



Chapter One

Gray Street

*"God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose.
Take which you please; you can never have both."*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Gray umbrellas crowded into the second floor apartment, resembling a cloud canopy over the tired furniture. Camera flashes lit the room like lightning illuminates the distant sky. It was a solemn moment so the photographic equipment simply added to the mood.

People Magazine flew me and their National Geographic photographer to this house to shoot memories. They were writing about cast away children and selected me for the story. I saw little glory being displayed in their magazine as disposable but also viewed it as an opportunity to tell my tale—no one ever asked before. I was flattered by the interest but did not want to end up in front of a dumpster on page 97 shouting “we’re number one!” The story was about losing, not winning. With that in mind I met the reporter, whereupon we got lost in a two hour interview. Pretend feels like forever to me, so I concluded the two of us did honest and flew to Milwaukee for the pictures.

The house stands at 1103 South 86th Street, two blocks from the state fair grounds, in a neighborhood that belongs to America’s “greatest generation”. A two-story craftsman, it started as a single family dwelling in 1923 but became a black market maternity home during the depression. Recently the owner converted it to apartments. Blue vinyl siding cheers it up, but perhaps with a disingenuous smile. The first floor stood in renovation with all its wood parts exposed, but the second floor remained untouched.

Only the television looked out of place, which I kept noticing. Perhaps I remembered the room.

This house provides the only physical connection to my past. My mother delivered me here in April 1940 and sold me three days later. While she may not have profited from the transaction, she condoned it. Everyone walked away from this disaster, perhaps justifying their exits by thinking time heals all wounds. Time did nothing for me. My identity lies buried here, covered by the decades. Identity loss is about more than credit card theft.

My first trip to this house ended in retreat, followed by a half century of estrangement. But now, like Douglas MacArthur I had returned, bringing the press with me. This trip offered some atonement, but we were not here in triumph. The story addressed the past. The magazine called it “Cast away”, not “Family Reunion at the Miller Beer Tent”. The photographer understood this and did not expect me to read from a happy script. We were seeking truth rather than creating it. He works for National Geographic, not the Federal Government.

The photo session brought four people together. While Tom set up his equipment in the living room, Brenda and David watched quietly from the hall. Brenda owned the house. David rented the apartment. The media coverage interested both, but neither lost track of the story. As I provided foreground composition, history added the shadows. Everyone knew this, which was a blessing.

Standing in front of a camera was easy, but keeping my balance wasn't. While Tom took pictures my mind tracked the memory of my mother, and I worried about walking into a flashback. But we finished without an incident, whereupon David helped Tom move the equipment outside. That left Brenda and I alone. She asked how I was, whereupon time collapsed . . .

I saw my mother. She slipped out of the bedroom where her roommate pretended to sleep and she pretended not to hear her cry. They could only share the waiting now, words failed months ago. Carol would eventually fall asleep but mother would not, so she curled up on the sofa and stared out onto Gray Street. A navy pea coat promised to protect her from the cold when the furnace burned down, as would the coffee they could heat in the kitchen. Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca lay next to her just in case, but she never read on these vigils. Instead, a nightly parade of last year's events marched before her and then around the corner to the end of the world. She cried. No one noticed except the snowman in the Johnson's yard across the street. But he too would be leaving, collapsing into a mound of



gray slush before disappearing entirely, like her dreams. She cried for Snowman Johnson, as well as for the two of us. We were her world that night.

A week passed, as did the waiting, and three days after delivery the Andersens came for her son. She flinched at the sound of the doorbell. The midwife forbid her to meet them, saying it was best for the baby. "Best for the baby" also made the most money. The midwife claimed the Andersens were nice.

My mother left it at that. Gone were the tears now. She sat and stared, resembling a soldier too long in the field. She had seen more than enough already and wanted no part of this day. Everything reflected loss. "It is all for the best," she told herself mechanically. But she felt nothing except empty. Her old world disappeared and a new one failed to replace it. She wondered if this was doing the right thing could doing something wrong feel any worse.

The front door closed and Mother rushed to the window for one last moment with her boy. She stared until the taxi disappeared and then stood frozen to the window. But no one was coming back. The cavalry did not arrive. It was all over now. Our relationship died, and with it died a piece of Nature's plan.

She leaves for Madison tomorrow. Perhaps the colors will return in another city. But this was not working. They had promised her better.

"I'm sorry", said Carol, unable to offer more than sympathy.

"It's for the best", mother responded, wiping away honest and walking into the bedroom to begin packing.

Did she believe it was for the best or regret this day the rest of her life? I will never know. We never met again.

I remember Brenda's question and my tears, but nothing in between. We probably said something. Eventually the tears with Brenda provided more traction than visions of my mother. We could not change this story, even standing in the middle of it, so we closed the door and walked downstairs. The two of us shared this house. She understood my connection. Most people do not.

Tom wanted some pictures at sunset, which left us with several hours together in the back yard. Brenda departed, and David went back upstairs. Time passed quickly. Tom told me about Australia's dog fence, and I told him about pitching machines. But mostly we sat quietly, my attention going to my early years in Wisconsin. The neighborhoods here appeared

little changed from the 1940's. Backyards still flowed into each other without fences, and nothing cluttered the yards except "victory gardens". One could have walked in any direction and not bumped into a garage or tripped over lawn furniture. The neighborhood triggered memories that lie dormant in Missouri.

