

## Lily's story - 2022

**Closed adoption was an abusive practice ...with hindsight we can see it for what it was ...an era in history, a social experiment, with tsunami size waves, that reached beyond the displaced child, across more than two families, and generations, forward, backwards and sideways.**

**Relinquishment is trauma. Adoption is trauma .. complicated developmental trauma.**

Many people I will mention in my telling, have their own adoption story – some are gone now. But I won't tell another person's story, beyond where it impacts on my life.

Many times over my life I've been told **how lucky I am** to have been adopted, **how fortunate** I was to **have not** been raised in a children's home, and how, clearly (in their eyes) it worked out for the best. They **did not ever acknowledge** that before I was lucky and fortunate, **I had experienced a severing from my family** – the grief, sadness and loss of adoption, was never mentioned. No acknowledgement or understanding of the vulnerability at my core, and how that left me open to abuse.

Hearing, and **not** hearing these things growing up, silenced me, negated my feelings, so I played the part of the good adoptee, **the grateful and compliant one**, and I considered other people's feelings always above my own – to please and placate – to ease others discomfort - to never show the anger and isolation, anxiety or confusion I felt about being this disconnected child in this family that wasn't mine – I had nowhere to go when I was abused, when my adopting family died, when I was deeply depressed, when I was a single mum. And these things happened to me, before I was fully an adult.

Adoption cut me off from my family, my culture, my medical and social history, but also from the songs of my mother and grandmother, the smell of their cooking and my father's tobacco, card games with my grandad, from the teasing of my siblings, the games played with my cousins, the family Christmases, the birthdays, the mothers days, the wet rainy inside days, the squabbles in family car trips and holidays ... all those things that people take for granted.

It is as Lemn Sissay says: **Family is just a set of memories disputed, resolved or recalled between one group of people over a lifetime** (*My Name is Why* – Lemn Sissay 2020). Well I was locked out of that – and no reunion can get it back - it is what it is.

So I was displaced from my family and randomly assigned another... I became a lucky bastard – quite literally, still consider 'illegitimate' under the law at the time of my birth.

The trauma of losing my family, is, and always has been, the first layer of who I am – before I am a woman, a NZ citizen, a swimmer, a mother, anything.... I am an adopted person. Adoption is my first culture, the first layer of me. Everything that has touched me in my life, since that separation from my mother, has been filtered through loss, abandonment, grief, and fear, fear of dying. My early synaptic wiring fired on these things - wired for abandonment before my eyes could even focus properly.

I know adoption happened to me as an infant only months old ... I remember it, it's part of my cellular being... I just can't recall it.

I'm following with interest what cognitive neuroscience is telling us about brain function – this has helped me understand so much ...but this knowledge does not change the past, does not give back what was taken – it can help me to accept, and hopefully one day, to forgive myself and to stop

blaming myself, to let shame and unworthiness be still in my heart and not an active participant in the decisions I make in my life.

In a way, I'm like a refugee – displaced from my homeland, and told I can never go back, I must adopt the ways of this new country, take on a new name, a new language, assimilate, accommodate, stay quiet on the edges and show gratitude for having been saved.

I learnt I was an adopted person when I was about 9 or 10.

I hear I have another mother – she lived secretly in my mind from that day on - a mother who loved me **so much** she gave me away – there's nothing stronger than a mother's love - what a paradox that is for anyone to try and make sense of – so, will this new mother give me away too? This mother who some people think is my grandmother? This dark haired, black eyed, buxom woman.... with a gentle, kind and warm heart. Me blonde blue eyed and not buxom.

Whenever she was late to pick me up from school, I would be in pieces inside .... sure that she had died... that she'd never come back for me, that I was forgotten...again.

When she did die a few years later, I was abandoned again – my fear validated. I wasn't worth fighting for. I only had her for a short time. I can't imagine her grief knowing she was leaving me unmothered at 14, that she'd broken the promise she'd made in her heart to the young woman that birthed me. I've thought about her thinking about my birth mother, a lot over my life. I'm sure they both thought about each other many times – but I know they never met.

