

Making Sense of Fantasy and Reality

Divided loyalties, unforeseen consequences, joy, loss—California daughter, Kendra Crookston, discovers that reunions have many seasons.

As a child, I spent much of my time wondering about my origins. Initially, I perceived myself as quite different from my parents. My mom and dad were, and still are, disciplined, conservative, and heavily involved in local politics. On the other hand, I was an oddball—free-spirited and with a wish to never conform.

Through those years, I recall feeling badly for my mom and dad because they could not conceive a child of their own. They are both smart and generous, and I grieved because they could not create a biological person to take after them.

Perhaps my sadness had stemmed from a belief that I paled in comparison to that imagined child. I think he/she would have been a math whiz, someone who knew the value of a dollar, and a good decision maker. As I type here, the tears run down my face. I longed for them to have the child I thought they deserved.

My parents, however, always described my adoption as a blessing. They provided very few stipulations to the adoption agency, and had waited years to become my mom and dad.

All in all, I had a happy childhood. I was close to my many cousins and they accepted me for me. My parents referred to me as “traveller”—a child who had never met a stranger.

As I matured, I talked to my parents about everything except strong feelings. They never fought, nor did they seem to share their feelings with one another, so I was unaware if they were ever ill, hurt, or sad. Therefore, I had plenty of room for fantasizing. I wondered who my birth family was, and who *I* really was. My mind spun a patchwork of romantic *and* catastrophic possibilities.

I only knew that I had been born in California, and placed with my adoptive parents in Ohio. Why Ohio?

I remember wondering if my birth mother was a movie star (I was from California after all), and on the bad days I imagined I came from a family who couldn't care for me. My parents always joked that I had crawled from California to Ohio as an infant. It took decades before I would uncover the truth of that trek.

The few times I mentioned searching for my birth family to my parents, they said they'd help me when the timing was right. I was twenty-one years old, living on campus, and about to graduate from an Ohio college with a useless degree in the study of people when I was finally ready. My parents and I went

to a restaurant and discussed the cost of a search. They offered to split the bill.

With the help of Adoption Network Cleveland, I hired a private investigator. In three days, the investigator located my birth mother by combing through California voting records. Being the impulsive person that I am, I immediately called the given number.

After a few rings, a woman answered. "I'm one of Karen's high school friends." I stuttered and lied.

"Karen doesn't need any old friends," the voice replied and then abruptly hung up.

I sat befuddled, staring at the receiver. A few minutes later, my roommate and longtime friend poured me a glass of champagne. I called again and nervously said, "Um, I'm Karen's daughter."

The woman sighed, "Oh, you must be Shannon." Hearing the sound of my original name hit me hard. I had never heard it before. Numbness swept through my body, followed by an odd combination of excitement and panic, which was all the more heightened because of the woman—who was this woman? She didn't sound pleased.

She rambled about some birth sister having a baby, and said she'd try to get in touch with someone. Finally, I realized I was speaking to my birth mother's abusive ex-husband's new wife. Maybe *that's* why she was abrupt.

Hours later, my phone rang. For the remainder of the night, I spoke with my birth mother and birth sister, Chantel, who had been born three years after me.

The following day, I boarded a plane to California. My birth mother paid close to \$2,500.00 for that flight. The experience was breathtakingly exciting! I arrived at the John Wayne airport in the evening and exited the jetway. I scanned the crowd and immediately spotted my birth mother who was visibly shaking as she stood beside a man I assumed was her new husband. She had my same skin tone, blond hair, and blue eyes. One of my many childhood fantasies had just come to life—that burning desire to scan a crowd of strangers and lock eyes with the woman who had created me.

Meeting her had an immediate grounding effect on me. I felt newly tethered to the plane. On that first night, I slept on the living room floor, curled right up next to my birth mother. I cannot imagine doing that with any other stranger. We have similar body types, which I later learned included feet that are shaped like hands. When I look into her eyes, I see a familiar person—a feeling that is truly difficult to describe.

Our courtship continued after I returned to Ohio. Six months later, I moved to California. It seemed natural to move across the country to get to know her better. In retrospect, my parents must have been horrified. The day I departed, my dad helped me pack my car. I remember him standing in the driveway of my childhood home and smiling. He said, "So, if this doesn't work

out, I'll fly to California, and we'll drive your car through Vegas on the way home. We'll play some slots." I laughed.

