

Kathryn: a Birthmother Whose Reunion Empowered Her

Although Kathryn was gang-raped at seventeen and gave birth to her daughter as a result, this story teaches many positive lessons. It shows how, when a birthmother initiates the search and finds her twenty-year-old child, the reunion and resulting relationship can be joyful. Two factors were key to bringing about the successful mingling of both families. First, beginning when the child was young, the adoptive mother had always had a relaxed, non-threatened attitude toward the child's birthfamily and toward an expected future reunion. Then, after the reunion occurred, the adoptive mother set boundaries for the birthmother and the adoptive family. Finally, the story shows how meeting her surrendered child erased a birthmother's guilt and freed her to reach out for her dreams.

The author has not edited the content of the material in this story and the opinions expressed in it are each person's alone.



Kathryn, birthmother: I remember walking home from the doctor's office and I was so small I didn't look pregnant from the back and this convertible with two boys pulled up behind me and they started flirting with me. For a moment I got all giddy and excited 'cause I was only seventeen, but as soon as they saw I was pregnant, they gave each other a dirty look and drove off. I could hear them laughing and I remember distinctly how humiliated and unclean I felt. Some things are so painful, they don't ever go away.

I graduated from high school in the spring of 1970 and, on October 15 that same year, I had my baby and gave her up for adoption. Not long after, I left my mother's apartment and got my own place.

During the first five years I was on my own, I'd say I was semi-stable, semi in that I was able to support myself in various jobs. I lived for the moment in a kind of limbo with no real plans for my future and very few options as far as getting a college education. I felt bitter about that because in high school I'd been very bright and had hoped to win a scholarship so I could become a nurse. Then when I had gotten pregnant, I'd felt like I'd been a bad girl and didn't deserve to try to reach out for anything good, so I'd just given up on all my dreams.

In my tiny apartment, I lived from moment to moment and went in and out of relationships with men pretty frequently. But then something changed; before I went out on that first date with Ryan I was very prudish. I was going to be a virgin until I got married. Now these relationships were always sexual because I felt I wasn't good enough for anybody, and sex was all I had to offer. Deep down inside, I still had intense feelings of shame, almost like a sickness—I knew I wasn't okay mentally. I seemed incapable of making any real plans for my future. It was all I could do to handle the day-to-day stuff, to hold down a job and pay the rent. Guilt and feelings of low self-worth were crippling me. I wondered if I would ever find a cure so I could get on with my life.

Ardith, birthmother's mother: Back in the '50s and '60s we lived in a small town called Popple Creek, Minnesota, about fifty miles from Minneapolis.

My husband Vince worked as a tire rat, repairing and recapping tires. He lost jobs, but he'd always go out and get another one, so he wasn't lazy. I believe he was an alcoholic because if he didn't have any alcohol in him, he'd get very, very irritable, and the slightest little thing—or nothing at all—would set him off. The five girls and I walked on eggshells—we were terrified of him. It's painful for me to remember some of these things that happened so long ago, like how he slapped me in the face a lot, gave me black eyes. One time when I was pregnant he kicked me and I had to go to the hospital for x-rays to see if I had any broken bones.

When he gave the girls a licking they weren't allowed to cry. I remember one time he was hitting one of them across the face with a fly swatter, and he wouldn't let her cry. She just lay there and shivered. She was only in grade school then, just a little girl. I finally managed to stop him, and I thought for sure he would turn on me, but he didn't. He would tell the girls they were no damn good and would never amount to anything. In the case of our eldest daughter, Kathryn, he didn't tear her down in that way, but he was very hard on her because she was the eldest, and he placed too much responsibility on her.

He called me Olive Oyl and said he was ashamed to be seen with me because I was so skinny. In public he would often walk several feet away from me and pretend he didn't know me. That kind of treatment led to another reason I was

afraid to leave him: I had no confidence in myself whatsoever. He was the boss and he ran the whole show. I was nothing, like one of the kids.

Over the years, Vince had been in trouble with the law and he was put in jail several times. While he was there, for a month sometimes, the kids and I lived on oatmeal. The first time Vince was jailed was because a girl he worked with charged him with rape. At the time we only had Kathryn, and I was pregnant with our second daughter. I wanted to leave him, but I was living with his relatives and they talked me out of it. As the years went by, I was trapped there with five young kids, no place to go, no money. I was still deathly afraid of him, we all were. I was so afraid and helpless—it was like I was paralyzed.

Because of some strange things that happened, I sensed Vince could go over the edge and murder somebody, so I was very careful. In 1968 I had just started working for Control Data in Minneapolis and my shift started at seven A.M. It was a long drive from Popple Creek, so I left home around six. Even though the five girls were scared to death of their dad, I had no choice but to leave them alone with him before he left for work and they left for school. Kathryn was sixteen and she was the catalyst that finally gave me the courage to leave my husband.

