

Dorothy: the Adoptee/Adoptive Mother Who Waited to Search

This chapter is my (the book's author's) own reunion story. As long as my adoptive mother was living, remembering her old anger kept me from looking for my birthmother. Mom always could intimidate me, and besides, it was more comfortable not having to worry about her fury or my own guilt. Not long after she died I took the plunge; I was fifty years old, our three children were raised, and it was time. Actually, my adoptive mom did me a favor: by waiting all those years, the woman I found was seventy years old and living a much more settled life than she had been at forty. I would not have relished finding her then.



What is it that makes so many adoptees feel second-rate, not quite up-to-snuff? In my own case, it began when I was eight years old and overheard one playmate whispering to another, “She’s adopted, you know!” while rolling her eyes in my direction. Whatever the meaning of word adopted was, I knew instinctively that it meant I was not as good as they were. Deep down, I felt they must be right. The next morning I timidly asked my mother if it were true I’d been adopted. She looked startled, hesitated a moment and then said, “Would you still love us if you were adopted?” I said “Yes,” and she admitted it was true. The tears in her eyes warned me I had better not mention that word again; whatever the word “adopted” meant, it wasn’t good!

I was born on January 9, 1928 in Vancouver, Canada, and was adopted a month later by Nevin and Minnie Ryan, a childless couple in their forties. They doted on

me and did all they could to give me a loving and stable home, even when things became very hard financially.

When I became a teenager, I nervously asked Mom if she knew anything about my birthmother. Her indignant reply was: “Why would you want to know about *her*? You’re an ungrateful wretch!” She did tell me something I never really believed, but which turned out to be true: my birthfather had been a professional musician. Maybe that’s why she “scrimped and sacrificed” so I could have nine years of piano lessons.

Over the years my dad supported us by earning patchy commissions as a salesman. My mother rarely gave me advice, but she did say more than once, “Never marry a salesman. You never know whether it’s going to be feast or famine.” The only time I remember Dad shouting at me was once, when I was seventeen and came home wearing green nail polish. He yelled that I looked like a God-damned whore. That was the end of the green nail polish—I was not the rebellious type.

Despite his trouble providing for his family, Dad was a wonderful father who—I was later told—worshipped me. Even though he and I were close, I came to realize he was not a good husband. He was one of those men who craved wealth but lacked the self-discipline to earn it the hard way, like nearly everybody else had to. Once he inherited two hundred dollars—a small fortune in the forties—and without saying a word about it to my mother, went out to the race track and lost every penny. Dad liked to impress his rich friends by picking up the tab when he couldn’t even give his wife grocery money. My mother, however, saw another side of him: the worried, short-tempered side.

During my teenaged years, we lived in a nice area of Vancouver where we managed to pay the rent on our large house every month. My mother was a wonderful cook, but she never taught me. I set the table and did the washing up. Although I helped around the house and mowed and weeded the lawn, Mom always thought I should have done more. One time she said, “Why would anyone marry you? You can’t even dust a room!” She said she had adopted me so I could be a companion to her in her old age.

When I graduated from high school in 1946, my parents gave me a lovely Gruen watch which Mom told me Dad had picked out and had engraved, then had taken her into the store where she had no choice but to pay for it. After that, I felt more guilt than pride whenever I looked at the watch.

Several weeks later, I pre-registered as a freshman at the University of British Columbia and bought my textbooks; I wanted to become an architect. I had no idea my dad had no money for my tuition nor the heart to tell me so. I did know, from overhearing Dad on the phone, he’d been selling shares in a defunct silver mine, and an investigation was possible. He was broke and had to sell his new Pontiac coupé; he was sixty-three years old and had bad heart disease.

On Labor Day, 1946, Dad took the streetcar down to Stanley Park, sat on a secluded bench overlooking Lost Lagoon and shot himself in the temple.

Fifty-six years later I went to the Vancouver Public Library with my close friend Sheryl Lindstrom, and we found several accounts of the tragedy. Apparently no one had heard the shot, but a lifeguard walking in the area found him about 10:30 a.m. and called an ambulance. Beside him on the bench were found a folded newspaper with an automatic revolver lying on top of it. The proprietor of Lost Lagoon Coffee Shop ran to try to help him and later told a reporter that the side of Ryan's head appeared to have been shot away.

As we read the old newspapers accounts, Sheryl and I mulled over the question of the revolver lying on top of the newspaper. We thought he had carried a newspaper—it was Labor Day and there *was* no paper—to cover the gun as he boarded streetcars and betook himself to the park. When he shot himself, it may have fallen from his hand onto the paper, but more likely the lifeguard who had found him had picked it up from the ground and put it there. It was a gun I had often seen in the top drawer of his chiffonier underneath his handkerchiefs.

Once my dad was admitted to the Vancouver General Hospital's emergency ward, Mom was telephoned to hurry there immediately because her husband was in serious condition. She and I assumed he'd had another heart attack; our next door neighbor drove us to the hospital where we learned the truth. The beds were arranged in two long rows on either side of the ward, and Mom and I walked slowly down them looking for Dad. I saw a man whose head was heavily bandaged and said, "That's Dad," but she looked at him and said, "Oh, no, that's not him." But it was him.

Soon after that, a young psychiatry resident persuaded her to let him grill her for over an hour about personal details which, he said, might explain Dad's suicide. While this painful inquisition was going on, I waited on a bench outside the office. I remember hearing him say to Mom as they went in, "Mrs. Ryan, we have to assume that your husband is going to recover," but that was nonsense; my guess is that he just wanted material so he could present the case on rounds. Five hours later, my dear dad died. To my knowledge, he left no suicide note.

The priest of St. Mary's Anglican Church said he couldn't hold a service in the church for someone who had committed suicide, so it was held at the crematorium. Mom and I and a handful of relatives were there. I had hoped that my high school boyfriend would be there, but instead he sent some roses with a note saying that, since I would not now be attending university, he thought it best if we broke up.

The next day I went down to the basement to fill the sawdust burner and saw that Mom had left a light on over the laundry tubs. When I went over to turn it off, I saw that one tub was full of pink water. Shivering, I suddenly realized what it was: Mom was soaking Dad's suit in cold water to get the blood out so she could have it cleaned and sell it. She must have been desperate for money to do such a thing, poor woman.

I know Mom felt terrible shame at my Dad's suicide because, when Sheryl and

I read his obituary, it said he was survived by his wife and a daughter, Dorothy. I thought it was significant that she had omitted her own name. I know she worried that creditors and clients would go after her for money, and I heard her take more than one upsetting telephone call and say, "Well, that was his business and I'm not responsible. I know nothing about that."

