

Briana: the Adoptee Who Was Given a Special Gift

Is it a good idea for adoptive parents to search for their son or daughter's birthmother? In this story, they did just that, and the resulting relationships were extremely positive. However, the adoptee, Briana, advises against it, saying, "If things don't go well, who is the adoptee going to blame? It's better if they do it themselves, then they are more prepared to accept the responsibility for whatever happens."



Dorothy, adoptee's mother: It was all my nutty idea, to go out and find our daughter's birthmother for her. I realize how crazy that sounds, and it is a very risky thing to do, but there were some special circumstances here. The first was that I, too, had been adopted and had a very positive experience when I found my own birthmother. The second was that Briana and I were very close and I knew, without any doubt, that she, also, wanted a reunion with her birthmother. Her wedding date had been set and she was in college busy studying for her final exams. The third factor was that we had had two sons born to us, and, perhaps for that reason, weren't as possessive of Briana or as fearful of a reunion with her birthfamily as many adoptive parents are.

Briana, adoptee: I must have been pretty young when they told me I was adopted, because I just remember always knowing. My parents would bring it up from time to time, saying things like how much they loved me and how I was the luckiest thing that ever happened to them. So I never had any negative feelings about it, never. The only negative I can remember was with my friends.

The first person I ever told was my really close friend, Trudy Hanson. We were

in second grade at Wilmarth School in Ashland, Wisconsin. I can remember the exact spot where we sat: it was on the school playground right across the street from Ollie's corner store. We were sitting there laughing and telling stories and that's when it came out.

She had been telling me about another friend of hers that was adopted, and when I casually said that I was adopted, too, I remember the look of total horror on her face. She said "You're what? You were? How awful!" I remember going, "Awful, what's awful about it?" I was just shocked at her response. Since I'd never been treated anything but positively about it, it was a shock to me that anybody would think badly about it. I remember feeling, for the first time, a little angry and resentful, thinking, What the hell's her problem? Then she said, "I can't imagine not knowing my parents," and I said, "What do you mean, I don't know my parents? Of course I know my parents!" I had this naive attitude and no understanding of what bothered her so much about it. Neither of my two brothers, Ian and Angus, had been adopted, so I didn't think of talking to them about it.

I grew up in a nice Tudor-style house my parents built on the outskirts of town. I was nine years old when we first moved into it and I hated living there because, when the school bus stopped to let me off, one of the boys would yell out, "Morrow Mansion!" After that happened several times, I cried to my mother, "Why can't we go back to Casperson's house?" That was the little white Cape Cod we'd rented while my mom was in college, during our first four years in Ashland.

I soon got to like the new house, though. The boys and I each had our own room and six acres of woods to run around in. We had two cats and lots of books and music and—because Mom was a professional artist—lots of art in our home.

Out back we had a small sugar bush we tapped every spring to make maple syrup. In that same area, Ian, who was about thirteen, built me a little playhouse out of popple trunks covered with plastic—I had lots of fun in that. A little stream ran through the land and my dad built three bridges over it. He cut long paths through the trees and mowed them sitting on the riding lawn-mower.

I didn't lack for anything: if I wanted piano lessons or to go into a program, my parents put me into it. I knew that a lot of my friends didn't have those opportunities, so I felt very lucky. I never felt I was spoiled, though—I did my share of chores around the house, and earned my own spending money from when I was quite young.

One day when I was about fourteen, I got home before my mother did. As I walked up the driveway I was horrified to see our cat Skeeter impaled on the top of the garage door. Sometimes we left the door up to cool off the garage and he'd been sleeping on top of it. Mom had no idea he was up there and hit the remote as she drove away. I took his body down and put it in a box on the back porch so it wouldn't frighten her when she got home. Mom cried about that. She felt so badly that she had killed Skeeter and ever worse that I had been the one to find him.

In 1978, when I was eighteen and Ian and Angus were away at college, my

mother was very excited because she had tracked down her birthmother³ in Vancouver, Canada, where Mom had been born fifty years before. The first time Mom called her, I was right there, listening outside the study door. Afterwards I went inside and dropped into the chair beside her desk. Mom said her birthmom—my new Grandma Davis—had been so nervous her voice was shaking. Then Mom asked me if I'd like to go along when she and Dad flew to Vancouver to meet her.

“That'd be great,” I said. “I'll look for my own birthmother too, some day, but I don't think I'll have the burning desire you did because we have such a good relationship. What I would like, though, is to have a picture of her and a family medical history for when I have kids.”

My high school education was pretty nominal because my friends and I were often stoned on pot, something my parents didn't realize until years later. I began to turn my life around the following year, when I moved to another city and did very well in a licensed practical nurse's program.

By the winter of 1985, I was in the final year of a four year nursing program and was living in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, with Keith McKenzie. Keith had given me a ring and we had set our wedding date for August third, a few weeks after my graduation. LaCrosse was a long drive from Ashland, so Mom and I talked on the phone often. One time we were talking about some adoptee-birthmother reunions we'd seen on *Oprah*. I told her, “Now that I'll be getting married and having kids, I'd like to find my birthmother, but I'm just too busy right now. I can't imagine when I'll have the time to do all that phoning and digging around. Some day I'll meet her, though.”

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: Soon after talking with Briana, I got an inspiration: What if I could get a picture of her birthmother and a family medical history as a very special wedding gift? I felt it was the best idea I'd ever had. Knowing Briana's character, I felt sure her birthmother would turn out to be a kind and decent woman who had made a slip when she was very young, probably conned by an older guy. I mulled over my plan and talked to Ken about it. As always, he was understanding and supportive, if not quite as gung-ho as I was.