Building my identity on fragments, or snippets, or make believe – not ideal, especially as I was about to enter my teen years and by the end of them, I had lost everything all over again.

When I was about 13 and adopted mum was dying from cancer, I found a receipt in the bottom of her wardrobe among her shoes, rolled up with other receipts from the electricity department, the council rates, the plumber's bill, and this one, a lawyers receipt marking a transaction complete, final order complete. I felt loved by her, but none the less, I felt commodified ...dehumanised by the process of 'purchase and payment made'.

The breadth and depth of adoption grief is huge ... its tentacles are like fungus, unseen under the ground .... reaching wide and impacting on things above the surface so far away some wouldn't even make the connection. I feel the grief and sadness of my two mothers deeply. They both suffered so much **because** I exist, because I was their daughter. In my rational mind I know it was not me, not intrinsically me, but in my limbic brain, in my compassion as a mother myself, I live with their pain too. Adoption under the 1955 Act was abusive to both of them – imagine the support they could have been for each other in a kinder world?

An old family acquaintance once told me, that my adopted mum didn't like to take me or my adopted brother out... she was worried that our mothers would recognise us. I have memories of the pain she went through, of her tears when my brother acted out, yelling at her and upsetting her. I'd never seen her cry before this time. I tried to protect her. I was frightened, for my adopted mum. I would've been maybe 6 or 7 at the time. My brother was a troubled boy – very tall for his age, adopted when he was three. I loved him dearly, he was my big brother, he was sometimes cruel, but I loved him anyway.

When I was told I was adopted I didn't really understand the story about another mother who loved me but couldn't keep me, about the hospital and all the babies and my smile being the thing that decided who I'd call mum for the next 14 years.

I've since found that adopting parents were given a 'script' to explain 'where we came from'. I had no idea where babies came from. But inside I knew I must **not have been good enough** or worthy enough to keep, to fight for, to love, because my first mum **gave me up**, relinquished, adopted, ...whatever the word, a baby feels that as abandonment, as terror. I had nightmares as a child – of being consumed by a loud dark noise that grew louder and louder and got closer and closer until I woke screaming in fear. The horror of nothingness ... of dying, took that form when I was young. Later it took the form of panic attacks, fainting bouts, and times of deep depression.

So along with the loss and grief .... shame and unworthiness sat deep in my core ...and these elements defined my life, my relationships, my choices, my stumbling attempts to keep safe, to find my tribe, to belong.

All my life I've not felt worthy ... of love, of being fought for, of being protected, or of having a place to stand. I didn't have these things in some cases due to circumstance, but I was made fragile by this process of displacement, and despite the fragments of wisdom that decades have bought me, I am still that abandoned unworthy child....

I have never experienced a healthy intimate relationship – I sabotaged them, I chose the wrong people, I'm hypervigilant, I don't believe I'm worthy of being loved ...and now thank goodness, being alone is not loneliness. But I grieve for what might have been if I had not had those decades at sea.... if I had grown with a reflection of me in my mother or father, in an aunty or sisters, or anyone within arm's reach that was my blood relative, that I belonged to.

It saddens me, that I spent so much of my life at the mercy of those negative feelings. I struggled to be authentic, but that was hard when around me was no reflection of who I am, of where I came from, or that I was 'known'. These feelings and thought patterns are so deep, so primal. They were there as a child and as I grew into an adult and sadly, as I mothered my own children.

However, I am pleased that a modicum of courage, has come with age. I'm sharing my story, after all.

I am not the only one who has suffered by my adoption. I saw the sadness in my adopted mum's eyes because I wasn't her child, my presence reinforced that every day. My blue eyes, her brown, my fair hair, hers black, my petiteness, her sturdy build. And the 49 years between us in age saw her frequently referred to as my grandmother. She was in fact older than my birth grandparents. She died when I was 14. My adopting father died in my early 20s.

Thanks to the antics in the 1960s playground I came to understand that there was something wrong with being adopted. When I was growing up adopted children were still illegitimate in the eyes of the law. We were bastards, the spawn of loose women, we were tainted children. Not 'special' in a good way, not chosen children, but randomly assigned to a family at the stroke of a pen.