With university now out of the question, I got a job as a switchboard operator. Mom was determined to—as she put it—keep a decent roof over our heads and decided to take in three university students as boarders. I moved downstairs into my mother's bedroom and slept across from her in what had been my dad's bed. Even with room and board money from me and the students, things were very tight. Once Mom had to sell one of her favorite antique chairs to meet the rent, and another time she took me aside and warned me not to let on the roast she was serving was horse meat. She was in her sixties, had rheumatoid arthritis and many worries, but she seldom complained.

I met Ken Morrow at a Saturday night dance at the YMCA on October 20, 1951. He was a tall, attractive young man with a kind, good-natured personality, and we immediately fell in love. He was a newly graduated optometrist struggling to make it in the big city, and his office was on Dunbar Street, less than a mile from our house. He rented a basement room in a rooming house and used streetcars for transportation. Mom liked Ken's sense of humor and the way he pitched in around the house, and she often invited him to dinner. If it was during the week, after closing his one-person office he'd walk down the hill to our house. Early in our romance, one thing I said to Ken was, "I'm adopted. You know what that means, don't you? It means I'm illegitimate," and he said, "That's got nothing to do with you. If anybody was illegitimate, it was your parents." After an intensive courtship, we were married on May 15, 1952.

For the first two-and-a-half years, Ken worked for a busy optometrist in the interior of the province, and I typed letters in the office of a family doctor. I became aware of the importance of knowing family health histories, so I wrote to the Deputy Minister of Health for the health histories of my birthparents, not really expecting to get anything. I was delighted to learn from their reply that my birthmother had been born in Nova Scotia and was of Scottish descent. I resolved to give any future children Scottish names.

One day I asked Ken what he wanted to do in the future, and he confessed hesitantly what he'd really like to do was to go to medical school. "Why don't we do it?" I said. We had been saving to build a house, so we took that money and a small inheritance from his grandmother and embarked on the five additional years of university he needed to earn an M.D. degree. We moved back to Vancouver in August, 1954, and rented a tiny house in Acadia Camp student housing; I got a job in the university personnel office. Ken did eye exams at a jail on the week-ends.

In January, 1956, our first son, Ian, was born. Five weeks later, I arranged for another student's wife to care for him and returned to work. In March, 1958, our

second son, Angus, was born at the big teaching hospital where Ken was a fourth year medical student. Unfortunately the baby was extremely sick with Rh blood incompatibility, and was given three exchange transfusions, the only treatment available then.

My mother had moved into a charming apartment on the bus line, and, now she received two government pensions, she was without serious money worries for the first time in her life. She loved visiting us and her two young grandsons. I don't think she was ever happier.

We badly wanted a baby girl to complete our family, and because doctors had warned us not to have any more children, we applied to a government agency to adopt. In January of 1960, we were incredibly lucky to be given eleven-day-old Briana, whose presence in our family has always added so much joy.

In order to reach his goal of becoming a board certified ophthalmologist, Ken needed to be accepted into a three-year residency program. When he failed to get the single opening in Vancouver, we began looking for alternatives. Reading ads in medical journals led to a high-paying preceptorship in a North Dakota eye clinic. It offered valuable experience and the chance to save money for the three lean years of residency training that lay ahead. In July of 1960 we said goodbye to my mother and immigrated to the United States.

In Minot, North Dakota, we rented a three-bedroom bungalow and furnished it at the Goodwill store. Our shabby furniture puzzled our neighbors, but we had to save money and didn't explain. During our second year in Minot, Ken landed a three-year residency at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. In June, 1962 we left North Dakota and rented a little brick house in Redford, a Detroit suburb fourteen miles from the hospital.

Ford Hospital paid Ken \$250.00 a month—one of the highest stipends in the country—but even with our savings, it wasn't enough to support five of us. After a few months, I got a day-care license and made sixty cents an hour caring for two pre-school children. But it still wasn't enough. Finally, Ken secretly and against strict hospital rules, solved our money worries by finding an excellent part-time job with an ophthalmologist.

In June, 1965, with Ken's training completed, we moved to Ashland, Wisconsin where Ken practiced with another Ford-trained ophthalmologist. Both of our cars were paid for and we had \$700 in the bank. We felt pretty happy.

Settled in Ashland with the three children in school, Ken told me, "Now it's your turn," and I entered college, nineteen years behind schedule. The question of finding my roots was put on hold, partly because I was so busy and partly because of a daunting phone call I made one day. I nervously telephoned the Vancouver doctor who had helped my parents find a baby to adopt. I asked him if he could give me any information about my birthmother. After a long silence he said words I still remember, "Your mother, Mrs. Ryan, was a fine and noble woman. If she hadn't been, she never would have adopted you. If you have any loyalty to her,

you'll forget all about this," and he hung up. I sat there stung, my heart pounding, feeling as guilty as he wanted me to. Finally, in 1969, something happened that brought finding my roots to the front of my mind again.

I was forty-one and about to receive a Bachelor of Arts degree in honors English. My eighty-three-year-old mother was still able to travel, so we sent her tickets to fly from Vancouver to Ashland for the occasion. On graduation day I helped her to get dressed and then had her sit down while I brushed her hair. Suddenly I realized that right then was likely my last chance to ask her a question I'd wanted to ask her most of my life. Standing behind her, I took a breath and blurted it out: "Mom, did you ever know the name of my birthmother?" and she said one word: "Torrance." That was the end of the conversation. From that instant on, the name Torrance was burned into my brain. Six years later, Mom died in a Vancouver nursing home. In the forty-seven years she had been my mother, nothing she had given me was more generous than her final gift: the key to finding my roots.

In January, 1978, Ken and I flew to Hyderabad, India, for the All-India Eye Congress. After a lavish banquet on the final day, we returned to our hotel and strolled around the grounds before turning in. We sat down on a marble bench and Ken spoke quietly, looking ahead at the flowers. "Last night I finished Rod McKuen's *Finding My Father*¹. Now I understand how you feel about finding your roots. When we get home I think you should go ahead and look for your birthmother. Now your mom's dead there's no reason not to."

Soon after we returned home to Wisconsin, I sat down at my desk and dug out a little clipping Ken's sister had sent me. It was about a Canadian group called Parent Finders and it mentioned one of its co-founders, a Vancouver woman called Joan Vanstone. I called Vanstone and told her my date and place of birth, the names of my adoptive parents, and, when she asked me for the name of my birthmother, I said, "I think it's Torrance, but I'm not sure of the spelling, or even if it's really the correct name."

