

An **Adoption** Travelogue

TWO FAMILIES
ONE VOICE

The **Secret** that should never have come out

**Richard
Buckworth**

“I had a really normal upbringing and being adopted didn't affect me”

This was my ***biggest*** lie.

OneVoice charts the healing journey I embarked on in search of answers to the questions which had secretly been affecting my life. It retraces my route across the globe to find my birth family and shines a light on the issues and the hidden world adoptees inhabit.

Every family has secrets but adoptees have more than most. When combined with the issues adoption naturally/naturally bring these ticking timebombs are always waiting to explode and wreck lives.

OneVoice is an inspiring journey that reveals these secrets and issues
~ and shows how they can be overcome.

The ***TRUTH*** will always set you free

First available in Great Britain in June 2025

This is a draft edition containing the first ten chapters of the final book.

The final book will be available to buy and download later this year.

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What you know you can't explain, but you feel it.

You've felt it your entire life,

that there's something wrong with the world.

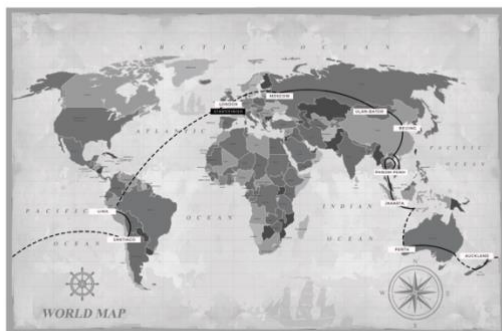
You don't know what it is, but it's there,

Like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.

Morpheus: 'The Matrix'

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About Me

I was born in 1970 and after an initial period in a children's home was adopted by a loving family, subsequently growing up just north of London. On the surface my childhood looked very normal but internally the shadow adoption casts was ever present and underneath I felt like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle.

After University I landed my dream job in TV but put my career on hold in 2002 when I set out to trace my birth parents. My aim was to find answers to the multitude of questions I had as an adoptee and fill in the missing blanks of my life. The trip took me overland across the globe to New Zealand and unwittingly set my life on a trajectory I could never have imagined.

I have subsequently spent over twenty years in the self-development field and used various therapeutic modalities to work through the issues I had been in denial about linked to being adopted. The two main therapies I attribute to healing them are The Journey (pioneered by Brandon Bays) and Systemic Family Constellations (pioneered by Bert Hellinger) and I went on to train in both of these which I use to this day in the workshops and 1:1 sessions I offer.

Aside from self-development my passions include exploring the world with either my trusty rucksack on my back or driving my 'rucksack on wheels' (aka my campervan), mountaineering, creative film projects and spending time in nature and with my family. I can usually be found up a mountain in any other available spare time.

My hope in writing this book and sharing my experiences is to inspire other adoptees (and anyone else who can relate to the issues I have encountered) to embark on their own unique healing journeys.

The truth will always set you free. It has me ...

THE LIE:

Someone asked me many years ago;

“Do you think you have been affected by being adopted?”

I replied;

*“No, I had a really normal upbringing with a loving family and
being adopted hasn't affected me at all”*

THE TRUTH

I felt like I didn't belong anywhere,
be it amongst friends, my family or even the country I lived in.

There was always a deep sense of being 'the outsider'
and intrinsically feeling 'wrong', like something was missing
but I couldn't quite put my finger on what that something was.

I am an adoptee.

Welcome to my world.

Introduction

My life has felt like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle, governed by numerous unanswerable questions which most *normal* people take for granted. OneVoice is a raw and very honest account of the rollercoaster journey I finally embarked on to find some answers – beginning with an overland traverse of the planet in search of my birth parents.

This rite of passage would initiate me into uncovering what *normal* could look like for an adoptee, a world where seemingly unconnected incidents could be pieced together to form some of the missing pieces of my jigsaw puzzle life. This book charts where that initial journey took me, opening up pandoras box on adoption and offering fresh hope for anyone affected by separation in any form.

Everyone has secrets and adoptees live with more than most people. I was once told “*You are the secret that should never have come out*” and OneVoice demonstrates how the secrets which lie at the heart of all adoptions can massively impact an adoptee's life whilst simultaneously showing how to heal from the associated traumas they bring.

This draft edition of the book is a taster of the final version and shines a light on the *everyday* things which most people take for granted, like knowing where our dancing skills come from, or our love of sport, or who we *don't(!)* look like in our family - explicitly showing how these seemingly innocuous situations can cause deep traumas for adoptees which are carried from birth, through childhood and right into adulthood. It also explores topics from the first-hand experience of the adoptee which

have never been fully explored; like the *ghost kingdom* where fantasies about our birth family exist, to the creation of two disparate voices running continually like background noise in our lives, to the massive impact being adopted can have on mental health and wellbeing.

I had what most people would describe as a very 'normal' upbringing where I didn't experience any of the horrific events you might hear associated with other adoption stories, but despite this surface appearance of normality on the inside I always struggled and this *pretence* (albeit it subconscious) of normal is exactly where I feel lots of problems lie for adoptees.

Adoption in my opinion is not normal and the mainstream narrative in thinking it is fundamentally flawed. If I wanted a chance of living my life fully I know now what I really needed to do was acknowledge all the inner turmoil and expose the deeply hidden issues which accompanied my adoption, issues which started affecting me right from birth where an underlying awareness of not feeling wanted lay at the centre of my world and many of the issues I've had to contend with in life can be traced back to this core issue, which was always lurking in the shadows just out of my awareness but deep down it had the power to totally overwhelm me.

This primary underlying issue for me was a sense of feeling abandoned blended with feeling intrinsically wrong in the world and somehow different to those around me. Growing up I would often have the fear I was going to be abandoned again and to compensate I would strive to be

the *perfect* child so THAT would never happen again. The inner voice I had running was “*If I'm good they will love me and then they won't leave*”, so any situation which for most children would just be a painful experience could for me become highly-loaded on multiple levels; for example being left on the first day at school felt like total devastation because it triggered on a deep, subconscious level the initial separation anxiety I'd experienced at birth; or a girlfriend splitting up with me could engender the fear of abandonment by those closest to me.

I wasn't consciously aware of these deeply buried traumas as a child, but consciously I knew ‘*something was amiss*’, I just couldn't quite put my finger on it. Unbeknownst to me they were constantly eating away at the very core of my being and brought un-diagnosed secondary issues including problems with my mental health - all of which I would eventually have to face as an adult.

As a child I would often drift off and dream of another life, fantasising about being in another family, much like we all do in those moments when our parents have punished us. The difference for me as an adoptee was I *did* have another family. A family who were *out* there somewhere. I would often lose myself in visions of what my life would be like with them - what they looked like, where we would live, what we would do together - but this was a secret place in my imagination which needed careful guarding because anyone finding out about it could lead to being abandoned by my adoptive family. Then I would have no-one. Again.

This was where I kept my most painful secret hidden; the desire for my birth mother to suddenly appear, rescue me and make everything in my world right again. I had always felt this sense of something – or someone - missing in my life. There was someone out there who *should* be in my life and if I let my mind run riot it would be my birth mother I would try and picture in these moments. But this came with a sense of guilt because it felt disrespectful towards my adoptive mother even thinking it, let alone voicing it out loud. It also raised the scariest thought of all - the possibility that I would have to make an impossible choice between my two mothers.

As a child I simply couldn't comprehend that two people could exist in the same role and I would lock away even the thought of such an overwhelming decision in a secret compartment. The truth was that I somehow needed both of them in my life and needed to love them both, but I didn't have the skills or awareness at such a young age to know this or how to go about making it happen.

Once I started to realise as a child what *being adopted* actually meant and that I was different to everyone else (there were no other adoptees I knew of apart from my brother John), I felt like I had some invisible affliction or disease which I just couldn't shed. I became an observer on life and would watch others 'do life' seemingly unfazed whilst my inner world often felt like it was fragile and being shaken like a toy snow globe. Deep inside me there was a secret place where another version of me existed who no-one else could see and I hid it exceptionally well from

those around me. I played the *normal* card the best I could but I withdrew more and more, becoming painfully shy and developing something of a lone wolf type mentality, never asking for help from others. All the while though inside I was subconsciously splintering from life and reality.

Ultimately, the experience of adoption is unique to each individual and my experience will be unique to me, yet I feel so many of the issues which adoption engenders are universally true for all adoptees. For example, adoptees often choose not to search for their biological family out of a fierce loyalty to the adoptive family who they see as *their real family*. But in doing so they massively limit their options to resolve an issue in their life which might well not be theirs in the first place because the root cause lies in their biological family.

Through searching for my birth family and working through the associated issues I can whole-heartedly say it has been worth it because:

- It has shown me the truth about who I am and where I come from
- Answered important questions ranging from illnesses to habits
- Allowed me live without forever *looking over my shoulder* and wondering if I'm related to the person next to me
- Given me the strength in life to move beyond merely surviving as an adoptee
- Given me a similar amount of resources and knowledge about myself that *normal* people have for granted

- Enabled me to approach life with conviction knowing the *whole picture*
- Gifted me with a sense of finally feeling like I truly belong somewhere.

I often hear the expression “*you can't heal from X, Y or Z*”. My experience has been totally different and I feel this type of thinking holds people back from even trying to seek a solution. I firmly believe that you can recover from the deepest wounding and with regard to adoption heal from the multitude of issues it causes.

On some level we are all a product of both nature and nurture but I feel adoptees can have a much tougher time than most because we take on board nature from our biological family and then blend this with the nurture of our adoptive families, which is essentially an alien environment bearing no resemblance to our biological experience nor carrying any of the family history which biologically tethers everyone genetically. Adoptees are essentially doubly burdened in life by taking on board the issues of these two disparate families and I feel it is vitally important to separate these two environments in order to identify the origin of issues we have taken on board and be able to heal from them.

My life has been a highly emotional journey and OneVoice shows how important it was to get to the root cause of the issues adoption gifted me. It shows if we acknowledge, face and heal our wounds how it is possible to live free from these types of constraints and enjoy all the *normal* aspects of life.


It is especially true for me as a father because I do not want my son to live with the secrets I had to, or carry any of my burdens in his lifetime – they were after all never his to carry.

And finally ... I was given one name at birth which was subsequently changed when I was adopted. I feel like I've always carried these two people within me yet they both haven't been given a voice or allowed to speak fully. A lot of my subconscious thinking is the birth me whilst the one I let people see outwardly is the adoptive me. But they are not separate people, they are both me.

I am an adoptee with two names. And OneVoice.

PART 1

SEPARATION

 09:30hrs - Monday 8th April 2019

Rosenheath District, Evans Bay, Wellington, New Zealand

I'm back. Back where it all began here in New Zealand. I'm sitting contemplating what it means to me to be a Kiwi, what it feels like to belong somewhere. My natural parents are native New Zealanders or "Kiwis" - which makes me a Kiwi by birth too. I knew they were from New Zealand from an early age because of my *'Magical Pink Folder'*, a precious folder which contained all the information I ever knew about my adoption. More importantly to me though, it held details about my biological parents, although this basically amounted to one, solitary paragraph each for my mother and father. But even so, I clung to this meagre information with the same fervour as a priest and their precious holy bible because it was all I knew about my natural parents. As such it was priceless to me.

It was me. Well, it was a me I dreamt of being ... *out there* somewhere.

I am paying a brief visit to my 'homeland' prior to a family wedding in Fiji, an occasion which I hope will put in place the few remaining pieces of my adoption jigsaw – or at least come as close as I will probably ever get. That's the thing with being adopted, lots of questions but never quite enough answers. Having 'successfully' dodged the bullet in my early life through a paralysing fear of opening the can of worms which

would ensue, I've spent the best part of the last twenty years actively trying to heal the fallout of my adoption.

So here I am, sitting on the edge of the Cook Strait, a stretch of water dividing the north and south islands of New Zealand, typing this knowing it will probably raise more questions yet again that will go unanswered. Having said that, I feel really honoured to be invited to this family wedding and deeply touched that one of my biological brothers feels a strong enough bond for me to present on his special day despite us only meeting a few years ago. This blood tie is one of the amazing things about families and in my case the timeless nature/nurture debate is a crucial factor because my whole life has been filtered through the adoption lens like panning for gold where I only a few granules of the priceless substance to show for it.

Questions abound and I ponder one in particular:

“How is it that I feel closer to someone I only met six years previously than the adopted brother I spent my entire childhood growing up with? Surely the years of growing, playing, arguing, laughing and sharing special events like birthdays and Christmas's should count for more than one brief meeting?”

Apparently not is my experience with the latter question. Blood *is* thicker than water and ancestral family ties bond you in a way most people aren't aware of, something which I have found especially important as an adoptee if you are willing to 'go there and trace your roots'. Hence my twenty-year odyssey to understand myself and why I have always felt different, like I don't belong anywhere, the first fifteen

years of which I spent dealing with much of the associated baggage that came from my adopted family (nurture) followed by the next five years (work still in progress ...) coming to terms with and accepting the truth of my birth family (nature), the ancestral lineage from which I emanate, truly belong with and ultimately owe my existence to.

Day to day life for me as an adoptee meant living in some weird limbo between these two families whilst always being invisibly tethered to my family of origin. Once separated from your birth parents it is then impossible to have the natural parent/child relationship with them ever again and even if I wanted to return to my biological family I could never fully do this.

I pondered how far I had come on my search for answers and how I might never know everything about who I am. This wedding was the closest I had ever come to feeling like I truly belonged in a *traditional* family unit and it was a new, quite foreign feeling for me.

I'm excited about going to the wedding yet simultaneously really nervous because it's on my father's side of the family and he and I don't have a relationship. In fact the polar opposite is true because on meeting him for the very the first time as an adult he told me that I'm '*the secret that should never have come out*'. I still to this day don't know exactly what he meant by this sentence, but what I do know is it hurt and cut deep to be rejected a second time. In total I have seen him for less than an hour since that initial meeting, so why am I so nervous heading for this wedding because after all, a wedding is a day for families to come together and celebrate each other. What could possibly go wrong?

My brother really wants me to be there which means so much to me and I want to be there for him too, so I have literally dropped everything and with the last money in the bank paid for a flight from my home in Wales. It comes at another cost though because I would have loved my partner and child to be with me but we just couldn't afford for all three of us to travel to the other side of the world. I am pretty sure though as scant consolation I can claim the prize for who has travelled the furthest to attend the wedding!

