

# The Last to Know—An Australian Late Discovery Adoptee's Story

I was born on Valentine's Day, 1955, in Paddington, Sydney and grew up in country New South Wales, Australia, believing I was the third of four children, and the only daughter of Dutch immigrants. Despite being only five months younger than my older brother, I never suspected something was amiss.

I had considered myself a medical marvel to survive, but it was a lie, not only about me, but about my "almost" twin brother, too. My mother even managed to keep this secret from her family in Holland.

Decades later, when I was 43-years-old, I approached my mother to find out more information about my estranged late father. I needed to know more about our family's medical history after my third child died from a congenital heart defect, and our next child was born with a disability.

My mother adamantly told me that the only thing I needed to know was that my father was bad (in phrases I won't repeat). She refused to speak any further about him, so I arranged to meet with a beneficiary named in my father's will to try to get more information.

Towards the end of the conversation with this woman, she mentioned my family's secret adopted child, but she did not know which of the four of us it was. I knew the only way to find out if it had been me, was to write to the Department of Welfare.

In October 1998, I received a letter in response to my "Request for Confirmation of Adoption." That moment is forever etched in my memory. I sat alone in my car and read a letter that challenged everything I had ever known or believed to be true about myself:

Our records indicate that you were adopted. Many people find it distressing to have their adoption confirmed, even when they have suspected it for many years. If you would like to discuss this with a counsellor, please do not hesitate to phone and ask to speak with a counsellor on duty.

I didn't phone a counselor—I phoned the person whom I had known for forty-three years as my 'mother.' The fact that I'd discovered my adoption shocked her. She felt betrayed. Whereas our phone conversations had always ended with "I love you Diana," after that day, she never assured me of her love again.

I cannot describe the physical and emotional pain I endured from her rejection. I found some consolation in finally understanding why it was that I had never felt a bond or deep love for her. Our relationship had always seemed to be based on what she needed from me— and I could never provide

enough.

Despite this, I agonized over what to do with my newly found information. Should I let it go, or search for my true identity? I struggled with feeling responsible for her pain, though in time, I learned that this was a by-product of adoption.

Worse yet was learning my three brothers, and their wives, knew I was adopted 20 years before me. I was the last to know.

The next decade was dominated by my search. I learned that my birth mother had also moved to South Australia and lived only 40 kilometres away from me. Our relationship was respectfully distant, and I am thankful to her for that. She provided my family history, circumstances of my birth, and information about my father in the years before she passed away.

I learned that they'd decided to relinquish their parental rights prior to my birth and that my mother went home on the fourth day of her confinement. I, however, remained in the hospital for a month, then moved to another location for two more months before joining my adoptive family.

There were some gems to savor in her family history—she was the granddaughter of a knight of the realm in England—although her father, shell-shocked and dishonorably discharged from the army after serving in Gallipoli, was considered a disgrace to the family name, and eventually disowned.

As for my father, my mother told me that he was Greek. After they'd each heard their parents arguing about my impending birth, they decided it would not work to keep me. I went from being double Dutch to half Greek, which explains my dark hair, eyes, and propensity to break plates.

My birth father went on to become an orthopedic surgeon. After googling his name one night, I read his obituary in an orthopedic magazine. Apparently, he had been a wonderful doctor, husband, and father. I had written to him twice, shortly after I found out I was adopted, and again five years later. Now I knew why my letters were met with silence.

Since I discovered my adoption, the most difficult parts of my journey have been extricating the effects of adoption on my mind, body, and soul. I lacked the resilience to cope with what life had thrown at me, and my default position became one of despair, detachment, or avoidance.

As time unfolded, my preoccupation with looking after other people to the neglect of what I wanted and needed, led me to study social sciences and counseling. My post-graduate counseling theory studies gave me a scaffolding in which to understand the effects of my adoption experience, the profound effects of loss, grief, and the trauma of attachment disruption.

I am trying to reclaim my soul—my identity—and something equating to agency to live as an adult rather than reacting as an insecure child. There was no loving adult to comfort me after my birth. There was no secure adult to parent me, or teach me social skills, or how to cope well.

And I finally understand how the various forms of family abuse, separation trauma, on-going complex trauma, and neglect have caused me to react defensively to others. Often, I arm myself for a fight as if in a life or death situation, which is often out of proportion to the actual situation. It's exhausting.

Seven years ago, when I was overwhelmed by the concurrent illnesses of my daughter and my two mothers, I began therapy. My therapist recognized my lack of essence, or presence, as I sat in his room reading my notes, unable to describe what I was feeling.

