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My story comes from my birth parents, siblings, and uncles; my adoptive parents, aunt and cousin; records from an adoption agency, hospital, and Babies' Home and my own experiences and memory.

I was born in 1956 in Dandenong, Victoria. My birth parents were Dutch and had migrated to Australia from Indonesia. During WW2, they had been POWs under the Japanese Occupation and recently both have told me of the atrocities they witnessed and the effect it had on them. My elder sister was born in Indonesia, and my elder brother in Perth, WA.

My birth parents' marriage was not a happy one, and it ended four months after I was born. After writing a letter in which my birth mother agreed that in future she would be responsible for me, and he for the other two, my birth mother left my elder siblings with my birth father and his pregnant, under-aged girlfriend, taking me back to her friends in Perth. A short time later, because she was called to testify in a court case involving my birth father, we returned to Melbourne where my birth mother got a job in a Babies' Home. She put me up for adoption then left. Not long after, she went as housekeeper and nanny to the man she later married, who was a divorcee with two small children. Meanwhile, my birth father put my siblings in a Children's Home during the week and had them out on alternate weekends. Years later, my birth mother took them into her new family. Although we didn't meet until I was forty, this family lived only kilometres away from where I was raised.

I was adopted at the age of eight months by an English couple who lived in Melbourne and were unable to have children. I am told that when they brought me home, after a period of visiting me every day at the Babies' Home, I used to sit in my cot and rock incessantly. Sometimes I would push myself to the end of the cot and bang my head against it repeatedly. It took many weeks to get me to cuddle in response to being held. Instead, I used to push away and stare.

Gradually, my new parents and grandparents won me round until I became a confident and rather precocious child.

Mum and Dad brought me up consciously, watching for traits to develop and fostering talents where they saw them. There was much relief in the whole family when I was told, at the age of seven, that I was adopted, and rushed to tell my aunt, who lived over the road, as if it were something special. After that, no-one made mention of it, and it was as if I was my parents' natural child.

According to one of my cousins, I did, now and then, express my curiosity about where I'd come from as we were growing up, but I don't remember this. I do remember, on my fifteenth birthday, reaching out in my thoughts to whoever had given me birth and wishing that she knew that I was alive and well. I even thought of putting an advert in the Personal column of 'The Age' newspaper. It was the first time I allowed myself to dwell on what might have been the circumstance of my birth. I assumed that I was the child of a teenage, unwed girl, and that she'd had no choice.

At about this time, I started looking at faces - in crowds, on the train, on TV - and wondering if I was looking at a birth relative. I toyed with the idea of raising the topic with my parents but sensed that this subject was taboo. Mum had told me about the procedures she and Dad had had to go through to establish the reasons for their infertility, and the crushing monthly disappointments when they were still trying to conceive. She also told me of the close scrutiny under which their personal lives had come in order to qualify as adoptive parents. I knew that Mum had a nervous disorder that sometimes made her ill, and that I had been a difficult child to raise - boisterous and wilful - unlike her quiet and 'proper' behaviour. So I put my curiosity aside even after I had looked in the mirror for the umpteenth time and thought, 'Who are you, really?' For me, therefore, there was a new dimension to the usual experience of a teenage 'identity crisis'.

I became a teacher, got married and had children. Even though I got tired of being unable to provide a genetic family history of illness during antenatal visits, and having to explain why, I never thought this sufficient reason to open the "can of worms" that finding out might involve. Instead, when my first son was born, I rejoiced that at last I could look at someone to whom I was genetically related. Even though Mum and Dad were both overjoyed to be grandparents, Dad said to my father-in-law, as they looked at my newborn son through the nursery window, 'Well, there's always going to be more of you there than me.' There was no answer to that one.

It was just after my second son was born that a letter came from an Adoption Agency. I reacted with panic. All it said was that my birth mother would like to contact me, but I felt somehow violated. How could 'they' have traced me? Why now, after all these years? I felt vulnerable, spied upon, and open to the scrutiny of some government-sanctioned body that knew more about me than I did, and I resented it. I was so angry that I feared I would lose my breast milk, and had to make a huge effort to try to remain calm. I rang Mum and Dad and they came to our place in the country for the weekend. We realized that the laws had changed, and now the records were open to allow people to register and search for their birth relatives. Together we drafted a letter to the relevant agency, the gist of which was that no contact was desired and that only 'non-identifying information' be released.

It turns out that my birth mother had only wanted to register, in case I ever wanted to find her, believing that she hadn't the right to disrupt my life. Well-meaning counselors and birth relatives had urged her to go one step further and send the letter.

Ten years passed. We moved to another country town, had our third son, and moved back to Melbourne. Mum had pancreatic cancer and was in and out of hospital. My sister-in-law became an invalid and went to live with her newly widowed mother. The two elder boys had settled in to new schools, the youngest to kindergarten, and my husband his new job. We seemed to spend each weekend over the other side of town helping out sick relatives. During this period of adjustment another letter from the Adoption Agency arrived.

