During that time Dad got a corrugated iron shed built on our farm, which became my home for the period I was aged 4 to 11. One half was the living area, which was separated from the sleeping section by lengths of fabric hung from the rafters. We had a wood stove, we washed in a dish on a stack of bricks beside the tank, we had a bucket toilet. The shed had only one door and three small louvred windows that were high up on the walls. It wasnt insulated in any way. Winter temperatures dropped below freezing, and summer days were over 40 degrees. But we had a garage for the car.

During primary school (Catholic, of course), I was second in the class. The boy who was always first was the son of the local parish priest and he went on to become dux of the state in our final high school exams. His mother hated me because I was a threat to her golden boy and was instrumental in seeing that the nuns punished me as often as possible.

At the end of primary school, at the age of 10, I was sent to boarding school. Mount Erin in Wagga. Catholic. I hated being away from my home and my beloved dog. I couldnt eat the disgusting food. I was miserable all the time. Every time we had a weekend at home I cried all the way back, although I tried to smother my sobs. But I never said I hated it or that I didnt want to go back. Very recently Ive realised that throughout my childhood I was frightened of my adoptive parents, although I never consciously realised it. I started doing badly in school, to the point that I dropped from the top grade of every subject to the bottom. I lost weight and I was a thin child to start with. I started stealing. I acted out. I didnt quite dare to do something serious enough to get myself expelled, but Im sure if it had gone on, I would have. I can see now that I suffered from clinical depression from that time on. My problems with chronic depression have been with me and have influenced my life ever since. After two and a half years I could stand no more. A weekend home was scheduled. I packed up all my things. I never said a word to anyone, but when my parents

came to collect me I told them that if they sent me back I'd run away. Years later I asked Mum why they'd sent me there. I got a variety of responses: it was Catholic, of course; someone had told Dad in the pub that the local high school was riddled with drugs (this was untrue); that they thought I was lonely and it would be good for me. I asked Mum if they hadn't noticed the drop in my grades or the fact that I was a walking skeleton. She said they were giving me time to settle in. For two and a half years??? It was the most miserable time of my life, except for one....

When I was a young child, I know that Dad loved me. I used to choose to go with him out on the farm rather than stay in the shed with Mum and do boring girl stuff. But when I came home from boarding school, Dad changed. He wasn't close to me any more. He treated me like I was promiscuous, which I wasn't. He seemed ashamed of me. One time I was dressed up to go into town and he said I looked like a moll. Our relationship never recovered. He was never there for emotional moments, like when he was out of the shed when Mum told me I was adopted. He was emotionally unavailable (imagine not being there when Mum told me about being adopted!). He was a binge drinker who became emotionally abusive when he drank. I had blocked out one particular recollection and it only came back to me in my thirties. One night while I was still in primary school I woke up and Dad was in my part of the shed. He was drunk. He had taken a wrong turn on his way to the door. He opened my wardrobe door thinking it was the external door and urinated on my clothes and shoes. This was the "better life" my mother had given me up to.

I thought about searching for my birth mother for years, but I didn't want to hurt or upset Mum and Dad. I had also realised at a fairly young age that Margie might not want to see me. She might have a husband and other children who were ignorant of my existence. So I waited. Dad died when I was 24. I waited and waited, but when Mum was 81, I decided I had to search. I contacted Vanish in Victoria, jumped through the necessary hoops and asked them to search for Margie. After only three weeks, the phone rang. It was the person in charge of Vanish. She told me they'd found Margie. My heart leapt.

Then she told me that Margie had passed away 8 years previously.

It was like my heart was torn out.

I knew immediately that I was in trouble. I wasn't going to be able to cope with this loss on my own. I tried to find help but no one understood. People even said to me, you didn't know her so why do you care?

She was my MOTHER.

I started having panic attacks. I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest it was beating so hard. I couldn't stand being around Mum. I thought I was going insane. I planned how I was going to commit suicide and where - in the Catholic church which I felt was responsible for so many of the bad things that had happened to me. Luckily I was able to function well enough for as long as it took to find someone who could help me. This was a psychologist who had dealt with people with adoption loss issues before. When I found him, I fell apart. I was taken to a hostel where I could stop living my normal life (I was divorced and had two young sons at that stage) and just collapsed. I dissociated. I lived as if I was 5 (significantly, the age I was when I was told I was adopted). Other women used to come in and read me a bedtime story. They took care of me. Eventually I "grew up" again. It was two months till I could return to normal life.