In March 1986 I finally called Joanne Hughes, the Canadian genealogist who'd found Ellen Davis, my birthmother, back in 1978. I told her my idea and gave her the meager background information the social worker had provided us when we adopted Briana in January 1960, in Vancouver, Canada: that her birthmother had lived in northern British Columbia and had finished grade eleven before dropping out of school. Because we, of course, had the Adoption Order, we also knew she had named her baby Cheryl Briana Munn. Joanne said we were lucky because Munn was an uncommon name, and it could be the last name of either birthparent since many birthmothers use the birthfather's surname when naming their baby.

3. See the preceding chapter, “Dorothy.”

Joanne began her research by scouring old city directories and telephone books from all over British Columbia, especially those from the north, making lists of Munn families. She asked friends who lived in northern towns to look for the name Munn in 1959 and 1960 high school annuals or year-books. She urged me to pretend to be Briana and to write a letter to Post Adoption Services⁴ in Victoria, B.C. asking for non-identifying information on her ethnic background, plus physical descriptions and medical histories of her birth parents and both sets of grandparents. I wrote the letter, forged Briana's signature, and mailed it at the end of May 1986, after we had returned home from Briana's college graduation.

Briana, adoptee: At Viterbo College, when you walk to the center of the stage to get your diploma, your parents also walk onto the stage and one of them pins you. When Dad struggled to fasten my nursing pin to my collar, all three of us had wet eyes. It had been a long, round-about struggle, but I had made it; I was a four-year degree nurse. Grandma Davis, Mom's seventy-eight-year-old birthmother, was in the audience taking pictures with a high-speed film and a long-range lens. She'd never seen a long-range lens before, but she's the gutsy type and will try anything. Afterwards, I tied my nurse's cap on my antenna and my pals and I drove around LaCrosse honking the horn before joining my family for a big celebration. That was on May 18, 1986.

Even though I had graduated, my life was still crazy because I had to study for my state board exams in early July, to become a registered nurse. Since Keith and I wanted to be married in LaCrosse—over 250 miles from my home in Ashland—I had to handle most of the details of a traditional church wedding. I liked Mom's idea of having two wedding receptions, one in LaCrosse after the August 3rd wedding, and, following our honeymoon, a second one in Ashland for our Ashland friends.

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: Joanne Hughes and I were both afraid that, without knowing the name of Briana's birthmother, it might be impossible to trace her before the wedding day. She suggested I call Harry Duncan, the Vancouver lawyer who had handled Briana's adoption back in 1960. I was afraid professional ethics might prevent him from cooperating, but our families had been close friends since we were children. I told him my idea for a once-in-a-lifetime gift and I said if he could give me Briana's birthmother's name, I would be discreet. On June 17th he sent me a brief letter:

Dear Dorothy:

Regarding the birth of your adopted daughter on January 1, 1960, the information you requested is as follows:

4. Post Adoption Services, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, B.C., Canada, V8W 3A2.

Name: Cheryl Maureen Webster

Born: Prince Rupert, B.C.

Age at time of birth: 17

Address: 7451 Sussex St., Burnaby, B.C.

*Best personal regards to you and Ken,
Harry*

A few weeks later, Ken and I flew to Vancouver for a medical meeting. I had Harry's letter in my purse, and my goal was to find Cheryl Maureen Webster's own birth announcement some time in 1942, since I knew she had been seventeen on January 1, 1960 when she gave birth to Briana. Finding that announcement would give us her parents' names and would help us trace her present whereabouts.

Luckily, the huge library was next door to our hotel, so after breakfast I grabbed my notes and was one of the first inside when the doors opened. First, I looked up the address on Sussex Street in the 1960 Vancouver city directory and found it had been the Burnaby Home For Girls, a protestant church home for unwed pregnant girls, just as I had suspected. Cheryl's mother must have sent her there from Prince Rupert to try to avoid scandal. Then I learned the only place in Vancouver with old Prince Rupert newspapers was the archive at the University of British Columbia.

Within an hour I was sitting in front of a microfilm machine at UBC, scanning birth announcements in day after day of the 1942 editions of the *Prince Rupert News*. After cranking the handle and switching rolls for several hours, I found what I felt certain was the birth announcement I was after:

*WEBSTER—To Mr. & Mrs. Danny Webster in Prince Rupert General Hospital,
July 28, a daughter.*

I printed a copy, gathered up my papers and walked over to the cafeteria at Brock Hall to get something to eat. For desert, I bought a Hagen Daz ice-cream bar dipped in a thick layer of dark chocolate—I felt like celebrating.

On our last morning in Vancouver, I decided to phone the high school in Prince Rupert. When a woman said "Brooks High School, Joyce speaking." I forgot the complex lie I had prepared and instead told her the truth.

Joyce Fournier immediately grasped the situation and said she'd be happy to look through the high school's old year-books for mention of Cheryl Maureen Webster, class of 1960. She promised to call me in Wisconsin in a few days. On July first Joyce called to say she had found nothing in the 1958, 1959 or 1960 year-books. Then came the bombshell. She had decided to call all the Websters in Prince Rupert to ask if they knew a Cheryl Webster, aged about forty-four. Eventually she found a woman who did. Elsie Webster said, "Why yes, Cheryl's our niece, she

lives in Vancouver. Our daughter, Eunice Rice, knows how to reach her.”