Two days later, Joan called back to confirm my birthmother's surname and to tell me her first names, Ellen May. Joan didn't tell me how she got the information, she just said, "It all checks out." I could hardly believe it: Mom *had* given me my birthmother's true surname. Now I had my birthmother's maiden name, but I lived over two thousand miles from Vancouver and could hardly do research myself. The only solution was to hire a professional. I knew public records were kept in the provincial capital of Victoria, so I called the Victoria Public Library for the name of a good professional genealogist. They recommended Joanne Hughes whom I called on April 7, 1987. In two months, after twenty-five hours of research, she tracked down my birthmother. Here is a simplified account of the steps she took:

1. Rod McKuen, *Finding My Father*, (Los Angeles: Cheval Books, 1976).

First, Joanne checked Vancouver city directories for the years around my birth, and found Ellen May Torrance listed in 1927 and 1928. I knew, from the letter I had received from the Deputy Minister of Health in 1954, that my birthmother had been born in Nova Scotia, so Joanne next wrote to that province and somehow succeeded in obtaining my birthmother's birth certificate. That document gave Joanne the names of Ellen's parents, who turned out to be listed in the Vancouver city directories from 1931 onwards. Their 1947 listing showed a Mrs. E.M. McLeod living with them, and Joanne had a hunch McLeod was my birthmother, who had perhaps married, divorced and returned to live with her parents. McLeod was listed at their home until 1951, when there were no further listings of her name at any address. It seemed she had remarried, left Vancouver, or died. Joanne backtracked, carefully looking through masses of McLeods in earlier city directories. Finally, in the 1934 book, she found a Matthew McLeod whose wife was listed as Ellen M. Checking subsequent directories, Joanne found Matthew McLeod listed in 1951 with a new wife, Ruby. The couple was still listed in the most recent directory of 1977. Joanne immediately phoned Joan Vanstone of Parent Finders in Vancouver to ask her to call the McLeods to see if she could get Ellen's current name and whereabouts.

"With this daring move, we hit the jackpot," Joanne later told me. "Joan called Ruby McLeod and said she was an old friend of McLeod's first wife, Ellen, and wanted to get in touch with her. Without hesitating, Ruby gave her Ellen's new surname, Davis, her address and telephone number." Ruby also mentioned Ellen had lived in California with Boyd Davis for nineteen years but was now separated from him. Now she lived alone in an apartment in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver. We found my birthmother on June 9, 1978. Her surname had changed from Torrance to McLeod to Davis and she had lived out of Canada for nineteen years.

As soon as she learned my birthmother was living in Vancouver, Joan Vanstone—whom I knew was discreet and sensitive—volunteered to act as go-between. She called my birthmother saying she wanted to see her about an important personal event that happened in 1928, and Ellen invited her to tea the next day. Ellen told me later she knew instantly what the visit was about and went right to her doctor for a tranquillizer.

Afterwards Joan phoned me, talking very fast. "If I had to pick out a birthmother for you, Dorothy, I could never have found a more lovely one," she said. "You are going to love her." Joan gave me many details of Ellen's life, and after I put down the phone, I wrote Ellen a long letter about my life. A few days later, I received a letter from her.

In it she told me how thrilled she was I had found her, and how Joan had shown her scads of papers proving I was the daughter she had given up for adoption fifty years before. She was living in a bachelor apartment in a Senior Citizens' complex and had a "poor, tired 1964 Ford which takes me to do my marketing." She enclosed snapshots of herself and mentioned she was going to fly to Penticton to visit her

son, Charles and his family. “Dorothy, I am going to tell him he has a half-sister and unless I’m totally mistaken, he will be delighted with this surprising news.” She closed her letter with, “Don’t be offended if I think of you as my dark-haired baby, Jean². Mother.”

A few days later, Ken urged me to phone her and break the ice, so one Sunday night in June I sat at my desk and dialed her number. We talked nervously for a few minutes, and I was delighted to learn my half-brother Charlie’s two daughters had red hair, just like our second son, Angus. Ellen then asked me if I was going to tell my friends I had found her. I said I wanted to, but I didn’t want to embarrass her. “Well, dear, you wouldn’t,” she replied. “Years ago, perhaps yes, but not now. I have grown up emotionally. When Joan first told me about you, I didn’t believe it was all happening...but now I’m bursting with excitement and pleasure. I can hardly wait to tell my friends.”

After the call was over, eighteen-year-old Briana came in and confessed she’d been listening outside the door, imagining the day when she would be calling her own birthmother for the first time.

A few weeks later, Ken, Briana and I flew to Vancouver to meet this welcoming stranger—Ellen Davis—who had given birth to me in 1928. Arriving at her apartment, I felt excited and nervous. Like all adoptees, I wanted to see someone whom I resembled. When I embraced my slender birthmother, then stood back and looked at her, there could be no doubt she was my birthmother. Both our faces were long and narrow, and she had prominent nose while mine was small and straight only because I’d had it bobbed. She had lots of beautiful snow white hair, while mine was tinted blonde. We were both slim and of medium height: I was an inch taller and ten pounds heavier. She was simply dressed in navy slacks and a pink gingham blouse tied in the front at the waist.

Her modest bachelor apartment was spotless, adorned with her needlepoint, bargello, and cross-stitch. When I admired her work, she smiled and, since she knew I was a professional artist, she suggested perhaps I had gotten my artistic talent from her. After she had served us tea and some homemade cookies, Ken and Briana left us alone to get acquainted.

Neither of us broached the subject of my birthfather. It seemed kinder to let her to tell me about him in her own time.

I had brought her some gifts: a small snapshot album of my life’s highlights, one of my small watercolor paintings, and a diamond and sapphire dinner ring that had been my mother’s proudest possession. At first she didn’t want to take the ring, but when I promised to take it back into our family when she died, she said, “I’m thrilled to accept it. I’ll never take it off.” Until she died ten years later, she didn’t.

2. Ellen named me Jean when I was born and seemed to like calling me that. After we met, to please her I changed my middle name from Jane to Jean.

In 1979, the year after I found her, my birthmother made her first visit to our home in Ashland. One morning we were sitting at the kitchen table, having coffee. Suddenly she said, “Dorothy Jean, I feel sorry for you.” Shocked, I said, “Why?” and she said, “Because you expect yourself to be perfect and you’re not, and you expect me to be perfect, and I’m not. Until you can get over that, you’ll never be happy.” She was right, and from then on, I backed off. As with all reunited birthmothers and sons or daughters, both of us had to learn to face reality, to accept each other as we were.

After she had flown back to Vancouver, on my bedside table I found an envelope addressed in Ellen’s shaky hand: “To Dorothy: Re the Past.” Her letter was dated May, 1979, and in it she told me very matter-of-factly the name of my birthfather, how she had met him and gotten pregnant. She said he had died years before, around 1954, and that she would go to the library and try to get a copy of his obituary because she realized how important that was to me. At the end of the letter, she wrote:

“Dorothy Jean, my darling, if questions pop into your mind and I am able to answer them I will be glad to do so. Although I am unable to tell you very much about your father, I can tell you I am so very happy that I am your mother. I do love you. Mom.

