

## Preface:

# *Adoptee with a Capital A*

Why did you write *Adoptee* with a capital A? I was asked after this book came out. It seemed so obvious to me at the time that I was making a political statement. I felt that most adopted people were not visible enough: that no one saw their sense of abandonment and loss or understood the identity struggles they were going through. Conferring the capital A upon the adopted was a declaration that Adoptees would no longer settle for being invisible. They would have to be seen with all the complex emotional baggage they carry. The capital A not only stood out but seemed to make them stand out. “Look at me,” it seemed to say. “See me.”

It’s hard to remember that in the 1970s Adoptees were still hidden in the closet, just beginning to peek out. Most of them were those “healthy white babies,” who had grown up in two parent households. There were nearly always two parents in that era before international and transracial adoption broke down the rigid stereotypes of what a family should be.

The Adoptees you will meet in this book were carefully matched with their adoptive parents by religion and hair color so that they could pass in society as their biological child. “To a certain degree we were camouflaged, which made us relatively invisible,” says one Adoptee, who grew up with what she calls “protective coloration.” But, as we will see, they weren’t protected at all but were psychologically affected by having to play what I call the game of “as if”—as if they were born into the family.

“Adoption has changed since *Lost and Found* came out,” I am often told, as if the subsequent generations of Adoptees are a dif-

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ferent breed, not as vulnerable to the pain of separation and loss as those who went before.

“Yes, many things have changed,” I respond. “Healthy white babies have become an almost extinct species in the adoption market, resulting in large numbers of children being imported from foreign countries. We are seeing more openness in adoption arrangements. Search and reunion have become almost the norm, and Adoptees are no longer accused of being disloyal or psychologically unsound in wanting to know their heritage.”

Yet, there are many things that have not changed, I am always quick to point out. Adoptees have the same ambivalence, guilt, and fear when embarking on the Search that I describe in chapter 14. And some Adoptees still choose not to search for the same psychological reasons. The varieties of reunion experience that I laid out in chapter 15 are the same, even though the number of reunions has jumped into the stratosphere.

Add the following to this list of things that have not changed—The majority of states still keep Adoptees’ original birth certificates sealed, shrouded in a veil of secrecy. Secrecy still produces feelings of shame, isolation, and despair in the very people whom it is meant to protect.

There are still no laws controlling the reproductive technology industry. Those brave new babies conceived by reproductive technologies that bypass Mother Nature’s old-fashioned recipe for creating life through the physical act of lovemaking, with or without the ingredient of love, will experience the same sense of alienation and bewilderment if the circumstances of their birth and full knowledge of their heritage are denied them. They have much in common with domestic and international Adoptees who are products of social engineering. The brave new babies may be genetically related to one or both parents, but they will be raised *as if* they were born to both in a natural way, rather than through the intervention of scientific engineering.

Psychiatrists have found that adopted children who are confused about their origins suffer from *genealogical bewilderment*—not understanding where one comes from—and *adoption stress*—not being able to cope with the confusion. Can we say that the brave new babies will suffer from *technological bewilderment* and *conceptual stress*?

Of course, the brave new babies have advantages Adoptees do

not: usually blood relatedness to at least one parent and historical continuity with one biological clan. Studies have shown, however, that lack of knowledge of even one parent can be as damaging as lack of knowledge about both—and many of our brave new babies will have one missing parent.

Like the adopted, the brave new babies are still being assured how much they were wanted—in their case, how far superior they are to a baby conceived in the old-fashioned, natural way. But also like Adoptees, they will have secrets of their own: they will know that rather than having been first choice, they were second best to the child who might have been, had their parents been able to have children the way nature intended.

I keep trying to imagine what will happen when the brave new babies ask, as Oedipus did, “Who am I?” There will be no oracle to consult, no Tiresias to issue dire warnings, no social workers to discourage questions. Instead the brave new babies will have to seek visionary scientists in laboratories, sperm and egg collectors in white coats, surrogate matchmakers, and tight-lipped lawyers. It is probable—and this is the most tragic—that false names have been given or records not kept. The brave new babies will have to live blindly, without the truth of their genetics or medical history, like many international Adoptees, whose records have often vanished in their country of origin.

The question of who is the Real mother still looms for everyone. The brave new babies have to sort through a bewildering array of mothers: the genetic mother, the gestational mother, the surrogate mother, the adoptive mother. But everyone has further questions: Who is my real father? Who is the authentic mother? Who is the authentic father? Must a real mother be genetically related? Does a man have a right to detach himself without responsibility from his sperm? And, not least of all, is genetic relatedness necessary to the formation of an authentic sense of self?

These are some of the issues I explore in this book. My hope is that it will help Adoptees and brave new babies form a healthy identity without guilt; that it will help all parents move toward open communication with their children without a sense of threat; and that it will help society and legislators realize the destructiveness of secrecy and sealed records—indeed, understand that the withholding of the truth of any child’s birth heritage is a violation of that child’s civil and human rights.

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I see this book about the field we call adoption as speaking not only to those directly involved in it—Adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents—but to all of us who are continually exploring the taproots of that most primal of relationships—the one between parent and child.

B.J.L.  
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