

Adopted

Loss, love, family and reunion



Jo Willis & Brigitta Baker

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To Lawrie, my rock, and a constant
source of love through the fog.
To Will and Hollie, I am so proud of who
you have become, and so grateful to you
both for mirroring back to me my best
parts and loving me despite my worst.
I love you all this much ...
with my whole heart.

JW

To Zoë and Jade, who have been able to grow
up in a country where young women are
no longer pressured to give up their babies,
and to Andrew, who held my hand through
the entire journey.

BB

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Foreword

I first met Jo Willis at a Wellington conference on adoption and healing in 1997. She came with three other women who, like her — and like me — were adopted by ‘strangers’ during the era of closed adoption, and had all subsequently made contact with their birth families. As she explains in this book, they had come together over two years to make sense of their lives in relation to adoption. ‘Despite remarkably diverse backgrounds, adoption experiences, lifestyles and personal circumstances ... we shared the same core issues. The relief at being able to talk openly about adoption in a supportive environment was immense.’

As they generously shared their discoveries, I sat at the back of the packed room with tears pouring down my face. It was the first time I had heard anyone talk about these deeply embedded issues, especially the recurrent feelings of struggling with relationships and never quite belonging anywhere.

These were vitally important insights which needed to be widely shared. So I was immensely pleased to discover Jo’s and Brigitta’s book online, and learn that Massey University Press was publishing a revised and extended print edition.

The contrasting adoption and reunion stories that Brigitta and Jo tell here are uniquely accompanied by the perspectives of birthparents, partners and children, as well as their own insightful commentaries. Not only intensely moving, they also achieve precisely what the authors aimed for: ‘To illuminate the complexity, the emotional challenges and the legacy of adoption’, especially along the path of reunion, both for adopted people and for their ‘partners, parents, children, siblings, friends and extended whānau’.

Their book demonstrates so effectively that no matter how difficult it can be, ‘an awareness of the range of emotions being felt and a willingness to keep communicating and making decisions together can mean positive, long-term outcomes for all parties involved — even when initially there may be a strong temptation to pull back’.

Finally, and crucially: ‘Although the relationships we have with others are critical, it is the relationship we end up having with ourselves that is most important ... It is not just about surviving; it is about thriving with the new self who has emerged.’

Anne Else

February 2022

Prologue

I stepped out the back door of the house and hovered indecisively in the courtyard.

I could hear my husband speaking as he came down the steps not far from where I stood. He was answered by a cheerful sounding female voice.

‘God, that’s her,’ I thought as waves of pure adrenaline flooded through me and my stomach began to churn. The realisation flashed through my mind that she sounded quite chatty and relaxed, then a stranger stepped into the courtyard and started walking towards me.

What should I do? Should I hug her? Was she a ‘hugging’ sort of person? What was even appropriate behaviour in this bizarre situation? What should I say?

Before I could summon reason, I was in her arms, crying like a lost child and never wanting to let go. For several minutes a spell held us bound as we rocked gently together. It felt perfectly natural. There was no hesitation from her, no holding back, no stiffness. I have no idea what she said to me until she gently took hold of my shoulders and whispered, ‘Let me look at you properly.’

Introduction

When we tell our stories, we change the world.
We'll never know how our stories might change
someone's life — our children's, our friends',
our parents', our partner's or maybe that of
a stranger who hears our story down the line
or reads it in a book.

— Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

For many adopted people, there is an almost insatiable hunger associated with not knowing who we are or where we came from. It is this hunger that drives many of us to search for our roots, to find the missing part of us, in the hope of finally having our questions answered. Being adopted does not make us unique in terms of the emotional challenges that affect our lives. Everyone has issues and limiting beliefs that affect the choices they make and the way they interact with others. Everyone has a story — adoption is just one. What is uniquely challenging about adoption is that, for those of us raised in the closed adoption era, it is almost the first experience in life; it defines us from the earliest hours of our existence.

Unfortunately, setting out to find the answers to the questions can be terrifying. The idea of taking the first step towards contact with a birthparent is often overwhelming, and the lifelong fear of not being wanted, of not being welcomed with open and loving arms, forces many of us to hesitate, to delay, to procrastinate. The excuses are endless: What if my birthmother isn't interested? Perhaps I was just a mistake that everyone wants to forget? How will I cope if a phone gets slammed down on me? What if I contact the wrong person and make an idiot of myself?

Then there is the question that overrides all others: What will I find? This fear of the unknown, of uncovering some unpleasant truth that will make us wish we had left well alone, can be an insurmountable hurdle for many.