“P.S. Please don’t be sad about the contents of this letter. It’s just that I thought you may possibly want to know the little I can tell you of your father and that you are too considerate to ask me. I *can* speak of it dear, even though I am full of guilt.”

We quickly fell into the routine of writing each other every week and I would call her a couple of times a month. Many times Ken and I sent her tickets for long visits to our home and twice we sent her tickets to Hawaii so she could share our vacation there. She quickly got into the fun of attending college graduations. She proudly watched as her new-found grandchildren gained their degrees, and finally, in 1981, she seemed especially happy as her fifty-three-year-old-daughter received her Master’s degree in studio art. She loved all of it—she was a woman who liked to be on the go and part of the action.

When it came time for me to write this chapter, I read through the box of my birthmother’s weekly letters and studied her diary and address book which my half-brother Charlie had given me when she died. Then I called some of her surviving relatives and friends, some of them as old as ninety-five. Piece by small piece, I have put the jig-saw puzzle of her life together until a picture of struggle and heartbreak emerged. As one friend said, “She never had any luck with men,” and I think that sums things up quite well. She said once, near the end of her life, her biggest regret was that she had never had a successful marriage.

Ellen May Torrance was born in 1908 in Digby, Nova Scotia, Canada, a tiny fishing town famous for its scallops. There were seven children in the family—four boys and three girls.

I wanted to illuminate my birthmother's nature, to begin to understand why her life had turned out as it had. One ray of illumination was learning about her father, a controlling, critical Scot with a gray, walrus mustache. Having lost his right arm in a train accident, he demanded to be dressed and waited on. He was a government inspector of fishing boats, and ran a very tight ship at home. Ellen's cousin told me, "Old Garnet Torrance was one of these men who, if you said something was black, he would say it was white. Everything Ellen said or did was wrong; he put her down constantly. He was very, very tight with money. Nobody liked him, including me."

As a girl in Digby, Ellen found life dull and school a bore. After she failed the ninth grade, her furious father shipped her off to a strict Catholic boarding school in New Brunswick, although the Torrances were Presbyterian. There she hated the regular lessons, but thrived on the nuns' needlework instruction; I still have a handkerchief which she tatted for me. After passing the ninth grade, she returned home to Digby, where she quit school to become night operator for the tiny Digby telephone exchange. There, she told me later, she passed the time by listening in on the latest gossip.

To escape her parents' home, Ellen started saving to visit her married sister, Jo, in Vancouver. As she was boarding the train for the long journey across Canada, her mother whispered, "I just know you're never coming back, Ellen," and she was right; that was exactly my birthmother's plan.

When she arrived in Vancouver, Ellen's sister, Jo, took her home and installed her in a small basement room. They hadn't seen each other for six years, and soon Jo confessed the reason she had married Marshall Campbell, an old man a man the same age as their father: Marshall had gotten her pregnant and their father had demanded a speedy wedding.

A few weeks later, when the Hudson's Bay Company hired her as a tobacco counter clerk, my birthmother was elated: there was no store in Digby to compare with the big, elegant department store with the giant white pillars.

However, she soon had to leave Jo and Marshall's house; she was afraid of Marshall, and he was afraid of her, afraid she'd lead his young bride astray. After Christmas, when Marshall told her to leave, Ellen found a boarding house near her job at the Bay; at last she was completely on her own and could do as she liked. She was the only girl there and had a tiny room on the third floor, across the hall from two young men, one of whom became my birthfather.

Doyle was twenty-three years old and a partner in a two-man real estate company. He was also quite a musician, playing banjo and guitar in two local dance bands. Ellen thought he looked like a movie star, with his neat moustache and his straight, dark, pomaded hair parted just to the left of center. He was soft-spoken

and confident; his father was a judge in North Battleford, Saskatchewan.

According to my birthmother, my birthfather was intelligent, had good manners and a shiny Chev coupe. Ellen thought he would be a good catch and flirted with him until he finally asked her if she'd like to go to a dance with him. She eagerly agreed. She was proud to be dating a musician and to be going for short weekend jaunts in his Chev. From then on, whenever Doyle had a gig on the weekend, he'd take her along and have the odd dance with her. It was a convenient arrangement, especially the lovemaking in her bed afterwards.

Unfortunately, though, Doyle treated her in a cold, patronizing manner. All he cared about was his music.

About the end of May, Ellen realized she was pregnant. When she was honest with herself, she knew she didn't love Doyle and it was obvious he didn't love her, but she yearned to keep her baby. She lay awake night after night, agonizing over how to inveigle him into marrying her. Since his father was a judge, she felt sure Doyle would do the honorable thing and marry her.

Ellen told me that on one of their drives to Stanley Park she told Doyle she was pregnant. He just sat there smoking, staring across at the mountains. "You'll have to give me a couple of days to figure things out," he said, and then drove back to their boarding house in silence. At dinner that night he wouldn't even look at her.

She said that a couple of nights later, he told her that his partner's wife was expecting their third baby in November, and would let her live with them until her baby was born in January in exchange for help with the children. That was all the help she got from Doyle.

When she was six months pregnant, my birthmother quit her job at the Bay tobacco counter and moved in with the Svensons.

"They treated me like a servant, which I was," said my birthmother in a letter she wrote me years later, "but across the street lived a young wife and mother called Mary who took me under her wing. She was the one who contacted the social worker who arranged for your adoption."

On asking Ellen what she wanted to do after the baby was born, Mary discovered her interest in nursing and determined to try to arrange it, despite the problem of Ellen's limited education. She knew there was a small nursing program in Bellingham, Washington, where her mother lived, so she wrote her mother a long letter and soon it was all arranged: Ellen could enter the nursing program at St. Joseph's Hospital in February.

After Ellen gave birth to me on January 9, 1928, she spent a month recuperating at her cousin Rosebud's house where she dated Rosebud's brother-in-law, young Matthew McLeod. He knew about my birth and adoption, and it didn't seem to matter to him. He drove Ellen to Bellingham, where St. Joseph's Hospital formally accepted her as a nurse-in-training, starting February 15. She was so euphoric that, when she was back in her room at Rosebud's, she wrote a glowing

letter to her social worker, Ronus. Ronus read it, then placed it in Ellen's file at the Vancouver General Hospital.