Joyce quickly contacted Eunice, who said “As far as I know, my cousin Cheryl never had a baby when she was seventeen, but still I guess it’s possible. I saw her a couple of years ago at a wedding in Vancouver. She’s married to her second husband. He’s a roofing contractor and they just built a new home in Burnaby.” Eunice told Joyce Fournier she’d be glad to talk to me, so I called her soon after. She gave me quite a bit of information, but was careful to withhold Cheryl’s surname.

She said, “Cheryl married the first time in 1962 and had a son, Warren, about five years later. Then she divorced and married her present husband about 1974. If you’d like me to, I’d be willing to call her for you and see if she is your daughter’s birthmother.” Then Eunice said, “If she’d like to make contact with you, that’s fine, and if she doesn’t, I could tell you that also.” The idea that the birthmother could choose *not* to have further contact was one I believed in deeply. Eunice had determined it intuitively.

Later, Eunice related her call to Cheryl:

“Hello, Cheryl, this is Eunice Rice. There’s a family matter I’d like to talk to you about. When could we talk privately?”

“Well, right now is okay. I’m all alone here.”

“Does January 1, 1960 mean anything special to you?”

After several seconds she said, “Yes.”

“Do you want to know all I know about this?”

“Yes.”

Cheryl nervously admitted that she was indeed Briana’s birthmother, and, after hearing about Briana’s life, said she was very, very happy to learn she’d had a good home and had made such a success of her life.

Then Eunice said Cheryl was worried because Briana wasn’t making the contact herself.

“I told her about you finding your birthmom,” Eunice said, “and we’re going to discuss it more when I go down to Vancouver in July. But this is where Cheryl said ‘Eunice, if Briana ever wanted to see me’—this has been like a secret dream she never thought would ever come true—‘I would go there immediately or send her the money to come out, but I want it to be *her* that wants it.’”

I tried to reassure her: “Eunice, I’m mailing you a letter I wrote to Cheryl explaining I don’t want to upset her or to intrude on her life. If she likes, she could just send me a picture of herself and the family medical history, then just leave it at that until Briana herself decides to contact Cheryl. I enclosed a beautiful little picture of Briana in her nursing uniform. I thought you could give Cheryl my letter and the picture when you see her in July.”

After Eunice and her family had been to Vancouver and returned home to Prince Rupert, she wrote me a letter. In it she said, “Dorothy, Cheryl is a very emotionally controlled person, but when she sat across from me in the restaurant

and opened your letter and saw Briana's face for the first time, she broke down and wept openly."

When I read that, I called Eunice and urged her to ask Cheryl to call me. When Cheryl called, I think I was able to explain why I was the one who was contacting her, to set her mind at ease somewhat. I told her about the close relationship Briana and I had always had and how often we had talked about adoptees finding their roots. I told her about finding my own birthmother in 1978 and how excited Briana had been about that. Then I explained how busy she was studying for two sets of exams and planning a wedding that was only weeks away.

We talked about exactly when I should give this special gift to Briana, and agreed it could not be until after her wedding and honeymoon. The best time seemed to be after they returned from their honeymoon and were in Ashland for their second wedding reception.

I told Cheryl, "Keith and Briana will be staying here at our house. I think I'm just going to take her into our bedroom and give her this gift privately because I think it's something between the two of us. Then she can do with it—you know, go from there—however she wants to. That's my plan. I hope that's okay?"

"Sure.... you know," she said quietly.

"Pardon?"

"I hope everything turns out okay."

"Don't you worry, Cheryl, it's going to be just fine." And I knew, in my heart, it would be.

While Briana and Keith were honeymooning in the Bahamas, a registered package arrived at our home in Ashland. Cheryl had sent several pictures of herself, her husband Tom Lindstrom and her son Warren, Briana's half-brother. She also sent a long, matter-of-fact typewritten letter giving her family's medical history and racial background. Her name and address were included. I chose what I thought was the nicest picture, one of her and Tom on a cruise, then took it downtown to be framed.

Briana, adoptee: The day of our wedding, August 3, 1986, was sunny and beautiful. LaCrosse, Wisconsin, never looked prettier. We had the pictures taken before the ceremony, so after the wedding the guests could go straight to the hotel for the reception dinner and dance. We spent our wedding night in the hotel's bridal suite and then, late the next morning, we all crowded into our tiny rented house to open wedding gifts. When Keith and I left for a fabulous honeymoon in the Bahamas, we still had our second reception to look forward to. After we returned, that was going to be held in Ashland for all the friends our family had made since moving there in 1965.

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: On Saturday, August sixteenth, Briana and Keith arrived in Ashland for their second wedding reception which would be at a luncheon

the following day. The bride and groom would again put on their wedding clothes and Briana would have a fresh headband of pink sweetheart roses and baby's breath. Keith's parents had driven to Ashland too, and had come to our home for dinner. Afterwards, we were all relaxing in the living room.

The moment I'd been thinking about for weeks had arrived: I stood up and went over to Briana and took her hand and said, "Come on upstairs, honey, I have something for you." We climbed the stairway, and walked down the hall to our bedroom. Inside, I closed the door.

"Sit down, dear. I have a very special gift for you and it's from me to you."

She sat on our bed and I handed her the small parcel. She smiled as she took it. "Wow, wonder what this can be?" she said. She untied the ribbon and unfolded the gift wrapping and looked carefully at the photo.