When I arrived in California for the second time, I discovered a family in transition. We spent the first three days in and out of the Pediatric ICU with my birth sister and her son. When not at the hospital, my birth mother and I studied each other. Soon after my arrival, my birth mother experienced flashbacks to the early months after I was born. She started to call me "Shannon," the name she'd given me. My birth sister didn't know what to make of me, and went about her routine as though I had never appeared. I spent much of my time alone.

Three weeks later, I took my father up on his offer. He drove us home, while I slept and cried, only stopping for food and to play the slots.

My birth family and I hurt after I left. For the next several years, we didn't speak to each other. I tried to put the entire experience behind me and move on. I got married, bought a home and had a child—all without ever telling them.

It wasn't until I reunited with my birth father seven years later, that I encountered them again. During the initial search for my birth family, I had registered with Ancestry.com. A member of my birth father's family saw my post and connected me to him.

This time I was more cautious. My birth father and I spoke briefly on the phone. My husband and I made flight arrangements, and once again, I was en route to California.

My birth father's daughter, Tracy, met me at our hotel. She brought me a mix tape and a beer. We bonded instantly. Had the tables been turned, I would've brought the same things. I think she is the funniest person that I have ever met.

Tracy, like Chantal, was born three years after me. My birth parents had both moved on to other relationships. He got married for the first time (to another woman) and together they had my brothers, Christopher and Ryan. Christopher and Ryan are half Chinese. Of all my father's children, I resemble him the most.

I remained guarded around my birth father, but I appreciated him. He is affable, direct, introspective, and able to articulate his feelings well. He has an innate insight about other people. He had been on his own since age 15. His immediately familiar gestures upset me, though, so I focused more on my siblings.

During that first visit with my birth father, I saw my birth mother again. We went to dinner together. I hadn't seen her in years. The meal was awkward. My birth mother made her desire to reconnect with my birth father a little too obvious. His wife was well aware of these advances. Dinner was tense, to say the least, and our estrangement continued for another eight years.

Before I returned to Ohio, my birth father told me he thought I'd inherited

many of his traits. I had a hard time accepting his attributions, because if I accepted them, I thought it would in some way minimize the beautiful people that had raised me.

To this day, I visit my birth father regularly. I treasure those visits and my children have enjoyed knowing him, too.

Recently, I contacted my birth mother. She's living in Maui with her sister after a stint in rehab for substance abuse. I try to put the past behind us and encourage her through her fragility. I also try not to read into the mystical texts that pop up on my phone from her, and instead acknowledge that while she grapples with mental health issues, she is an incredibly spiritual, perpetually optimistic, and Bohemian-like woman.

After all this time of collecting pieces of my story, I understand the circumstances better. My birth parents were minors when I was born. For six months they tried to raise me while living on friends' couches and in their cars, until they realized they were unable to raise a baby together. As an infant, my birth mother once threw me across the room. She knew then what she had to do to save me and herself. I thanked her for making such a selfless decision.

My birth parents headed for Ohio after a few Los Angeles adoption encounters where people offered to buy me. That was one horrifying scenario I'd never imagined. Having been raised in Ohio, they returned to place me with a reputable agency. The day they signed the surrender papers they boarded a Greyhound bus back to California.

After all these years, some of my greatest blessings are my siblings. I am the oldest of five. My two brothers and two sisters share uncanny similarities with me: the same dark sense of humor, same sense of honor, and same sense of friendship. It's better than anything I could have hoped for. They call me "sister" and it's music to my ears.

I remain close with my mom and dad. They've been supportive to this day. My mom watches my kids daily. Whenever I leave my parents, I get a little sick to my stomach. Perhaps it's some odd form of separation anxiety. I now know that they enjoy me for who I am.

A reunion's reality is often quite different from the media's portrayal. I have had some of the most joyous, authentic moments with my bloodline. However, I have also experienced some of the most devastating feelings of loss and disappointment, too. I strive to find a place in my head and heart for everyone. I still wrestle with divided loyalties and uncertainties at nearly every turn.

When I reflect on all we've been through, I see that reunions are lifelong and have many seasons.

Image: Kendra with her adoptive dad, Ken.