In 1960 I was astounded to be given a hand-written copy of that letter by Mrs. C., the social worker handling the adoption of our daughter, Briana. This kind woman was an extremely experienced social worker and wanted to help me learn something of my own roots. Amazingly, she found my birthmother's file at the hospital and in it Ellen's letter. She wrote out a copy of it and, without revealing my birthmother's name, gave it to me. Part of it read: "Now that I've had my baby, I shall enter the hospital in Bellingham and train to be a nurse, as I have always wanted to do. I am doing this because of the love of the work and also with the hope of proving to myself and those who believe in me that I am made of something worthwhile. When these three years of hard work are over, I will have lived down a certain phase of my life and again to be able to look myself and my mother in the face without shame. My baby girl I have not forgotten, and in one way I hope never to forget her, for in my heart she is my baby Jean, and she will keep me from doing things I might otherwise do and be ashamed of."

Things didn't work quite as she dreamed, however. I learned what actually happened from the "Re the Past" letter Ellen left on my bedside table at the end of her first visit to our home in 1979:

"I was at St. Joe's Hospital less than a year, then I got a letter from Matthew McLeod urging me to move back to Vancouver so we could get married. I returned to Vancouver expecting to transfer to St. Paul's Hospital, only to find I did not have enough education. My sister Jo's husband had died and she had a rooming house on Richards Street, so I moved in there. Matt was twenty-one years old and I turned twenty-one on February 18, 1929. We were married five days later."

In 1993, when my husband, Ken, and I moved back to the Pacific Northwest, it seemed an odd coincidence that we should end up living in Bellingham, Washington, the city where my birthmother had so eagerly begun her nurse's training in 1928. I was curious to know how long she had actually stuck it out at St. Joseph's and how the experience had gone for her. With an amazing bit of luck, I discovered a remarkable 87-year-old graduate of the program named Lucele still living a very active life in Bellingham, and one day I took her to lunch.

She told me she had been a nurse-in-training at St. Joseph's Hospital in 1928, the year my birthmother had begun the program.

"Because of the Depression, St. Joe's, which only had fifty beds, had a hard time staying afloat," she said. "When you applied, the nuns didn't ask about things like high school graduation. They were mainly interested in getting cheap labor, and paid us five dollars a month. When my mother took me in to apply, sister looked me over and said, 'Well, she's terribly thin, but that wouldn't stop her from working hard since her health is good.'

"There were only five girls in each class, and I can visualize this one girl with

short dark hair and bangs, and I know she was Canadian. She did a lot of smiling. I know she didn't stay very long."

When I showed Lucele two pictures of my birthmother taken about that time, she exclaimed, "Oh, that's her! I'm certain it's the same girl. She had lots of energy and used to walk so fast wherever she went. She had a wonderful personality, especially around sick people."

After a couple of hours, Lucele had answered most of my questions. Had my birthmother flunked out of the nursing course the way she'd failed grade nine in Nova Scotia? "That's unlikely. I never heard of anyone failing," said Lucele. "Sister Angela used to say, 'No matter how poor a student you were in school, you will do well here.'"

Did they ask her to leave because she was unruly? "No, I don't think so," said Lucele, "because we all knew the rules and obeyed them. A few used to stay out after the curfew, but there was sister waiting at the door, and she'd give them a calling down."

I showed Lucele my birthmother's "Re the Past" letter saying she'd left St. Joe's to return to Vancouver to marry Matthew McLeod and expecting to transfer to St. Paul's Hospital, only to learn that she didn't have enough education. "Do you think St. Paul's required high school graduation?" I asked her, "and would they have taken a married student?"

She answered no to both questions and then offered this insight: "The hard work and long hours may not have bothered your birthmother, but the tight controls—having to be your room by eight o'clock, for instance—no doubt galled her. You have to remember she'd been living in Vancouver on her own for several years and was used to complete freedom. I think that, after the initial thrill of being a nurse-in-training wore off, the loss of freedom really bothered her.

"I never did hear why Ellen left St. Joe's—they kept those things quiet. It's a shame she quit because she had a wonderful personality for a nurse. I think when her boyfriend proposed, she just dropped everything and moved back to Vancouver."

It's likely Ellen returned to Vancouver, Canada in the summer of 1928 to resume dating Matthew McLeod. They married in February, 1929 and nearly two years later had their only child, Charlie. Neither of them ever told Charlie he had a half-sister somewhere.

Matt got work in road and defense construction around the province. If he was close enough to Vancouver, he'd visit Ellen and Charlie on the weekends, or they'd visit him. In the forties he worked near Victoria on Vancouver Island, where he at first boarded with his oldest brother Willis, who was also his boss. Willis hated Matt's drinking and carrying on while his wife and son were living in Vancouver. One night, after returning home from a dance drunk, Matt went into a rage and shouted he was going to kill Willis.

Willis' daughter told me, "I was a terrified kid watching it all from an upstairs

window. When Uncle Matt ran to the shed for the big double-bitted ax, the other men grabbed my dad and hid him, then when my uncle couldn't find my dad, he took the ax and smashed my dad's truck. The next day, my dad kicked him out."

Soon after that, Matthew moved to Duncan where he was hired as superintendent of an airport construction job. At the beginning, his wife and son still lived in Vancouver. He did find some female companionship, though, according to Ruby, his second wife.

"When I met Matthew, he was thirty-seven and I was twenty-six. I had been married for four years and had one child, my son, Rod. I divorced my first husband the same year I met Matthew, whom I used to see occasionally when I was in Duncan. I guess I started going around with him about 1944. I'm not the first woman McLeod was tangled up with while he was married to Ellen. There was a few, I think, before me."

I told Ruby one of the few stories my birthmother had ever told me about her marriage to her two husbands. She said that one weekend, while Matt was working in Duncan, she paid him a surprise visit. She found him at a dance, dancing with a beautiful young woman. "I could see they were very much in love," she told me. "I fled to the ladies' room and was in a stall crying when two women came in and one said, 'Did you see Matt dancing with that girl?' and the other said, 'I hope poor Ellen never hears about this!' and I thought to myself, That's it! If he wants to carry on with another woman, I'm leaving."

"It could have been me, eh?" Ruby said. "Matthew loved to dance and I did go dancing with him sometimes."

Then Ruby offered some insights about my birthmother's first husband. "Matt did have a foul temper," she said, "and when we were first married, he could get into the booze, get nasty and a little bit hefty with his fists. Later he did quit drinking, but for the eighteen years he was married to Ellen and for the first few of the forty years he was married to me, sometimes he drank quite heavily and could get violent. I stood up to him, but Ellen didn't. Her father, old Mr Torrance, was a very domineering old boy, and so maybe that's what she was used to accepting."

Since her husband worked out of town for so many years, my birthmother claimed to have raised Charlie almost alone. According to Charlie himself, though, it was his grandmother Torrance, living next door, who actually raised him. He said he loved his grandma Torrance.

