

CHAPTER FOUR

Living in Two Worlds



“There is no absurdity so obvious that it cannot be firmly planted in the human head if you only begin to impose it before the age of five, by constantly repeating it with an air of great solemnity”

— Arthur Schopenhauer

I can trace my first thought of adoption to when I sat with my adoptive parents in a cheap motel waiting for a social worker to deliver my new brother.

The visuals associated with the memory are only three feet high. I see dresser drawers, but not the television that must have been perched on top. I see my adoptive father’s knees, flanked by the legs of the chair he sat upon, protruding from a dark corner of the room. Looking down, my feet hang above a shag brown carpet and my legs rest upon a garish orange and brown bedspread. My mother’s arms come into view as she places a pillow – a pillow almost bigger than me – upon my lap, telling me to wait. Be patient. I will be the first to hold him.

When the door opens, I see sensible black pumps, legs wrapped in shiny, thick nylon and a tan, wool skirt. This is it, this moment that’s been promoted as my moment; the day I am getting a brother.

And then, he’s in my lap, perched precariously atop the pillow. Two things happen as camera flashes light up the dark room: I become a sister and I re-

alize babies don't fall from the sky into their families, that I wasn't plucked from a bassinet, in a row of other bassinets, to come home with my family. I became a sister and realized I came from other people, somewhere else.

It was just a split moment, a heavy feeling of responsibility for the squirming baby in my lap combined with a huge sadness that his people – and thus my people – were elsewhere. In the midst of my brother's transition from one life to another, I realized I came not from some heavenly place with winged cherubs, fluffy clouds and flying storks, but from people – My People.

I was three and a half years old. This might be my first memory.

In the five years we spent together in the farmhouse, before the family disintegrated, I hold few memories. Having a baby in the house lightened the mood, perhaps providing a temporary distraction and injecting hope into my parents' doomed marriage. Perhaps my father could live for a while with the fantasy of having a boy with him during fishing and hunting trips and maybe my mother was able to transfer the hopes she'd had when adopting me to my brother. For sure I hadn't saved the marriage.

But I do remember a brief period of time when I was enamored with my brother and my mother was something resembling happy. For a short while, the house brightened, the tension lifted and I had something other than fantasies to take me away from the constant anxiety I felt.

I remember more of the fantasies I concocted in my mind than I do literal events in that farmhouse. My bedroom was small enough that I could take a running leap from the hallway and land on the bed without touching the carpet. I did this every night, certain a misstep would result in my ankles being grabbed by some nighttime creature lurking beneath my bed. In the dark of my room, I'd rub my eyes until the nighttime shadows were broken by colorful stars. A medical text would call these phosphenes but, unaware of the functions of biology, I imagined they were tiny fairies coming to retrieve me and carry me back to my real family.

My bedroom window overlooked our wheat field and, just to the other side, nestled into the rolling pastures, sat the Big Sky Drive-In Motor Theater. Watching movies from my window was strictly taboo, but if my parents went to bed early, I'd perch myself upon the windowsill and spend hours

watching the soundless images flicker across the distant screen. The very scenes my parents didn't want me witnessing mesmerized me – handsome and beautiful embracing couples, each one, in my mind, with the potential of being my real mother and father.

All children escape in fantasy. It is a necessary ingredient of childhood. But there is a vast difference between creating imaginary characters in far away lands and knowing you truly have an alternate reality; a literal life you could have and should have been a part of in which the characters are not just pretend, but are of your own flesh and blood. I knew the people on the big screen at the drive-in theater were merely actors, but they reminded me that, somewhere far away, my parents – my entire family – were living a life without me. The scenes on the big screen merely allowed me to give them a face and storyline and place myself within it, if only until the closing credits.

Even at the tender ages of four, five and six, I grasped I lived in two worlds: The one intended for me and the one assigned to me; the one forbidden and the one accepted. What I was missing, throughout my entire childhood, was the guidance to help me build a bridge between these worlds

My parents told me the Chosen Child story and, in accordance with adoption practice in the sixties, that was that. The tale was supposed to be a sufficient way of addressing adoption without over-emphasis. Once told, an adoptee could then go on with her life, any longing for the life she might have had fading into the background until adoption, eventually, became a non-issue.

While the story might have been well-intended, designed to spare adoptees pain, the underlying message of the cheery tale was that the adoptee should view her experience as win-win for everyone – even consider herself more fortunate than her peers who were neither chosen nor special, having been stuck with the parents she was born to. Missing from the story entirely was any recognition that an adoptee might have conflicting feelings about being given up by her own mother or that she might feel a sense of loss.

So the perfectly natural reaction (grief) to having been relinquished was neither recognized nor accepted in any adoption dialogue in my home. There was probably no evil intent behind this, but that doesn't make it less damaging. The result was that any thought of my biological family was im-

mediately banished, by me, into a place of guilt and secrecy. How could I cry over losing my first parents when I was supposed to be celebrating gaining another set? And the fact that I felt like crying, while I was expected to rejoice made me feel there was something intrinsically wrong with me. I learned to pretend before I learned how to read.

Clearly, adoption became part of my inner vocabulary at a very young age. But the fantasies about my real family weren't free. Three things happened if I allowed myself to entertain these thoughts: I felt I'd committed a cardinal sin against my adoptive parents; I was certain that, because of my longing and the sadness I felt, there was something very deficient about my character (perhaps the very deficit that caused my parents to give me up) and the life awaiting me outside my bedroom door felt more and more abysmal.

My parents could have subverted the blow to my esteem with a simple question: "How do you feel about being adopted?" But, no one ever asked me that question. Relinquishment is problematic; people not connected with adoption seem to understand that intrinsically. An adoptive family is different from a biological family. My parents' first mistake in handling adoption was pressing against making our family the same as any other. My truth was buried in the cover-up. My self-esteem suffocated beneath the rubble. They could have handled it better.

There was much less they could do about the abyss waiting outside my bedroom door. Adoptive families are not, contrary to popular myth, immune to the dysfunctions of regular families and our family had a hearty sampling of dysfunction. Adopting me did not cure my father's alcoholism or my mother's depression. And, once it was discovered that my younger brother was not the healthy white infant the state promised, but suffered severe developmental delays, the darkness enveloped our house again.