"Who—who is this?" she asked quietly, looking at me.

"That's your birthmother, honey," I said, "Her name is Cheryl Lindstrom." She started to cry, got up and came over and hugged me and we both cried and rocked back and forth for a few minutes. "That's the best present anyone ever gave me, Mom," she said. Then we both sat down on the bed and I gave her the other pictures from Cheryl, including the one of her son Warren, which Briana looked at through a magnifying glass.

Briana, adoptee: As soon as I saw that picture of Cheryl, in my heart I knew she was my birthmother. I couldn't say the words, all I could say to my mom was, "Who is this?" and she confirmed it for me.

I was almost in shock. I couldn't believe I was actually looking at a picture of this woman. Then all these things were going through my mind, Where did she get this? How did she get this? How does she know her? Why would she have this picture? All these things were going through my head at once, I was just overwhelmed. There was nothing negative at all in any of my feelings at that moment, other than pure nervousness and excitement at seeing what she looked like for the first time.

I think my mom handled it perfectly, having just the two of us there together. That was our special bonding moment when each of us knew what the other one was going through and feeling, that no one else could truly understand.

I remember seeing the picture of Warren. That really shocked me, to think I had another brother out there. When I had thought about my birthmother through the years, I felt sure she'd be married and maybe have a child or children, but for some reason, it had never occurred to me that her children would be related to me.

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: After Briana had looked at the pictures, I handed her Cheryl's typewritten letter covering the family health history, which she read with her arm around me, crying off and on through it all. I dabbed her cheeks with Kleenex, and finally there was a knock on the door and Ken came into the room, a big smile on his face.

“Your mother sure believes in taking chances, doesn’t she, Briana?” he said. But he knew everything was all right because we were both smiling and laughing, she wiping her eyes through her messed-up mascara. She jumped up and embraced him, and again she said, “That’s the best present anyone ever gave me, Daddy-o!”

Briana confessed that her secret fear had always been that her birthmother wouldn’t want to meet her. Then, after asking me a dozen questions, she ran downstairs to tell Keith and his parents the news.

Keith, adoptee’s husband: When Briana came into the living room and showed us her birthmother’s picture and letter, I know my mom was a little concerned that Briana might not be able to handle it. Mom thought it was too much, too quick, getting married and all that other stuff. For myself, I thought it was very interesting.

Dorothy, adoptee’s mother: A week later, after I had called Cheryl to tell her about Briana’s elated reaction, she sent Ken and me the most enormous bouquet of flowers I had ever seen. I know she was relieved it had gone well. Meanwhile I had made up a photo album of Briana’s life which I Fed-Exed to Cheryl on September second. Two days later she called to thank me. “I’ve already read it eight times,” she said.

Over the next several weeks, I knew Cheryl and Briana had been writing letters and phoning, but I hadn’t heard of any plans for a meeting. Briana and I talked from time to time, but aside from asking how Cheryl was doing, I backed off. A face-to-face meeting was going to be strictly up to them. LaCrosse, Wisconsin was a long way from Vancouver, B.C.

Meanwhile, at the end of October, Ken and I flew to Nelson, B.C. for our annual visit to see his mother in the nursing home. Since Nelson wasn’t too far from Vancouver, we had invited Cheryl and her husband Tom to meet us there and to spend three days at the same motel. We had a rented car and met their plane at the tiny airport. By now Cheryl and I had spoken on the phone several times and had exchanged letters and pictures, so why was I feeling nervous? I guess I wanted her to like me, to find me a mother worthy of having raised the daughter we both loved.

Cheryl walked across the tarmac, spotted us and waved and smiled. She was wearing a stunning brown suit. I soon found out that Tom was the type that liked to kid around: on learning I was fifty-nine, the oldest of the four of us, he started calling me old timer.

He and Cheryl had been married for thirteen years, both for the second time. “She’s young, you know, Dorothy, only forty-five,” he told me, “good looking, too.” He was proud to be able to buy her nice things—he told Ken her new suit had cost him seven hundred dollars. I liked Cheryl immediately. She was friendly and easy to talk to. I’ve always found her to be the best listener I’ve ever known. She

keeps her eyes glued to your face and never interrupts.

I don't believe she ever listened more intently than she did at dinner that night as I told her family stories about Briana. During that first evening together, Cheryl gave me a beautiful Liberty silk scarf which I still carry in my handbag.

After breakfast one day, Ken took Tom for a walk up Baker Street, the Nelson street where he had hawked papers as a young boy. Cheryl and I lingered over our coffee and talked about my birthmother, Ellen Davis. When I first found Cheryl, it seemed like a godsend that the two birthmothers—my own and my daughter's—lived only three miles apart in Vancouver. I will always be grateful to Cheryl because, typical of her, she befriended my Mom Davis when she was sick and depressed, taking her flowers, candy, taking her out for lunch, or having her to her home for dinner. As we sat in the hotel restaurant, she told me how Mom Davis had helped her:

"A week after you found me," Cheryl began, "when I first talked to your birthmom, she said it's like we had lived dual lives. We both had a baby girl before we were married and surrendered her for adoption, then each of us was married twice. When I told her my second husband, Tom, is a roofing contractor, she said her second husband had been, too. I told her Tom had always known about Briana, but that I was worried about how to tell my son, Warren, about her.