After my half-brother Charlie died in 1990, his widow, Gaye, told me that he didn't have a very good home life when he was a kid. "He never felt welcome at home. He often hesitated to go there, for fear his folks would be fighting and would shout at him to get out," she said. "His mother never liked to cook, to stay home and get a hot meal for Charlie. She was very neat and tidy, her house was spotless, but that's not the same thing as being a real home person. She was never nurturing to Charlie."

Once, during a visit to our home in Wisconsin, Charlie told my husband, Ken,

that when he was a teenager, he thought his mother was going out too much, not behaving herself. She was gallivanting, and he didn't like that.

Charlie was always careful not to say anything negative about Ellen to me. Once, though, when I said, "You know, Charlie, reading between the lines, I think I had a much better time of it growing up than you did," he replied, "Dorothy, you sure got that right."

Having a crummy home life was part of the reason Charlie quit school at the end of the ninth grade, in June of 1946. At fifteen and a half, he went to work for his dad at various construction sites around the province. That fall, when construction work dried up, Charlie got a job as a busboy at the prestigious Hotel Vancouver.

Ellen, in one of her rare sharing moments, told me it was while Charlie was working there that he happened to spot his dad checking into the hotel with another woman. Charlie called her and told her what he'd seen, saying, "Mom, you'd better get down here right away!" So she rushed down to the hotel where the house detective had the woman thrown out and later testified in Court. That's how my birthmother got her divorce from Matthew McLeod on March 21, 1947.

Ellen got a job as a dental assistant and moved in with her parents, where her father demanded she wait on him the way she had as a girl in Digby. He criticized her constantly, blaming her for her marriage breakup, despite Matthew's proven infidelity. Her mother had grown senile and could give her no support.

Depressed, Ellen turned to her church for support. One Sunday, as she was kneeling at the communion rail, the priest, knowing she had been divorced, stopped in front of her and, frowning, said, "You shouldn't be here, Ellen." She stood up and walked out the door and never went back.

Before long she joined a fraternity of men and women called the Rosicrucian Order. Their occult methods appealed to my birthmother's love of the off-beat, and she enjoyed the fellowship of their meetings and dances.

Mrs. T., a close friend Ellen made through the Rosicrucians in 1948, told me how miserable Ellen had been living with her parents. "Her father was a Scottish curmudgeon who begrudged Ellen every mouthful of food she ate, every jot of light and water she used. He demanded she be in by ten o'clock every night, and here she was, a woman of forty with a grown son.

"About that time she became friendly with a carpenter called Boyd Davis," said Mrs. T. "Ellen yearned for someplace else to live and I had three sons to support, so I hired Boyd to build an apartment in my basement, and she moved in. Soon after, Boyd left his wife and moved in with her. I never liked Boyd. He made a pass at me once while they were living downstairs."

Because my birthmother had scarcely mentioned her second husband, Boyd Davis, I was very curious about him. Years after she died, I met Boyd's second son, Rob, who didn't hesitate to tell me the straight truth about his father.

"You might call my old man, Boyd, a professional womanizer. He was always on the lookout for a woman with money. The only woman he ever married purely

for love was my mother, his first wife. After they divorced, he began a routine where he'd meet a woman, live with her awhile, then marry her and proceed to spend her money, meanwhile keeping an eye out for the next one. He was a very smooth-talking person when you had something he wanted. Oh yes, honey just ran out of his mouth. He would have lived with a snake if it had money.

"When my old man first met Ellen, me and my brother, Boyd Junior, were sixteen and eighteen, living in a boarding house and supporting ourselves. Ellen's folks were old and had some real estate and she was their only heir, so it wasn't long before he left his second wife and moved in with Ellen. When you say Boyd went through all the money your birthmom inherited, I wouldn't doubt that for one second."

Not long after Ellen's father died, Boyd divorced his second wife and married her. After her mother, too, had died, the two of them left Canada. On October 5, 1954, Ellen wrote in her diary: "MOVED TO CALIFORNIA WITH BOYD DAVIS!" She was obviously excited to be moving to California, glamorous land of hot sunshine and great wealth. She had no idea what lay ahead.

They decided to settle in San Diego. They rented an apartment and Boyd got a job with a construction company doing carpentry.

When her late parents' real estate was sold and Ellen's inheritance finally came in, she and Boyd made the down-payment on her modest dream house on Golden Avenue in Lemon Grove, California and moved in. Boyd promptly quit his job and bought a dump truck and loader and started hauling dirt. He called his company "Davis' Dirt."

"Boyd and my husband Sid were both contractors," recalled Myrna, an old friend, "and sometimes they worked together on big jobs, loading rocks and top soil and hauling it out to building sites.

My mother was happiest with Boyd Davis during the four years they lived on Golden Avenue. After that her money and his charm ran out.

"Boyd was drinking a lot, and he got more belligerent every year," Myrna continued. "I didn't care that he was an atheist, but when he'd tell our kids, 'Don't you believe in that stupid Bible!' it made me so mad I'd want to slug him. Sometimes Ellen would come over and complain about his drinking and what hell it was living with him. They never divorced, but they separated several times."

In 1960 they sold the Lemon Grove house and bought a cheaper house in Spring Valley, another suburb of San Diego. Two years later, they had to sell that and rent a place. Ellen filed for an interlocutory divorce, but never finalized it.

In 1962 my birthmother was fifty-four, weighed a hundred pounds, and was in poor health. Desperate to leave Boyd, she loaded up her old white Buick and drove to Charlie and Gaye's in Penticton, British Columbia. There she got a job nursing an old bedridden woman, but all the lifting exhausted her. Two months later she quit and drove back to Spring Valley where she moved in with her friend, Kitty. Two months later she returned to Boyd.

Curious about the many references to Kitty in my birthmother's diary, I scoured her old address book and unearthed a telephone number. It was eight years since my birthmother had died, but I called anyway. To my surprise, Kitty answered and we had a long talk. She told me they had been next-door neighbors in Spring Valley, and that, over the years, Ellen spent a lot of time living with her.

"One day I remember vividly was in October of 1964, when Boyd brought her to my house from the Chula Vista Hospital. When I opened my door, there was Boyd supporting Ellen, who was white-faced and crying. I got her into bed and then went back to Boyd, who told me he'd found her unconscious in the bathtub and had called the paramedics who revived her and put her in the hospital for two days. She'd taken an electric hair drier into the water and tried to electrocute herself. After six weeks she moved back to the trailer with Boyd."

Ellen's diary had only a handful of entries for each year, but there was always one for Christmas. In 1965 she wrote: "Spent Christmas *alone* in Spring Valley."