Since meeting my birth father's other children I have been made to feel so welcome by them all yet I still struggle with his fierce resistance to acknowledge me so quite frankly I have no idea what to expect when I arrive in Fiji. I haven't spoken with my father since our last, fateful meeting in 2012 where he told me to leave his family alone and the first time we will be meeting again is now, here at (t)his family wedding, so I'm feeling pretty apprehensive about it and the possibility of awkward moments which often occur when families gather... only this time on a pretty large scale at a family wedding. A family I hadn't even grown up with.

At the end of the day though I tell myself that no matter what has happened, I am still my father's child so have a right to be here. I am also an adult now, and the eldest of his children, so I need to behave like one rather than some demanding, petulant child. The years of hard work I have undergone in therapy come back to me and remind me to let go of any expectation and yet here I am in New Zealand preparing for this wedding feeling completely out of my depth because I haven't heard from

him in any shape or form for over six years and we are about to be thrust together in an emotional tumble dryer.

What should I say?

- Maybe nothing ... not my style though.
- Maybe a polite *"Hello - how are you? What have you been up to?"* Very British and perhaps a fake smile to go with it? No ... not my style either.
- And when it comes to the classic *'And now for the Family Photos ...'*, when exactly do I step forward - if at all?
- Maybe they don't do family photos here in NZ - that would make it all a helluva lot less awkward all round.

But then my other brother is best man and even suggested I might be asked to make a speech. OMG! The ultimate social pressure on top of everything else – what exactly is appropriate to talk about in this situation?

"Well it's been an amazing journey growing up together and boy-oh-boy the stories I could tell ..."

- No, that doesn't feel quite right as ... well, it would be a lie as we didn't actually grow up together. How about:

"So I met the groom six years ago and we get on really well but I'm still the secret in the family you all are probably only seeing or hearing about for the very first time".

- End of speech. Cue a spaghetti-western-esque tumbleweed moment of silence.

Mmmm, maybe it needs some work on the delivery, get the punchline a bit clearer ... and maybe just flesh out the content a bit. Wow - that's it - that'll give everyone something to talk about!

Frankly I'm clueless as to what to say because it's a very special day for my brother and his bride and I don't want to be the person who messes up what is, after all, their day. But I have to acknowledge how nervous I am, firstly knowing I'm pretty much a secret and have no idea what my place in the family is, and secondly a wedding of all days is not the place I wanted for us all to be together for the first time.

I was then reminded of someone asking me many years ago;

“So, do you think you have been affected at all by being adopted?”

“No”, I replied without hesitating, “I had a really normal upbringing with a loving family and being adopted hasn't affected me at all”

I hadn't known it at the time but this was a lie.

2

Siberia

“Look inside yourself, Simba.

You are more than what you have become.

You must take your place in the Circle of Life.”

Mufasa: ‘Lion King’



📍 21st January 2002:

Moscow, Russia

And so the search begins. I was finally embarking on the adventure which could change my life forever. On so many occasions I had dreamed that one day I would be brave enough to be in this position and here I was, finally sitting on a flight to Moscow at the beginning of what I hoped would bring the conclusion to a very long journey. Ever since I was a boy I had dreamt of searching for my birth parents and completing my jigsaw puzzle. That time was eventually upon me as I headed east for New Zealand, hoping to find the answers I so craved. Little did I know at this time that the trials and tribulations of this journey would mirror my life to date as an adoptee.

My mind was racing with competing thoughts as it slowly dawned on me, I was heading into the unknown and the bottom-line question it kept asking was *“What the hell am I doing chucking in my job, friends and life as I know it and travelling halfway across the planet on some wild goose chase which might include a vague plan of trying to trace my birth mother?”* This in turn flooded me with a heady mix of conflicting emotions, lurching one moment from feeling absolutely petrified of what I would encounter to the next and a sense of quiet, resigned confidence that I was taking the right steps for the next chapter in my life. I appeased my fears with *“It's all about finding yourself travelling and it doesn't matter if you don't even bother trying to find her”*, but deep down I knew this was a lie.

The flight to Moscow was only three hours actual flying time yet felt like it had already been a lifetime in duration as the plane levelled out after take-off. Minute by minute I calmed by breathing, accepting it was now too late to turn back and somehow with each terminal hour that passed flying further east I found myself relaxing more and more. I also realised that I had been running on pure adrenaline for the last couple of months before my departure and now that the trip was underway, I could let go of work and all the associated daily stresses it brings. This would bring a deep sense of peace the longer the trip went on and simultaneously I would come to realise the importance of facing our deepest, darkest fears ... no matter what the cost.

Moscow in winter is a very, very cold place. And as I quickly discovered it wasn't only the weather which was cold. So were the Russian police. I had set out on the trip with the intention of filming it, on one hand for posterity but also maybe as a means of earning some money on my return by selling some of the footage to agencies or production companies needing footage from remote or extreme parts of the world. I found myself filming in Red Square on day one with my camera on its tripod only to be 'arrested' by the Military police who marched me to a small office in the Kremlin walls. I would later learn that allowing yourself to be escorted somewhere 'out of sight' was a total no-go for travellers in this part of the world and you should always be on your guard.

You were supposed to keep your identification on you at all times but in reality, all that actually meant was you should never carry your

original passport because the authorities were allegedly not '*strictly*' legitimate and they regularly preyed on tourists, allegedly to support their low salaries. Unfortunately, I was relatively new to travelling like this and wasn't fully aware of some of the small cons backpackers can encounter so I rather naively handed my passport over to the guard who then arrested me for 'illegally filming without a permit', apparently one of these classic cons.

Basing my defence on a fairly justified ignorance of local customs, I pleaded my innocence regarding the somewhat increasingly concerning matter of the 'Tripod' law. As far I could make out this law basically stated that using a tripod meant you were a '*professional videographer rather than a tourist and that you required a special permit to film*' (which to be fair as I was considering selling the footage on my return was partially true!), but I quickly realised the conversation was going nowhere and more importantly my passport was looking less and less likely of being returned. I had money on me and in desperation I asked "*How much would it cost?*", to which the calm (and on reflection clearly rehearsed!) response was "\$200" ... and so 10 minutes later, with my wallet somewhat lighter having seen my \$200 fine/bribe/extortion disappear into the back pockets of my guard with no 'official receipt', I found myself released back into Red Square.

Luckily my passport was safely returned because otherwise it could have been a remarkably short trip. Day one and my learning curve was apparently going to be pretty steep.

 23rd January 2002.

Trans-Siberian Railway – Day 1

From Moscow I headed east through the remote and desolate tundra of northern Russia aboard the Trans-Siberian railway. I'm not sure when originally booking it what the difference in price was between 1st and 2nd class travel, but now on board the train which would be my home for the next eight days I'm glad I had plumped for second class as I really couldn't tell the difference between the first and second class compartments and was feeling pretty smug with my choice. That was until I realised I was the only westerner in mine and before the train had even pulled out of Moscow, I was asked to leave it by my Mongolian roommates. Despite my best protestations the language barrier proved insurmountable (my Mongolian was non-existent as was their English) and being '*the foreigner*' I was removed physically from their compartment. As there were only about half a dozen westerners travelling on the whole train this actually proved to be a good thing because I subsequently found myself placed together with some English-speaking travellers in one compartment, a fact that would change drastically later on but for now this fact helped me ease gradually into this somewhat alien environment.

I had made a conscious choice to leave technology and the 'developed' world behind as much as possible for this trip, which included my mobile phone because I intended to only communicate via email or letter when it felt appropriate. I quickly discovered this was the 'norm for

backpackers' (I felt like I was starting to fit in already if only on this fact alone) and after only a few days away I was already enjoying the serenity and relaxation that a tech-free existence could bring.

It was a little bit shocking therefore when it turned out that one of the first people I met on the train was actually travelling with a mobile. Damn. It was still a fairly bizarre experience to be thousands of miles from anywhere vaguely developed on board the train which we had all affectionately started referring to as home and the presence of the mobile was a stark clash with the remote journey across Siberia. So even though he offered for me to make a call I politely declined. To be fair my reasons were also financial as it was 2001 and owning a mobile phone was still pretty expensive let alone to make phone calls from abroad - God knows how much that would have cost!

I was gradually settling into the slow pace of the days and the relative monotony of *train life*. With each passing hour I found myself relaxing more and more into it, making time to read my book, chatting with fellow travellers, or simply doing nothing other than gaze on mile upon mile of fir tree lined landscape sliding past the train windows. The view rarely changed and it became something of a meditation to either hang out of a window or stand at the end of a carriage hour after hour, drinking in the endless, snowy vista. On rare occasions when the train dared to go round a long curve, you had the excitement of actually seeing the front of the train – something you might not have seen for days.

As I slowed down to match the pace of life on board, my thoughts drifted to the future - both in terms of the trip I had embarked on as well

as my adoption journey, which seemed to be eerily reflective of the harsh, unforgiving surroundings out of the window. The bleak, white landscape was quite a mirror for how I was feeling inside as whenever I tried to think ahead about tracing my birth mother, and potentially changing my life forever, I was greeted by an equally blank canvas which was as seemingly frozen as the starkness stretching out endlessly in all directions.

Maybe it was the physicality of the distance between me and New Zealand which was keeping me disconnected, or else I simply wasn't ready yet to contemplate the ramifications of any potential action I was going to take. For now I decided to just relax and focus on enjoying the bizarreness inside and outside the train as it was clearly going to be a long journey. Besides, what lay after it which was totally unknown territory and way too scary to even contemplate.

I was really keen to capture the barren wasteland I was travelling through so filmed and took photos en-route whenever possible. The most exciting thing I found was the on the infrequent occasion we pulled into a station. Well, describing them as stations was way too grandiose because more often than not these stops were in the middle of nowhere and the norm was only a short, buildingless concrete platform. The train timetable was also all in Russian so there was no hope of knowing where you were in Siberia let alone the name of the station, but at least you could read the times you were meant to arrive in a station and this became the way to tell the time instead of using something normal like a watch. There was something strangely relaxing about the train pulling into a station about every three-four hours, day or night, because it broke up the

monotony and changed the whole pace of the day. You'd even wake yourself up in the middle of the night to witness these highlights.

The most amazing thing though wasn't necessarily the stations themselves, it was observing what happened when you pulled into one of these remote outposts. During the day you knew when you were approaching a station because the train would suddenly bristle with life and commotion. The majority of passengers were Mongolian traders who constantly sold their goods the along the Trans-Siberian route and pulling into a station meant they had to capitalise on every available second to trade. The train would stop on average for fifteen minutes at each station and even before it came to a halt these traders would leap off and start working. For some locals this was also their only connection each week with the outside world and so they would erect a temporary market stall in literally a matter of minutes and start trading, a sight which was truly unique to behold as you pulled into a station.

It was such an odd experience, clambering off the train in the middle of nowhere and meandering through the hastily constructed markets, observing the bartering taking place in a foreign language so unrecognisable to my own. Amongst all the hustle and bustle goods such as footwear, tools, clothing or food were being bought and sold whilst traders walked around with vast selections of things as bizarre as leather moccasin shoes dangling around their necks. All-in-all it made for an incredibly rich and exotic spectacle so far removed from home.

Just when I didn't think it could get any stranger I witnessed the craziest thing ever. As the train pulled away they carried on trading as if

nothing was happening, totally ignoring the departing train which I found simply jaw-dropping as it was their weekly connection with the outside world moving faster and faster out of the station. Then suddenly, at some apparent 'mystically-decreed' moment, everyone would en masse stop trading and run at full speed to jump aboard the moving train, making it by the skin of their teeth as the last carriage cleared the end of the platform. I could only presume it was to make the most of every precious second to make some money but whatever the reason I found it mind boggling to watch - and bloody scary too if you decide to give it a go like I did, because if you missed getting back on board you would be stuck there in the middle of a frozen nowhere until the next train a week later.

Once safely aboard it felt surreal to gaze back at the station where once there was a bustling market, watching it disappear right before my very eyes. It was gone in a matter of minutes and the station returned to its normal desolate quiet. I never risked it a second time.

At night this whole process is even more surreal. Nearing a station there is nothing to see until the darkness sparks into life as local traders suddenly appear out of the inky blackness, erecting their stalls in literally a matter of seconds. The traders on board the train similarly come alive and engage in their incredibly fast bargaining process until the mysteriously allotted time decrees the end of trading and once more at the last second they all dive back aboard the departing train. Then this temporary market is dismantled in a matter of seconds and along with the traders it vanishes like ghosts into the night as if it never existed, leaving behind just an eerily quiet void.

After the first night watching these surreal events unfold it made me reflect about my own 'invisible' birth parents who seemed like ghosts to me in much the same way I imagined I was to them. Here I was, alone in a remote part of Russia, having just watched people I would never see again disappear like 'ghosts into the night' and I wondered what it had been like for me when my birth parents had done exactly that to me. What had that baby me made of the eerie void they left in my life. The thought of what that younger me had gone through all those years ago unsettled me as usual, triggering at the same time old questions:

- What had I done for them to leave?
- If that baby me could speak - what would it have said?
- Who would be there to listen to my voice?
- What had that younger me experienced or felt being left alone in the hospital followed by the children's home?
- Who had taken care of me when my mother left?

What effect did all of this have on me because on some deep level I would have still taken in everything going on around me despite it happening at such an early, pre-verbal stage. One thing I remembered reading about leading a healthy life was how crucial it is for babies to receive all they can from the most important nurturing figure at birth and also for the first few months of life. Their biological mother. Without this they can struggle mentally and emotionally for their entire lives. Of

course, I had long ago decided not to open that door to ‘poke around’ and so was content that this wasn’t the case for me.

But the people I had just seen vanishing into the night like they had never existed gave me pause for thought on all the people who had disappeared from my life from an early age. I pondered on these questions for a while but as with all things adopted, I didn't have any answers and in the same fashion as when I was a child, I pushed these disturbing thoughts aside and placed them carefully in the secret drawer of *‘unknowables’*.

3

Tree Roots

“Adoptees, whether or not they ever knew their birth parents, often describe the constant, gnawing feeling of there being something missing”.

Saroo Brierley: ‘A Long Way Home’



 October 1976

Bromley, Hertfordshire, England

Since I was a baby I'd heard my parents tell me I'm adopted, but it never really went in because, well, I was simply too young to understand what it meant or actually entailed. It just sounded like a nice story which they told me, but just like any other child I really just wanted to get on with the important business of being a kid and playing with my toys. Here I am though doing what all small children do, having fun rummaging inquisitively through cupboards and drawers and suddenly it's in there my hand. I don't fully appreciate in that moment the chain of events this will eventually trigger in my life but for now all I know is confusion.

