

An Adoptee Turns to Humor to Endure Secrets and Lies

I was born in February of 1968, a byproduct of the previous year's notorious "Summer of Love." There were so many relinquished babies in the late '60s, we were like a Pet-Smart hamster cage overrun with new litters. Any 'God-fearing' family with a traditional home setup and decent donation check could score one of us pinkies.

The idea of adoption first popped into my adoptive dad's head as he strolled through the 1967 Minnesota State Fairgrounds with his four bio-kids and clinically depressed wife. There in the livestock section was a Catholic Charities adoption marketing booth decorated as – no lie – a red barn adorned with big photos of adorable, pink, healthy baby faces. BINGO, thought Dad. This will keep my emotionally crippled wife busy and add some pep to the house like a cute new puppy.

"No, I do not want to adopt a baby," insisted adoptive mom. But Dad demanded it would be a nice Catholic thing to do, and it was a patriarchal time, so despite protests from Mom and the youngest bio-kid, they did it.



Again, in those days there were gobs of babies available. Have you seen that old 1967 *Star Trek* episode, "The Trouble With Tribbles"? It may have been inspired by all of us little homeless waifs. So a family that already had several natural-born children and an unstable mother was still able to pass the brief home visit with flying colors. Those issues might not be approved on today's social service checklists.

As I grew...and grew...and grew (eventually reaching 5'11" in a very petite family – women 5'1", men around 5'6"), adoption was never discussed except for the one time I was informed about my own adoption.

I was 6-years-old and we had recently talked about the word "adopted" in my first grade class. For some reason, I had confused the word "adopted" with "baptized" so I told my teacher that I was adopted at church. She explained the definitions in more detail and cleared up my confusion.

I relayed this story to Dad when he and I were alone together, and he stated matter-of-factly that I was in that category the teacher described, I was adopted. Another woman had me, and they were raising me, and that was about

it.

Mom never wanted to talk about it. The older siblings weren't interested, either. They are strikingly similar to one another in stature and physical features, and they're all very much alike in personality and lifestyle preferences, too—staunchly conservative, Catholic, meat-and-potatoes Republicans.

And I'm an agnostic, vegetarian, tree-hugging liberal. For years I tried to adapt and conform. Most adoptees have a strong desire to fit in and deep fear of abandonment, so up through my early 20s I attempted to change my true nature. But man, it is exhausting trying to be someone you are not.



So, like bad episodes of *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island* blaring on the TV every Saturday night, it ("it" = adoption, round peg in square hole, etc.) was plainly 'there' in the room but never discussed.

There were some nice times together. There was definitely no abuse, and my kid brain always reasoned, if not for this family I would've been left in a bag on the street or something worse! Be GRATEFUL, Tribble!

At age 18, I had to find a genetic link after a lifetime of feeling like an alien dropped from space (this *Star Trek* theme won't stop, will it? I do love Shatner).



Catholic Charities agreed to check my file, and saw that my mother, Terry,* had contacted them several years prior, inquiring about me. They sent her a form to fill out, which would allow me to access my information and her contact information. The completed form was never returned; however, it did not take long for the social worker intermediary to contact Terry and see if she was up for some communication (cue Peaches & Herb "Reunited").



Polite, friendly letters, a few phone calls, and one face-to-face meeting ensued. The honeymoon phase felt good. I was shocked at the amount of relief I felt about the fact that I had actually been born to someone, came from a real genetic family like other human beings. Not like Mork from Ork. Not even a tribble.

Terry was 24 when she had run out of money, and options, while living in San Francisco several months pregnant with me. She had not told anyone in her family about her pregnancy, but decided to tell her brother, who was a priest temporarily assigned in St. Paul, Minnesota.

He got Terry settled in at a Catholic Charities wage home while she waited out the pregnancy and relinquishment plans. She told me she blocked out a lot of that period of her life, but more than once she defended her choice, stating, "I did what was right for me at the time."

Okay. Thanks Mama. But WHY couldn't your brother have been stationed in Honolulu? Or anywhere else that wasn't the COLDEST FREAKING PLACE ON THE PLANET TO GROW UP? Just kidding (kind of). There are some lovely people up there in Minnesota, even if they do all sound like the cast of Fargo.

Terry and I stayed in contact off and on for about six years. It was rocky. She had never told her kept children (or most relatives) about me, and she was clearly not comfortable having an ongoing relationship with her deep, shameful secret.

So, after dozens of her denials and disappearing acts, our quasi-relationship was kaput. My letters were not answered and the rare phone call had been met with condescension and irritation. Secondary rejection is not fun or pretty. But I decided it was a sign to look up the "other half of me," my paternal side.



Terry had never told my father, Rick, that I existed. She had broken up with him and moved to San Francisco from Philadelphia after finding out she was prego with me. My last phone call to her, telling her about my desire to connect with him, was met with the outrage and fury of a thousand angry

klings!

With the help of a Catholic Charities intermediary again, I found my father. Although Terry had never intended to state his name anywhere in the records, apparently she let it slip during a counseling session and the note-taker at the time (bless her heart) jotted Rick's full name in the paperwork margins. It was easy to find him because he and his family lived in the same neighborhood as Terry and her family. Some of their kids attended the same school, and the wives knew each other. Talk about a soap opera. Seriously, Aaron Spelling couldn't make this stuff up!

No wonder she freaked out. Oh, the tangled web some weave. We have never spoken again. But I forgive her, for my own well being and for the sake of moving on.

Anyway, Rick was surprised but delighted to find out he had another child. Getting to know him and several other paternal family members has been a real treat. He is as laid-back as my mother is high-strung. He introduced me to dozens of kinfolk.

My Great Aunt Helen and I developed a close friendship for a few years, until she passed away. She used to tell me I reminded her of her mother, my great grandmother. She said our hands and gestures were identical, and Great Grandma was nearly 6 feet tall. This meant so much to me.



It's been a ridiculous ride, but fascinating to say the least. Now I have my own wonderful tribbles, I mean CHILDREN!, and have learned some valuable lessons to pass on about nature, nurture, honesty, openness, forgiveness, and love.

One of the biggest messages I've taken from all of this is that sometimes the universe hands you some major, in-your-face contrast so you can more clearly see what you do want in your life. Honesty, integrity, and being a loving, attentive mom are high on my list of goals, and maybe some of that has to do with seeing their opposites.

So, now with a bit of closure achieved, life goes on.

As Mr. Spock keenly advises: "Live Long and Prosper" – and of course laugh whenever you can.

*Names not changed to protect privacy. Screw that. Enough with the secrets and lies.

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