

Graham Pascoe

My name is Graham. I was born in Melbourne in 1934 and lived there for twenty-odd years with my parents and younger brother. It was a loving, stable family, neither rich nor poor, in what would be considered to be a lower middle-class residential area. In 1972 I moved to a large town in regional New South Wales with my wife and two infant children. Early in 2002, when I was nearly sixty-eight years old, I learned that there was indeed truth in the old saying, 'Life is full of surprises'.

One day towards the end of 2001 I was looking at some old family photographs which had been in my (by then deceased) parents' collection and found some snapshots of a cousin Joyce with whom I'd lost contact many decades ago. Another cousin, Betty, told me how to contact Joyce so I telephoned her to tell her about the photographs. I identified myself by referring to my parents and younger brother. Needless to say, she was surprised to hear from me after so many years. She immediately exclaimed, 'Ah Graham, you're the adopted one aren't you'. After talking with her for a few minutes I concluded that she had mistaken me for my younger brother and that perhaps he had been adopted by my parents.

Soon afterwards I contacted Betty again and told her what Joyce had said. Betty was dismissive, assuring me that Joyce was unreliable and what she had said was nonsense. I gave little or no further thought to the matter. After all, I had a birth certificate that named my mum and dad as my mother and father, so it seemed that Betty was right and Joyce was wrong.

Towards the end of summer in 2002 I was in Melbourne lunching with Betty and her husband. The subject of Joyce's remark came up again; once again, Betty was dismissive. Before our meal had finished Betty left the table and her husband turned to me and said, 'Graham, I think you have the right to know that Joyce was correct, you were adopted. Betty had been sworn to secrecy about it by her mother.'

In a subsequent conversation with Betty she confirmed the information, saying that she believed that a young woman from a prominent family had given birth to me but was unable to keep me so the hospital staff arranged a swap, giving the 'unwanted' baby to my adoptive mother who was in hospital at the time, having given birth to a son who had died soon after birth.

When I told my brother he assured me that he was unaware of my adoption. 'It doesn't matter. We're still brothers and I still love you', he said. I telephoned my few other cousins and all of them said that they knew, were told not to mention it and it made no difference anyway. It had been a well-kept family secret. Fortunately, I was able to reflect on the wonderful family life I had enjoyed, regardless of my ignorance of the real circumstances of my infancy. I couldn't have imagined how life with my birth mother could have been any better for me. The sadness I felt was for her, a woman who had gone through life not knowing what had happened to her son.

By then I had become quite emotional about the matter and one night I happened to see a television program about the life of a prominent Australian businesswoman and author, Jill Ker Conway. Like me, she must have had auburn hair in her youth. As I saw her in one scene I wondered if my birth mother's hair had been like that.

I then decided to attempt to learn more about my adoption and subsequently obtained from The Department of Human Services in Victoria a copy of my original birth certificate. It confirmed my date of birth, identified my birth mother but not my father and stated that my mother had named me Claude. A copy of my birth mother's marriage certificate noted that she had married almost five years later. A copy of an Adoption Order from the Court Records from Petty Sessions in Melbourne was dated October 1934 and so told me that my adoption was official, not just a matter of a 'swap' by hospital staff, and that my adoptive parents' surname 'be conferred upon the said infant who is henceforth to be known as Graham...' I later learned that my birth mother had died in 1995 at the age of eighty-one.

Coincidentally, several years before I commenced my search my wife had searched for and been re-united with a daughter whom she had given up for adoption as a baby. Thus I had been made aware of some of the emotional stresses involved in the lengthy process of trying to find family members in these circumstances.

By contacting a Melbourne organisation called Vanish I was able to learn that my birth mother's widower Stanley was still alive and that I had two half sisters from the marriage. The last thing I wished to do was to cause any unnecessary distress to them. I decided not to try to contact Stanley. From the pastor of the church which conducted my birth mother's funeral I learned that 'she was a lovely lady who was very popular with young people'.

Vanish was able to tell me that one of my half sisters still had her maiden name and as that was on the public record (the electoral role) I wrote to her advising the name which my birth mother (who was, of course, also her mother although I didn't say that) had given me to the effect that I may have relatives with the same surname as she. I invited her to contact me. I received no reply. By now about twelve months had elapsed since my 'discovery'. I wrote again, this time with what I hoped was a similarly discreet letter for 'Person to person delivery'. Confirmation that the letter had been delivered came from Australia Post. There was still no reply. In June 2003 I wrote her a third and final letter to the effect that 'Information I have suggests that you and I are directly related and the reason for my writing to you is just to learn who my relatives really are. It would mean a great deal to me if you would write or phone me.' That produced no response.

Vanish then sent a letter to my other half sister seeking her permission for me to contact her. Vanish received no response and I resolved then to take the matter no further. As I said earlier, my only regret is for my birth mother who presumably lived sixty-one years of her life not knowing what had happened to her baby son. If only she could have known what a wonderful life I'd enjoyed.