In my hand is the family tree. I've seen this sort of thing before. But this one is different. It's quite an old document and I'm the last entry on it. This is the first time it registers though.

I read my name and a distant, forgotten voice stirs in the back of my mind. Where everyone else has as usual their name and date of birth, mine is different, along with my brother John whose name is just above mine. One word makes us stand apart from the rest and it screams off the page and heads directly for my heart.

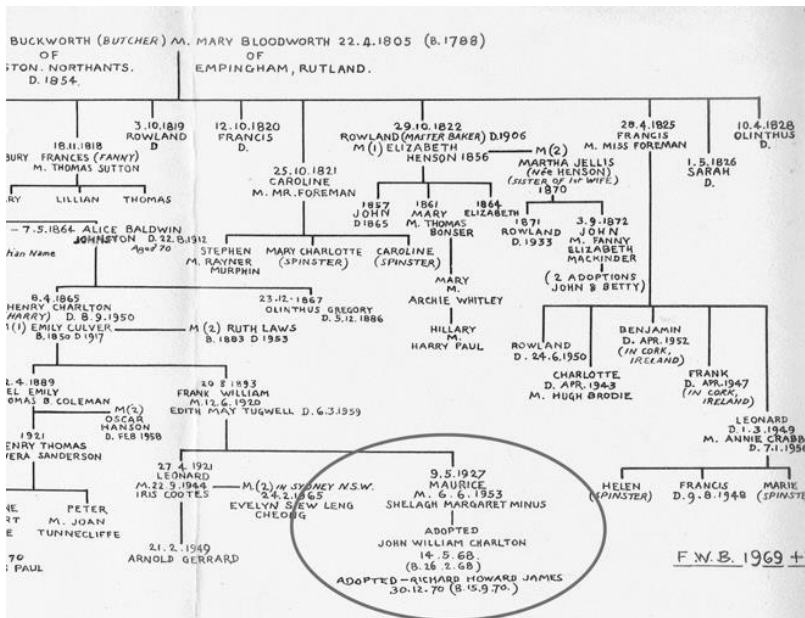
That word is '*Adopted*'.

I'm stunned and sit down to take it in.

I've heard this word a lot from my parents who have always told me how '*special*' I am because they *chose* me at the children's home. But

seeing it written here in black and white ink and seeing how different I am to the rest of the names on the tree completely floors me.

It's like I never knew that being adopted meant I was different. I thought it was just another nice story parents tell their children but holding this piece of paper with it written as bold as day sends me reeling.



I'm not like the other people on this tree and I have this weird feeling of my whole reality changing. I sense I don't belong in this family - and neither does my brother. But somehow we have both 'ended up' in this family by some random act of the universe. Suddenly, multiple alarm bells are ringing inside me all at once. I don't fully understand what this

really means because I'm only six years old, but am left with this sense that things in my life aren't how they appear.

I wrack by young brain and try to give meaning to this discovery. It's not only that the word adopted is there it's because it's the first thing that is written, even coming before my name so it appears like it's almost my first name. It's like a label that defines me and follows me everywhere.

Added to this I have two dates next to my name, the first one I would expect to be my date of birth but it's not correct and I have no idea at the time what this initial date relates to. It seems the same as Jesus' 'miraculous virgin birth' with me magically born to them on the thirtieth of December 1970. My actual birth date is in brackets after this date which I find incredibly confusing as it feels like there is some huge void between the fifteenth of September and thirtieth of December 1970.

- What happened between these two dates?
- Where was I?
- Is my birth date less important than this other date?
- What is this date?

It triggers a lot of confusion inside me. What should I do with this information?

I feel guilty that I've uncovered the family tree and discovered what feels like a secret. I decide not to tell anyone. Best keep it to myself. I don't even share it with my brother who I presume knew and kept it from me. If anything it should be our secret to share because he is adopted as well, but I feel like I have to keep quiet even to him about it.

It's too much for such a young me to take in. I carefully fold the document so it doesn't look like it's been touched and place it back in the cupboard where I found it. But from this day forward I know. I'm adopted. Which means I'm not the same as other children and these people aren't my real parents. It feels like some sort of charade, a devious trick has been played on me unknowingly and I'm just finding out about it. A seed of doubt has been sown deep down and my sense of childlike innocence feels like it's lost some sparkly magic.

In my subconscious mind an old voice stirs. It feels like it has something to say yet doesn't know what it is. It will remain a constant companion throughout my childhood and beyond. Life won't ever be the same again. My style is to keep things to myself so this is what I do. I file this experience safely away under the heading '*To Be Dealt With At A Future Date*'.

I turn the key and lock the internal drawer.

4

Outer Mongolia

"What's the most you've ever lost on a coin toss?"

Anton Chigurh: 'No Country for Old Men'



📍 04:30hr - 27th January 2002

Russian / Mongolian border

As the train worked its way slowly further east I gradually got to know all the westerners on the train - all eight of us out of about a thousand people that is - but my interest was more piqued by the primitive surroundings and faded elegance of this be-moth of the Russian railway mixed with the unrecognisable dangers lurking in the lousy Russian cuisine of the dining car, the seemingly endless tundra in all directions out of the window and the hardy Mongolian people who mostly populated the train. I was fascinated by them, from listening to their harsh-sounding language that was totally unfathomable to me and unlike anything I had ever heard before, to observing their amazing capacity for delicate finesse which was so at odds with their otherwise dominating, clumsy presence.

After a six-hour border wait, during which time the restaurant wasn't open for food, the toilets were out of bounds and there was no power for the lights, we finally crossed into Mongolia. I had dreamed of visiting this remote landscape ever since studying Geography as a young boy. Mostly because it was so far removed from anything I could imagine growing up in England and their steppes conjured up a wild '*end of the earth*' imagery which I really wanted to experience.

After a couple of days exploring the isolated Mongolian capital, Ulaanbataar, I spent a few nights sleeping with local herdsman in a ger (Mongolian tent) on the windswept steppe. It was exactly how I had

imagined and having been dropped off by jeep in the middle of nowhere I truly had the sense of being totally isolated. I took the opportunity to ride bareback out into the desolate landscape on one of their horses and having been used to always carrying a compass in the mountains had the sense of what it might feel like to be lost and days from help in all directions.

Of course, the reality was I was sleeping in the gers in relative safety but it still felt magical to be so far from anywhere in such a harsh environment. Daily life here has its challenges for the nomadic people and I soon realised just one of them. If you ever find yourself in the middle of winter in Mongolia, where the temperature gauge has already broken when it hit -28 degrees centigrade and you're leaving a ger at night to use the outside(!) toilet a short walk away - make damn sure you are really desperate!

When I returned to the trans-siberian train heading towards Beijing I was on my own, my original western companions having taken a different route onwards, so this time there was no escape as my new 'roomies' were all Mongolians and having spent a brief period experiencing their lives on the steppe presumed I knew them a little bit and could consider them friends. But I was about to find out the hard way what it really meant to drink and any notion of 'British drinking prowess' was vanquished (not that I can claim any prowess in this department at all).

Within a matter of minutes of meeting a canvas-style holdall was unceremoniously dumped on the table in front of me. Looking at the hulking size of my Mafia-esque roomies made me think I must be en-

route for some gangster training camp and my first somewhat uneasy thought eyeing the holdall was “*Drugs?*” ... closely followed by my second equally unnerving one - “*Guns ...?*”. No words were exchanged and Mongolian gangster number one placed a bear-like paw on the zip and opened the bag, extracting a bottle of Vodka. My first instinct was to relax, no guns or drugs, but it was closely followed by one of nervousness as four mugs were smacked down on the table in front of me. It was clear I wasn’t going to be given a choice.

As someone who enjoyed a drink I would normally have been more than happy to join in, but I was feeling somewhat intimidated by these ‘warriors’ who had me pinned in the corner of our/their confined cabin. No escape. And to my alarm, as the vodka was being poured, they didn’t seem to be adhering to the internationally accepted protocol I understood of using spirit measures because the mugs were filled right to the brim. I tried in vain to decline such a large measure but the withering stare I got in response was enough for me to keep my mouth firmly shut.

Whatever the Mongolian word for drink was was totally lost on me as we crashed our mugs together and drank. I took a small sip, which it turned out was apparently not good manners in Mongolia as I watched the other three knock their heads back and drain their mugs. Then they all turned and looked at me somewhat menacingly. Gulp. With seemingly no other choice I tried to force the rest of my vodka down. It tasted like neat rocket fuel (on checking the label later it rather scarily said 94% proof) and took me about four attempts to finish but I felt somewhat proud/relieved that I had managed it. Then in some poor demonstration

of personal pride and prowess at managing this feat proceeded to slam my mug down.

Without missing a heartbeat Mongolian gangster number two lent down and pulled out vodka bottle number two from the holdall. My heart sank. This was going to be a very long journey.

After polishing off bottles three and four which had subsequently appeared from the holdall between us we all passed out. As I came round about two hours later my head was throbbing and my mouth dry and rancid. I looked around the compartment and seeing my roommates all asleep relaxed somewhat. I had survived! I pulled myself upright and immediately felt sick.

In a blurry-eyed haze I tried to quietly make my way past the comatosed gangsters, swaying uncontrollably I was nearly at the door when one of them stirred in front of me and blocked my path. He looked at me curiously through heavy eyelids as if I was some foreign intruder and then muttered something in Mongolian which was enough to rouse the other two. And then something happened which I never saw coming.

One of them reach down to the hold-all and pulled out two more bottles of the deadly rocket fuel ... And my heart sank once more.

Check-mate.



30th January 2002

Trans-Siberian Railway (Day 8)

After eight days of pretty lousy, unidentifiable Russian cuisine, the same repetitive view from whichever portion of the train you used as an observation post and the stark reality of the ever-growing distance between me and home setting in, I started to find the stillness of mind to begin reflecting on more important matters. This trip had been so long in the planning - indeed since I was a young child I had dreamed of such an adventure - and now the largeness of it was beginning to dawn on me.

To most people's bemusement I had left behind all the perceived safety and security of my home life to embark on some sort of *'find yourself'* odyssey and as I watched the stunning scenery slide by, I remembered that this trip was two-fold. One was about travelling, seeing the world and giving myself the gift of freedom. The other was to hopefully trace my family roots, find my tribe and people, and most importantly answer questions about who I was.

I found myself musing about my entry into the world and subsequently being given away, all of which had happened without me having any say about such a monumental decision. Now, as I contemplated this whilst being in the middle of nowhere surrounded by relative strangers, I pondered these and other related thoughts:

- Who were my people?
- Where did I belong?
- Would I ever find peace for my restless soul.

This trip felt really symbolic to me, it was like a metaphor for the journey of my life to date as I found my way back to where I belonged and my people who I had been separated from at birth. I was aware of feeling a weird mix of emotions, on one hand quite lost in the world, separated from the people I was meant to have grown up with by thousands of uncharted miles, whilst on the other the patience I had silently endured for thirty years as strangers came and went in my life to finally now being brave enough to face the truth of who I was and trace the roots which had given birth to me.

Out of the window I got lost watching the icy wasteland of Mongolia and as I did so it conjured up a coldness deep inside my bones. I got a fleeting glimpse of the sterile hospital ward in which I had been born and pondered on how each different stage of my life-journey so far could be viewed like the stations on this train ride, with people coming and going but none were my direct family. Strangers who magically appeared and disappeared like the traders and markets we passed through at night or the Mongolian mafia who's every whim I had been at the mercy of. And these strangers were also similar to the other babies who had magically appeared and then disappeared from the children's home where I had been sent directly from the hospital.

I hoped that each step of this journey would help piece together the lost pieces of my jigsaw puzzle and one patient foot in front of the other was like each mesmerising rotation of the train wheels, slowly carrying me ever closer toward taking control of my life for the first time. I wanted to find my place on the planet, one where I would be free to make my

own choices, on my own terms and without any sense of feeling lesser than.

Most of my life I had spent being a people-pleaser, making decisions based on what other people wanted rather than tuning in to my own needs, something mainly borne from one of my chief fears as an adoptee - that if I actually voiced my needs I would be rejected. Again. But also out of a sense of staying 'off their radar' wherever I went to avoid being cast out once more into the adoption-abyss. The double-bind was this pleased nobody in this process but it wasn't anything I felt I had control over. You aren't living in truth - rather a manipulated version of it which serves nobody - least of all yourself.

My thoughts went back to the home I grew up in and there was also guilt tied up in this. My adoptive parents had taken me in when no-one else had wanted to. They had given me a loving home and upbringing so how could I search for my birth family when they had given me so much? Hadn't my childhood been filled with kindness and care which otherwise I wouldn't have had so I owed them everything I had and at the very least should therefore do everything in my power to keep these memories unchanged.

Who was I to take away from them the beautiful family and all the experiences we had created together.

5

Magical Pink Folder

*"A Man I Knew Used To Say That
Hope Was Like Your Car Keys:
Easy To Lose, But If You Dig Around,
It's Usually Close By."*

Superman: 'Justice League'

📍 September, 1979

Bromley, Hertfordshire, England

I grew up just north of London in one of the home counties, Hertfordshire. It was an idyllic and quintessentially British setting as I was surrounded by countryside and my 'back garden/playground' were the fields out the back of my house and the farm across the road. There were only eight houses and a couple of them even had tennis courts and swimming pools which I had free access to and regularly used so on the surface it appeared like I had the 'perfect life'.

My parents had moved out of London in 1968 to buy their dream house in the country, a small semi-detached gatehouse cottage at the top of a long driveway which led to my friend Anthony's rather grand house. In doing so though, they had to mortgage themselves up the hilt as my father's job as a bookbinder was never paid very well meaning there was never any spare money in the house. All of which meant we *appeared* to live a privileged life, but the reality was we didn't, we were merely surrounded by it and we were the 'poor neighbours'.

I always felt *inferior* to those families around me and when friends from my comprehensive school came to play at my house I felt distinctly uncomfortable because I knew that most of them lived in quite contrasting environments to mine. It also didn't help that my adoptive mother Shelagh was quite 'snooty' having grown up in Burma surrounded by servants so could be quite judgmental of anyone she deemed *not good enough*.

I felt embarrassed at school in my knitted or hand-me-down clothes compared to the other kid's trendy outfits and watched my neighbours disappearing on exotic holidays to the other side of the world whilst we struggled to even afford a local farm stay before the holidays eventually dried up when I was eleven. And when the other kids were debating about going on the annual school ski holiday - although something of a first world issue - I knew we couldn't afford it so never had any expectation for going on any school trips let alone even ask my parents.