"Ellen told me how she handled telling her son, Charlie, back in 1978, when you found her. When she visited him and his family in Penticton, she and Charlie went for a walk one morning. That's when she tried to tell him about having had you, but she was crying, so she showed him your picture and asked him to read the first letter you had written her.

"Three weeks after my cousin Eunice first called me," Cheryl said, "I decided to tell Warren on his nineteenth birthday. I handed him the picture of Briana in her nursing uniform and asked him, 'Do you know who this is? Look closely, Warren, do you think she looks like you?' then finally I said, 'Well here, read this—this explains it.' I showed him your letter to me, telling how you had adopted and raised Briana and why you had searched for me. So talking to your birthmom really helped me, Dorothy, because it's hard saying that type of thing—I was stuck for words. Actually, I needn't have worried—Warren was very happy to find out he had a sister. What he said was, 'Why didn't you tell me this before?'"

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: After our trip to Nelson, we had scarcely got back to Ashland when Briana phoned from LaCrosse, burning to know how we had liked them.

"Tom's kind of boisterous and likes to tease," I told her. "Cheryl's caring and generous, and talks fast, just like you. She's a wonderful person, just lovely."

One evening two weeks later, Ken and I were watching television when the back door opened. "Hi, anybody home?" It was Briana, who had driven all the way from LaCrosse to surprise us. She walked into the living room, kissed us, then

handed me a long stemmed red rose and a very special card—one of those little booklets—several pages long. On the last page she had written: “Dear Mom, I found this card the other day and started crying right in the store. How embarrassing! I knew it expressed many of my feelings for you. Even though you found my birthmother you’re the only mother I really have and I love you more than I can ever express. I love you so much! Briana.”

That night Ken fell asleep quickly, but I was too excited to sleep and had to get up. Briana was just getting into bed, so I got in with her and put my arm under her head. We talked about the relationship that lay ahead for her and Cheryl. I told her it could be wonderful, but it would take time and work, like any other relationship. I told her she would not be disloyal to me if she loved Cheryl. I said “I give you my full permission to love her. In fact, I *want* you to love her.” She laughed and cried at the same time and replied, “Thanks, Mom, I guess I needed to hear you say that.”

Briana, adoptee: I finally met my birthmother when she and Tom and her son Warren flew to LaCrosse on April 1, 1987. That was eight months after my mom had taken me into her bedroom and given me Cheryl’s picture and letter. We didn’t meet before then because things in both our lives were so hectic and probably because Cheryl didn’t want to rush me.

We met at the airport of course, and that was a little nerve-wracking because the plane they were to come on, they weren’t on. I was standing there waiting for every person to get off and they didn’t come and didn’t come, and I thought, Oh, God! They’re not coming! What’s going on? I went to the person at the desk, and they said there was an overflow, and they’d be on the next flight.

When the plane finally landed, I saw Warren first. My heart started pounding and my knees started shaking, palms sweating, tears flowing—it was pretty emotional. He walked right past me, he didn’t recognize me at first. Cheryl was right behind him and we both kind of went for each other instinctively. I gave her a big hug and she hugged back and Tom just watched us, seeing how we were going to react to each other.

She was real nervous, I could tell, and I was real nervous, of course, but she didn’t say too much at first and there was small talk. When Warren finally realized who I was and came up to hug me, he said, “You’re prettier than I thought you were going to be,” so that was kind of a nice comment.

Two minutes after we had met, Tom said, “Give her your present you got her there, Cheryl, give her your present!” and I said “What present is that?” and she handed me this little Robin’s egg blue satin bag with white piping and inside was this beautiful gold bracelet with the date engraved inside, April 1, 1987, and the word Mom. That was really special.

When we met, Cheryl’s eyes were watery, but she didn’t cry. She seems to keep her emotions under strict reign, up to a point. For the first four days there was re-

ally not much touching, I touched her more than she touched me. I know it was just because we never had any time alone to really sit and talk and break the ice.

I brought them home from the airport and showed them the house—which we had just bought—and our dog, Moose, and we kind of shot the breeze. We went to dinner at Piggy’s where we all had some wine and loosened up a little bit. Tom kept saying, “What do you think, Cheryl? What do you think of her?” and he kept asking me the same thing. Warren kept watching me, lots of eye contact, checking out his new sister.

When we came back to the house, Cheryl told me the story of how both she and Tom had first been married to other spouses and the two couples had lived next door to each other and had been friends. After she had discovered that Bud, her husband, was cheating on her with Tom’s wife, she got evidence and divorced him. She moved into an apartment, put Warren in daycare and got a job doing office work to help support them. Then, after both she and Tom had been divorced for a few years, they started to date each other. Finally, when Warren was seven, she and Tom had a simple wedding in his apartment.

As she was telling me all this, she sounded concerned that I’d look at her like she wasn’t a good person. I said, “Hey, obviously you’ve got a good life now and you’re happy—that’s all that counts,” so she seemed to accept that. Then Keith came home and met everybody, and we all went to bed.

The next morning Keith went off to work early, and the rest of us went out to the shopping mall. The guys went off on their own and Cheryl and I walked up and down the aisles of the stores, talking about all kinds of things. It went along like that for several days, and we didn’t really break through to each other until the last day of their visit, the day before they drove up north to visit my folks in Ashland.

On that morning, Keith had again gone to work early, and after breakfast Cheryl kicked Tom and Warren out and told them to go for a long walk, which they did. She seemed real nervous, got up from the table and went back upstairs to their room. She was gone a long time and I was getting kind of concerned, a little anxious myself, because she was staying away so long.

