Sometimes a Reunion Gives an Adoptee New Secrets

Heather Katz, Co-founder of Secret Sons & Daughters, shares her adoption reunion journey in search of peace and equanimity.

I have never kept deep secrets of my own, and yet, I was born one. I entered the world in an outdated era, darkened with shame, dishonesty and guilt. I am, at forty-two years of age, an adoptee still longing to fill in the low-lying branches of my biological family tree.

In the winter of 1971, the unthinkable came to pass for a good, unwedded girl from a devoutly Irish Catholic family—she fell pregnant. Mortified, feeling very much alone, and carrying the firm belief that there was no one to turn to for help, my frightened mother concealed her swelling belly from the rest of the world.

She was sweet, remarkably beautiful, and sought after by many suitors. As a college sophomore with a scholarship in language arts, she had looked forward to a bright future. Despite her dashed dreams, my mother hoped to keep her growing miracle.

At seven months into her pregnancy, her mother finally uncovered the truth. The following day, her parents set events in motion that would alter the course of many lives to follow.

The family arranged for my mother to leave her home state and move into the Edna Gladney Center for unwed mothers in Fort Worth, Texas. No one in her hometown, including her siblings, was ever to know of me—and she was never to speak of my birth.

For nine months, I innocently played beneath her beating heart, and on the day I took my first breath, they pried me from her arms. As she cried, the Gladney counselors tried to comfort her, saying she’d happily marry, have more babies and possibly even enjoy a satisfying career.

Focus on the present. Move on with your life. Those were the messages of that time.

Eleven days after my mother had returned home without me, I was enrolled in an unrecognized form of the American witness protection program. The state of Texas stamped, “Classified,” (or so it feels) across my original birth certificate, replaced the old one with my new identifying information, and then placed me into the (fortunately) loving arms of another set of parents.

I had a charmed childhood. My dad was a Rabbi (now Emeritus) of a large Reform congregation in San Antonio, and both of my parents are recognized leaders in the community. My mom was the Director of Family Life Education at Jewish Family Services and a full-time, attentive mother to my adopted,
younger sister and me. I was raised in a warm, well-ordered, and accepting family, as well as in a large group of caring congregants.

We did not keep secrets in our family. From the moment I was adopted, my parents spoke openly of my adoption. When I was only three months old, my great-great aunt asked my mom when she was going to tell me I was adopted. My mom responded with, “I am just going to tell her that she is a girl, Anglo, American and adopted. Being adopted will always be part of her identity.” Indeed, it was. I do not recall a moment of not knowing I was adopted.

After years of trying to conceive, and then waiting even longer to adopt, my parents got “the call” from Gladney that made me their own.

I felt special and wanted. My parents continually expressed their belief that although my original parents could not care for me, they had probably wanted me. I’m unsure I believed that latter part at the time, but my parents still found numerous ways to help me feel loved.

They declared that their adopted children were unequivocally theirs, no matter how we each had come to them, and that we were, and still are, just as much a part of them as any biological baby might have been.

Appearance wise, I thought I fit in nicely with my family and friends. When folks would say I looked just like my mom, she’d say, “Well, thank you, that is a huge compliment, but Heather is adopted.”

I would follow with, “I love looking like my mom.”

Afterwards, and when alone, we’d chuckle.

Most of the time, I forgot I was adopted. If ever I felt unlike my childhood peers, it was more because I was a Rabbi’s daughter, and not because the two people who raised me were not my original parents.

In this broad-minded setting, whenever I was curious, I would ask a multitude of questions and openly fantasize about my genetic ancestry. When my sister, Alisa and I were young, we’d play all kinds of speculative games. Repeatedly, we’d tell my parents that each of us surely had the taller natural father than the other. I’d bet Alisa the trade of a laborious home chore that my father was the tallest, and resembled our six-foot-one dad the most. Therefore, I’d eventually grow to the required five-foot-nine inches to win a modeling contract. I lost. My sister’s natural father is enormous, and she is five-foot-seven. I barely rise above five-foot-two!

This intense curiosity persists today: I still wonder which unknown family member passed on their musical abilities to both my children and me; I wonder what family folklore I might never hear; and while I met my birth father once, there is much I cannot say or know.

My parents spoke kindly of my unknown family and assured me that they would help me search some day. When I was twenty-one-years-old, they set their own fears aside, rolled up their sleeves, and joined me in my journey to find the missing pieces.
My parents hired a search specialist. The weekend of my 21st birthday, while I was on a camping trip, my mom spent hours on the phone, calling all over the country to track down my natural mother. When I returned to my college dorm, my mom called me and said, “I found her!” I was scared to death. I did not want to contact her until I was in the supportive presence of my parents and had had the opportunity to meet this supposed saint-like intermediary. So, I waited a few months until I was home from college for winter break.