I remember one birthday setting my heart on a BMX bike only to be gifted a second-hand grifter (don't get me wrong still a great bike!) but

even though I tried my best to turn it into a BMX I still looked stupid compared to my friends. Because of the lack of money in the house I knew not to ask for anything and so found part-time work from an early age to be able to buy things I wanted.

Despite this background I was still extremely grateful for everything I did have and only rarely felt like I missed out because, well – you can't miss what you don't have. Besides, I was a sensitive child and didn't like the thought that having given me everything they could I shouldn't be grateful to my parents. After all, I had the most important thing and that was a family who wanted me and you don't really need more than that.

My adoptive parents were sadly unable to have their own children naturally and so turned to adoption as their 'last resort'. My older brother John was adopted first and I *came along shortly after*, the classic 2½ year age gap between us that most parents aim for. For the most part I didn't have much to complain about and gave the impression that life was great and nothing bothered me because I wanted an easy life and hated *upsetting people* – especially my adoptive mother, Shelagh, who was firm, loving, kind and strict - all at the same time.

For no particular reason I was closer to Shelagh than my adoptive dad, Maurice, whilst my brother John was more his father's son. Shelagh looked after the house whilst my father travelled up to London to work which meant I naturally saw much more of her but I was always so excited to see my Dad when he got home late from work or the weekend when I wanted to spend as much time together as possible.

Church was the only event which we attended every Sunday morning

- without fail. I wasn't even allowed to play football for my local team because their matches clashed with it and I soon came to realise that the Church was something my parents absolutely loved. Considering they had first met at a church group I shouldn't have been massively surprised but even at such a young age I was aware that if my parents, especially my Mum, were happy then life was good. And if that meant enjoying church then so be it.

All of this didn't mean my life was really bad growing up, just that I knew my place and was wary of upsetting the applecart. I was though still aware of certain things which were jarring, even to me as a child, but my voice wasn't the loudest or most important which meant in my world I just had to suck it up. I should probably have been a bit suspicious though as one of my Mum's favourite saying was "*children should be seen and not heard*", which she imposed without fail. Literally. As a baby I was left at the bottom of the garden in my pram to cry it out and she would do bizarre things like insist I turned over the TV channel to what she wanted to watch even if she wasn't in the room. Despite all this I loved her because she was, after all, my mother and the only one I knew ... albeit one I was often scared of.

Once I reached school age I flew through my Primary and Middle Schools where I found schoolwork easy and even asked for extra homework because I was bored in the classroom, mostly due to everyone

else in my eyes being too slow at learning. But away from that I am already aware that internally things don't quite feel right. I don't know *what* exactly but deep down I know something is amiss. I struggle to connect with the other kids who seem to be able to effortlessly play together whilst I would feel quite lonely, spending a lot of school playtimes by myself observing them. It's the same with my football team where once I'm allowed to play for them (on a *Saturday* afternoon!) I struggle to relate to my teammates, feeling starkly at odds with them, like we just don't *get each other*. Even at such a young age I'm aware of my awkwardness and feel painfully isolated at times. I might be quite bright but emotionally it was hard being me.

I already had an outside part of me observing things, like another person sitting on my shoulder or inside my head who never seems to be quiet. They were almost permanently on the lookout for something or someone, which on one level could be mistaken for shyness, but there was a lot more going on behind the scenes than just that. My best friend James smashed his head accidentally into the playground wall one day and had to go the sick bay. I made up that I had also injured myself so I didn't have to be left alone as I perceived it.

I was picked on at school once, presumably for being shy or different, and weirdly seemed to enjoy baiting the other person, daring them to hit me and then perversely enjoyed the sensation of being hit. Maybe it was because I was already used to being bullied, maybe because I was shy *any* form of attention felt good to me, maybe I just needed to feel like someone was interested in me. I couldn't even begin to understand it at

the time of course and I kept incidents like this a secret when I got home because I didn't want my parents to worry about me.

Despite my thirst for knowledge, I had a serious case of *'teacher pleasing'* and I seemed to be especially drawn to making female teachers like me, even to the extent of fantasising about being in a relationship with some of them from as early as aged 8. But it wasn't just restricted to my teachers, it leaked out of the classroom into fantasizing about friends' mothers and even one of my mother's good friends. At the time of course it felt totally innocent because it was focused around my love of school work where my teachers were concerned but in later life coupled with this draw to other women it would feel like it had an unhealthy edge to it.

On top of this I was equally drawn to a certain type of female film character in films, Princess Leia from Star Wars and Marion Ravenwood from Raiders of the Lost Ark being the two main ones. The only common characteristic between them was their brunette hair but there was something about them which piqued my interest. Of course this could all have just been another young boy's crush, but the really weird part for me was at such a young age I even felt this odd need to choose between the two main female characters in Battlestar Galactica - Lieutenant Athena and Kara "Starbuck" Thrace. Why did this require some sort of decision to choose one of them and why did it consume me so much? I was too young to know then but later in life it would be apparent why this would have played on my mind so much.

As I continued growing up this tendency to do what people ask of

me to make them happy is increasingly apparent. Especially women. The most obvious is at home where I would describe myself as something of a ‘mummy’s boy’, doing anything to make her happy now as well as my teachers. Partly out of fear of her but also something deeper because despite being increasingly aware this is not an entirely healthy place to reside I felt unable to do anything about it. This aspect of people pleasing stands out in my childhood and I would subsequently learn can be a chief characteristic of adoptees.

Being two years older than me, my best friend James had already moved to the Middle School when I transitioned to this new school myself at the age of 9. I’d already felt distraught when he left because I struggled to have friends but equally painful was my other two best friends Sarah Patterson and Sarah Hampson didn’t come either. Starting a new school can be hard for anyone but I had a double-whammy because I had relied on these friendships so much and any parting felt like a rip in my soul. What made this even worse was one of them emigrated to Australia meaning I would never see her again. To most this would be a manageable situation, albeit it painful, but I felt utterly bereft, particularly because Sarah was going to the other side of the planet, to Australia. But knowing she was disappearing to the other side of the planet weirdly also triggered me into asking my mother Shelagh questions about my adoption.

She took me to one side and showed me what I came to refer to as my *‘Magical Pink Folder’*. It turned out this was my adoption folder which held all the medical notes, adoption agency letters, court orders and children’s home correspondence about my early life. It also

contained something even more incredible which fired my imagination and brought something - or more specifically someone – magically alive. In it were my natural mother’s details and also her actual handwriting, including her signature.

This took my breath away, touching something deep inside me. It was like making a physical connection to my other fantasy world as I held this piece of paper knowing *she* had clearly held it too. Knowing her hand had actually written on this piece of paper felt so incredibly surreal. This small thing brought her to life in a way I had never previously known.

The pink folder also contained my birth name, Nicholas James Griffin. My adoptive mother explained that they had kept James as a middle name for me but changed my given name. It was the first time I was hearing about being given another name at birth. It felt really strange. I had lived, been spoken to and had letters written about me as *Nicholas*.

Trying to take it in was weird and it would take years to fully register, but for now weird was as good as it got. Even though I was only six I somehow knew I couldn’t show any adverse reaction to Shelagh. I needed to show her *she* was still mother ‘*no. I*’. But something felt odd. It might sound obvious to most but for me seeing it written there so matter-of-factly, the name she, my birth mother, had given me at birth, deep down a part of me was rattled seeing this for the first time.

It’s a moment I would never forget. Not only seeing that I had lived with another name, more importantly this name was the one my natural mother had chosen for me. A voice stirred and I wondered if one day I would get the chance to ask her directly about it.

- Why had she given me a name knowing we would be separated?
- What did the name mean to her?
- What does a name mean to anyone anyway?
- Who was I – Nicholas or Richard?
- Was I still Nicholas to her?
- Did she even think about me?

I became fascinated with the contents of this folder and would reach for it whenever possible, losing myself in a fantasy world contained in the pages and letters; from the doctor's notes to correspondence with the children's home, details about my birth mother to personal thoughts about me. This was another me. A me I wanted to get to know.

My start in the world had been recorded in more detail than non-adoptees most likely had about their early life and it was priceless information which started to fill in some blanks for me. I tried not to make it too obvious what I was doing, choosing my moments to secretly take peaks in the folder and keeping my sneakiness quiet so as not to upset my adoptive parents. I was probably still trying to please but the line was blurry between being sensitive to someone else's needs or taking care of my own.

Whichever it was the contents of that folder opened my eyes to a new world. One of varied possibilities and a fantasy life on the other side of the world.

6

Chinese New Year

“The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem. Do you understand?”

Captain Jack Sparrow: ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’





1st February 2002

Mongolian / Chinese border

As we crossed the border from Mongolia into China I was immediately struck by the sheer volume of rubbish which lined the train tracks and countryside. I'd never seen such huge quantities of waste scattered like this and it was bizarre how it marked the border transition between Mongolia and China, literally to the signpost. One moment clean and natural the next toxic and messy. It got me thinking about the simple phrase '*Out of sight out of mind*' and how in this vast, empty expanse of land it was seemingly ok to dispose of waste where no-one would ever see it.

When I thought about it more in depth, it also held a double-edged meaning. One very personal to me. If you '*dump your rubbish*' on the other side of the planet and leave someone else to deal with the mess then it also conjured up issues related to my adoption because if you literally '*dump a baby*' on the other side of the planet then you don't have to a) deal with the fallout, b) even think about it or c) entertain the notion that you will ever see it again let alone have to face the consequences.

Out of sight out of mind.

Which got me thinking about how my birth mother would actually respond if I suddenly rocked up out of the blue on her doorstep some thirty-two years later like some rubbish the sea has washed up. Some things we would rather not see again and we would probably have a hard job accepting what happened in the intervening years after we 'disposed'

of our rubbish, only to find it returned uninvited. I hoped if I did have the courage to go through with everything she wouldn't see it like this, but I had to be prepared for that outcome too. I needed to see myself more like a message in a bottle which has worked its way around the world to be returned to its 'owner' rather than unwanted trash.

I tried to imagine how would I feel if this happened to me? If someone suddenly appeared on my doorstep claiming to be a child of mine. I hoped I would feel loving towards them and welcome them in, after the initial shock had worn off. I'd want to know about them and what their life had been like. What had happened to them during the intervening years. I'd be interested in their life and want to see which bits we had in common. Or maybe this was me projecting what I *hoped* my mother would feel if I did exactly that and knocked on her door.

The last leg of the Trans-Siberian railway took me to Beijing where I encountered a previously not considered issue - language. Well, that's not entirely true, I knew the language would be a problem so I had a pointing dictionary with me (utter genius I should add - a book of pictures rather than translated words where you can just point to what you want and bingo!) but what I hadn't appreciated was that all the signs were in Chinese and I had no hope of understanding any of them. Luckily I had with me a trusted Rough Guide to China, although it didn't prove to be that lucky as nearly every site I tried to find either wasn't where the book said it should be or it had moved. I guessed that was the rapid change in China for you.

After a few days in Beijing I said goodbye to the travellers I had been on the last section of the Trans-Siberian with (agreeing to meet up with a couple in Adelaide) before heading south for Chinese New Year where I hooked up with three other travellers with the same idea. Luckily one of them was Chinese so I could finally get translations for the menus and whilst at one of the food markets she introduced me to something I never thought I would see on a menu - cat!

As a dog-owner I thought there was no way I would indulge in eating dog but she assured me it was a delicacy and normal in this part of the world so I tried my first cat (*DISCLAIMER* I'd like to add now being a cat owner and lover that I feel guilty about indulging in the 'local cuisine'!) and yes - it tasted just like chicken! The thought of it was definitely worse than the actual eating but this was helped massively by the foul aroma which wafted from the raw market surrounding me and can only found in this part of the world.

 11th February 2002

Yangshuo, China

I had always wanted to visit Guilin since my adoptive mum had travelled there and it was just as she had described it, utterly breathtaking and totally out of this world. My travelling companions were great guides and we explored all the exquisite landscape had to offer, from trekking to boat trips to simply taking in the view. But the real surprise adventure was to be had in Yangshuo. Chinese New Year ... in China! I'd always

wondered what this would look like and it turned out it came with a *very* steep learning curve and probably needed a health and safety warning.

Picture a small, quaint Chinese village with wooden market shacks surrounding the main square which was all prepared with fireworks and a bonfire. OK, now picture this same scene when night falls and the shacks suddenly turn into a James Bond-Mafia-style bazaar for purchasing all manner of rockets and grenades and basically anything one could ever imagine you could set light to and explode and you're getting close. Not only that, these fireworks were packed to the hilt with explosives and could be deadly!

Having armed ourselves to the teeth with an assortment of explosive devices we set about having some fun letting them off and joining in with the celebrations. Pretty quickly we realised that there were NO restrictions in this village and anything went. People were firing rockets usually destined for the skies at anything from knee to head height along the ground, all in the confined space of the market square. Meanwhile we had discovered that the bangers were so powerful that you could even blow up a piece of concrete piping with them.

But what was scariest of all was the fireworks and rockets were heading in the direction of the main bonfire - which was when we realised it was actually a huge stack of even more fireworks! The age-old saying '*when in Rome*' has never felt more true and trusting the locals knew what they were doing we proceeded to pretty much ignore every safety warning you have ever heard and went '*Chinese-style*' for Bonfire night.



17th February 2002

Hanoi, Vietnam

Having survived Bonfire night, a few days later I found myself crossing the border into Vietnam and heading for the capital, Hanoi. The city was a melting pot of smells, sights and experiences – from chickens being killed on the street in front of your eyes to some of the most colourful and stunning spice markets I'd ever seen. Crossing the street involved you taking your life in your own hands because there were no crossing places and the traffic never stopped. I had been advised in this part of the world the system worked better than our stop-start traffic light system back home because the traffic would go around you which allowed it to flow continually, albeit slowly.

I decided to test this theory literally when I was faced with what looked like a ten-lane highway which showed no sign of stopping. I was never going to get across unless I put all my trust in their system, which also involved me placing all my trust in myself. And letting go. After counting to three I took a leap of faith. Placing my right foot into the road first and then closely following it with my left. I waited for the first impact. But there was none. I took two more strides before becoming aware that all the traffic was flowing around me, like a river flowing around a rock it's found in its path. It was an unbelievable feeling and so at odds with what my rational brain was telling me.