I remembered that Jimmie Hansen lived across the street and we got chicken pox at the same time. We missed school and spent the week harpooning whales on his lawn. His family owned a Buick, one of only two cars on the block. We had a coal burning furnace, marbles was the big game at school, and the Andersen's had friends on the Root River who kept live minnows in the water.

The Andersen's and I passed for a normal family. Stanley worked for Oster Manufacturing, a small company housed in a three-story building on the lake. They made electric motors in 1940—kitchen appliances came later. The company obtained government contracts to make motors for gun turrets and radar scanners during the war, which helped keep Stanley out of the army. Ann stayed home. She and I often took the bus downtown, and our trips packed Greyhound adventure into two miles of Racine Motor Coach. The Cole Brothers set up circus tents every summer on the lake, and we rode toboggans in the winter at Washington Park. I have good memories of these years but could sense problems behind the facade.

Ann was not happy. She perked up on our trips downtown, but wilted at home. I had nowhere to go with this observation, so it disappeared along with Ann's energy. Stanley and I shared nothing but living space. He broke his ankle walking home from the bus one evening, and I recall a sense of satisfaction over his misfortune. Obviously we were not about to march into battle together. In truth I cared more about my dog than my adoptive parents, which did not add to my sense of security. But these were not issues a five year old dwells on for too long.

We were in fact not a normal family. Neither blood nor law connected us—I was not legally adopted until age thirteen. Even the closest relatives did not know I was a black-market purchase, and the Andersen's let me believe I was their natural child until age twelve. Later in life Stanley boasted, "I treated you as if you were my real son". Apparently proud of himself, he added, "We did more for you than was required." Was I supposed to feel good about this? Pretend is not real, and requirements apply to institutions, not families.

The Andersen's offered counterfeit and expected real. They broke the law, and our family lived a court order away from dissolution. Legal custody remained with my natural parents—registering me for school must

have been fun. Was none of this to show through? Secrets crowded out authenticity, and the Andersens attributed the tedium in our house to my lack of enthusiasm. I once asked Stanley what would have happened if they had died before I was adopted. “You would have gone back to an orphanage”, he proclaimed. How inspiring!

The lies affected me more than my relinquishment. I was only given away once; the lies were forever. I did honest with my dog, which only invited criticism that I cared more about animals than people. Not long before Stanley died I asked him why they waited so long to adopt me. “We didn’t think of it”, he replied. Apparently finding something more credible was not worth his effort. He offered no place for me in a relationship, which is why we had none.

My visit through memory lane ended with the sunset. Actually the experience was more enjoyable than the above issues might suggest, none of which was new to me. While sitting on the lawn I had alternated between being enthralled with my heritage, fascinated by the memories, and interested in today’s project. These things certainly kept my attention. But the hours passed. Tom took the sunset pictures, and we were about to leave.

“Do you mind if I see the house again?” I asked, balking at the finality. “Take all the time you want”, Tom replied.

I returned and talked to my mother. I could have stayed forever, but Tom didn’t mean that long. It felt my Mother’s presence but could not reach her. I have never been able to do that. So I just stood with her awhile, knowing we would never meet again. This was goodbye. Hello was supposed to come first, but she wrote this script, not me. I tried to take as much of her with me as possible, but it was like gathering fog. So I simply faced the door and forced myself to walk through it, leaving our relationship as unfinished as the apartment. Tom was a welcome sight.

He and I had breakfast together the next morning. We did not share a lifestyle or major interests but connected for this trip. We accomplished a limited goal, albeit with honesty and consideration. I did not get to hug my birthmother or learn what my father did in the war, but it was good weekend. Short of fantasy, it does not get much better.

I will always miss my mother. Nature designed us to work, and we didn’t. My natural identity died three days after its birth. Sad fits. Celebration doesn’t. But more than sad I came away from this trip with a feeling of futility. Nothing justifies the losses incurred there. I was no gift. Mother made no sacrifice. We saved no whales. God had no special plan. No one

had a plan. Everyone simply walked away. How impressive is that?

My view of Mother changes as her narrative changes. Her attractiveness for me always rested on the fantasy that the two of us lost a vital connection. But we did not lose it. She gave it away. Let's get that right. Idealizing her requires me to sacrifice too much of my sense of reality.

The Andersens do not fare well under historical revision either. While they “met requirements”, they also presumed to own me. That proved fatal. In our final conversation I asked Stanley about the maternity house. “Your life before we got you is none of your business”, he replied. His life from this point on became none of my business either.

Stanley died one year later. My vision of the Andersens having been good parents has declined to the point that I question them as parents at all. I refer to them now as Stanly and Ann. Is that ingratitude or reality?

As the narrative of my history changes so do the lessons that accompany it. Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Those who learn the wrong history probably fare even worse. The revision affects many aspects of my life. I lose two families but gain reality. A judge asked me at my adoption hearing if I wanted to live with the Andersens or go to a boy's home. I opted for family then. Truth works better today. But then I am entirely alone.

The truth is that nothing admirable happened at this house on April 16, 1940. I lost an identity. My mother lost a son. The Andersens lost a chance for an honest relationship. Platitudes about mothers loving their children so much they give them away only dump responsibility to the adoptee, who is then expected to make everyone feel better by feigning stupidity. Truth was the only thing worth salvaging from that day in April. There was no honor. We had no heroes. The cavalry failed to arrive. No one made a contribution to America's greatest generation. This was Waterloo, not Bunker Hill.