This time I just groaned as all the leaflets accompanying it fell into my lap. I thought, 'Oh, no. Not again!' But this letter was different. It said I had a sister, and that she had information she would like to share with me. A sister! Suddenly my status had changed. This was huge! My imagination went into overdrive.

For the next couple of weeks my thoughts went round in circles, always coming back to the same point: how will my parents react when they hear? I decided not to tell them, because I knew that no matter how many obstacles I threw up, the idea of a sister after all these years of being an only child, was tempting me to find out more. I still could not decide what to do, so my husband asked me to write down all my thoughts and

feelings on the matter. Even after this I could not decide, but wept tears of real grief at the times when I thought I had decided not to allow contact. Finally, I rang the counselor who had sent the letter and received enough information to allay my fears. I went in for an interview and discovered much more. After I had made contact with my sister, I told Mum and Dad.

I have since met both my siblings and my birth parents and established relationships with them. At times it has been joyous and at others, unbelievably difficult. Before Mum died, she and Dad met my brother and sister, but not before they had suffered a period of grief at the thought of 'losing' me. They also suffered anguish about what they called their 'role' in my life and that of their grandsons. In referring to their parenting of me they used harsh words like 'charade' and 'forty years' babysitting'. My husband helped reassure them at times when I felt too hurt to try.

After about a year, I joined a local adoption support group. I wanted to understand my parents' reaction. Also, my presence in the lives of my birth family had forced to the surface old rivalries and bitterness about the past, mainly concerning my desire to know my birth father. There was so much going on in both my families that the only place, apart from my own home, I felt safe was among people who had experienced adoption, in whatever capacity, and were further along the road to living with it than I was. Hearing their stories, borrowing books from the group's extensive library and reading many articles on all aspects of adoption, I was better equipped to understand the deep concerns of my parents. I began to understand that among other things, all this was a terrible reminder of their infertility. I also tried to work through the anger and resentment I still felt towards my birth mother, despite hearing her reasons for relinquishing me and of the numbing sadness that dogged her life ever since. And I understood, through my reading, that just because I couldn't remember the anguish of being separated from my birth mother, I had still experienced it, and I could acknowledge its effect on my life.

When I got to know my estranged birth father, I made him aware of the barrier I felt between my birthmother and myself. He asked me if I thought I could ever give up a child, as she had done. When I said 'no' he simply said, 'Then you must forgive the difference between her and you, and that may take some time.' I have learned that in the case of my feelings for my birth mother, even love is easier than forgiveness when the wound is so deep.

It is over ten years since I met my birth relatives. For most of this time, particularly in the beginning, I kept a journal, which I have deliberately not consulted while writing this. It's far too raw, anguished and emotionally charged for me to be able to read just yet. But it helped me no end at the time. My sister and I also corresponded frequently and at length. She had a lot to tell me about her childhood and our parents. And I had to work hard sometimes to describe to her how devastating it was to believe you were one person and then find yourself shaken to bits then reassembled as someone else. That's how the experience of adoption and reunion seemed to me.

At one point I felt the need to behave as if I had been the one looking for my birth-relatives, rather than they having 'found' me. I think it was in response to the feeling that they had always known of my existence, and were in possession of all the 'facts' of family history. I also felt as if they had slotted me in to the family too easily after assessing my looks, tastes and personality. The adjustments felt much greater on my side - dealing with the reactions of my children, in-laws, parents and friends - and I needed to be proactive.

I rang the Adoption Agency, explained my situation, and they assembled the relevant paperwork. At an interview, I received each document pertaining to my former identity and circumstance and was able to take home a complete dossier, to look at in my own time, rather than rely on the information I had been given by my birth relatives. For the first time, I was struck by the amount of information I could see on my original birth certificate alone. There was my birth name, my place of birth, my siblings' names, my parents' marriage details, and even the then address of my grandparents. With this, and all the other documents, I silenced all the rumours and speculation that I'd heard in both families or dreamt up myself. It somehow empowered me to be in possession of my own 'facts'. It was the beginning of coming to terms with this new person I'd begun to build.

Now that I know my birth family, what I realize has been a lifelong interest in 'nature versus nurture' has engaged me anew. I follow with interest the latest discoveries in genetic inheritance, particularly to do with personality. Formerly, as a young adult, I denied that genetics had more than a passing influence on the way a person developed. I wanted to attribute everything in my development to the environment in which I was raised. I am also pleased that my sons, previously only having one side of their genetic story available to them, are now drawing strength from knowing the other. And I feel I have the freedom to forgive myself for the ways in which I did not conform to my adoptive parents', and therefore my own, expectations in terms of personality and behaviour.

By being their daughter, I could never take away the fact of my adoptive parents' infertility. And by my presence in her life, I cannot remove from my birth mother the pain of relinquishing her child. Just as my experience of being abandoned is there in my psyche despite all the love I've been shown ever since. Acknowledging these things, as my own 'adoption triangle', gives me a more secure basis from which to try to get on with my life.