Kathryn, birthmother: My father was a nightmare person who insisted on being waited on. He had so much anger, the slightest thing would trigger it. After Mom got her job, I had to take over as his servant, helping him on with his shirt and buttoning him up and then serving him exactly what he liked for breakfast, prepared exactly the way he liked it.

This one morning I told him I was sorry but we were out of eggs, and instantly he jumped up from his chair and shouted he was going to kill me. He grabbed me around the neck and stopped himself just short of choking me to death. When my mother came home I told her about it and showed her the marks on my neck. Her face went white. She said, “Okay, that’s it! We’re leaving right now!” and she bundled us all into the car without even packing a suitcase. We went to my grandmother’s and stayed there till my mother found an apartment in Minneapolis. She had left my dad for good.

Because he wouldn’t give her any money, Mom had to work on an assembly line ten and twelve hours a day, six days a week, to support the six of us. Being the oldest, I was the surrogate mother, helping with the four younger girls and around the house. As soon as I could, I got on the work program at high school and started working at a fast-food place called White Castle. Mom didn’t have any money for Christmas, so I used my White Castle money to buy retreaded tires for her car, a kitchen table from Goodwill, a small Christmas tree, and little presents for everybody. I know my mom remembers Christmas of 1969, too.

My four sisters and I found living with Mom in Minneapolis very different from living in Popple Creek with her and my dad. In Popple Creek Dad wouldn’t let us girls do anything at all, he kept us all hidden at home. He never let us go anywhere

and we weren't allowed to have people over. Now that we were away from him, we experienced a freedom we'd never had before, and we didn't know how to handle it. I had never been on a date with a boy in my life because my father was so strict. Neither he nor Mom ever said anything to us girls about getting pregnant—we were ignorant beyond imagining.

It wasn't until I worked at White Castle that I first started interacting with boys, flirting back when they flirted with me. One night a big, good-looking guy called Ryan came in and started teasing me and laughing, and calling me by the name on my employee badge. A couple of nights later he came in again and asked me to go out to a party with him as soon as I got off work. I was so awed by a boy giving me all that attention! So, foolishly, and without telling my mother, I went to a party with this guy, not having had more than two conversations in the restaurant with him. I was really stupid.

We went to this party in an old, run-down apartment block not far from White Castle. When we got inside, Ryan immediately handed me the very first beer I had ever tasted. During the course of the party I was given LSD and experienced the most horrifying, terrifying night of my entire life.

In the end, three men raped me. It took me a long time to say "raped me," because I don't really know, for sure, what happened. I mean, I was under the influence of LSD, and through therapy my therapist has assured me I was indeed raped. But it's still hard for me to say that, 'cause I willingly went to that party and I should not have been there.

I can remember fragments of the night and all of them are bad—all of them are terrible. For twenty years I've gone over it, trying to remember exactly what happened. I believe they put the LSD in my beer, and it totally distorted my thinking, screwed up my visual perception. I didn't know what was wrong with me, what was happening to me. I had no control over anything. I really thought I was going insane. I ended up in a dark, empty room with a bare mattress on the floor. The man I went with, Ryan, and two others, one them black, had intercourse with me. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I don't know if I'll ever get over feeling ashamed of myself for being so foolish.

When I woke up the next morning, somehow I got dressed and stumbled outside. Still half drugged up, I shuffled along Lake Street, where my mother found me. She and a next-door neighbor had been driving around for hours, looking for me. They took me to Hennepin County Hospital where they gave me a morning after pill, which supposedly would bring on my period. Well, it never did. So then, several weeks later, I found myself pregnant.

Ardith, birthmother's mother: About three months after I had left Vince and had moved to Minneapolis, Kathryn got pregnant. That wasn't my first problem; I had had terrible problems, raising those five girls alone. I had no control over them at all; they just did what they wanted to do. The three younger ones were the worst.

They ran away for days at a time. They'd be picked up and I'd have to go down to the police station and get them.

Kathryn was never picked up by the police, but sometimes she and Sandy, my second-oldest daughter, would take off with their girlfriends and I would have to go looking for them. I couldn't understand their behavior, because I thought life was so much better for all of us after leaving Vince. My sister Jill said, "You're not doing anything wrong. Those kids, because of their background, aren't normal and can't act normal. They don't know how to handle their new life."

Vince knew where we were. I didn't try to hide it from him, because I wasn't afraid of him any more. Even though he said he'd kill me if I didn't come back to him, I felt as if I'd rather be dead than live with him again. I had my own place, and it was pure heaven. Sometimes Vince would come snooping around our apartment and I would hide Kathryn in a closet. She was afraid of what he might do to her. I was afraid if he found out she was pregnant he might somehow use that to prove I was an unfit mother and have the five girls taken away from me.