And behind this question lies another — one that often goes unrecognised and unacknowledged. What are we actually looking for? Although the answer usually lies buried deep within our consciousness, many of us are looking for that safe haven, that loving connection that makes us feel unconditionally loved, secure and whole. A connection that allows us to be our true self and not feel rejected. A place where the grief and the sense of loss we have carried in our heart can be healed.

We are searching for the sanctity of our mother's arms.



Our aim in writing this book is to wake adopted people up to the impact adoption may have had on them, and to raise awareness and understanding about a topic that affects so

many New Zealanders. It is the book we wish we had been able to read before setting out on our own paths to reunion — a hand to hold through the process. At times it was extremely difficult to write. It forced us to confront truths and reveal details that ran the risk of hurting some of those closest to us. But it was also very healing. Our intention is not to cause pain, but rather to illuminate the complexity, the emotional challenges and the legacy of adoption for adopted people as we write our own stories

The book is in four parts. We begin with our own journeys from adoption to reunion with our respective birth families, to the post-reunion experiences. The third and fourth are a series of other perspectives: our birthmothers, one birthfather, as well as our partners, and all four of our children, giving more insight into the impact of the reunion journey on those whom are closest to us.

Our two stories provide a real contrast in experiences, not only in the adoption process and growing up as adopted children but also with our birth families following the reunion. One of us made a choice to wait many years before pursuing reunion, which meant a degree of maturity and fewer expectations but then dealing with grief over having missed out on a birthmother's presence for so long. For the other, the first meeting with our birthmother came at age 21, which triggered another painful experience of rejection that made it difficult to have trust in the relationship going forward.



For adopted people, understanding how we may have been impacted by relinquishment is key to recognising potential triggers and self-limiting beliefs when it comes to our wider interpersonal relationships. Helping the people we are closest to understand why we sometimes behave the way we do, and accepting that we can't simply 'get over it' and may need extra support, can have a big impact on our emotional wellbeing. Having people in our life who validate our experiences and accept us for who we are is extremely important.

We sincerely hope that as well as helping other adopted people feel they are not alone in their experience, our stories may enlighten other affected partners, parents, children, siblings, friends and extended whānau. If we can shine a light on what has traditionally been hidden around adoption and its legacy, then perhaps those of us who have experienced adoption first-hand may find greater understanding and empathy for the challenges we face.

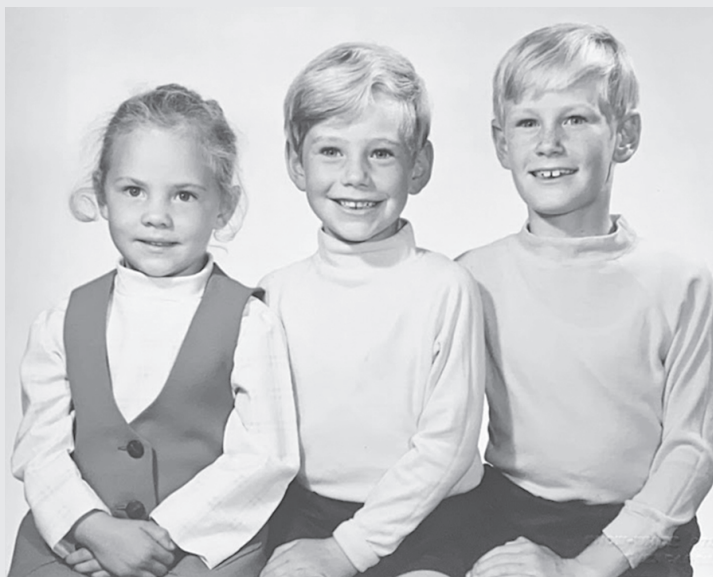
What we have found through our own experiences of adoption and reunion is that, although the relationships we have with others are critical, it is the relationship we end up having with *ourselves* that is most important. Finding peace of mind, feeling genuinely happy and okay about who we are, and being authentic in how we live our life — despite the early trauma of separation from our birthmother — is what really counts. It is not just about surviving; it is about thriving with the new self who has emerged.

No matter which side of the adoption equation you are on, the journey will almost always be tinged with a degree of sadness. You can't undertake it without having to confront

the ‘what might have been’ questions and recriminations. Adopted people and birth families at some point often have to accept that some of the things they missed out on can never be reclaimed.

We know from personal experience how healing it can be when others articulate the raw emotions we ourselves are experiencing, and we truly hope that people who read our stories will not only appreciate our honesty but also will find healing through our words.

