

I Never Thought of It Before... I Was Someone Else Before I Was Me

by Lori Clemmons

She was fifteen years old. She was in high school. She was smart and made good grades and just got mixed up with the wrong crowd. She was part Irish and part German.

For thirty years, this was all that I knew about the woman who gave birth to me. It never seemed like much, but I figured it would have to do. It was somewhat comforting—she was young, she was smart, she cared enough to not have an abortion. But at the same time it was unnerving—my father was from the “wrong crowd”; did he even know or care? I always wanted to know more. I remember being about eight years old, asking lots of questions but not being able to get answers. I had dreams of what she looked like and what I would look like when I got older. It was the wanting to know what she looked like that led me to take the steps to find her.

After my husband and I had been married for four years and given birth to my older son, we made the decision to adopt our next child. The only thing I insisted on (much to the distress of my friends and family) was that we have an open adoption. It was a scary decision—I’d heard so many horror stories. I wasn’t sure how much openness I wanted, but I knew I didn’t want my child to have the same questions I had. I wanted a way for him to have the answers.

Through the course of adopting Jesse, I developed a great relationship with his birth mom. Kelly was so warm and so real it was easy to trust her. In fact, the closer it came to Jesse’s birth, the more contact we wanted with her in the future. She was part of our family and that connection became very important to us and to her. One of the most special things she did for Jesse was put together a photo album for him. She had no pictures of his birth father, but she had lots of her family. There were lots of pictures of Kelly and her two sisters and one brother as they were growing up (they looked so much alike with their bright blonde hair and cute smiles, it was hard to tell which one was Kelly until she reached her teens), Kelly’s parents, grandparents, cousins, vacations, everything you could imagine.

When Jesse was about a year old, I decided it was time to update his photo album with all the pictures sitting in a box in the office. It was when I picked up the picture of Jesse in the tub with his hair slicked back and that silly grin on his face that I saw it. I flipped back to the pictures of Kelly and her siblings

as kids and pored over them. Sure enough, there was Jesse. It was no longer a problem to tell which kid was Kelly. It was like looking right at Jesse.

At first it was exciting to see how much he looked like her. But it made me start to question again—who do I look like? Where did I get my brown hair? my smile? my blue eyes? I’d always thought it would be great to find out, but never thought it important enough to launch an all-out effort. Looking back, I think it was fear that stopped me—fear of what my adoptive parents would say, fear of rejection, fear of what I would find, fear of the emptiness of not being able to find out. Now, all of a sudden, I had to know. None of the fears mattered anymore.

So, off to the library I went. I started with the “how to” books and worked into the ones dealing with the emotional side of reunions. I made my plan of what I needed to do, realizing it could literally take years. One thing I wasn’t eager to do was talk to my parents about it. I didn’t know how they would feel. We had talked about adoption as I was growing up, but there had always been an underlying uneasiness about it. I didn’t want them to feel threatened. I figured it could wait until they came to visit. We could sit down and talk then.

When I called the state in which I was adopted, they said they needed a court order from my state of birth in order to release any information. I called the state of my birth and they would not issue a court order since in their state none was needed. After two hours of getting the run-around, I got frustrated with one woman and gave her a piece of my mind. When I finally apologized and explained my situation, she said she could send me some non-identifying information, but probably nothing that would help me in my search. I figured it was better than what I had so far, so I thanked her for whatever she could do. I was pretty disappointed, but figured it was a start.

A few days later, a large envelope came in the mail. I didn’t open it right away, expecting a bunch of papers signed by my adoptive parents, the courts, etc. When I did open it, sure enough, all those papers were there. But on one of them I caught the name Christina Quin King—who was she? I stopped and read the “Affidavit of Parental Relinquishment.” The wonderful woman who survived my temper tantrum had thrown in all the information I could have asked for. So

who was Christina Quin King? I read on, and found out that she was.....me! I'd never thought of it before. I had been someone else before I was me. A different name represents a different life. All the questions started coming again—the ones I had never let myself think about. What would Christina have been like? Would I have been like me if I had been raised as Christina? Would I still have the same bull-headed stubbornness? the same likes and dislikes? the same fears and concerns? Would I have had the same care-free, happy childhood? I understood now what the books meant when they talked about the need to mourn the loss of a life.

It was a few days before I could pick up the papers again. I found out my birth mom's name was Jeanne; she was 19 when I was born and working at a bakery. My birth father was 23 and in construction. I was Irish. Even the little I'd been told about myself had been wrong. Using the clues in the paperwork, I made two phone calls and soon had a current address and phone number for Jeanne! I just kept coming back and staring at it all day long. It wasn't supposed to be that easy. Was I ready to face my fears? What if she didn't appreciate my contacting her?

I put the address away for a few days, then couldn't wait any longer. I called my parents and figured I'd tell whichever one came to the phone. Their response was one fear I needed to face. My dad answered. He said they had figured I would search some day and they just wanted me to be careful and not get hurt. He would explain things to my mother.

I decided to write a letter of thanks and appreciation to Jeanne. I wanted to start a relationship with her but I didn't want her to feel pressured. I was feeling so much that once I started writing, it all just came. I had my husband and a few friends read the letter just to make sure it was appropriate. I sent it off the next day with a return receipt so I could be sure she got it.

A letter came from Jeanne a couple of days later. It was short and pretty formal. She said it had taken her five hours to write the letter (it must have brought up a lot of emotion) and she included her phone number and said she wanted to hear from me. I called her and we were able to talk. It was awkward at first, but it got easier. She said she had married and had four children after I was born, and then had divorced. She had never told her husband and children about me.

That was all a year and a half ago. We've not met in person yet. Her children still do not know about me. There is still some distance in our relationship and I still don't have a picture of her. She says that based on the pictures I've sent her, I look a lot like her. It's not the ideal relationship I had envisioned, but neither is it the rejection I'd feared. I still don't know the answers to a lot of my questions, and for some I probably never will. But it's more than just looking at some pictures and getting answers about the past. It's the beginning of building a relationship I've always wanted and dreamed of. It's discovering a part of me. It's something very precious and very fragile and it's important to treat it gently. I know a time will come when I'll feel that inward pressure to know more, but for now I'm happy to let things progress along their natural course.

Lori Clemmons is a mom with two children, one adopted, one born to her. She has two siblings, one adopted like herself, one born to her family.