Hearing I was adopted I remember feeling untethered, on loan, not worthy of the mother-love that everyone says is the strongest love of all – Blood is thicker than water.... We were often read the children's story 'Are you my Mother' by PD Eastman at school – I was the bird in that story trying to find my mother. For decades, I'd look at people with blonde hair and blue eyes and wonder, are you my mother, are you my family?... Many times, people would say, 'do you have a sister called blah, you look just like her'... I love that genomics has found that all blue eyed-people are related, so now I can rightfully claim to be in the blue-eyed family of humans.....

So many triggers constantly throughout my life... preparing a family tree for a school project, asked by a doctor about medical history, being told I had soft English skin ... all these things triggered my feeling of isolation and disconnect.

As a child I complied with the mantra ..be grateful, be silent, comply with the lie and don't talk about it. It's our secret.. So there were 'good' secrets ...? That is a dangerous thing for a child to be told. There were elephants everywhere in my childhood. My parents and the people in the community I grew in, all played along with the secret. I learnt that a lie can be the truth. Legally, I am a fiction under the current Adoption Act. For years I thought, who am I? What is my substance? Am I a person of no substance? I felt like a dot, not on anyone's line, not even a twig on any tree.

It's bizarre when you meet with other adopted people at support groups and sessions and find so many of us were told the same story about our adoptions .... the official child welfare narrative, when rehearsed by so many, is dehumanising ... *'you were the prettiest of all the babies at the hospital, you smiled up at us, we chose you because you were so special'* – This was also my sex education – babies are chosen from hospitals. This was not good either.

Add no knowledge of sex, to the unspoken demand to comply with the lie, and not to speak of it, and add to that the unworthiness, untethered layer that adoption wrapped me in, the disconnection from my blood family by adoption, and the non-engagement from my broader adoptive family because I wasn't a 'real' member of my adopting family ...and that my adopted mum was ill and dying, and that my brother was being groomed and taken away by paedophiles in Scout Leader uniforms ....I had victim written broad across my forehead...and it did not go unnoticed...but sadly by the wrong sort of men. Unfortunately it wasn't seen by dad or my mum or my brother .....and since there was no one else looking out for me, I became a victim of sexual abuse.... that started when I was 13 or maybe 12.

I get confused about the sequence of events over the years between about 11 and 22. Some memories are fragments...some were buried for years and woke me in tears at 3 or 4 in the morning when I was in my late 30s. They plunged me into another bout of depression – I'd cry in public for no apparent reason. I just kept crying. At that time, I was a single mum with four children... studying at university to complete a degree.

But back then, no one talked of cancer, no one talked of child abuse, of paedophiles or sex or adoption. My adopted dad's world was imploding... he was the only adult available to help us and he was not equipped to deal with any of it.

When a paedophile enters your home, life is never the same again. My brother went to live with him when he was about 15. So I lost him when I was about 12.

Decades later I read that that scout master spent time in jail for abusing young boys. By that stage I hadn't seen my brother for years. He just disappeared.

So I lost them all one by one, even my dog. So crazy my adopted dad gave my dog away because mum was in hospital for months and months and Dad thought it wasn't fair on the dog to be home all day alone. So I went home to an empty house each day after school, and cooked the dinner, chopped the wood and lite the fire, cleaned the house, paid the bills, brought the groceries, and visited my mum in hospital every day for six months ...until she died three days after my birthday.

At about 15 I began having fainting episodes. One day I remember coming too at Wellington railway station with my head over the edge of the platform. I told my dad and he seemed angry, so I stopped telling him when they happened. Looking back, I think I was consumed by grief...unable to

breath out. I didn't eat properly, there just seemed no point to anything. I wondered about my birth family. I wanted to find them, but I had internalised that as a selfish want... I'd hurt people. I was still the shameful secret.

It was the time of Whina Cooper. It was the time I heard Māori speak of whakapapa and turangawaewae. I heard them say, 'if you don't know where you come from you are nothing ... if you don't have your turangawaewae you have nowhere to stand'. So I was nothing, I belonged nowhere.