Despite the emotional turmoil, for us the journey has been worth taking.



Above: Me aged eight months; on a kindergarten float in Gore, aged four.

Below: With my two brothers, aged five.

PART 1



Brigitta

CHAPTER 1

Denial

I wonder if I've been changed in the night?
Let me think. Was I the same when I got up this
morning? I almost think I can remember feeling
a little different. But if I'm not the same, the
next question is, who in the world am I?

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

My adoptive parents were living in Gore, a small town at the bottom of the South Island, when I was born in 1968. They already had two sons but wanted a daughter to 'round out' the family, and because my adoptive mother hadn't had an easy time with her pregnancies, they didn't want to risk another attempt. They'd actually been offered another child before me — a baby girl — but she didn't look enough like my brothers to 'fit' into the family. It sounded like shopping for a pair of shoes. It was one of the first stories I remember hearing about my adoption, about how they'd passed over this other child

because they felt it was important that the hair colour was the same, the eyes were similar to my brothers', and that the child 'matched'. I used to wonder what happened to her.

The other story I often heard was that when they collected me, I was brought into the room in a well-worn Salvation Army gown, one that no doubt had been used by dozens of adopted babies. My adoptive mother was a wonderful dress-maker and had sewn a lovely little outfit for me, probably smocked and beautifully embroidered, and my two brothers, who were pre-schoolers at the time, insisted that my mother change me there and then into this new outfit so that I was 'turned into' their sister as soon as possible. Alarming, my brothers then held me for two hours in the back seat of the car as we drove to Gore. There were no car seats, of course. I think the boys even gave me my first bottle.

My early impressions, therefore, were of being chosen over someone else, the specialness of the new clothing, and my brothers being really enthusiastic. The whole family was on board; I was the treasured daughter, and now the family was complete. In some ways it gave me a sense of entitlement and belonging — the opposite experience to many adopted people who speak of not fitting in or feeling like an alien in their family.



From the outside, my childhood probably looked quite idyllic and, for the most part, it was. We lived on the edge of town, surrounded by paddocks where we were free to roam. We

played with the neighbourhood kids, went to the local school, and although my parents were not well off, we had everything we needed. It was a typical country childhood and I didn't feel that being adopted set me apart in any way. I don't remember being told I was adopted; it was just always there. I don't have any recollection of realising that Mum and Dad were not my 'real' parents.

We had a book called *Mr Fairweather and His Family*, which was about a man who lived alone and how he came to have a family with a wife, a cat, a dog and, eventually, two adopted children. It was probably the standard text handed out to families like ours and I had some vague idea that the book related to my situation, but I wasn't really sure how. I don't think I felt any personal connection with the story; it was just another book among the many at my disposal. I was an avid reader and loved to go outside and sit under the trees in our large garden to read.

I don't remember asking my parents many questions about being adopted, and I didn't have any conscious thoughts around the word itself. When I went to the small local primary school, there were actually four of us who were adopted in my class alone. We weren't considered anything special, and I remember thinking it was no big deal. Neither do I have memories of fantasising about my birthmother or dreaming of finding her. I've read a lot of stories about adopted people who had these sorts of dreams, but I certainly never thought about her. There wasn't a lot of space for curiosity regarding my birth family and origins — my parents never talked about it when I was young, so I followed their lead and didn't raise the subject.

Reflecting on it now, I probably did feel quite secure. There was a strong sense of being a core part of the family, and possibly that was to do with it being a very small family. Both my parents were raised as only children (my father's four siblings all died as infants in pre-war England), so there were only the five of us — no aunts, uncles, cousins, and only one grandmother in New Zealand. There was a realisation that other people had extended families and we didn't, but my parents would say how lucky we were that we didn't have to put up with difficult relatives at Christmas. They made it seem like a good thing.

My brothers didn't look alike, even though they were related by blood, and I would often point out to people the similarities *I* had with my adoptive parents, such as having curly hair and being tall like my dad. I looked for things that were the same, and being part of a small family meant I didn't have a lot of mirroring back of characteristics I was lacking that were shared by a wider family group. The beliefs of the time were very much oriented towards nurture over nature as the greater influence. It was only as an adult that I allowed myself to realise how very different I was from the rest of my adoptive family.