Halfway across the road, and surrounded in all directions, I decided to push my luck. I closed my eyes and put one foot in front of the other,

almost inviting myself to be hit. But once more nothing struck me - although a few tuk-tuks did brush lightly against me - and when I finally opened my eyes I took a moment to take in the scene; standing in the middle of this gridlocked road as all the vehicles slipped around me and flowed on to their final destinations.

There are times in life when you feel nothing can touch you and this was one of them. It gave me a sense that if I changed my way of looking at a situation and was open to listening to the advice of others there was always the potential for things to turn out well. I would never have done something as crazy as this back home but now I was away it felt like all the rules were different. If I was willing to let go of the rulebook and see what hand life dealt me, I wondered what might happen.

I decided it was time to message my mum back in the UK. It had been some time since we'd been in communication and I'd only sent her postcards since leaving. Plus, with all my thoughts focusing on the trip I was aware that the person who I still viewed as my mother was back home waiting for news on me. I knew she would be naturally anxious to know I was safe and well, but there was also the part of me feeling guilty that I hadn't told her about my plans to trace my birth mother on this trip. Maybe if I could harness some of my road-crossing bravery I could approach this secret differently.

I had made the decision to withhold my intentions to trace my birth mother based on not wanting to worry her unnecessarily. Even so, I was acutely aware that I was keeping it a secret from her. I could tell myself a good story but deep down I knew I was avoiding telling her the truth to

sidestep the fallout and hence the guilt which would accompany it.

All of this was churning around inside of me when I found an internet cafe to write to her. When I logged into my email I was surprised to see she had already written to me:



Tue 05/02/2002 08:22

Dear Richard

How about this Mum at the computer I'm with Dorothy. Thank you for your postcards took Lucy (*her dog*) to the Vet to have her nails cut weather is very bad at the moment strong winds and rain galore flooded at the bottom of Bromley Lane. We are all very well . John is coming for breakfast to-morrow morning. I'm so glad you are enjoying yourself . I'd like to be with you.

Lots of love Mum xxx

Written in classic 'parent style', it was still really good to hear from her. It was also quite surprising as she was completely computer illiterate to the best of my knowledge and I pondered what other things she could surprise me with. I had agreed to stay in touch either with phone calls (if possible), postcards or via email to her friend Dorothy and I could picture her trooping around to her house in the typically wet weather to write this email.

I contemplated what to say in light of taking a new approach, but I kept coming back to the same thinking. Tracing my birth mother was about me not her. I was eternally grateful for everything she had done for me in life but this was something I had to do alone. I needed to trust that that was more important and when the time was right she would hopefully understand.

I typed a brief response just so she had a reply which I followed up a few days later with a more detailed description of what I'd been up to:



Hoi An - Sat 23/02/2002 07:35

Well Hello there!

Have eventually found the sun! I've been chasing it for nearly 5 weeks now and it's obviously decided to give up and let me near it ... I reckon it's about 26 degrees and pretty awesome.

China was pretty interesting but very difficult to travel through ... combination of lack of speaking the language and understanding any symbols. People were OK and it's pretty strange to sit in a train station with a couple of thousand of the locals staring at you!

Managed to hook up with a couple of English guys and a Chinese girl in the South though in a place called Yangshuo (near Guilin) and Daphne was right it was definitely beautiful and worth the extra effort. I spent the Chinese New Year (Tet Festival) there and it was fantastic - the best and most unruly firework display I have ever witnessed. The place itself was awe inspiring, quite a pleasant change from the rest of China. People and

atmosphere were very relaxed and friendly and the food (mainly thanks to being with a Chinese national) was brilliant.

From Yangshuo I arrived in Hanoi having met an Irish guy and an Australian girl and stayed in the Old Quarter section. Quite an intriguing place with a real buzz to it - but the best bit was a 3 day trip out to Halong Bay. Awesome! Went through the bay on the first day for about 4hours looking at the caves and limestone formations which are amazing. Then spent the night on the boat moored in a small cove - quite brilliant and a shooting star to boot. Day 2 and we had our own private boat to tour around in and see some of the local floating fish farms and try the local rice wine - fermented with lizards!

From Hanoi I have now headed South and am currently in the Centre of Vietnam in a small but beautiful place called Hoi An. It's rating as potentially the best place of the trip so far and am probably going to spend quite a few days here relaxing as some of the traveling has been quite hectic.

Hoi An is quaint and quite French with a really relaxed and friendly feel. It really does feel like the Vietnam I've been looking for - the food is amazing, less tourists than most of the places I've seen and the surrounding countryside is breathtaking - I think you'd love it! People I've spoken to though have said I should head for Laos as soon as possible as it is still quite untouched and looks like Vietnam did 10 years ago so can't wait.

Anyway - must be off but hope you're well and it's not too cold back there (I've heard reports that the weather isn't up to much so I won't gloat about it here too much!).

Hope you're keeping well and would love to see some of these sights with you - maybe another year heh?

Take care and will send another email later this week ... hope you've received my first postcard by now, yes I've actually managed to send one for a change!

All my love, Richard XX



Much Hadham - Tue 1/03/2002 02:49

Dear Richard

As promised, here I am again - Dorothy is helping me to use the computer.

Much Hadham is very soggy at the moment - torrential rain for three days. I bet your weather is heaps better.

Dorothy and I went to see The Green Tye Players on Saturday - a type of Musical Hall - a great show with loads of laughs.

Received card from NCO requesting your immediate attention just as I was about to phone them again re confirmation of e-mail. I phoned them straightaway and told them, as I told them on the phone last week, that you would be away until late June. I asked what it was all about and after confirming that I was your Mother, they said there was an amount owing to them. To avoid any further bother, I sent them a cheque for £172. 90 - hope this was in order.

Your parcel arrived safely, beautifully packed, containing all your warm gear and a lovely present from you - thank you so much Richard for the beautiful jade elephant and he has joined my collection and greatly admired.

Thank you for the invitation - you know I would love to join you in your travels - just keep Burma for next year.

John is temporarily in a new department at work and is enjoying it. He is a lot happier these days - no lady yet.

So glad you are enjoying your travels keep well.

All my love and missing you-take care.

Mum.

My mum had always loved travelling and we had planned on returning to where she was born in Burma for a trip of a lifetime together. She also really loved South East Asia and had spent three months travelling there with her dear friend Daphne and I had always wanted to travel to this part of the world having grown up hearing her stories about it. Daphne had loved Guilin in China and I was happy to let mum know how right she was about it.

I wrote to her about my travels knowing she would enjoy this aspect but still kept back mentioning anything about my thoughts around a certain '*other mother*'. Aside from anything, whilst I still wasn't 100% sure I would actually go through with tracing my birth mother it felt best to refrain from giving her undue anxiety. It felt really good though to stay in touch with her as we had always been close to one another and it was good to hear that the weather back home was being as predictable as ever.

What I found interesting in her email was the sentence '*after confirming that I was your Mother*' ... because on one level this was true but in light of how I was thinking about New Zealand it gave me pause for thought on what was becoming a *massive* topic. Who did I actually perceive as my mother, the one who had brought me up and taken care of

me all my life or the one who had given birth to me but also left me at the hospital as a baby? Or was it both? I still didn't have the awareness to know the answer for myself, but it raised the never-ending 'Nature v Nurture' debate regarding adoption.

The only answer I reached was the simple truth. I had two mothers; one who gave birth to me and was therefore my 'natural' mother and another mother who raised and 'nurtured' me. What had been stressing me was the *old* issue which – when I would briefly allow myself to go there - at times had haunted me as a child. The notion that somehow I might need to choose between them, which I thought was partly why I had kept my search for my birth mother Lydia a secret from my adoptive mother Shelagh from the outset.

But how could I even begin to make a choice? They both had important roles in my life. Would they want to meet each other? Could they exist together?

Lots of questions I once more didn't have any answers to.

7

Two Mothers

“What right do you have to take a baby and turn

His life into some kind of mockery?”

The Truman Show

 Bromley, Hertfordshire, 1981

I wasn't like some children I hear about who are adopted, wishing they had different parents to their adoptive ones. This was never a thought pattern even when they were really upset with me, like when I was caught shoplifting and they did the silent treatment but still I wasn't thinking 'You're not my real parents' as I have often heard is the case (saying this about my adoptive brother was a different case though!). I'm happy I never used this particular tactic as a weapon against them verbally because I am sure they also had their own pain to deal around not being able to bear their own children. People pleasing all the way – go me.

Even as a child, I was quite sensitive to this type of topic and aware enough to know how unjustified it would be, albeit coming most likely from an unhealthy place in me of wanting them to be happy and putting their needs first. I do not know *how*, or even *if*, they had worked through

this infertility issue and later in life I would come to see how crucial it is that parents should face and deal with this issue prior to adopting a child so as to avoid using the adoptee to fill the void it creates in them.

As a result of seeing the contents of my pink folder I would spend long periods drifting off into a fantasy world imagining what my birth mum might look like, what her life could be like and what my life would have been like if we had stayed together. One of the things which made the fantasy even more amazing was her being from New Zealand. My adopted family never went abroad whilst I was growing up (apart from how expensive it was, my Dad was scared of flying) so this mysterious land on the other side of the planet conjured up vivid and magical images for me. It became the fairytale backdrop I pictured all these wild adventures set against; a land of fiery volcanoes and breathtaking fjords, windswept beaches and sweeping, majestic mountains.

Whenever I pictured these volcanoes and the rugged, wild landscapes it also brought to mind another of my favourite books, Lord of the Rings. The epic journey they undertook captured my imagination at a young age and I had pictured myself doing something similar as an adult. Partly a childish fantasy on one hand, but maybe also a deeper yearning to find something or someone and the landscape was a backdrop for a land I knew in my heart. Little did I know that Peter Jackson would one day use New Zealand as the location for his Lord of the Rings films and it was exactly how I had pictured it in my imagination.

In a bittersweet way my friend Sarah emigrating to Australia was a great prompt for me to dig around my adoption, not knowing at such a

young age that the faraway land she had gone to was ironically right next to where my natural parents had come from. I had no clue if they still lived there or were even alive but even so, my quest had now tentatively begun at the tender age of nine. From then on I would repeatedly read Lord of the Rings, imagining myself on a similarly epic journey to that of Frodo Baggins but where his mission was to destroy a powerful ring which could change the course of the world, mine was to find my birth parents and change the course of my whole world.

As well as having her signature and handwriting, I also now had a paragraph about her which became one of the most important passages I'd ever read. It was contained in a letter from the adoption agency to my adoptive parents dated 17.12.1970 and read:

Re: Nicholas James Griffin

His mother comes from New Zealand, she is twenty-two and a half, works as a Secretary. She went to Boarding School where she did well and also qualified in the Chamber of Commerce Commercial Course. She is five feet seven inches, medium build, med-brown hair and green/blue eyes. She is interested in sport of all kinds especially badminton and tennis. She likes dress-making, knitting, music and reading. She is very concerned that her child should have the security of a good house with two parents. Both her parents are living in New Zealand; her father is a Sheep Farmer, and she has two sisters older than her and both are married.

In my mind this conjured up a truly enigmatic picture of an exotic, alternative life on the other side of the world and brought her even more to life in this fantasy. These few details I would cherish, carrying with me at all times being the only concrete things about her I possessed. The fact I now knew the colour of her hair and eyes meant a huge amount to me because I'd endured too many conversations along the lines of "*So where do you get your eyes from?*" and "*Who in the family has your nose?*", until eventually I had learned to switch off as I couldn't actually answer them.

As a child, little things like this would build up and grate with me because I had no idea where my looks or eye colour come from and try as I might, looking around my family I was going to be hard pushed to find an answer. It was even harder for me because my adoptive mum had dark, swarthy skin being part Burmese so frankly I stood no chance. But to admit this means acknowledging you're adopted which also means you are different from the other kids and growing up ALL any child wants to do is fit in so best not to mention the 'A' word heh?

Discovering my birth mother's love of sport helped me understand where my similar love came from as my adoptive parents weren't sporty at all. My adoptive brother wasn't sporty either so I would spend hours alone on a tennis court hitting balls to an invisible opponent and it was sport which ultimately saved me from not only social anonymity in school due to my shyness but in subsequent years it would also save me from being bullied. It's a funny thing growing up in school, because I was quite intelligent and loved schoolwork I felt like I was socially shunned for

being a boffin, but suddenly when the 'sporty' crowd discovered I could play football and invited me to play for their local team I felt like I belonged somewhere.

When I was in my Senior School this pattern continued, the school hard case would regularly bully me until one day my '*solution-finding-brain*' came up with the idea of doing his homework for him. Initially this helped but it was when he discovered I was also pretty good at rugby that he and the 'corridor thugs', who normally would kick, shove and punch people, would actually stand back and let me walk down the corridors freely. So in a weird way sport became my saviour - thanks birth mum.

But it had come at a cost. It had created a rift inside me because once I had somewhere to 'belong' I turned my back on part of my identity and created a mask to fit in with the sports crowd. I had shut down an important part of me which wasn't '*suitable*', such was the desperation to belong. Despite enjoying playing sport I had always viewed the sports crowd with a hint of disdain for excluding geeky people like me, whilst simultaneously something close to envy for the effortless way they seemingly floated through school untroubled and even enjoyed the attention from girls, something which was way out of my comfort zone.

Most of the sporty crowd were in lower academic sets than me and my strong desire to *belong* meant I even tried to get put down from the top set so I could hang out with them, shunning my close friends in favour of my 'new' friends. I applied my '*think outside the box*' mind to this issue and managed to convince my teachers I was struggling with the schoolwork (I wasn't!) and could they move me into a lower set. They

must have suspected something though because they never moved me, instead entering me for both sets of exams, ‘O’ Levels and the lesser GCSEs that the lower sets took, which ironically meant I ended up having to do more work as I had two lots of exams to revise for.

I have no idea what my parents made of this – but they had enough to deal with from me at that age as I went steadily off the rails over a two-year period, including being caught shoplifting, smoking, drinking at the local pub and bunking off school. It was partly linked to me trying to fit in with the ‘*non-geeky*’ crowd and on reflection it was most likely me rejecting everything my parents stood for in classic teenage rebellion.

But being adopted means you have two sets of parents so it raises the challenging question of ‘*Which set of parents was I actually rebelling against?*’. Or was I simply off the rails *because* I was adopted. As I once more stared down at the sheet of paper in my hands, another thing struck me - I knew my birth mother's name. Lydia Griffin. This fact, coupled with all the other information I had on her, meant she was suddenly a very real person. She had a name. She existed. And for this reason, along with the other documents which had her handwriting on, I pretty much ignored the paragraph on my father - even skipping the rather massive fact that he too was adopted (something which would massively come back and haunt me) – because without a name I couldn’t bring him to life in the same way as my birth mother and so any fantasies I had of New Zealand only involved my mother.