I remember the intermediary’s words: “Adoption is about loss. Each member of the triad has faced some sort of loss, but hopefully some kind of gain as well.” She then asked if I was ready to face whatever I might find on the other side of that proverbial locked door. I said, “Yes!”

She turned up the volume on our phone and dialed my natural mother’s number. After several rings, she answered, “Hello?” in a soft, deep southern accent. I grabbed Mom’s arm.

The intermediary introduced herself as a social worker, then she asked: “Does October 30th mean anything to you?” There was utter silence. I felt my heart tumble in my chest.

I wondered if she was okay, or if she’d hung up. I did not want to hurt her. I only wanted to know her and tell her that I loved her. What felt like an hour, but was only thirty-seconds, passed. Finally, she asked if she could place the phone down. She needed to move to a more private location. Then, after asking the intermediary about my state of health and happiness, she whispered, “My family does not know about her. I cannot talk at this time.”

“Your daughter only wishes for you to know that she is doing well and that she’d enjoy exchanging letters when you’re ready and willing,” said the intermediary.

My natural mother took her number. Twenty-four hours later, my biological grandmother phoned our intermediary to request that I write to both of them soon—but only to my grandmother’s address.

And write we did—back and forth, for several months, before we all felt comfortable enough to meet in person. That long-awaited day finally arrived.

My mom and I drove all day until we reached my natural mother’s hometown just before dark. We checked into a hotel room and tried to relax for an hour. We thumbed through my baby book of first photos, which we had brought to share. That did not quell the sick feeling in my stomach. I could tell my mom was nervous, too. She had never heard of any mother meeting their child’s other mother before. With no handbook on reunions, she went with her gut—she wanted to help me find answers, and she wanted to thank my mother for giving her a daughter.

We heard a knock on the door, and the muffled sound of female voices. I pushed my mom in front of me—signaling her to open the door. We grabbed each other’s hands, and drew in big breaths as she unlatched the lock.

My natural mother was standing beside her mother. My mom reached out for a
welcoming hug, while I stood frozen. Her eyes looked like mine, both in color and in shape, we shared the same shade of chestnut brown hair color, and the very same turned up nose. I looked over at my grandmother. Though she had bottled blond hair, she too, had huge eyes and a turned up nose. Here we were—two mothers, two daughters, all related in complicated ways.

My mom looked like me plenty, but for my turned up nose. That was my unusual trait—and now—for the first time in my life— after seeing my natural mother, I realized just how much I really looked like someone else!

We all exchanged hugs, made awkward chatter about hair highlights or something mundane like that, and then shared a light-hearted restaurant meal together. We spent close to four surreal hours with them. From that encounter, a phantom had been laid to rest and my ancestral tree had grown a few more branches. However, when I had asked questions about my birth story or my paternal family, I learned nothing more. At the time, it was too difficult for my mother to dredge up the past. Eighteen years later, the rest of my maternal biological family would learn of my existence. At almost forty-years-old, I finally met my maternal biological brother and sister. Knowing them has brought me much sought after peace.

I was thankful my mother and grandmother told me they loved me through those decades, but I withstood much pain over the missing elements in the rest of my birth story. Some years of not knowing were easier than others. Birthing my own beloved children brought about added bizarre feelings, but what’s more, they profoundly rooted me to the earth—allowing some relief from that yearning. I vacillated between anger and long periods of acceptance. I wished to respect my mother’s privacy and grant her forgiveness, but I also felt the burning “right” to know all the missing information.

Like me, many adoptees find a biological family member, and are forced to collude with the secret he or she kept—even in reunion.

As an adoptee, life feels like a mix of sharp curves and smooth corners. Today, some phantoms linger, but many do not. My natural mother did go on to marry, have two other babies, and has become a successful career woman. While it took decades to make life come full circle for the both of us, it was not too late to heal. My biological maternal family is happily reunited now. I find much joy with those whom I do know and love—both adoptive and biological relatives—and strive not to dwell on what was lost.

Thanks for visiting our online community. In addition to stories like this one, you can find valuable resources, discover your rights to your original birth certificate, meet other adoptees, and join the discussion by commenting (below) or on our Facebook page.

Subscribe to our blog to receive more adoptee tales, and consider adding your voice to the Secret Sons & Daughters collection.