Our only extended family was my grandmother. She remarried when I was five, but from when I was about nine, she and my step-grandfather were estranged from my parents, and I didn't see them for a number of years. My mum would talk about what a bleak childhood she had endured due to Nana's cold and unaffectionate mothering style. I found out many years later that Nana hadn't wanted my parents to adopt

me, and had always preferred the boys, apparently bringing them presents and ‘forgetting’ one for me when I was little. I never had any sense of that; I just thought she didn’t like girls, rather than her disapproving of me specifically.

I was the chatterbox in the family, once bending my father’s ear to such an extent when he was driving that he crashed into another car while turning around to tell me to stop talking! My father’s job was a big part of our lives. He was an electrical engineer and looked after all the mechanical equipment on the racecourses in Southland. He had a lot of staff, and some of those people became like extended family to me. We pretty much grew up on racecourses, and we all had jobs to do from quite a young age.

Dad was the boss at work, and I have strong memories of him being adored by the women who worked for him. He called everyone ‘sweetheart’ and ‘love’. It was quite a social environment; he really looked after his staff, and there’d be drinks put on at the end of race day. He was well respected, and that same desire for respect has been a huge theme for me. Dad was larger than life. His was a strong personality and he ruled the roost, so my early impressions of family life were all about him. I felt like I shone when I was in his presence.

Dad was an intelligent man and could easily have gone to university, but he was from a working-class background and it wasn’t encouraged. Instead, he was sent to war at 18, serving in the Middle East as part of the Royal Engineers in the British Army, so it was vitally important to him that all three of us kids received a tertiary education.

Under the surface of what appeared to be an ordinary family, things were not as stable as they seemed. My mother struggled with depression and was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She had a breakdown when I was about eight months old, and I went away to a facility in Dunedin with her.

She apparently also had breakdowns after the births of both boys. As an adult, I find it incredible that despite her history of instability, the authorities of the time didn't seem to question her suitability as an adoptive parent. Years later, when I worked up the courage to ask her about this period, she told me in a matter of fact way that when she was in the 'hospital' (psychiatric institution), she used to hand me over to another patient, a man who she'd become friendly with, while she went and had her 'sessions'. She said she didn't think she ever had shock treatments, but this man did after he'd finished his stints of babysitting me! I tried to be casual while asking her what impact this might have had on me, being handed over to a random stranger in such circumstances, but she responded quite indignantly, saying, 'It was really good therapy for him to look after you — he adored you!'

Throughout the first eight years of my life, there were other periods when my mother was very unwell and would detach from all of us. She would take to her bed for days at a time, and I remember feeling scared when she did that. I didn't really understand what was wrong; I just thought she had the flu or something similar. I actually have no memories of her being emotionally present when I was young. Because of the way

she was raised and her inability to reach out, I don't remember her cuddling me or showing me affection. I had no conscious feeling that there was anything odd about that, but when I was older, she did explain that, because of not being hugged as a child herself, she felt stiff and awkward with physical closeness.

One time, when I was about seven, I crashed my brother's bike on the gravel road we lived on. My forehead was all cut up and grazed. Dad popped me into bed with Mum — she must have been having one of her episodes — and she didn't say anything to me, she didn't ask if I was okay, she didn't hold or comfort me, she just looked through me as if I wasn't there. I must have been a bit of a mess, because I've still got the scars from the accident, but she just lay there. Even now, as a parent and with a greater understanding of mental health issues, I look back on this and wonder about her lack of response. She must have been extremely unwell.

When she retreated to her bed, Dad used to take over. He was the affectionate one, the one who always cuddled and held me, and so in some ways, I feel that he buffered me from what I missed out on with Mum. Dad filled the space when she was emotionally absent. He protected me, made me feel special and gave me a degree of resilience. When I was eight, another breakdown took her away to a residential facility for a while, although I don't remember how long for and I don't recall missing her particularly. But I do remember a sense of shame associated with that time and being terrified that kids at school would find out where she was.

When she came home from hospital, she appeared to let go of a lot of things that used to worry her; she was more relaxed

and positive. She decided to train as a social worker when I was in my early teens. It was something she chose to go and do that was separate from anyone else in the family, and I remember those years as being happy for her. She gained confidence and felt she'd found something she really loved. We probably had the closest relationship during that time. I had lots of freedom, but she was there if I needed her. There were certainly no more episodes of her taking to her bed.

But, unfortunately, by the time she was well again we had lost the chance to establish the bond that would normally have formed when I was a baby. Her mental health issues had prevented the vital emotional connection between mother and child from developing; a connection that had been harder to establish in the first place, given I'd been separated from my first mother as a newborn. Years later, I came to realise that it was this lack of healthy attachment to a mother, along with my relinquishment as a baby, that significantly impacted my ability to connect with women and to trust female relationships. I believe it also forced me to become emotionally independent from a young age, and to avoid situations where I felt vulnerable.