Adoption did not keep me safe emotionally or physically growing up. My second family were taken from me by death and abuse. What I couldn't understand when I looked back decades later, was why my adopted dad's brother and sister and their families, some who lived in the same city, were never part of our lives.

When my mum was sick, when she died, when my dad was sick and he died, when I was alone with a baby at 21, not one of them contacted me to see how I was. I've since seen that family's family tree, wonderfully prepared, going back to the 1600s in County Cork, and my brother and me, we're not on it. Adoption was a nuclear family thing.... Even in inheritance law, adopted children could not inherit from their adoptive grandparents until sometime in the 60s or maybe 70s.

The benevolence of adopting parents was not required to extend to aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins ... certainly not in my case.

It takes a village to raise a child ... I would have been happy to have just had my family.

The Adoption Act shut me out of the support I needed as a teenager and young adult.

I remember my late teenage years were fraught with deep depressions - I would hide away for days at a time, not leaving my bed, crying. And there was literally no one there - my dad had moved in with an old friend of his. I was living alone in the family home - it was like living in a tomb. I wanted to die but was not courageous enough to do anything about it.

I tried to find my family. I still have the letters I received from social welfare in response to my request for information about my family. Every response was another abuse, I was consistently denied the right to find my people. My letters to those agencies were a cry for help, but they were clearly not seen as that, but rather as an ungrateful adopted person wanting to interfere with my birth mother's life - I should leave well alone and be grateful for what I had.

I couldn't talk to people about the negative side of adoption. People only wanted to hear the fairy tale version ...when I realised this, I tried my best to bury my pain - I got quite good at it - too good really.

But things began happening in the adoption world - The Adult Adoption Information Act was passed and in 1986, a single mum with my own 5-year-old daughter, I waited hopefully to apply for my original birth certificate. I was 26.

Many stories of reunion have been shared with me over the years .... some good, some not so good, and some just plain horrid.

People can still place vetoes for adoptions made prior to 1986. This is simply perpetuating and sanctioning the shame and grief of adoption. The veto system re-traumatises those who place a veto and those who have been vetoed. It confirms the unworthiness, unwantedness, abandonment and all that... of the adopted person - it casts them out again. There ought to be no option to veto,

rather there ought to be support for all parties to work through the sadness, anger, shame, grief, whatever it is they need, to swim across to reach a more compassionate shore.

I can remember my walk to the letterbox the day the letter arrived from the Registrar General's Office. I remember opening it right there on the dusty roadside.

For all my life, I had wanted to believe the story my adopted mum had told me of a young woman, who loved me so much that she gave me away. And here we both were, in a different time, me 27 years older, surely, I'll finally know who I am, surely, she'd be eager to find me.

But I was devastated, she vetoed me. My adopted mum did not tell the truth, my birth mother didn't want me and still didn't. I was still the shame, the secret, the isolated one, not to be brought into the fold of my family. Once again, my existence was wrong, I was unworthy and dangerous.

From memory the panic attacks started then. I remember feeling anxious going out – I wasn't sure what I was anxious of. I don't know what caused or triggered the panic attacks – they would just come on while I was at home. I just felt terrified, so terrified that I couldn't speak, if I moved, I felt like throwing up. I felt as if I was dying – I had to focus on each breathe, in...out...in....out. The attack would eventually pass, and up I'd get and carry on.

What were they thinking...those officials and social workers who implemented that process? Did they truly think that an adopted person would receive that information about a veto and go 'Oh well, never mind, I'm so lucky and grateful for the family that adopted me'.

I think the process was there to protect the adults – the adopting parents, and the adopted child's parents. I don't think they understood (or maybe just didn't care) that adoption doesn't end with the Final Order for the child, but that it continues everyday of our lives...we are still the abandoned one, the dangerous one, the one to carry the burden of adoption for everyone else ...and we must be grateful....

It took two years before I had the strength to revisit adoption. One day I read Joss Sawyer's book 'Death by Adoption' and found my anger ...which eventually led me to find compassion for my mother, and then, finding her. I was 32 by then. A mother of three.

I phoned her up. She'd never told anyone about me, she said she was pleased I'd found her. We talked for hours on the phone, day after day.