In 1966 Boyd's mother died and he became preoccupied with her estate. Ellen wrote, "November 23: Boyd returned home from his mother's funeral in Vancouver. He's in another mood, very different and remote. Tells me all he wants is OUT of this union." Then, a few weeks later: "Boyd has sold everything for practically nothing—my half was \$183.00. He came over here today very sorry and lonely and scared, wanting me to move back to B.C. with him. I told him it was out of the question—I was too afraid ever to try again. As usual, he was drunk. I have only pity for him and hope to God he gets to Boyd Junior's safely."

On December 15, 1966 Boyd Davis left my birthmother in California to fend for herself. Their marriage had languished for fifteen years and now they separated for good.

The next seven years were, in many ways, the toughest of her life. She was fifty-eight years old, had \$183.00 in the bank and a few months of nurse's training to her credit. She took the first of twenty-two jobs as a live-in practical nurse or housekeeper to rich old ladies in the San Diego area. Sometimes she'd quit after a few days. Three times, admitted as a welfare patient, she had to be hospitalized for a bleeding ulcer. Whenever the jobs dried up and she became desperate, she borrowed from friends or on her insurance policy and moved in with Kitty, paying room and board.

Ellen—who was still Canadian—moved back to Vancouver, Canada in 1973 when she turned sixty-five. That fall she started her last job, working as a housekeeper for a wealthy old jeweler named Mr. Albertson. She stayed with him almost a year.

My husband, Ken, recalled that even though Albertson wanted to marry Ellen, she couldn't stand him because he used to urinate in his bedroom sink. Ken said, "She could easily have divorced Boyd and married that old fellow and inherited a lot of money, but she had too much pride to do that. I always respected her for

that. I asked her once why she had never divorced Boyd Davis. She said Boyd was living on Vancouver Island with his common law wife, and they had no reason to go through with a divorce.”

Ken continued, “When you tracked her down in 1978, she was living on the Old Age Pension in that tiny senior housing apartment, and seemed quite contented. I think it was a good time for you to find each other.”

In 1979 when my birthmother sent me my birthfather’s obituary, I wrote the Division of Vital Statistics and they sent me his Certificate of Death and a letter giving important information extracted from their records. The letter included the name and relationship of the informant, J. Myles, brother-in-law of the deceased. I found three J. Myles in my Vancouver telephone book, one with an apartment address. Since my late birthfather’s brother-in-law had to be an older man, that seemed like my best bet. I wrote the name and phone number on a slip of paper, tucked it in my wallet, and forgot about it.

Over the years, her health deteriorated to the point where, if she wanted to go shopping, she had to be pushed in a wheelchair. She had always been a high-spirited woman, and she hated being enfeebled and dependent on others. Trying to help from Wisconsin, I managed to get her into a special program with Vancouver’s only geriatric psychiatrist; he seemed to help her.

When I called her one night in December of 1988, for the first time I heard her cry, saying she could hardly walk across the room. I felt very sorry for her, but all I could do was to wait for the results of hospital tests she was scheduled to have the following day. Late the next morning her doctor called to tell me she had just been found dead in her apartment, he assumed of a heart attack. I was shocked at the news, but still I was glad her misery was over. She was eighty years old and we had had ten good years of knowing each other; for that I was very grateful.

Her son Charlie and I carried out her wishes: her body was donated to the medical school and there was no funeral, just a lovely dinner for her closest friends. I returned to Wisconsin with her diary, which Charlie wanted me to have.

A few months later, I decided to try to find out more about my late birthfather, and possibly locate his family. I dug out of my wallet the little piece of paper with J. Myles written on it and dialed the number, thinking the chances of this being *the* J. Myles were very, very small.

When a man answered, I introduced myself and then asked if he had been the brother-in-law of Doyle Putnam. “Yes, I was,” he said. I explained where I’d gotten his name and he listened calmly to my story, which evidently he was hearing for the first time. I told him I knew that Doyle, after his liaison with my birthmother, had married and fathered three more daughters. Immediately the man—who told me his name was Jim—asked if I wanted their phone numbers so I could call them, but I told him I didn’t want to do that because it might spoil their high opinion of Doyle. He promised he wouldn’t say anything to his nieces. Ken and I were going

to be in Vancouver the following month, so I invited him to meet us for lunch.

Lunch with Jim was thrilling, sitting there hearing stories about my birthfather's life, looking at pictures. I couldn't see any resemblance between Doyle's other three daughters and myself, but I did spot one resemblance between Doyle and me: we both had a long upper lip. That pleased me enormously, to see where part of me came from. Jim wanted me to call him Uncle Jim, and he couldn't have been kinder. As we were leaving, Ken shocked me by suggesting that Jim could call one of his nieces to see if she wanted to meet me. My new uncle did that as soon as he got home.

Within the hour, Crysta came to our hotel and, over a glass of wine, we sat talking for over an hour, or mostly she talked and I listened. Crysta, shorter and rounder, and nine years younger than me, engulfed me with a flood of stories about our father, Doyle—whom she called an eccentric genius—and other luminaries of our family. She was devoted to her twin sister, Gwen, whom she called later that night with the startling news of a new sister. A few days later, Gwen wrote me a long, friendly letter welcoming me into the Putnam family.

I learned from them that my birthfather, Doyle Putnam, had been born in 1904 and grew up in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, the youngest of three sons. His father was first a King's Counsel, then later on, a judge. The family had a big, three-story house where they entertained often. Unfortunately, his mother was so hateful that both Doyle and his older brother left home when they were sixteen. The middle son fled to university, but by the age of twenty-three he had to be permanently confined to a mental hospital. He finally escaped one winter day ten years later; his frozen body was found beside a railroad track. This mental illness was something my own research had turned up, and my twin sisters were keenly interested because their elder sister had schizophrenia.

Doyle was an ambitious musician, playing acoustic guitar, banjo and saxophone, so he moved to Vancouver when he was in his early twenties. There his and my birthmother's paths crossed. After their liaison ended in 1927, Doyle moved to Winnipeg where he played in a pit orchestra and fell in love with a beautiful chorus-line dancer named Andrea, whom he married in Vancouver in 1932. Nineteen months later, their first daughter, Donna, was born. By then Doyle was playing on two weekly radio shows: in a small jazz band called Three Shades of Blue and in Ricky Hyslop's Orchestra on The Nabob Hour.

An elderly musician friend of Doyle's told me my birthfather had once said to him, "If I had your talent, I'd move to London." Apparently Doyle had confidence in his own talent, because in late 1933 he moved with his small family to London, England, where, a year later, he was recording with Edgar Jackson's Orchestra, a group of leading London musicians. He played in the London Hippodrome Theater Orchestra and, as a member of the "Buddy" Rogers Band, he played in a couple of movies. He also cut a hit Decca record called "Stay as sweet as you are," under

his own name. In 1937 Andrea gave birth to twin girls, Crysta and Gwen.