Finally she came back downstairs and sat down. I could see her eyes were all watery, and her lips started to quiver, so I said, “Are you okay?”

She said, “Yeah, I’m okay,” and after a long pause she said, “Well, what do you want to know?”

I said, “What do you want to share with me?” I didn’t know how far to go with her, how much she could handle then. I said, “Why don’t you just start at the beginning where you met my birthfather and how everything went.”

She told me that when she was sixteen, she met this guy called Rolf Munn at a dance. He was nineteen, tall, dark, and good-looking, and he had a reputation with the girls. But she was attracted to him and thought she could handle him, so she started going out with him. He was pushing sexuality towards her and she

was quite frightened of him, but then he told her he was sterile, and it was naive on her part, but she believed him. She was in love with him and so she got sexually involved with him.

She said, "It just kind of happened. I got pregnant," and then she started to cry. She just blurted out, "I didn't want to give you up, I just didn't want to do it!"

I put my arms around her, and I said, "I don't want you ever to feel guilty, because you didn't make a mistake, you made the best choice for both of us. I love you for what you've done." And we just held each other and then things really started to flow, and boom! she poured her heart out to me. I think she just needed to know I didn't have any bad feelings, only love for what she'd done.

She was real open about my birthfather, Rolf, but couldn't remember a lot of the history with him, it had been so many years. She said she was going to look for a picture of him for me because I told her I'd be interested in seeing that.

She said, "I've got his address here, if you want any of that information, I'll give it to you. You're more than welcome to contact him."

I said, "To be honest with you, I really don't feel I want any contact with him," so I didn't take it.

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: In 1996, Cheryl talked to me about that devastating time back in 1959 when she'd been dating Rolf:

"It's been ten years, now, since Briana came back into my life, and as far as my affair with her birthfather, Rolf, goes, that's a very personal part of my life and the memories are still too painful. It wasn't a happy time, I can tell you. I was only sixteen when I met Rolf at a Teen Town dance. He was nineteen, the same age as my brother, Craig. When I got pregnant, we were going to get married, but when our marriage plans fell apart, I had a feeling my family was definitely behind it, because suddenly everything just took a complete turn.

"When I went in to see the doctor, he said, 'If you think you're going to keep this baby, you're being very selfish. You're not thinking of the child, you're thinking of yourself.' Apparently he had met Rolf when Rolf went to his office to sign a paper admitting he was the father, and his advice to me was, 'You don't want to marry *him!*' He was the doctor who had arranged for me to spend the last three months of my pregnancy in a maternity home in Vancouver, where Briana was adopted.

"Things happened back then that now, thirty-six years later, I still don't fully understand. I do know my family never liked Rolf. Neither my brother nor anyone in my family has ever talked to me about it, so it's been a dead issue for many, many years. That's why I feel I should just leave it like that, because I know their feelings on the matter. It's not about the family reputation or shame, it's just the way we are, kind of private type of people.

"As far as I'm concerned, the only positive thing to come out of that relationship was Briana, and I have had no problem discussing this whole thing with her, but I do have a problem discussing it with anyone else.

“I’ve never looked back. Of course I’m glad I’m not with Rolf now—that would have been a worse mess. So, really, somebody was looking after me, I guess. You’re young, you think you’re mature, but you’re not. You don’t even know your own mind.”

Briana, adoptee: After that very first meeting with my birthmother in April of 1987, Keith and I continued living in LaCrosse for another two and a half years. Cheryl would fly out from Vancouver once or twice a year and I flew out there a couple of times and stayed with her and Tom. At the beginning, we called about every week, just to check in with each other. When I had Lee in March of 1988, Mom drove down from Ashland for four days, and a week or two later Cheryl flew out for a visit.

During those visits, there were a few touchy moments where Cheryl got some hurt feelings. Once I was visiting her in Vancouver and my elder brother, Ian—who lives in Seattle—picked me up a day early because he wanted me to spend a little time with him before I had to fly back home. Cheryl thought I was leaving early because I was upset with her about something, but I didn’t know she’d felt a bit hurt until much later.

In August 1989, Keith and I went out to Bellingham on vacation, planning to drive north to Vancouver to see Cheryl and Tom and Warren. Just for fun, Keith decided to apply at the Bellingham hospital to see if there might be a job opportunity in case some day we would want to move here. The next thing we knew, they offered Keith a great job at St. Joseph’s so we sold our house in LaCrosse and moved here to Bellingham on November 13.

Us moving forty-five minutes from Cheryl’s house in Canada was probably the big turning point in our relationship; then we lived close enough to meet every couple of weeks and go shopping and have coffee and talk for hours. Over the years I have found the times when we made the biggest leaps in our relationship usually happened in a crisis situation, like when her second husband, Tom, passed away, or like when I found my birthfather. When I did things she didn’t think I would do, or handled things differently than she expected me to, it threw Cheryl off guard.

Tom worked hard as a roofing contractor and didn’t take care of himself. When I’d see him, I’d take his blood pressure and give him hell. I’d say, “Tom, you’re a stroke waiting to happen,” trying to scare him into following his diet and taking his medications. But he had a very strong will and did things his way.

In the summer of ’91 Tom did have a stroke. He was still in rehab that September when our twin boys, Kyle and Stewart, were born, and Tom demanded Cheryl get him and bring him down to Bellingham to see them. He eventually came out of the stroke fairly well, but Cheryl had to drive him around to check on his roofing crews, because the doctor didn’t want him to drive. That’s when I saw her the most stressed out because she was so worn out all the time, but she never complained about it. Tom was very generous, had a good sense of humor, and was

very good to her.

