

# **Teen Corner**

## **Picture Me**

### **By Sofia Arroyo**

I grew up very aware of the fact that my family was different than others. At times I struggled with looking different than the rest of my family, but other times I was so proud to show everybody who I was and where I came from. It wasn't until I was 6 that I really understood that I had another family full of people who loved me. I knew that I was Guatemalan, but I wasn't sure what that meant exactly. I wanted to explore my roots and I was given the opportunity to do so during the summer before I started high school, when my middle school hosted a trip to Guatemala.

I decided to write my birth mother and tell her that I was going to be in Guatemala and would love to meet her. After a couple days, I received a letter back from her saying that it would mean the world to her if she could see me and just like that we had plans to meet in Antigua.

When the special day finally arrived, I was more anxious than I had ever been before. I walked around Antigua's central square, waiting for a familiar face to appear. I held the picture of my birth mother tightly, worried that if I were to let go, I might not recognize her and all my saved dreams and memories would fly away forever. For the first time in thirteen years I was meeting my birth mother. There were so many unanswered questions I wanted to ask and so many feelings pent up inside me. My whole life seemed as if it was coming to some kind of crossroads; now was the perfect time, somehow meant to be or so I hoped. It wasn't until later, when I returned to the States, that I would realize that all the unanswered questions I had before I left would remain unanswered.

I wandered around the square hardly aware of time. I looked at all the handmade crafts vendors were selling, from beautiful cloth to jewelry; I was fascinated by the intricate colors and designs that somehow spoke to me; yet I wondered if I really even belonged here. I looked like everyone I saw and yet I didn't really fit; but maybe soon I would. Every once in a while I would stop and look 360o around me searching for a woman who might hold the key to me, my first mother. Without notice, I heard someone gently say my name. I turned around and looked deep into the lady's brown eyes; we communicated non-verbally expressing our happiness, bursting into tears before launching into a warm and memorable hug. I realized I had waited way too long for a hug from my birth mother. It was more than I could ask for.

After embracing for what felt like ten minutes, we found a small café and began to talk about our lost memories. After going through three smoothies, one hot chocolate, a bagel, two tangerines and a chicken enchilada, I learned about every little thing that had happened to my family. Every story my birth mother told me was fascinating, so much so that I could not speak. I watched my birth mother smile, laugh and cry over and over again. Each time her expression changed, I began to feel more like her – saw myself within her and her within me. I didn't want the time to end; I didn't want to forget what it felt like so I decided to ask one of the waiters to take a picture. A picture would help me remember that I really was experiencing a part of me that I hadn't seen reflected in my life since I was a baby. What and who I was with my birth mother somehow made sense as if it had always been there but I had never even known about it before.

The afternoon became night, the last customers were starting to leave the restaurant and the waiters were putting the chairs on the tables. We were finally asked to leave the restaurant and after paying we walked out into the warm night air. I remember crying once again when we hugged the last time. We stood in the middle of the street embracing each other with more love and passion that I ever thought I had. It was hard to say good-bye. I knew that we would keep in touch but I didn't want to go another thirteen years before seeing my birth mother and experiencing this connection to my heritage and this new part of myself — again. My first day back in America, I went to the camera store and got my pictures developed.

Long after my reunion with my birth mother, I still had many unanswered questions. It wasn't until later, when I was writing my novel about Isabella, a teenage Latino American girl, adopted at birth, searching for her own answers about who she was, is and wants to be, that I answered many of my own questions for myself. Isabella helped me explore what it means to be adopted, what it feels like to have an empty space in your heart and search for yourself in your adoptive family, your birth family, to be between two identities, two countries, two cultures and eventually to understand that to be yourself you have to look not just to others but also within yourself. I still look at the picture of my birth mother and me in the Antigua Square everyday.

*Sofia Arroyo Hall-Gallagher is 15 years old and lives in California. This fictional account of an imagined reunion with her birth mother is a window into one young woman's feelings about being adopted.*