She said she had done what the nurses told her to do – to go away, but she had never forgotten her first baby girl. When she heard about the Adult Adoption Information Act she said she was angry, because she felt lied to by the government, she hadn't told anyone, so she placed the veto.

She asked me not to contact anyone else in the family. Not my grandma, if I did, it would kill her (So, I really was dangerous!). She came to my home to meet me, her grandchildren, and my partner. I met her at a designated place and recognised her immediately – we are the image of each other.

But in that moment of recognition, the grief I had for my mothers tumbled together – the one I had just met had blonde hair, blue eyes, she was short....but somewhere inside I was wanting my adopted mum, the one with brown eyes, and black hair and rather buxom... the one who I remembered **and recalled**...the one who died.

What a jumble of loss and grief to unravel.

I tried to be sensitive, always giving my mother the time she needed to tell her story. I didn't rush in with questions. She wanted to know if I'd had a happy childhood...a good family. I told her the good bits – left out the bad.

Being in my presence she began to remember things she had buried for so long. It was like listening to a person's first telling of sexual abuse. I could see the rawness of her pain as the memories came back. ... Overtime, more emerged... snippets of conversations and memories about my father, and my grandparents, and her life before and after my birth. I believe she was suffering from post-traumatic stress. She says she can't remember signing adoption papers, but looked at me questioning saying 'I must have signed them...mustn't I?'

When she found she was pregnant with me, having run away with my father from her parents' home due to their disapproval of her wanting to marry a man with a German surname, she told my father of the pending birth and suggested they marry before the baby comes. It was then that he informed her that he was already married, and she could stay with him until the baby was born but then both of us had to leave. My father died before I could meet him as an adult, so I don't know his side of the story.

My mother told me she lied to the nurses at the hospital where I was born and then in the Karitane hospital where we went so she could learn 'mother' skills. She told them she was married and my father had come to see us both and take us to the Karitane mother and baby home. When it was time to leave there, she returned to the flat where she and my father had been living before I was born. I heard some alarming things from my mother about this time when her and I were there. About finding lots of blood in my nappy and her being badly treated by my father. He was Australian – I didn't find this out for decades after I went to Australia at 16 looking for my adopted brother – I found I hated the sound of Australian men's voices – totally illogical I knew that, but I hated hearing their voices. What we have learned about babies in the womb, it's very possible I associated that accent with bad things, with trauma.

So my mother returned to the Karitane hospital and told the nurses the truth of her unmarried and now homeless situation, and she asked for help for her and her baby. She told me 'They ripped you out of my arms', they told her she had nothing to offer a baby on her own, how would she work, where would she live. They said the baby would be adopted and that she would never see her again, and that she must never look for her.

Sadly, this is not an isolated story. It's so tragic what those women went through.

My mother was damaged by that, I could see that, and over the months of us in 'reunion' the damage began to show – on both parts no doubt. We haven't been in touch for about 30 years. I sent her birthday cards each year for many years until my Uncle (her only sibling), who I finally had the courage to connect with about 14 years later, told me that she didn't understand why I sent her those cards – so I stopped sending them.

Reunion, like adoption, is also not the panacea it was hoped to be.

Having said that, finding my family, meeting many of them, being welcomed by some, the source of curiosity by others, and ignored by some ...has been the best thing to happen for me. I now have a dysfunctional family like everyone else. I can't rebuild those *shared, disputed memories* that Lemn Sissay says are what makes a family, and I still struggle with how to 'be' a sister, or niece or cousin... but this is a far better place than where I was before.

If I let myself remember those horrid years from about 11, through the loss of my second family, the sexual abuse, and raising my four children as a single mum getting myself through university, and then imagine what it may have been like to have my family there to ground me, feed me, or just hug me.... it cuts me up. My children could have had a family more than just me and each other.

Adoption isolated me and my children .... through legislation, through the numerous adoption myths that still float about, through denying me being able to openly grieve for the loss of my people, to subject me to the social mores of the time that tainted me by the circumstances of my conception and birth.

I want people to hear my story... I want people to stop gaslighting me... I want the myths of adoption busted... and I do not want to be a legal fiction any longer.