Finally in March of '94 Tom had a major heart attack and they installed a pacemaker. The next day they had to operate to replace the wires and boom! he crashed on them right there. I drove up to Vancouver and stayed with Cheryl for several days and helped her with the funeral arrangements.

During that visit Cheryl said to me, "You know, my life was not as easy as you think. We had a lot of hard times."

"I never did think it was easy," I said. She never enlarged on it, that was all she said. I think she thought I pictured her life as always having been glamour and glitz, living in that big, beautiful new house, without any financial problems.

I think she wanted me to realize she did have to go through a lot over the years. She never knew her father—she was under two when he died. She got pregnant at sixteen and had to go through all that. She lost her mother very young. She'd had two marriages. She divorced her first husband and was on her own for several years before she married Tom. Now she was a fifty-one-year-old widow. She'd had quite a complicated life over the years; it was not serene and straightforward.

Keith, adoptee's husband: Briana's reunion with her birthmother, at least from my perspective, has gone pretty smoothly. I'm sure we've been kind of lucky with Cheryl and her late husband, Tom. Cheryl's really nice and Tom, although he had a little bit of a rough side to him, was, uh, a fun guy—most of the time. You always have the concern you'll find your lost birthparent and they're an alcoholic, chain-smoking person living on welfare in a mobile-home park.

I've tried to be patient and supportive, like the time Briana went on a trip with Cheryl to visit Prince Rupert, the town where Briana had been conceived. Or when Tom died and she wanted to be with Cheryl to help her get through that. I took over the kids and the house on those occasions because she's taken over the kids and the house a couple of times while I've gone away rock climbing, so it just seemed fair.

Briana, adoptee: Right from the start, Keith has always been very supportive of my reunion, very accepting as he always is of things that goes on in my life. When Cheryl and I drove to Prince Rupert to meet one of my birthfather's daughters, Sybil, Keith took care of the kids for five days. I thought it was pretty nice that he would do that without even hesitating. He's never said anything negative towards any of this, but now that I'm finding relations on both sides of my birthfamily, he gets a little concerned about the backgrounds of these people and what they will expect of me.

As far as him truly getting the big picture, why adoptees need to make these connections with their birthfamilies, I've tried to sit down and talk to him about it, but I think it's just too far outside his experience.

In our own family, my brother Ian has been quite tuned in to my reunion. He's

been with Cheryl and Tom and Warren several times, and he liked Tom a lot. My younger brother, Angus, in Minneapolis, hasn't been as involved, partly because of the distance. I know Angus was very supportive when I first made contact with Cheryl, but I think he got a little bit more protective of Dad when it came to my looking for my birthfather, Rolf.

I wrote Angus that I was going to try to make contact with my birthfather and hinted at what I expected to find, based on things I got from Rolf's ex-wife and daughter. Immediately he wrote back and said, "Give me a buzz after you make contact—I want to hear how it went."

So after my call to Rolf, I called Angus and told him that Rolf appears to be the exact opposite of our Dad, who's highly ethical, kind, and generous, always eager to help you out. Angus listened very nicely, and then at the end, he said, "You know, Briana, just don't forget who your father is," and I said, "Don't worry, I won't." I think, when he heard Rolf offered no competition in the father department, he was, in his heart, a little happier.

When I was real young, Dad was probably the one most afraid of a reunion ever happening. As I got to be a teenager, I remember asking Mom for any information she might have, and she just said, "All I know is that your birthmother named you Cheryl Briana Munn," and then when I turned eighteen, she gave me this sheet of paper that had all this information on it.

I said, "Why didn't you share this with me before?"

She said, "Because your dad didn't want you to have it before you were mature enough to deal with it properly." My dad is a strong believer that you should be very mature before you go looking for your roots, then you can handle whatever happens.

Dad made a complete turn around when I was twenty-six and planning my wedding, and Mom decided to look for my birthmother for me. Dad was right there with her in the Vancouver Public Library looking up stuff and making calls from a pay phone. By then Mom had known her own birthmother for many years and he could see how much it meant to her. I think that changed the way he felt about reunions.

He could see it's not scary and it's not awful, and you don't have to open every door if you don't choose to. It doesn't mean you don't love your parents, that's the big thing—that's what parents need to remember. Of course, now Dad has semi-retired and he and Mom have moved out here to Bellingham, we see each other often and that reassures them.

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: Briana, I know, feels she's been very fortunate, very blessed, to have found a birthmother like Cheryl. Our whole family love and respect Cheryl, she's absolutely first class.

But when it comes to Briana's birthfather, Rolf, I think you could say he fits the mold of many birthfathers we've heard about: he's not exactly an honorable man whom you'd love to have as part of your family. That's hardly surprising, given

the circumstances that usually go along with surrendering a child for adoption: an older, smooth-talking guy gets a young girl pregnant, and then abandons her. That's been a popular folk-song theme for centuries. I realize it's unfair to generalize, but adoptees shouldn't be too surprised if the birthfather they find isn't what you'd call a fine person. Unfortunately.

Ken, adoptee's father: When adoptees have reunions, usually they're thrilled and quite content just to meet their birthmother. After meeting her birthmother, Briana wrote us saying how happy she was to have two beautiful mothers and that she wasn't interested in knowing her birthfather, even though Cheryl had offered her his address and said she'd try to get a picture of him. She didn't want any contact with Rolf then, but all that changed ten years later.

