

# **Adoption Loss**

## **A Birth Mother Remembers**

**by Debra Baker**

I delivered my baby on February 28, 1968, knowing he was not mine to keep. I named him Sean Christian, knowing that name was not his to keep. Adoption is seen as a gift but it is about loss. As a young mother giving up my infant son I didn't just lose my baby, I lost myself.

I loved being pregnant, feeling my growing belly, figuring out which bump was my baby's head, which was his little bottom. He kicked so much my ribs were sore, but I didn't want it to end. I can remember the place I lived while pregnant, the other girls, even what I ate, and my two dresses. My feelings are not as easy to remember, probably because the fear and shame I experienced was so profound.

When I signed the relinquishment papers five weeks after I gave birth, nightmares and depression overwhelmed me as I struggled to figure out a way to do the impossible, to keep my baby. As the milk leaked from my breasts, my mother bound them, but her efforts could not hide the fact that I was a mother without her child. I pretended it didn't matter, and since my folks didn't talk about it, it didn't happen. I would live my life trying to forget.

Of course, I could not forget. Every February 28 I wondered where he was and what he was doing, how he looked and if he was happy. I felt profoundly sad, and I had no one to talk to about it. Who would understand? I was not in contact with the girls I lived with while pregnant. Did anyone even care? My nephew was eleven months older than my son, so I was acutely aware of the growing stages my son went through. I love kids and they are naturally attracted to me. Being with them constantly reminds me of my feelings for my baby, and reinforces my belief that I would be a great mother.

Five years after Sean was born, I tried to imagine him going to kindergarten. I was not the mother zipping his

jacket and kissing him goodbye; someone else had that pleasure. I started college myself, but it felt strange to be in class with other young people, younger than myself. I was twenty-four and a mother, but my persona was of a cool, single woman. I had a secret no one could know.

I wrote my son a letter on his sixteenth birthday; I was thirty-five. "Today is your sixteenth birthday. It's hard to believe." I felt a deep longing as I imagined him going about his day at school. "Are you getting your driver's license? Please be careful," I wrote. "I think about you everyday, wondering where you are, what you look like, your interests." I knew I would never see him, and it felt like I was writing to a phantom. "Do you want to meet me?...I will never try to find you. It has to be enough to know that you are loved." I kept this letter. There was no place to send it and I could not throw it away.

By this time a few of my friends knew about the adoption, and I told my boyfriend, but I did not talk about it, and never spoke about it to my family. No one wanted to hear how I felt and they would never understand. I was in therapy for a while, hoping to put the issue "to rest," but how is that possible? It will never be put to rest.

As the years passed I watched my niece and two nephews grow up, wondering about my son, their cousin they didn't know about. I felt like I was living a lie. I was an imposter. I could not say I had a child when asked and that always made my stomach tighten. My cousin adopted two children around the time of my son's adoption and that was like a knife in my heart. But I lived my life, just as the adoption caseworker said I would, but never forgetting my son, as she promised.

Sean turned twenty-one when I was forty, and I began a slow journey towards awareness about losing him and what that meant. The next nine years would take me through an emotional upheaval I hadn't felt since signing

the adoption papers. All of the anger, shame, and guilt surfaced and my emotions were difficult to control. I screamed, I ranted, I cried, until my boyfriend insisted we go to a Searchfinders meeting and fill out papers to do a search.

During this emotional time I produced a film about my experience as an "unwed mother" and the lifelong ramifications of adoption. My anger at the stereotypical images on TV and in the movies of birthmothers being drunks, drug addicts, or otherwise unfit fueled my desire to show a real birthmother. I started to tell my story, and began to heal, as friends and strangers responded with compassion and support. I spoke to my family about what happened, but unfortunately my dad died before we had the chance to discuss it.

Though I felt completely alone during my pregnancy and through the following years, adoption happened to the whole family, not just me.

I found my son while I was editing the film, when he was thirty years old. The excitement of meeting him, and then my grandchildren, carried me through the days. I told everyone I knew and anyone who would listen. I joked that I was "out of the closet" and it felt great. I began to think of myself as a mother. I have a son and no legal document will change that. But I am aware that I am not the woman who raised him, and that will never change. But to be in each other's lives is a long-awaited gift.

*Debra Baker wrote, produced, directed, and edited the films "Broken Ties" and "Lost and Found," which have screened on PBS, and at numerous film festivals. She is a frequent presenter at adoption conferences in the U.S. and Canada, and was awarded the Excellence in Broadcast Media Award by the American Adoption Congress in 2002.*