I knew some of my birth parents’ story through the pages in the folder, like they had met on the boat travelling over from New Zealand

and they both enjoyed sport and had been to boarding school. There was a farming background they shared as well but this was pretty much it, so I pieced together other bits of information too; like I was born in London and made some presumptions such as them both having lived and partied in London at some point and maybe then travelled around the country a bit too. I liked the idea of them having fun and being young and partying, not really thinking that they would be much older now. I tended to keep the picture in my head of them at a certain age in much the same way I've heard other adoptees do, the age you last saw them at when you were born, which for me meant my mum was still twenty-two and my dad twenty-three.

It also reminded me of the story my adoptive mother used to tell me. At the tender age of eleven she had made a long boat trip from her home in Burma during World War II along with her sister and mother. Under the cover of darkness they had fled from her alcoholic father with a police escort aiding them. They were rushed to the dock at dawn and placed on a boat heading across the ocean for a new life in England. During the six-week voyage they were constantly under the threat of being attacked even though they were a civilian ship. She witnessed many gruesome sights including bodies floating in the sea that the captain said they couldn't rescue because they were most likely decoys placed by German U-boats to get ships to stop and then they would torpedo them. This type of memory used to haunt her into her later years, but I found it interesting that she focused on the voyage more than the experiences at the hands of her abusive father.

She had told me this story many times and it had sparked a sense of travel in me from an early age, but now it resonated with me in a new way seeing that my own parents had similarly travelled across the ocean by boat seeking a new life. There were also some interesting mirrors I noticed between my natural and birth family; my adoptive father also came from a farming background whilst my adoptive mother had survived this long boat trip when escaping Burma. It brought into focus once more the Nature vs Nurture debate as both stories involved my mothers travelling across the seas – one to escape, and the other? Was she escaping something too? And if so - what? They seemed to be poetically linked. It also dawned on me that my birth parents might even still living in the UK. Maybe they never left? Were they even still alive?

These were the type of questions which bugged. I always wanted to presume the best and that they were alive and well. But from my experience of being adopted, something tends to hold you back from opening that can of worms and actively looking into your adoption and searching. All the “What Ifs” stop you:

- What If they are dead?
- then you’ll never get your answers.
- What If they are alive but don't’ want to know you?
- even worse than if they’re dead.
- What If my adoptive parents don't support me searching?
- then they'll abandon you too

- What If I get my hopes up and then can't trace them and it's all a total waste of time?
 - best not start that process 'just in case'.

This is one of the massive conundrums which from my experience baffles those who aren't adopted or have any direct experience of adoption. Everything takes on a different timescale, where decisions on anything tend to be made slowly and with precaution. Like the decision to search for lost parents, it opens the possibility of so much emotional pain and trauma that maybe it's best to leave it well alone. I feel every child deserves to know the truth of their existence though, yet adoptees are rarely given the bare bones for the border to their jigsaw let alone the meat to flesh out the rest of the picture.

No matter what happened to cause you to be adopted, your background and roots are a fundamental part of the fabric of you and explain so much about your life – from healthy/unhealthy behaviour patterns to what or who you look like, cultural traditions from your family of origin to who you get your love of certain hobbies from.

The old adage *'The Truth Will Set You Free'* is perhaps never more appropriate than when dealing with adoption because without knowing the whole picture how can you truly know who you are?

8

Temples of the Mind

“So forget any ideas you've got about lost cities, exotic travel, and digging up the world. We do not follow maps to buried treasure, and "X" never, ever marks the spot”

Indiana Jones: ‘The Last Crusade’



 15th March 2002

Siem Reap, Cambodia

For the next few weeks I enjoyed the best of what South East Asia had to offer. Its blend of mouth-watering smells and delicious foods, jaw-dropping scenery and stunning temples combined to bring a reflective stillness to match that of my amazing surroundings.

This slow pace of life felt like the perfect prescription from your doctor, not always possible in the hectic modern world we normally rush around in and I was starting to wonder if perhaps that in itself was the problem. This part of the world I thought can teach a thing or two about the immense power of meditation and stillness and having never really experienced it before I embraced it fully.

I couldn't leave the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, without a sobering visit to the infamous Killing Fields. There are several of these sites located around the country which serve as a powerful reminder of the infamous Khmer Rouge regime who systematically executed anyone suspected of connections with the former government. It's believed as many as two million people were killed as part of this crackdown and a stupa (sacred monument) I visited containing hundreds of human skulls neatly stacked on top of each other paid homage to these atrocities. Standing in silence I bowed my head to honour the men, women and children who had been murdered and I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the deathly silence which pervaded the fields. You could

almost smell the stillness and it was so hard to comprehend what man had been capable of doing to his fellow humans.

The majestic temples of Angkor Wat provided the perfect backdrop for me to hit the pause button, although I couldn't help but ponder how this place of peace and reverence co-existed within a country which has such a bloody recent history. Rising at 0400hrs for sunrise when the temperature wasn't blisteringly hot, I headed off on my scooter for the tranquility they offered for a few bearable hours. Whilst sitting in a reverent silence amongst the ancient ruins, I felt like I was an integral part of the very fabric of everything in life, deeply connected to nature. It was like the temples themselves gave off this presence of serenity and I gazed in wonder at them, noticing how they were entwined within the embrace of age-defying rocks and the trees they naturally co-existed with.

It felt reflective of the same way all human lives are so entwined and interconnected beneath the surface and gave me a quiet place to focus on my own inner journey. I was starting to feel drawn towards New Zealand and it came to me how important my own family lineage was. How, like the trees, I also couldn't escape the ancestral ties which went beyond my birth mother and connected me with a long line via the tributary arteries.

Questions seemingly as ancient as the surrounding temples infiltrated my awareness and enveloped me like the early morning heat haze:

- Who I was?
- Where did I come from?
- What drove me in life?

- What part was nature and what part nurture?

With these questions came a deep inner knowing that my life would never be the same again if I did trace them. But would tracing them answer the questions or merely add fuel to an already burning fire that I could never put out. I'd lived my life to date and survived, on the whole unscathed, without knowing the answers. This was the *great* story I told myself. I'd always told myself. To survive. But a voice deep inside me I recognized from childhood wasn't content to walk away. He needed answers.

On this trip whenever I had the opportunity to stop and '*smell the roses*' I became aware of what was truly important in my life, and this was one of those moments. There was a drive deep within me which had always been there but hadn't been given the chance to voice himself. What was important to him. To me. And as I returned to the backpackers perched on the back of my moped, even though it was only a couple of miles, those miles seemed endless. With the wind in my face I opened my mouth and drank in what tasted like freedom. Each gulp I took was another mile. Each mile was bringing me closer to finding the missing pieces of my puzzle.

Later that day when it was cool enough, I returned to take in one of the jaw-dropping sunsets Angkor was renowned for. I climbed the steps to one of the temple plateaus and joined a swelling number of people gathering with the same idea. As I looked around I was awed by the majestic views that stretched out endlessly and I felt connected to

something bigger. I couldn't put my finger on it but something had shifted in me. I felt different about life. I felt positive about myself and whatever happened next.

I'm wasn't a huge believer in coincidences but over the years I have become increasingly aware how life has been trying to show me something with sublime synchronicity – even if I wasn't directly aware what it was at the time. As I sat quietly by myself taking in the moment, sensing the magic of Angkor's temples and allowing it to touch me so deeply that I didn't want it to ever end, unbeknownst to me there was someone else at the very same spot enjoying the same sunset. Someone I would meet later in my trip who would have more of an impact on my life than I could ever have imagined.



28th March 2002

Don Det, Cambodia / Laos 'border'

I had heard a rumour that someone had recently spent five weeks in this no-man's land but despite my concern it still appealed to the adventurer in me whilst also amusing me that in our modern world such an area could still exist! Much to my surprise, when I came to leave Cambodia I found myself feeling pretty nervous after paying the Cambodian guards an extra \$1 (because they were on 'overtime') before facing the walk through no-man's land.

Of course, this is South East Asia, so it was either going to be rigidly guarded with patrolmen prickling with guns or else so laid back no-one

would be guarding it. As it turned out the border post on the Cambodian side itself was unmanned but better still the ‘building’ was a small shack with a hammock in it. Because it was empty it would have been rude not to leave Cambodia without a somewhat amusing photo that summed up this bizarre part of the world.

I was apprehensive about being at the mercy of the Laos officials though, whilst also picturing what a few weeks would be like in this rather isolated part of the world. The strange thing was I could view the Laos side literally 50 metres away, but that felt like such a long distance to walk and wade through the river. I was also travelling by myself which added to a sense of *‘being totally on your own’*, something which had started to play on my mind the closer I was getting to New Zealand.

The sense of elation I had experienced that evening at Angkor suddenly seemed a lifetime ago as this sense of being on my own with my journey was reminding me of the amount of my childhood I had felt similarly lonely. What lay before me seemed like such a mirror of my inner world of apprehension, all of which was mixed with a fairly large dose of fear of the unknown.

The opposite really should have been true, because if I was brave enough to go through with it and face the truth, I would finally feel complete with the missing pieces of my life, but that also brought a dread-filled chill which ran up the back of my spine. Knowing the truth comes at a cost and I was vaguely aware it wasn’t just me this would affect, another family and its extended family would also be dragged into my personal journey of self-discovery as well as my adoptive family at home.

Jeez, was I just being selfish? Maybe it would be best to forget it all.

One step at a time, one mile at a time. That's what I told myself is the best approach. Let events unfold with each piece of the puzzle, the border was already in place and the rest needs time to fill in, piece by piece until you see the whole picture reveal itself before your eyes - and it probably won't be how you envisage anyway. So, I placed one foot in front of the other and walked and waded slowly across this quite bonkers border crossing, and with each step I was moving away from where I had been toward something new and unexpected. Life is always guiding you if you are open to the information it's constantly offering (and also able to interpret it!) and allow yourself to be surprised with what is on the other side of the void.

And on this occasion what was? That was the strange thing – nothing. Well, nothing to fear. I stepped onto Laos soil expecting to be met by some gun-toting guards or at least custom officials with threatening looks on their faces as this bedraggled tourist waded his way into their country, but all that greeted me was a couple of sleepy looking guards who asked for \$5 plus an extra \$5 because they were also on overtime before they sent me on my way. Apparently I could have spent the night in no-man's land to avoid the \$5, but I presumed that was how the traveller had ended up spending 5 weeks here. I decided it was worth the extra \$5.

It was all so bizarre that I actually started laughing with the comedy of my previous apprehension and fear. It also meant that some part of me relaxed about upcoming events and what I would have to face in New Zealand if I went ahead with my search. Mmmm ... the *if* was definitely

starting to feel more and more like a *when* and if this border crossing was anything to go by then it should be no problem.

I spent five weeks in this divine country, soaking up the gorgeous scenery and all the hidden gems it had to offer; from exploring its caves with a small, handheld car-battery-powered basic light, to watching locals catch fish using electric prods where they literally electrocuted the fish in a pond and collected the bodies. Not quite the same as the providers for your local supermarket, or maybe it is you just don't know? One of the more bizarre incidents also involved the aforementioned prods. As I arrived in a remote village and descended from the bus, the police held back the crowds of locals wanting my western money with these same cattle prods. It was more than slightly disturbing and I felt somewhat guilty about being a 'foreigner with money' and my relatively privileged upbringing that on the surface created such a division.

I wondered how it would feel if I was the one being held back by a cattle prod and treated like an animal. Although nothing compared to this, I did have a vague sense of what it felt like as I had grown up in a family with very little money and we had been surrounded by other families with clearly lots of money. But I had never felt like there was a division between myself and my neighbours. Maybe that was the innocence of being a child where you don't see difference and it's only the adults who do. Or more simply maybe it was because my neighbours shared what they had – be it allowing me to play tennis on their court or swim in their pool. Whatever the reason there was no escaping the simple fact that I was a privileged western tourist who could afford to travel and only by

luck was not the one being prodded by the police.

Laos in 2002 was basically like Thailand before it became a tourist hotspot and I felt totally at home. The pace of life was slow, electricity had not reached everywhere yet and you could get away from the cities easily. Trekking was still relatively new which was good news (although I did feel marginally guilty that the more people like me who travelled the more developed and like Thailand this stunning country would become) and basic which meant you really had to engage with the natural environment which was something I loved.

Getting around though could be pretty challenging to say the least and it's certainly not for the faint-hearted. For one the roads are rubbish and the transport options aren't great. If you want to explore the country, more than likely you'll be either sharing a decrepit old bus with the locals and all their livestock or like my most extreme journey in the back of a lorry. Which doesn't sound too bad on paper, but for one journey of mine it was an old army lorry which had hard wooden seats down the sides for people to sit on whilst the middle was piled high with bags of rice. Chickens and assorted animals were welcome too as us travellers perched alongside the locals making the journey.

These lorries were over-filled with people which, as I'd arrived late for this particular journey, meant for the duration of the eleven-hour trip I was hanging off the back of the lorry, my feet resting outside on the rear bumper and my hands were gripping the bar overhead. On the odd occasion I could sit it was on the top of the three-inch wide metal tailgate, but as the roads were so bumpy it wasn't to be recommended for very

long. By the time we arrived at my destination of Vientiane I felt like I'd had the longest workout in the gym ever with every limb feeling numb.

I definitely needed a rest after such a bone-crunching journey and once ensconced in a hammock at a backpackers' hostel I found my resting mind wander back home. I had had such an amazing time travelling through Vietnam, Cambodia and now Laos, all of which had given me a mental breather and not much time for reflection or forward thinking, but now I was spending a few days in the Laos capital, Vientiane, I had the space to gather my thoughts and peek gingerly into the future. First things first though, I felt the need to message my mum and let her know I was at least still alive.



Vientiane - Wed 03/04/2002 19:48 (UK time)

Good Morning / Afternoon / Evening!

It's currently 10am and I'm residing in a rather sunny Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Thought I'd drop you a line to let you know I'm safe and well and see how you are! Also can't believe I've been away for about nearly 3 months already.

Cambodia was beautiful and the Temples of Angkor were awesome. The boat ride from Phnom Penh up to the temples was interesting to say the least. I took the small "fast boat" up 350km of the river and what a sight! They completely over filled the boat so that even the roof was completely full - and they then even managed to ground the boat on a sandbank! The boat was actually quite fast

with us but when we arrived and the boat stopped what temperatures - it was about 40 degrees and stank of fish!