He has provided a safe space to cry years worth of pain, to speak and feel heard, and to be accepted despite my mistakes and weaknesses. It has been a place to learn the skills I need to live. Through this inner work of psychotherapy and hypnosis, I have met my demons and knit together some of the pieces of identity that were fragmented after my birth.

I continue to reclaim whom I am, but am left with the disquieting evidence that perhaps there is no way back from the life-long effects of my adoption. Every day I learn to settle my physiology and be gentle with others and myself.

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**Editor's note:** March 21, 2013 was a significant day in Australia's adoption history. On that day, former Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave a moving apology on behalf of the Australian Government to people affected by forced adoption or removal policies and practices (video below). The Australian government's "[Find & Connect](#)" website provides links and information for Australian adoptees to search for records and connect with support services.

<http://youtu.be/5hVbokTpYeg>

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## **[The Adoption Domino Effect](#)**

*Joanne Currao, A Late Discovery Adoptee, Discovers a Secret that Affects Her and Her Children*

About a year and a half ago, at the age of 48, I found out that I'd been adopted as a baby in New York. My life derailed right then and there. My

adoptive father died when I was 17. My mom had passed away two years prior to this discovery. All I had left was my older brother.

At the time, I'd been married for 26 years and had three beautiful children who ranged in age from 9 to 22-years-old. I had been a stay-at-home mom since my second child was born and enjoyed every moment of my family. Life was beautiful. . . or so I thought.

I was on the phone with a cousin talking about antiques that had been my mother's, explaining that my brother had most of my mom's things in his house, and that we needed to discuss them, but there never seemed to be a convenient time. She said, "Oh. I thought that the fact that you did not have more of her things might be because of the adoption!"

I was confused. "What? Do you mean our grandmother?" I knew my grandmother's first born child had been born out of wedlock.

She went on to explain that my brother and I had been adopted, and that my mother was unable to bear children after her third miscarriage. "I thought you knew," she said.

My mouth dropped open. Did I just hear that correctly—*Adopted*? How could that be? Sure my mom had had three miscarriages, but she had always told me that I was hers. I sat in stunned silence as the word 'adoption' washed over me.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I hadn't realized that you didn't know. I feel bad."

"How did you find out? Who knows this? How long have you known?" I asked.

"My mother told me when I was young, maybe 12. Everyone knows, our cousins, their spouses, everyone."

I thanked her for telling me. I told her not to feel badly because it was vital that I know. I told her I'd be okay and got off the phone. The room was silent, but the sound of a train crash rang through my ears.

That word "EVERYONE" rang in my ears. *Even people who married into this family knew?* But I didn't. I felt ashamed, like I was the butt of a huge inside joke. Everyone knew, and probably talked about it in hushed whispers. I imagined that—"See that kid over there? She was adopted, but nobody is supposed to tell her that so *shhhh*." My mind raced reimagining the family functions of my life.

"Honey?" I called to my husband in the other room. "You're not going to believe this—my cousin just told me I was adopted!" He was as stunned as I was. He looked at me with an odd look on his face and asked about my brother. He told me he would have thought my brother was a natural child, because my mother had always seemed to favor him.

"Nope. He's adopted too." I decided right then that despite how horrible it would be for him to hear, I needed to call my brother and tell him what I'd just found out, make sure he heard it from me.

I composed myself as best I could, picked up the phone, and dialed his number. I whispered a quick prayer for God to give me strength while I waited for him to answer. It was going to hurt him.

After we exchanged hellos, I said, "I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it. I'm sorry to shock you with this. I just talked to Donna and she dropped a bomb—she said we were both adopted."

Nothing. Nothing on the other end of the line, but a long silence followed by a heavy sigh. *Did he already know? Could he have already known and not told me?* In that moment, I felt certain that he knew the truth. "Wait—you know this?" I asked.

"Yes. I know. I came across our Adoption Decrees in Mom's papers a few years before she died," he said. "I really wanted to tell you, but the time never seemed right, and as time went on, it got harder and harder to tell you. Mom was sick and you were going through so much at the time."

Now I was the silent one.

He apologized. He told me his name at birth, and that he had found his biological mother. I was stunned!

Not only had he not told me, he had gone on to find his mom and hadn't thought it was important to tell me the truth. I was at a complete loss for words. He, too, was "in" on the family joke. That's what it felt like. I imagined my brother talking in hushed whispers with his own family about me. I had never felt more shame and anger than I did on that day. My mind raced away with imagined scenarios of the people that I'd loved laughing at me behind my back for being too stupid to know this fact about myself.

I learned two things that day: nothing in my life was what it had seemed, and that betrayal runs *deep*.