After adoptees get their new-found birthmothers firmly integrated into their lives, they usually want to explore the other half of their genetic background by contacting their birthfathers. That's how it was with both my wife, Dorothy, and our daughter, Briana. I understand it completely.

Now, in 1996, when Briana wanted to track down her birthfather, Cheryl didn't much like the idea of Briana making contact. Rolf's the kind that moves around a lot, and Briana had written him a letter and it came back stamped, "Moved. Address unknown," so she got mad and impulsively called his ex-wife up in Prince Rupert. She relayed the conversation to us:

When Briana asked to speak to Rolf, the ex-wife said, "What is this concerning?" and Briana said,

"My name's Briana McKittrick and I'm looking to speak to Rolf about a personal issue. I'm getting very frustrated and I really need to make contact."

The woman said, "What would you like to speak to him about?"

Briana said, "I guess there's no other way, other than just to come out and say it: I'm one of his children."

Rolf's ex-wife said, "Huh, another one to add to the list." Then she said, "He is a wonderful man in so many ways, but Briana, this man has fathered so many children. You have a whole bunch of brothers out there."

I reasoned that, since this was Rolf's ex-wife's statement, perhaps it was a total fabrication, but things have come up that give it some credence. During that same call, Briana also talked to her twenty-year-old half-sister, Sybil, who was eager for Briana to call Rolf in Reno and gave her his number. She said she'd call him first and tell him to expect Briana's call.

Since then Briana has had two telephone conversations—if you could call them that—with Rolf Munn, her birthfather. After the first one, she called and told us about it.

His current wife answered the phone and then said to him, “It’s someone for you, Rolf, a Briana.”

Then Briana heard him say, “I don’t know any God-damn Briana!”

Then his wife put her hand over the phone and said, “I think it’s that Briana Sybil told you about.”

Then he got on the phone and was calling her dear all over the place. It was strained, he was uncomfortable—in fact he asked his wife to get him a drink of Scotch—and he didn’t want to share anything, didn’t know what to say except to ask her where she lived and her kids and what she did, and as a kind of an afterthought, who had raised her. Briana told me the whole conversation was very surfacey, very generic, with no warmth at all. Frankly, it angered me that he wasn’t nicer to her. I thought it was a pretty poor show.

Dorothy, adoptee's mother: At a reunion, if the birthmother offers the possibility of contact with the birthfather, rather than turning her down, perhaps the adoptee should say, “No thanks, not right now, maybe later.” Because, inevitably, the appetite for that information will develop.

Keith, adoptee's husband: Briana’s contact with her birthfather Rolf has been just about nil. If she ever wanted to fly down to Reno and lay eyes on him sometime, I’d be more than happy to go along. Trouble is, by the time we got down there, he’d probably have gone. He sounds like your typical smooth-talking bartender who likes to sit around and have a few drinks and smooze with the customers.

Briana, adoptee: Back in 1986 when I first made contact with Cheryl, I had no interest in my birthfather, Rolf, but now, ten years later, I do. Adoptees do have certain basic human rights: one of them is to clap eyes, at least once, on each of their birthparents. Funny, how that strong need just comes, that you need to make this connection for some reason, even if it could be an nasty scene. You just feel like you have to do it, and it doesn’t matter if it was ugly or it was good or what it was, because when it’s done and over with, then you can go on.

So, yes, I do want to meet Rolf Munn. I feel I have to look this bugger in the eye, I guess just because it’s one of the things on my check-list that I need to do. I would have Keith take a picture of us, to have a record of me and the other half of my genetic roots, the half Cheryl says I resemble. When I talked to him that first time, I told him I wasn’t looking for a father, but just wanted to get in touch with my genetic background and was curious to know a little bit about his family, but that got me a zero. I made the second call because I heard he was sick—that was a zero, too. So I expect nothing from him. I now know, in this lifetime, there’ll never be anything he can give me. He’s just not capable of it.

The most important thing I've gotten out of this whole reunion is that now I feel complete. Now I can really get on with my life. It feels good to have everything in order, even though everything may not be exactly what I would have chosen. No one has any choices in what they get. I may have wished Rolf was a more loving person who wanted to meet me, but that wasn't the case. But somehow it doesn't even matter—it just feels good to know he exists and where he is, and that he knows *I* exist. I have a picture of him and I've made contact with two of his daughters. Whether that develops any further doesn't really matter—I can deal with it however I choose. It's like cleaning out the garage, getting all that crap out of there; it feels good to get everything dusted off and tidied up.

Finding my roots has made me more confident, like my existence is now validated in some way. When you finally put your beginnings together, it somehow puts you on the human map where you can point to your place and say, I am here, this is where I came from. Especially now that we have three kids, it's important to have some family history we can pass on. That's how we chose our kids' names, because of the Scottish heritage of both our families.

Most people know who their mother and father are and have details of their family backgrounds. They've heard their mother describe what their birth was like, and all that silly stuff people take for granted, but I don't believe you can ever understand how important it is until it's *not* there. Now I don't feel left out of some of these conversations, and I can say, for example, "I have a grandmother who died of breast cancer," and in the doctor's office, I can fill out my family medical history properly instead of scrawling the word "Adopted" across the page.

All of these things I've learned have been very satisfying—very completing—to me.