On the first day of arriving in Siem Reap we watched the sun go down, not to the tune of humming birds or crickets but rather a thousand Japanese tourist cameras snapping away. Still the view looked like it could have been Africa. Although everybody talks about Angkor Wat as the main attraction I think a smaller temple called Ta Prohm was the most impressive - it was half hidden in the jungle with the trees growing through the buildings - you'll love the pictures.

Although I really wanted to go trekking on the north east of Cambodia it's still not entirely safe and as my travelling companions weren't going that way we all headed to the Laos border together.

Upon arrival at the Cambodian "immigration" we had to pay a further \$1 because the guards were on "overtime". The actual building was a bit of a sight so to get my money's worth I had my picture taken in their hammock!

From the border we headed for a remote location called the Four Thousand Islands where we spent 3 days relaxing in straw huts. Very picturesque and generators provided minimal electricity for a couple of hours in the evening.

Went out for a curry last night which was amazing - we had fish, prawn and chicken curries all in for \$3 - my faith in SE Asian food is safely restored!

It's still about 30 degrees here so how does that compare to home? Any news? It's quite difficult to keep up with home news here

but gather that the Queen Mother died the other day which I take it was a very sad day for the whole nation?

I'm probably going to be away from a computer for about the next 3 weeks so not to worry if you don't hear from me - I'll break "radio silence" when I get back to civilisation.

Hope all is well and missing family and friends - look forward to hearing from you.

All my love

Richard, XXX

Thoughts of my adoptive mum seemed particularly strong in this part of the world and I knew she would appreciate some of the adventures I was having, knowing South East Asia like she did having grown up *in the tropics* as she referred to Burma and India. But I couldn't escape this underlying sense of guilt whenever I messaged her which seemed to be increasing with each message. Each email I sent seemed to be missing a crucial detail. Was I trying to cover my tracks and ease my guilt with platitudes and pleasantries?

The longer I was away the more often thoughts of my birth mother and tracing her would bubble to the surface, but I felt increasingly alone on this because I didn't have anyone else I could share them with or how I was feeling, especially not Shelagh. Yet surely of all people shouldn't she be the one who a) I should find easiest to talk to about it and b) didn't I owe it to her for all she had done in bringing me up?

This kind of thinking left me in something of a conundrum. I wished with all my heart that I could talk with her about it all because if not I knew I was keeping this huge secret to myself. But whenever I thought about it I felt like I was betraying her trust somehow, even though we had discussed this possibility years previously. Yet here I was heading for New Zealand for the first time in my life so wasn't it blindingly obvious what might happen? Surely she was thinking it and I was naïve to think she wasn't.

I was actually quite surprised she didn't mention it to me, although I guessed that would require her admitting it as a reality, and if I confessed then she might find the truth too painful. But why was I protecting her from the truth? Was it my childhood fear rearing its ugly head once more, that of having to make the ultimate choice if I found my birth mother? Was it blind loyalty to my adoptive parents that was preventing me from acknowledging it to myself even let alone her?

Loyalty. Such a powerful word. Especially to me as an adoptee.

- Who was I being loyal to?
- Myself?
- My adoptive parents?
- My birth mother?

My initial sense was loyalty to myself as this was after all my journey and I needed to give myself permission without seeking it from any outside authority who could influence my decision. If Shelagh knew then

whatever she said could affect the choices I would make and I needed those choices to be solely mine. I had spent too many years of my life having decisions influenced or decided by others and this wasn't the time for my 'saving others' pattern to emerge. But like an itch you can't scratch I was acutely aware of my saving people lurking in the shadows of my mind – specifically my adoptive mother.

I had heard her story of escaping Burma on numerous occasions yet something about it bothered me. More accurately, not the story itself but how I had received it, how I had decided I needed to save her. It wasn't like she had explicitly asked me to fill this role, but on some level I felt like she needed me to rescue her from her painful past. It dawned on me that she hadn't actually resolved it and instead was stuck in her own trauma. Through reliving it's telling she was somehow trauma bonding with me and being the dutiful *son* I obliged.

But somehow this all felt the wrong way round.

- I felt used.
- Almost *abused*.
- Surely if anyone needed to be saved surely it was me?

For now I pushed these intrusive thoughts aside whilst simultaneously noticing how pervasive they were. This was the one time it had to be about me, putting my needs first ahead of what other people wanted from me or for me. It sounded selfish in my head because it wasn't something I was accustomed to and it was hard for me to discern what were my choices against such a strong pattern of behaviour. If I collapsed into loyalty to my adoptive parents then I might never take the necessary

steps. Maybe there was a shift deep inside me where my loyalties were in fact moving more towards my biological family. And therefore, even to myself ...

9

M*A*S*H 'N' MASKS

*"The mask is not for you, it's to protect
the people you care about."*

Batman: 'The Dark Knight Rises'



 12th April 2002

Luang Prabang, Laos

I arrived in Luang Prabang at nearly midnight with two travelling companions and the usual problem of trying to find accommodation, but one of the amazing things about South East Asia is how it never seems to sleep. Even arriving at such a late hour, you could always find somewhere to sleep which proved to be the case once more.

After being woken as usual by the dawn cockerel crowing and the blended sounds of the workday already beginning for the locals, we headed into town to realise we had timed our visit to Luang Prabang perfectly as it coincided with their water festival. As far as we could tell this involved the local monks parading through town whilst everyone was allowed to coat them in water or flour. Something which for a traveller was like 'playtime' at school on a grand scale and after purchasing our own water pistols and flour we threw ourselves into the celebrations with total abandon. I'm not sure if there is anywhere else in the world where shooting a monk with a water pistol is actively encouraged but it certainly demonstrated a new way of looking at what would normally be seen as a very serious life.

Adoption is a serious matter and there are numerous serious aspects which relate to it. Or perhaps they aren't as serious as they appear and I needed to relax and see the lighter side. Whichever way round it was, being here gave me the opportunity to have some fun and not let the looming matters rule me. Even so I still noticed I found it hard to

completely let go. I seemed to have a cut-off point which appeared to be way earlier than for other people, yet I could still maintain a pretty impressive mask behind which I could hide a lot of inner angst.

All the way through school I had kept my adoption a secret from everyone. I didn't want people to know something about me or that I was different from them whilst all the time desperately wanting to fit in. There was a part of me which I felt I needed to keep just for myself, I didn't know why just that it felt important. Knowing I had a 'secret part' others didn't know about made me feel good. I knew something they didn't, which even now as I thought it made me realise how ridiculous it sounded.

It had been the same when I went on to university and work where this time I wore a protective mask, using the 'party me' who I could hide behind and hope everyone would like once I had been drinking. I had always been shy and came to rely on drinking to come out of my shell, but I had also grown to hate the me who came out when drunk. For years I had been willing to 'play the game' though and eventually learned to only get drunk up to a certain point, knowing that beyond this point I wouldn't be able to control myself. It was weird that I had once more become aware of a mask I wore, especially the 'fun' me one which I prided myself on and others appeared to like.

I had always felt painfully shy ... or had I? It struck me that whilst being a sensitive child I hadn't always been so shy. I remembered though going through a few years of being so shy that I became almost mute. A memory crossed my mind of being at a family reunion and a girl I really liked being there. One minute I was talking freely to her the next I was

outside sitting by myself because I had gone totally blank and not known what to say. This could of course have been a simple case of childhood nerves in front of a girl I fancied, but something about it bothered me. Another memory came of being at the dinner table with my family and literally not being able to speak. It had felt like my tongue had literally been removed and I'd lost the ability to speak. My mind had still been whirring but my voice had stopped working.

Both memories had the same feeling associated with them. The feeling that I wanted to be invisible. No-one was interested in what I had to say so I might as well disappear. They wouldn't notice. I racked my brain trying to remember when this period in my childhood had started and suddenly it hit me. It had been right after I had found the family tree and seen the word adopted so clearly written against my name. The day my world had changed.

The next few weeks were spent exploring some of the remoter parts of Laos including Muang Ngoi which was only reachable by a long journey by boat. I felt totally isolated being so far from civilisation and it felt good. It was almost impossible to compare where I was with anything I had ever seen before in my life as it resembled a David Attenborough documentary deep in the heart of a jungle. Some of my favourite comic books growing up had been 'The Adventures of Tintin' (by *Hergé*) and most of his adventures were set in remote locations similar to where I now found myself now.

I took the opportunity to laze in a hammock overlooking the river and let my mind drift. Swinging gently from side-to-side I pictured some of

Tintin's more intrepid encounters and remembered how much I had wanted to do the same as a child, to head off and explore the world, and wondered why I had left it so long. More than that, why do so many childhood dreams slowly disappear as we all move into adulthood. What changes?

For me I realised that I had been postponing travelling out of fear. Deep down I knew that if I was going to ever embark on such a trip it was always going to involve trying to trace my birth family. So I'd avoided it and come up with any excuse. What for most would be a trip of a lifetime often entailed *finding yourself* and that had been too scary for me because it would mean opening pandoras box. And I hadn't been ready.

But on top of my fear of what I might find there were also some genuine reasons. My loyal commitment to looking after my adoptive mother was certainly one and now I felt sad at my lateness to the *finding yourself party*, wishing I'd travelled like this much earlier in my life because I had missed so much. Perhaps I could have gone travelling without thinking about anything else but the more I dwelt on it the more I realised this was never going to happen, such was the power that adoption had always had over me.

I'd also managed to adopt my father's fear of flying when younger. He never left the confines of the UK such was his fear and I wondered if that was another reason why I had decided to make this trip overland. I had told everyone a good story about how important it was to *experience* a country rather than merely fly over it, which I stood by because it held a lot of truth, but if I was really honest with myself I knew that another

reason was this fear of flying. I didn't want to admit this to anyone and preferred to keep this a secret. Another one to add to my growing list.

I knew that my trip was leading me inextricably to a '*date with destiny*' and always had been, but was I ready now and was my birth mother even in New Zealand? It was equally likely she had left the UK and was now living in a different country. So here I was heading into the unknown on a wing and a prayer that she was in New Zealand, but for all I knew she could still be living in the UK and the further east I travelled I was actually putting more distance between us. All this was coupled with the rather minor detail of would she even want to meet me and a low-level panic crept in at the prospect of opening up the proverbial can of worms.

Did I really want to know about my family and where I came from? Was I building myself up for ultimately a huge letdown? Was all this emotional upheaval ultimately going to be for nothing after which I would sadly wend my way back to my old life, tail between my legs, and have to pretend everything was *A-ok*? That I was totally fine and the world was a great place and none of this mattered anymore. Strangely it was thoughts like this which not only made me question everything, they simultaneously galvanised me and gave me the strength to keep moving forward on my journey and find answers.

I needed to complete my story of who I was and where I came from.

I had to be prepared for whatever the resolution looked like.

Adoption.

It's a messy thing.

 21st April 2002

Luang Namtha

One night whilst sleeping in my somewhat basic bamboo hut in Muang Ngoi something crept in and bit me. At the time I hadn't given it much thought but my ankle became twice the size it should be. Despite its rapid change in appearance I wasn't too bothered by it until I showed one of my fellow travellers who happened to be a doctor and she recommended immediate treatment as it looked seriously infected.

For anyone who grew up in the 1970s and remembers watching the TV series M*A*S*H, which was based on the treatment in a field hospital for injured soldiers during the Vietnam War, well, this was what now faced me. Having seen a local 'doctor', I was directed to their 'field hospital' on the outskirts of town and as I sat in the waiting area this was the picture running through my mind. I wasn't feeling that confident anyway without the additional uncomfortable thought of such basic facilities, and then when I was escorted through into what I thought would be a doctor's examination room my heart sunk as I realised I was in an operating theatre – only Laos style.

I was asked to sit on the only object in the room suitable, which turned out to be the operating bench, and as I showed the doctor my ankle, I nervously scanned the room. Basic was an understatement. The room was stark and reeked of antiseptic whilst surely the double-doors leading to the outside shouldn't be left open at least for hygienic reasons? The equipment looked not only dirty but also like it was straight out of the

1930s. *Now* I was nervous, actually that was an understatement. *Petrified* was more accurate.

Having taken in fully my quite alarming surroundings what happened next was totally surreal. Having inspected my ankle the doctor calmly informed me that I need a minor operation and he would be happy to perform it straight away. My mind reeled, “*What?!? Sorry. Repeat that please?!?!*” Yes, I heard right the first time. *Now* I was freaking out. I started thinking about all those stories you hear about travellers who get mysterious diseases in some of the remotest parts of the world, never to be seen again or suffer some minor injury but because of their remoteness end up dying only to make a short paragraph back in the UK media. I did not want to be another statistic.

I realised how uncharitable I was being and how lucky we are without knowing it in the developed west with all our hi-tech medical facilities. I was also being so ungrateful for what was being offered to me and it made me wonder where else in my life I was ungrateful or had been as a child, maybe with my adoptive parents who after all gave me a home and bring me up so perhaps I'm being massively ungrateful in rejecting them when I search for my birth family ...

I was sliding into a deeper conversation with myself which frankly could wait, so returning to the issue at hand and with a deeper sense of humility, I decided to place all my trust in the doctor. That said, as the doctor gave me a tablet to swallow and wheeled over a squeaky trolley with what looked like pretty filthy surgical tools more at home in a blacksmiths workshop, I was looking at the open door thinking if I need

to make a run for it ...

I thought the tablet would knock me out but I was wrong, and it meant that as he took a rusty looking razor-sharp knife and started cutting my ankle open I nearly fainted. It was so surreal, here I was in a remote town in Laos, watching my ankle be surgically cut open right there in front of me with what appeared to be very basic implements and no apparent attention to any form of hygiene, when a perverse sense of humour came over me as I wondered what travel photo would they use as the '*last photo seen alive*' for the British Press? Would anybody even know how I died? Would I be one of those '*Missing - have you seen this person? Last seen alive in Laos*' type stories?

In the end I didn't faint, but damn I came close although I couldn't quite believe I was witnessing this. There was a weird sense of respect though for the doctor going about his normal daily practice as I watched his diligent work in these (to me) bizarre surroundings, slicing open the wound to release the infected fluid and then cleaning it.

Half an hour later and I was done, and more importantly alive! Whatever tablets I'd taken had meant I didn't feel any pain whilst he did his work (although I did wonder if the mental scars of watching it, in time might be worse anyway) and they seemed to still be working as I clambered off the operating table. I thanked him for his work and he nodded and asked me to pay outside. End of conversation. I wondered what he made of this westerner - in fact was I the first one he'd ever operated on?