One of the other defining moments in my childhood that impacted my sense of security as an adopted child resulted from an interaction with my eldest brother. When I was about six years old and Nana was staying with us, my brother and I had some sort of disagreement. Things were always tense in the house when my grandparents visited, as they were big drinkers and smokers, plus my grandmother was very demanding and treated my mother like a servant at times. On this occasion,

I remember Nana and Mum being in the room and my brother getting annoyed with me over something minor and saying to me, 'Well, you're not really my sister anyway.'

It was a tiny comment, but at the time it felt huge. Everything I had known and believed about myself seemed to rush out the window. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. My brother had no idea how much it hurt, but what went through my mind was, 'He's right, I'm not really his sister, and maybe I don't belong.' The fact that neither of the adults in the room reprimanded him or made any sort of comment only reinforced to me that it must be true.

As irrational as it sounds, I don't think I ever forgave him for it. Up until then he had been my adored older brother, but now I believed I knew how he really felt about me, and it was the first time I remember feeling unloved and unwanted. It was horrible. I've always been very black and white about people, something that has caused problems in my relationships; you're either on my side or you're out. Completely out. From that point on, he was out, and I spent the rest of my childhood alternating between trying to win his approval and tormenting him to the point where he couldn't stand me. Any brother-sister bond I'd believed in was broken with that one comment.

I had probably formed a strong attachment to him as a parental figure, given my mother's absences, and my other brother was a quiet, highly sensitive kid, so my eldest brother was the boss and we both looked up to him. Even when I was a teenager, his approval still meant so much to me, although I'm sure he was unaware of it. When I became dux of my high school, he was away at university, and I remember Mum

making me speak to him on the phone so he could congratulate me. All he said to me was, 'Yeah, you made dux, but it's only in the arts subjects.' That comment is more clearly remembered than all the people who said, 'Well done, you worked hard for it, good on you.'



As a child you can't rationalise other people's behaviour. You don't understand that they have their own reasons for acting in certain ways; all you can do is deal with your own reaction to it. The way I coped was to prove that I was better than anyone else. My whole life became geared towards beating people, whether that be academically, professionally, or in the amount of attention I received. Being the 'perfect performing daughter' was the role I played out within my family; I felt I had to keep it up in order to be accepted, and because my father, especially, expected a lot of me. I saw his disappointment when my brothers did things he didn't like, and I didn't ever want him to look at me and think I was anything less than perfect. I didn't feel I could be loved just for myself — I needed to be successful, to achieve and make him proud. This was pressure I put on myself, but the need for external affirmation from my father set a pattern for the rest of my life.

My strong internal drive to keep proving my worth mainly applied to things I knew I could excel at. I was never any good at team sports, so I just didn't compete. My adoptive parents weren't really sporty, so I was never particularly encouraged

in anything sports-related except swimming, which I was very good at. I remember being thrilled when my swim coach suggested to my parents that I take up competitive training, but my father felt it would impact negatively on my schoolwork, so I dropped the idea. He said it was my decision, but I was so desperate for his approval, there was no way I would go against what he wanted.

Our family was musical, particularly my mother, so she really encouraged this in all of us. I loved ballet and any form of dance, but as soon as I was old enough to learn an instrument, I gave up ballet and trotted off after my brothers to music lessons, because that's what was expected. I started with recorder, then clarinet, then flute, and I learnt piano when I went to high school, as well as musical theory. However, it was schoolwork where I really excelled, and because I knew how important academic success was to my father, I pushed myself hard.



As I matured, adoption became less of a taboo subject. My sense was that my mother was willing to talk about it, but I didn't really want to raise it in front of my father. I think her social work gave her more awareness of what was happening in the adoption field in terms of legislative changes, and she used to talk about having contact with Jigsaw, an organisation that helped connect adopted people with their birthparents. But despite her occasional prompts, I rarely expressed any interest in knowing more. I think I didn't want to do anything

to spoil Dad's image of me as his daughter; I wanted the fantasy to continue.

The subject of adoption would usually come up over my name, which my parents spelt 'Briggita'. It was pronounced with a hard 'g'; a Germanic pronunciation, which with my father's Scandinavian roots was a version he would have found familiar. When people asked where it came from, there would be this pause. My parents would never say straight out that I was adopted and the name came with me, but it always felt a little tense and they would be vague about it. I knew that being adopted meant I had this weird name, but I quite liked that it was different. My thoughts never went any further than that. I didn't think about the person who had chosen it. I didn't think about the existence of another mother who gave me up.