In the months that followed, I cried so many tears I should have washed away. I had a horrible crushing chest pain and became severely depressed. I was also worried. All my life I had given my physician an incorrect health history for myself and my children.

At a routine screening during my second pregnancy, my doctor discovered I carried the genetic defect for Cystic Fibrosis, a potentially fatal disease affecting the lungs and other organs. At the time, the news had shocked me. Supposedly, that trait is rarely found in Italians.

My husband had to be screened too. We both needed to have the gene in order for it to effect our offspring. I asked my mother if anyone in our family had had Cystic Fibrosis or been tested for it. If ever there had been a perfect time for her to tell me about my adoption, that would have been it.

She simply said that there was no family history and told me to disregard the results because they were probably wrong. I wondered if it might be on my father's side, but because he had passed away years earlier I couldn't ask, so I reasoned that since my husband is a full-blooded Italian, and he did not

carry the trait, all would be okay.

Once my adoption was revealed, my fears returned in full force and kept me awake many nights. What genes or other horrible defects might I carry that could hurt me or my children?

I contacted Catholic Charities, the organization I learned from my brother had handled our adoptions. They said our records were destroyed in a fire. I googled the said fire and learned that there had indeed been one at the Iron Mountain Storage facility in NJ. The fire destroyed Catholic Charities' adoption records in New York City from the late fifties to the mid seventies, mine included. I contacted the church that I was baptized at. They said they had no record of me under either my first name or my adopted name.

More pain in my chest, only now it felt like an elephant was standing on me. Within a few weeks, I was at the doctor's office for the pain, and explaining to him that I had no health history. Fifteen minutes or so later he asked: "Any family history of anything like this?" I looked at him in disbelief.

"Oh! I'm sorry." He went on with the exam, deemed my chest pain stress related, and gave me a prescription for a sedative and antidepressants, then sent me on my way.

The last year and a half has been a roller coaster of emotions. I paid a large sum of money to find my mother, only for her to tell me that after all this time, she does not know if she can have a relationship with me. She never told anyone about me, and her shame and guilt are unbearable.

Despite a few exchanged letters, I still know very little about her, only that she is Scottish and Polish and she told me that my father was Jewish. I was raised Italian. I know Italian! I don't know Scottish. I don't know Jewish. How can I even begin to identify with who I really am?

My name at birth was Tracey. That is not an Italian name. What does a Tracey look like? Act like? My entire foundation, everything I'd thought I was, had fallen out from under me.

One afternoon, during all this, my oldest daughter, Veronica, sat next to me at the kitchen table with a sad look on her face. "Mom, I know you're sad and angry. I just want you to know that I'm sad and angry too. I feel like Grandma not telling you, is the same as not telling us. I feel like I am adopted too. Like I am feeling everything you feel. All the lies. Grandma's family history is not my history anymore. All those stories that I loved to hear were all untrue for me. I thought she loved me. I'm mad because she lied not just to you, but she lied to US."

I hugged Veronica. It hurt to think that my adoption had to affect her too. She and my mother were very close. My adoption was like dominoes, impacting my children and perhaps their children one day too.

I still don't even know what my birth mother looks like or the sound of her voice. Thankfully, though, I found my birth father's family. He passed in 2002. I keep in touch with his sister, and she is wonderful. She has shared

stories and photos of him. I look like him. It is surreal to see a face that really looks like you when you have never had that experience (aside from my kids).

I remember a time when I was about seven and asked my mother if I was adopted because of a feeling I had. She got angry and denied it, said I was crazy for thinking such a thing. So many memories come flooding back, and so many lies.

I have had weeks where I couldn't even leave the house. After reading books about adoption loss, I realize that all the same feelings of loss and trauma that adoptees who knew they were adopted described, were feelings I could relate to also, even though I was not consciously aware of my adoption. Somewhere in there is knowing.

I am slowly getting my life back through individual and group therapy and building a new foundation. I am not going to allow myself to be a victim of decisions that were made for me without my knowledge, consent, or approval. I owe this to myself, my husband, and my children. I'm healing my hurts, facing my trauma, and learning about who I really am inside, the culmination of all my experiences.

I am fighting for open records for others like me, in New York, and in any state I see that needs letters and support. Most U.S. States do not allow adoptees the right to our original birth records and identities.

I need my original birth certificate. It is a need that is beyond the obvious. I already know my name, and the name of my first parents. I already have my medical history. This is something different. Sometimes it feels as if I wasn't born at all, like I just sort of popped into existence—a daughter without a country. I want to see with my own eyes that I was born and connect my face to my past.

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