On the way out I paid for my '*private*' operation ... \$5. I didn't think

it was worth putting an insurance claim in for it when I got back.

📍 26th April 2002

Luang Namtha, Laos

My ankle felt pretty strong which was good news as I set out from Luang Namtha with a small group on a three-day trek into the surrounding jungle. The temperature was scorching and without much water we quickly baked in the blistering heat. En route we filled the metal army water bottles we'd been issued with from the streams and added tablets to purify it, but it was best not to look at the water (which I presume is also why we had these army bottles so you couldn't see into them) because as well as tasting disgusting it was also a weird grey colour. But it was also quite humbling because it made you appreciate that the people who still lived in these habitats wouldn't even have access to purifying tablets and would have to drink the water as they found it.

The second night we camped in a remote village where western tourists were still a rare sight and they welcomed us, albeit somewhat warily. It's still not best practice to take photos without asking permission when travelling to certain parts of the world, but because it's such a stark contrast to our western lives we /I almost feel like we/I have carte blanche permission as tourists/a tourist to start snapping away. In this village they were fascinated by our cameras and I let them play with mine and take some photos much to their delight. Although, yet again I felt a pang of

guilt and a part of the problem introducing ‘*The West*’ and ‘*technology*’ to this remote part of the world.

The chief of the village held a banquet that evening in our *honour*, although for me the honour was really sharing time and food in this village with such beautiful, generous people. We were welcomed into a great hall in the main hut in the centre of their village and took places around the edge before the chief gave a speech in his local tongue which was translated for us. It was fascinating to hear about life here and how the people of his village would sometimes head down the hillside into the nearest town and bring back news of gadgets they could hardly comprehend like TVs and washing machines. So out of place in their humble village as they truly lived like nomads and had a pretty much hand to mouth existence, yet the overriding feeling I had was of how much joy and laughter they possessed at the simple things and how important the basics of food and shelter were.

At the end of the speech he invited questions from us. I asked in light of all this perceived development and technology surrounding him what he most wanted for his village. His simple answer would stay with me for the rest of my life:

- Clean water.
- Food.
- And a road.

That was it. The basic stuff we in the ‘west’ take for granted every day of our lives. There were times of my life I realised I hadn't been grateful for and this was one of them and as the food was laid on the floor

in front of us I reflected on what the chief had said and felt truly humbled by such a simple request. It was hard to believe that it was 2002 and people still didn't have access to these basic requirements whilst here we were dining with them with our apparent wealth dripping from us in the form of our clothes, cameras and cash.

For me it really put into perspective any of the daily grumbles about my life in the west. All the times when I might think the latest version of a mobile is important, or simply turning on the tap in the kitchen for a glass of water without thinking where the water came from. I realized how extremely lucky and blessed I was and that life was so relatively easy for me.

My 'issues' around adoption seemed to pale into insignificance compared to daily life here in this village and suddenly I felt really awkward sitting with my relative privilege and the luxurious fact that I had the ability to make a choice or even question my life. Who was I to even question my upbringing, shouldn't I simply be grateful for everything by adopted parents gave me? They took me in, brought me up, fed and clothed me, loved me and did everything that my biological parents hadn't done. They had made a huge choice to adopt me in the first place and compared to most I had an extremely privileged childhood.

The mere fact that I possessed a life where I had the resources to trace my family rather one where I had to accept what was in front of me without question was surely enough. But that's the thing about adoption – to others it might appear selfish and even greedy, but I felt like it was never enough. There was always something missing and I was starting to

wonder if the *only* people who can truly understand what it feels like is another person who is adopted.

10

Growing Pains

“Help me! Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope”

Princess Leia : ‘Star Wars IV: A New Hope’

📍 Bromley, Hertfordshire 1981-1986

Growing up I often felt a sense of isolation whilst at the same time desperately wanting to belong. I would spend huge chunks of time on my own, hating who I was as I just didn't feel like I fitted in anywhere. Boys in the football team treated me like a wasn't one of them whilst girls certainly weren't interested in me as boyfriend material. I would look at myself in the mirror and ask what was intrinsically wrong with me. On occasion I would hate what or who I saw in the mirror so much that I would hit myself until the pain got too much. There was a part of me I hated. I often hated being me. Why couldn't I be like the other children.

I wondered what I was giving off to keep people at arm's length as I seemed to lack the basic skills those around me had and projected it all inward from the outset. I didn't want anyone else to see what was going on inside me so I kept it hidden – even though this wasn't a conscious choice. I am adopted. I am different - you just don't know it.

To talk about being adopted meant having to admit outwardly I was different and that is *NOT* something any child wants to admit, let alone

give another child the ammunition with which to target you. So what to do? Best turn that hatred inward and keep it quiet, letting it burn slowly away like a dying fire.

My adoptive parents being significantly older than my friends' parents meant they came from a different generation where feelings were certainly not talked about let alone mental health. Of course, I myself wasn't aware of mental health as a topic let alone knowing how to communicate this and to whom, and with hindsight I would see how a lot of this self-hatred caused by my adoption would trigger depressive thoughts about myself. Presuming it was a normal experience for all children as they grew up I kept things like this to myself – besides, who could I talk to about it? There always seemed to be a nagging voice in the back of my mind trying to tell me that something was amiss but I couldn't put any words to it outwardly.

My magical pink folder was something of a double-edged sword for me. On one level it had opened a doorway to another world, but on another I lost some of my childhood innocence. At times I would become pre-occupied with my *phantom family*, imagining an alternative life with them which became even more vivid after watching my favourite childhood film, Star Wars. I would watch the film repeatedly and pretend I was Luke, but not in the same way other children might have done. In my world, I saw the film through the lens of him being a *fellow adoptee*. His was the ultimate story of an abandoned child coming to terms with who he was and it gave me hope that if he could find his family so could I.

Of course, this would have sounded utterly ridiculous to anyone had I told them I was daring to compare my life to Luke Skywalker! I could just imagine how much they would have laughed at it so added it to my growing list of *secrets*. I would simultaneously try and distance myself from Luke when it suited me, pretending instead I was more like Han Solo – probably because the truth was a bit too close to the bone but this wasn't being honest with myself. I was lying to myself to avoid seeing the similarities. The film is laden with a host of secrets – from his Aunt and Uncle not telling him about his real parents, to who Luke's father really is and even the identity of his sister who he is initially attracted to. Of course, at such a tender age I didn't fully appreciate the gravity of what all this could mean for me (after all does anyone want Darth Vader to be their father?) or how deep secrecy courses through the veins of adoption, but it did awaken a deep part of me who yearned for answers and supported my fantasy world where I believed *anything was possible* and in later years contributed massively to my secret inner yearning to find my own family.

The film also gave me my first experience of death. When some of the spaceships exploded and crashed into the Death Star it gave me nightmares and stirred a deep sense of people disappearing in life. Where did they go and were they really gone forever? I didn't feel like it was the type of thing I could talk with my adoptive parents about but I really wanted to be able to talk with someone about this type of topic. Without that it became another secret I kept from them, which on the surface appears harmless but by now I was building up quite a repertoire of things

I was keeping from my parents and the people around me.

There were a couple of triggers in daily life which could also send me into a weird mood swing; watching football or playing computer games with my neighbour Anthony being two of them, where I'd have moments of this overriding sense of being at odds with the world and couldn't relate to what was going on. They were only fleeting and I presumed it was just a normal experience for all children, but there still loomed this nagging sense of unease in the back of my mind. The term depression was not in my vocabulary when young so I never made the connection and it would lie waiting patiently in the shadows. Out of sight and out of mind – as with all things adoption related.

I was a top student but somehow my dedication started to wane around the age of thirteen. Part of the problem was I never seemed to be known by my actual name at school. My brother John was an incredibly gifted academic and whenever I started a new school year I was always being referred to as 'John's brother' rather than Richard, and this really started to bug me. Why was I always being compared to his achievements? Why didn't they see me? As a result I started to assume different personas in order to fit in and be liked (well, hopefully liked anyway) which seemed to work, but they came at a huge cost to me.

This identity problem supported one of the core issues of my adoption. I had another, secret name, which was never acknowledged or spoken about. Nicholas. All my adoption paperwork referred to this child called Nicholas but I couldn't relate to him. He was like another being somewhere *out there*. I didn't tell anyone else that I had another name,

even one of my best friends who also happened to be called Nicholas. It was a quiet part of me that only I knew about and I wanted to keep that way.

Another major problem was I would get bored once the excitement of something new had worn off and I started to find school unfulfilling by the age of thirteen. I had gone from being one of the top students who loved school to acting up, being rebellious and basically sticking two fingers up to authority. I'd like to say this was just adolescence or my personality but there was something deeper going on inside me. I rebelled against my parents, authority and amongst many things I missed nearly two years of education through bunking off school with two close friends.

Of course, rebellion is a natural stage for all teenagers where they need to grow apart from their parents, I couldn't see it at the time but I would come to see it goes deeper for adoptees as we are not only rebelling against our immediate family, but also our unseen phantom family, our birth family. But this gets tricky because we don't know what or who we are rebelling against whilst simultaneously wanting to belong to them. For me there was probably a lot of pent-up anger which needed to be expended and subconsciously a lot of it was probably targeted unbeknownst at my birth family and the void left in my life through their absence. But you can't break free of a family you haven't grown up with so you stay invisibly tethered to them and act out everywhere except against who it's really about.

It was a strange time of rebelling as a teenager, against everything and anyone. I started taking money from my mother's purse which

alarmingly didn't seem to bother me and it was also the time I learned to shoplift. My brother had initially forced me to steal for him 'professionally' and he had taught me so well that I ended up stealing to order for him. Books and records mostly but it got to the extent that I would go shopping for myself with only my bus money in my pocket and steal everything else. I knew if I didn't steal what my brother wanted I would get in trouble with him and I already pretty much lived in fear of him and his temper so I would regularly take the blame for things he had done, taking the punishment from our parents rather than risk his wrath.

My partners in crime and I wouldn't do much when playing truant, mostly hang out in the woods or sneak into one of our houses if the parents weren't there and play games. But quite often we would also go into a local town where I would hone my shoplifting skills and we meticulously planned raids. We would go shopping with no money and steal everything - clothes, toiletries, books, records, food, toys, stationary - you name it, we stole it. We would even then have the audacity to sell our swag at school to make some money, creating a quite impressive small business.

I was absent from school for anywhere between two-four days per week, somehow getting away with it by either bringing in a forged note from my mum or signing the register when my tutor wasn't looking and backdating it over the days I'd missed where they'd left it blank. Finally though it had to come to an end and we were all caught (ironically by one of our Dad's who doxed us into the school!) and punished by the school. Funnily each set of parents blamed the other for leading their child astray,

of course thinking it could never be their precious child who was the ringleader which was much to our amusement as we all knew we were in it equally.

As you'd expect my parents took it badly - I'm fairly sure they usually took it as a bad reflection on them rather than looking at why I chose to bunk off. No-one ever asked me why and over the years since I've come to realise how important this is, because unless you get to the root cause of a problem it's never going to go away. You will simply be covering over the symptoms with a plaster and not deal with what caused the issue in the first place. At the time I had no idea why I was behaving like I was but if there had been any form of therapeutic support rather than punishment I am sure it would have saved me a lot of time and money as an adult.

Back then it seemed better bunking off than going to school but what really scared me on reflection was my ability to go so off the rails. Where was the 'A' grade student who was heading for a top University, that was what I had been told from an early age and was expected of me. School - University - Good Job. That was the plan and of course, up until this point I had played ball and dutifully obeyed. But now the gloves were off and I wasn't the sweet, innocent child anymore and I wanted to break free, make my own choices and move away from any form of being controlled.

You'd think those people closest to me would notice and step in but only later would I realise that adoptive parents simply can't have the same intuitive bond with 'their' child that the natural parents have - no matter how hard they might try and convince themselves otherwise. The natural

blood ties are so much stronger than the nurtured ones no matter how hard people strive to replicate them. It's almost like they *have* to believe it otherwise the whole system breaks down. And then the truth would have to be faced and most people run a mile from it – myself included.

So what was the truth.

- I had two families: One biological (nature) and one adopted (nurture).
- I had two names: One biological (nature) and one adopted (nurture).
- I had two voices: One biological (nature) and one adopted (nurture).

These distinct, opposing voices of nature and nurture needed to have their say and although I wasn't aware at the time this was one of the main driving factors for this rebelliousness. I was most likely not alone in this as my adoptive parents had their own issues to deal which weren't mine to carry, but being the compliant adoptee I shouldered them anyway.

Adoption is not only burdened with a multitude of secrets, it's also laden with unexpressed emotions and issues from all the people involved in the 'adoption triad'. Adoptees should never be used to solve other people's issues and I would come to realise later in life that it's a by-product which happens so often - albeit unconsciously. But at this point in my life I didn't know who I was and frankly didn't care. I was happy to throw it all away for what?

Amongst this melting pot of issues, a buried sense of anger was being activated in me.

- I was angry at my adoptive parents.
- At the school.

- At life.
- At being adopted.
- At my birth parents.
- I was angry at everything.

Something which would only get worse eighteen months later when events beyond my control would turn my whole world upside down and my life would never be the same ever again.

Epilogue

I hope you have enjoyed this 1st ‘taster’ edition of OneVoice. The completed version of the book will be available later this year where I continue the story about searching for my birth family and the issues related to it. I also explore the journey I undertook to heal from these issues and expose the hidden aspects of adoption.

The book is intended as an inspirational story to show how it is possible to heal from any trauma and also an introduction to me for anyone seeking a therapist to work with. One of the most important things I have learned is *normal* can be a cover up job for hiding deeper issues and as an adoptee I know this strategy very well. Many times in my life I felt like I didn’t know where or who to turn to for help and I wish someone could have guided me.

I am so grateful I found powerful modalities that got to the root cause of my issues and the two main therapies I attribute to my healing are The Journey and Systemic Family Constellations. I am now trained in them to help other people clear at the core whatever has put in place their patterns, issues or traumas.

To get in touch with me regarding my workshops, 1:1 sessions I offer or simply to find out more:

Email: info@familyconstellationstherapy.com

Website: www.familyconstellationstherapy.com

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@RichardBuckworth>

Use book resources:

The Journey Book: Brandon Bays

Family Constellations Revealed: Indra Torsten Preiss