When I was about 16 years old, my adoptive mother gave me a small white Bible that my birthmother had left for me. It wasn't linked to my birthday or any particular event; I just walked into her bedroom one day and she handed it over, saying something like, 'I thought it was about time I gave you this.' I was shocked, but still my main thought in that moment was, how does she want me to react? I was looking to her for the cue to how to respond, rather than feeling anything for myself. But I do remember wanting to know more. Perhaps she realised this, because she told me that my parents weren't young teenagers, they were a couple, but they were not ready to have a baby. I think she was trying to let me know they were 'legitimate' in some way.

Interestingly, she didn't give me the Bible when Dad was around — it was something private between the two of us.

I'm not sure she even told him about it, and it was certainly never discussed in front of him. Years later, after I met Jan, my birthmother, and we talked about the Bible, Dad said he remembered one of the staff members at the Salvation Army home shaking it first to make sure there were no hidden notes inside before handing it over. He could still recall, after 40 years, how careful they were that nothing was passed on from my birthmother.

Receiving the Bible didn't cause any real shift in my awareness, even though it was the first physical evidence that it was true, that I was adopted, and there was another mother who had left me this gift. There was a photo of me inside it, taken when I was 10 days old — the day I would have been handed over — and I remember having a reaction to that. I looked really ugly and I thought, no wonder she gave me up if I looked like that! But I carried the Bible as I walked down the aisle on my wedding day, and although I hadn't begun to look for my birthmother at that stage, on some level I think I wanted her to be part of the occasion.



I never really rebelled as a teenager, but there was a lot that I kept hidden from my parents. Nothing that would particularly shock them, but I had a strong sense that I didn't really need people and enjoyed being independent, so I just didn't confide a lot about what was going on for me.

I kept quite an emotional distance from most people, the one exception being my best friend, Justine, who lived next

door. She went to a different school, but we spent almost every weekend together. As close as we were, however, I never talked to her about adoption, and she never shared with me how volatile her home life was. When her parents spilt up, I remember being completely shocked that she hadn't disclosed to me how rough things were at home. Perhaps as teenagers we just didn't know how to share our inner worlds.

Being adopted wasn't something I kept a secret growing up. There was no shame; I just preferred to keep up the illusion that I was part of an intact family. When people found out, they would say things like, 'Oh, you're adopted; you don't look it.' I was never quite sure how I was supposed to respond when I heard that. Then the next question would be: 'Have you ever thought about finding your birthmother?' I remember whenever this question was asked of me in front of my parents, my response was always 'I'm not that interested' or 'I don't feel I need to look for her'. The reaction was provoked by wanting to do what I thought would please them.

There was a lot of bravado from me about adoption not affecting me. I grew up in this fantasy world, convincing myself that I really was the 'natural' child of my adopted parents, and repressing any thoughts or feelings associated with my birthmother. As for my birthfather, I never even considered him. I lived my life accepting that the slate had been wiped clean when I was handed to my new parents. My childhood and teenage years were characterised by a complete denial that adoption had had an impact on my life.

I didn't ever make a judgement about my birthmother and I never felt any blame towards her, I just didn't want my adoptive

parents to feel that I wasn't grateful they had taken me in. I felt that admitting to curiosity about my origins would somehow be a betrayal.

I kidded myself for nearly 40 years that adoption hadn't had an impact on me, but when I started examining it and looking at the patterns, I could see adoption issues playing out. The key themes were craving acceptance through approval-seeking behaviour and hating being seen as vulnerable. I saw my adoptive mother as someone who was vulnerable, and the last thing I wanted to do was to be like that because, to me, it was a sign of weakness. I wanted to be seen in my father's mould — strong. I had to be strong and capable to be okay. Perhaps at some deeper level it was why I never allowed myself to yearn for my birthmother; that would have allowed vulnerability in.

Having heard so many stories of the pain that many adopted children go through during childhood and early adolescence, I can see that, despite my own childhood not being perfect, I did escape relatively unscathed. I have to give my adoptive parents credit for that. They didn't have all the skills needed to support me in accepting myself for who I was, but they thought they were doing the right thing, and it was the best that they could give with the information they had available to them at the time.

But as I became an adult, life's challenges started to create cracks in the persona I was presenting to the world.