During this period and afterward, I was incredibly angry. All my years of questions and wondering and uncertainty just bubbled up and I spewed them out. My rage was directed at Mum. She was the only one available. Things came out: Margie had actually lived with Mum and Dad during the last weeks before my birth. That's why the I was born in the Yarram hospital - it was the closest to Carrarung where Mum and Dad lived. But when I asked Mum what she looked like, Mum couldn't remember. During my childhood I'd looked for my adoption papers but couldn't find them. No wonder: Mum and Dad hadn't legally adopted me till I was 16 years old. That's right. Sixteen! I asked why. Mum said the solicitor they'd used when I was a baby had absconded with the funds. They just let it go. Recently I mentioned this to a childhood friend. She casually announced that she and her five siblings knew all about it. Her mother was the JP who witnessed the necessary documents. So everybody knew, except me, the one person who should have been told. I was so angry. I shouted at Mum that I should have been told and why wasn't I given the choice? She is timid and I'm quite frightening when I'm angry. Poor Mum. She said the solicitor in June had asked the high school principal if I was happy and he said yes so that was good enough. This despite the fact that he'd hardly have known me by sight. And despite being reasonably intelligent - I now have a PhD - I failed my final high school exams.

In 1996, two years after I discovered Margie was dead, I approached Vanish again to see if they could find any other members of my birth family. They traced the person who had registered Margie's death. He was married to my aunt, and they were living not 15 minutes drive away from me in Queensland. My aunt, Barbara, responded to the letter I had sent cautiously asking if she wanted to know me. She told me that she herself hadn't known of my existence until years after I was born. At a family Christmas, someone mentioned "Margie's baby". She was stunned to know I existed.

She told me that my mother Margie was the middle one of five sisters. Like so many relinquishing mothers, she never married and never had any more children. A woman who was her best friend for years and years didn't know I existed. She never told a soul. She died at the age of 52, the same age I am now, from breast cancer. Her mother, my maternal grandmother, died of the same disease. No one knows who my birth father was, although my aunt Jan who was nursing with Margie thinks he might have been an

architect. I will never know if he even knows I'm alive. I have no way of tracing him. Through Barbara I met the two youngest sisters, my aunts Jan and Lou, and a number of cousins. One of them showed me a ring she owned that had been left to her by my mother. That was such a hurtful thing to do though no one else seemed to realise that. If not for adoption, I would have had something of my mother's. Barbara later gave me a few things that belonged to Margie, things that no one else wanted like an old fishing net and a couple of dolls. That is all the legacy I have of my mother.

In 2004 my husband and I moved to Melbourne. I know from her death certificate that Margie is buried in the cemetery at Point Lonsdale. We drove past that cemetery many times but I couldn't go in. Even as I write this, I am close to tears. I can't bear the pain of seeing my mother's grave.

My eldest aunt refused to meet me. I tried for 10 years to integrate into my birth family but never felt that I belonged. But I've never felt that I belonged in my extended adopted family, either. Now I have nothing to do with either my birth family or my extended adoptive family. It's the only way to avoid the pain of not belonging and of them not understanding my grief. After dealing with repeated episodes of major depression that have interfered with my career and my relationships, that have required hospitalisation, that still require medication that I will have to take for the rest of my life, and extended treatment by a consultant psychiatrist, I feel that I have my life under control. Well, for the moment. Adoption issues have a way of coming back and biting you when you least expect them. They come up when other people talk about their families. They come up when you realise yet again that you're not really part of a family, except the one you've created for yourself - your children, their children and those who truly love you, adoption wars and all. Adoption has coloured every aspect of my life with pain, loss and sadness. Anger is a constant; scratch an adoptee and you'll find incredible rage. My adoption has affected everyone I care about - my birth mother, my adoptive parents, my two husbands, and my children. I hope to avoid the effects passing on to my grandchildren but I may not be able to. I'm sure my behaviour when my children were growing up affected them negatively and therefore the pain may yet reverberate through generations to come. Adoption is not the panacea it was once thought to be; it is loss, it is grief and it is pain. Pure and simple.

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