When Ken and I semi-retired to Bellingham, Washington, in 1992, it was a happy coincidence that my half-sister Gwen lived there also. She worked as a realtor, in fact, she sold us our house. She and I have lunch together three or four times a year, and have become good friends. She has given me lots of background about our father, Doyle.

Gwen told me, “We children always called him Doyle, it was never Dad. When we were very young, our house in London was often full of musicians who thought us calling him Doyle was funny, and then it just got to be a habit. I think he wanted it that way. He wanted the image of a famous guitarist, not a daddy. He was very, very ambitious and very focused on his career, but unfortunately we had to leave London because of the outbreak of war in 1939.”

Back in Vancouver, Doyle found it increasingly difficult to support his family as a musician. For one thing, every since Benny Goodman’s band had featured Charlie Christian playing an electric guitar, that instrument had gradually replaced the acoustic guitar, Doyle’s principle instrument. The trouble was, Doyle was a purist who worshipped at the feet of the great Andrés Segovia, and he was not about to change to electric. The other problem was that, when the war ended and wartime restrictions were lifted, excellent records were again being made and top-notch recorded music often replaced live bands.

“The main heartache for our whole family was my mother’s multiple sclerosis,” Gwen told me. “As the years went by, she was falling down and couldn’t walk. I’ll never forget waking up to the sound of an ambulance motor running outside our door, waiting to take her to the hospital again. Eventually she had to be hospitalized permanently. At night Doyle would hole up in his huge studio, and we’d hear him playing one of his instruments, usually his guitar. He never had any other woman, as far as I know. My mom’s mother, Grandma Myles, came to live with us and she was wonderful. When we three girls were teenagers, we came and went and acted pretty much as we wanted.”

“Doyle was ambitious for us,” Gwen continued, “and he instilled a sense of confidence in us. I’ve never been afraid to try to do something new. I’ve always thought, ‘Damn it, I want to do it, and I’m going to do it!’ Both Crysta and I are that way. All three of us have done real well, considering the way we were brought up.”

His family problems combined with all the changes in the music world dimmed Doyle’s dream of becoming a famous guitarist. Finally, he renewed his old real estate license and made a lot of good business contacts playing chess; he was British Columbia champion for several years.

“Four years before he died,” Gwen said, “Doyle drove to Mexico and spent six months searching for the supreme guitar, which he ultimately purchased from Segovia for \$1,600.00. To finance this pilgrimage he had sold our nineteen-room home to a large real estate firm and then leased it back by allowing them to use

our grounds as a parking lot. When he died there was no money at all. It was all pretty selfish, but I guess he just couldn't quite give up his heart's desire to become a famous guitarist."

After he'd been back home in Vancouver for a couple of years, Doyle became very short-tempered and threw Donna, his eldest daughter, out of the house. Their grandmother Myles finally told the girls he was dying of colon cancer and was in terrible pain. "On June 5, 1953," Gwen said, "he finally let my uncle Jim drive him to the Vancouver General's emergency ward, (the same place *my* adoptive father had died after shooting himself in 1946.) Two hours later he was dead. He was only forty-eight years old. After the funeral—which the Musicians' Union paid for—musicians filled our house to pay their respects."

One of those musicians told me recently, "Your birthfather was a superb musician who could play anything. He was always eager to help others and was very well-liked. In his personal life he was careful. When you're a musician playing in night clubs, some women can be very aggressive, but Doyle was very level-headed and avoided most of the pitfalls common to musicians."

"Doyle's goal," Gwen continued, "was to become a famous guitarist—everything else was secondary. He never did any physical work, but he loved discussing current events or arguing politics with his friends, or voicing his opinions on late night radio shows or in letters to the editor. He was often serious and critical, but he could be very charming and fun-loving. I don't remember him hugging us girls too often, or hugging anybody, for that matter. His mother, whom we girls referred to as 'the bitch,' was very cold and aloof, so I guess that's where that came from. Doyle was a wonderful, interesting individual. For Crysta and me he just died too young because we were left with harsh memories of him from those last terrible months."

After adoptees make contact with their birthfamilies, I believe that eventually they try, in their minds, to answer three questions: Why did I search for them? What did I find? and How did my search affect me?

I searched because I was very curious to know my roots, like all adoptees are, whether they admit it or not. I wanted my birthfamilies' health histories, yes, but that was my ostensible, not my true, reason for searching.

When I tracked down my birthmother, I found a lonely, seventy-year-old woman who had made some bad choices in her life but who had handled the repercussions pretty well. She didn't think very highly of herself, perhaps because of her tyrannical father. She was gutsy to the point of recklessness. She had a lot of pride, and scarcely mentioned her life with two alcoholic husbands. Nor did she allude to the seven miserable years she spent alone in California, eking out a living as a caregiver to rich old invalids while her own health was fragile. Although she tried to act the lady, she had a bitchy and inappropriate side, although she was careful not to show it to me.

The first thing I learned about my birthfather was that he had died twenty-five years earlier of colon cancer. Having a liaison with Ellen was one bad choice Doyle made, but Ken believes that my birth taught him a lesson he never forgot. He was encouraging to his three daughters, but not outwardly affectionate. He was very intelligent and a highly accomplished musician. He pursued his musical career aggressively, but bad luck in the form of the second world war intervened when his career was at its peak in London. Terrible luck struck again when his wife was permanently hospitalized with multiple sclerosis. His third stroke of bad luck was to be hit with fatal cancer when he was forty-eight.

Reflecting on my search and my research, each bit of information I've uncovered about my birthparents has excited and fascinated me. I was lucky because both sides of my birthfamily welcomed me into their lives, and things don't always happen that way. Like nearly all adoptees who reunite with birthfamilies, I am very, very happy I looked for and found my roots.

My birthfather's determination and drive are qualities I can see in myself, and learning of his intelligence has improved my self-image, has made me think more along the lines of "I'm smart enough to do this."

I admired my birthmother's independence, neatness, and just plain guts. What I didn't like about her was a certain phoniness, a front I couldn't seem to penetrate. Still, I was her daughter who cared about her and who tried to help her. She tried to please me by her faithful letter writing, her beautiful knitting and needlework for me and my family, and by trying to be the kind of birthmother I wanted her to be. The last time we were together, she hugged me goodbye and said, "Dorothy Jean, I hope you know how much you mean to me. Before you came into my life, nobody gave a God-damn about me. For you to find me after *fifty* years had been the miracle of my lifetime."

For my part, what I discovered about my birthparents helped me to mentally paint a more accurate self-portrait because then I was able to recognize the physical and temperamental outlines which their genes had already laid down on my canvas. My search also taught me that I clearly had the better life with my adoptive parents, Nevin and Minnie Ryan, whose stable and loving upbringing allowed me to complete my self-portrait with acceptance, pride and, I hope, with grace.