

CHAPTER THREE

In the Beginning



What we remember from childhood we remember forever - permanent ghosts, stamped, inked, imprinted, eternally seen.

— Cynthia Ozick

The interior of the white, craftsman farmhouse was as bland and empty as the lives of the people who lived inside it.

He'd fallen into his life, without giving it any thought at all. He operated the wheat farm owned by his parents. The house belonged to them, as did the crops, the equipment and even the livestock. What little money he made outside of the family dole was through bartering and trading his personal effects. New things – campers, cars and trucks – would appear in the driveway then disappear just as fast, each time adding a little cash to his pockets and, perhaps, temporarily making him feel worthwhile.

When he couldn't produce the capital for his buy and sell ventures, the reality of his life crept back in. It was during those times that he ran. The small town bars knew him well, as did the police who regularly hauled him off to the drunk tank to sleep it off.

Sometimes, he disappeared only for an evening. Other times, he was gone for days. Eventually, always, the phone would ring and we'd head off to the jailhouse to pick him up, or he'd catch a ride home with the Sheriff who boarded his horses in our barn. What followed his homecoming was never a relief. He was a dry drunk and his periods of sobriety were dark, fearful times.



She came to Eastern Washington to earn a degree, fully intending to return to the city and set out on her own. It was the late sixties and she paid attention to The Women's Liberation Movement, picturing herself entering the business world, living independently and not needing a man to feel fulfilled. Though that dream seemed dead now, she still dressed the part, even while cleaning house, mending her husband's work clothes or watching soap operas. She fit into the Polouse County landscape like a cactus on a ski slope. How she came to be a farmer's wife probably had more to do with expediting the escape from her own mentally ill mother than any sort of life's desire.

She resented her mother-in-law's nearly constant overbearing presence and had trouble relating to any of her relatives and friends. They seemed content with their lives, while her own was an exercise in concessions and sacrifices. The difference between her and them, she determined, was children. As a bonus, she considered, adding a child to the family might force her husband to step up to the plate – and spare her the embarrassment of ever having to confess his sins to anyone; least of all to herself.

By happenstance, these people became my parents . . .



The social worker had a reputation to consider. She was known throughout the county for facilitating flawless adoption matches. Her philosophy was simple; an adopted child should blend into the family as best as possible. She should look like her new family and share an ethnic heritage whenever possible. That way, she surmised, there would be no observable reminders that the child was any different, sparing both her and her parents any discomfort. The social worker prided herself on her ability to study the face of an infant and envision her fully developed features. She could tell whether a nose would be large or small, a body would be robust or petite and if eyes would change to blue or brown. She examined fingers and toes to predict things like athleticism and paid close attention to temperament.

She did the same when she interviewed birthmothers and perspective adoptive parents; taking stock of their eye color, facial features and body type,

scribbling notes onto her yellow legal pad. It was such a focus of her work, her adoption files read like All Points Bulletin police descriptions of fleeing suspects.

I had been in foster care three months when the Gray's file landed on her desk. She'd been just about to close the case, having found a nice Norwegian couple looking to adopt their second child. But, a home visit changed my fate.

It was an impressive scene at the Gray's farm. She entered through the kitchen porch, where a petite, well dressed homemaker greeted her. The county sheriff sat at the kitchen table, enjoying a quick breakfast and large cup of coffee. Farmer Gray's mother busied herself in the kitchen while Mrs. Gray guided her through the immaculate farmhouse, pointing out the nursery and playroom already prepared for a baby. From the nursery window, she directed the social worker's gaze to a large plume of dust, far out in the wheat field, explaining it was Mr. Gray's combine, midway through his workday.

The Grays looked first-rate on paper; a large farm in a booming market, horse stables, a spacious house, doting grandparents and even the endorsement of the county sheriff. The only perceivable issue seemed to be that Mr. wanted a boy, but the worker had the grandmother's assurances he didn't know what was best for him.

Alone in her office, the social worker's decision came down to two, underlined notations in her yellow legal pad:

Mrs. Gray is Norwegian.

This worker feels the baby will resemble the Gray family. They appear to have matching noses.

And just like that, because of another family's ethnic background and the shape of my little nose, my file was transferred, the deal was made and the case was closed. It was just a few days before Christmas.

The event is forever memorialized in the family album, a brand new baby placed beneath a Christmas that looked like it belonged in the lobby of Nordstroms, not the living room of a simple farming family. Even the local

paper couldn't resist the perfect human interest story, just in time for the holidays:

YULE PRESENT SPECIAL:

Mr. and Mrs. Edward R. Gray, Old Colfax Highway, received a special Christmas present from the State Welfare Agency this year, but it didn't come wrapped in fancy paper with ribbons and a gift tag.

Their special present came wrapped in a blanket – a three month old baby girl named Rhonda Lynn, whom the Grays adopted through the state agency in Colfax.

The story of my adoption is a composite of many things: the bits and pieces I garnered from my adoption file and newspaper articles, the worn photos in a family album and the stories told to me over the years. But, mostly, I look back on my first five years spent at the Gray farm, viewing a sort of mental slideshow – snapshots of events, each picture associated with a tone and a feeling.

Whether or not my recollection of events is accurate is inconsequential. From my view, it is. I may get the sequence wrong and, sometimes, even the context, but my feelings aren't up for interpretation. I've carried these feelings and memories around for forty years. I've reacted to them, rebelled against them, tried to forget them, treasured them and despised them. They, in part, add to the amalgam that has become me.

My mother would surely tell the story in a different light, undoubtedly casting herself as a heroine who rescued an orphan, simultaneously saving the world from overpopulation. My father would play the part of victim, demanding reparations for his suffering. So then, I suppose, it cannot be as-

sure that I have the story right, for surely they do not. But I do have an advantage. I know my experience better than they – or anyone – and only I have unedited access to my feelings.

And it is to their advantage to rewrite history. If my father views himself as the victim of a controlling shrew who separated him from his children following his divorce, he isn't accountable for his absence from my life. If he is the victim of a disease that led him to drinking and violence, he can carry on without apology and view me as unempathic and selfish. If my mother sees herself as an overlooked mother-of-the-year candidate, I thereby become an ingrate and her sufferings become even more poignant, more demanding of praise. She is spared ever feeling a twinge of internal discomfort; of ever having to self-reflect.

I, however, have much to lose by sticking to my truth. It is a daunting proposition that places me alone in the world, without the safety net of family or the comfort of a shared experience with most of society. It is uncomfortable. It entails introspection and unbending grief. It is an experience full of good-byes and unrealized dreams.

I've wasted many years of my life trying to live it from the perspectives of others. I've been the grateful adoptee, thankful for being rescued. I've been the understanding daughter, forgiving my parents for their misdeeds. I've been a searcher, believing in those who said finding my birthfamily would make me whole. In exchange, I received the company of family; twice the family of most, but at the expense of my soul. I was nothing more than a shell of a person. That may have been enough for them, but it has never been enough for me.

Sharing my truth is not the easy path. I will gain authenticity, but I will then have few people to share it with. I will possess a more definitive understanding of who I am, but my world will become smaller and less friendly. The truth has sat within me all these years, waiting to be shared. More often than not, it's been the only thing to comfort that child inside me who experienced this life – who was there for the traumas and the pain; who remembered, even while I tried to forget; while I abandoned her as she'd been abandoned so many times before.

I owe the truth to her, damn the consequences.