When Kathryn told me she was going to have a baby, in the next breath she said, "I can't keep it." I think it was that whole horrible experience of being gang-raped. If she kept the baby, every time she looked at it would bring it all back. There was no way she could afford to raise it, and no way I could, either. I always tried to be a supportive and non-judgmental mother. I didn't tell Kathryn what to do—I just tried to help.

Kathryn, birthmother: My mother asked me if I wanted to go to New York for an abortion because they weren't legal in Minnesota in 1970. She didn't have the money, but she said if I really wanted one she'd try to get me to New York. I'm not sure why I said, "No, I couldn't do that," but still I thought she had made a really nice gesture. Mom never offered her opinion unless you asked, but just asked me what I wanted to do. Basically I made my own decisions.

One of the reasons I decided on adoption was that I was afraid my father would do something to me if he found out that I was pregnant. I was barely eighteen years old and my only job had been working for minimum wage in a fast-food place, hardly work that would support me and a baby. But I think the main reason was that I lacked the self-confidence to even consider it. I had been drugged and raped by three men, one of them black. The guilt and degradation I felt for that whole scene haunted me and destroyed my self-esteem. There was no way I could raise my child myself.

When I went to the doctor, he was not one bit supportive or sympathetic. He just said, "You're pregnant." He didn't even look at me when he said it. Afterwards, my mother took me to the Lutheran Social Services' unwed mothers program—monthly group sessions I went to before I had the baby. In that group of ten or twelve girls, nearly all of them were keeping their babies, so it was very, very intimidating for me. I sat there and never said a word. There was no discussion of adoption as an

option, or any other options, such as if I wanted to wait for awhile and just think about it, I could have put the baby into foster care for a time.

Obviously, Mom had told my sisters what was going on, but we never talked about the fact that I was pregnant. While Mom was working at Control Data, I stayed home and cleaned the house and had supper ready when she came home. She didn't force me to do these things. I was a willing workaholic because I felt so guilty. For my whole pregnancy I was terrified the black man would turn out to be the father and my baby would be black. I used to have nightmares about that.

But I used to have some happy times, too. All week I used to look forward to Friday night because my mother would take me out in the car with her, just the two of us. She'd take me to the Dairy Queen and we'd each get one of those big chocolate swirl soft ice-cream cones dipped in dark chocolate. Then we'd go for a long drive down Portland Avenue. It was her way of giving me a little treat, of showing she cared. It would be a little thing to some people, but it meant a whole lot to me.

Two weeks after my due date I finally went into labor and my mother took me to the hospital and stayed with me through the whole thing. And, for as long as she could stand watching my pain, my sister Sandy was there with me also. My three younger sisters were down in the hospital lobby waiting and they sent cute little letters up to me. I still have one of them.

Ardith, birthmother's mother: Kathryn was very small, and she had a long, hard delivery. She finally delivered a baby girl during the night of October 15, 1970. Of course, our main worry was that it might be black. When we saw her, she was a little blond towhead, a replica of my daughter Jill when she was born, so that was a big relief.

Kathryn, birthmother: I saw her momentarily in the delivery room when they laid her on my stomach, this blond, red-faced, pug-nosed, little thing. Then they did the most terrible thing to me: they put me in a room with a girl that was keeping her baby. For four days, every few hours, I watched the nurses bring in her baby, show her how to nurse it, fuss and smile over it and tell her what a beautiful, good-natured baby she had, how much weight it was gaining from her breast milk. Every one of those nurses knew I was relinquishing my baby, and, to this day, I think they were trying to get me to change my mind. No one ever said anything to me about it directly, but their attitudes and how I was treated—the support I *was not* given—those things hurt me deeply. The aides came in with my meal trays, but I was practically ignored by the nurses.

At first I didn't want to see my daughter, because I knew if I touched her, if I held her, I wouldn't be able to give her up. It sounds horrible, but I was so afraid of keeping her, I had to disconnect myself from her emotionally, to shut down, and I shut down for twenty years. The day before I was to leave, the nurse came in

and asked me if I wanted to dress my baby to go to her foster home. I'm sure they meant well, but for me, that was the final torture, to have to turn down my last chance to be a mother to my baby, to dress her and hold her and kiss her. Saying no took all my inner strength. It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life. I never held her but I did break down and I sneaked down to the nursery and I saw her.

The day I was to go home, Mom was working, so my grandmother picked me up and took me home. My having had a baby was totally ignored by everyone—my sisters didn't say a word about it. I think because of all the abuse we had taken from my dad, that was my family's way of coping with things: emotions weren't acknowledged or talked about. When Mom came in from work she didn't give me a hug or a kiss or anything like that—she didn't hug or kiss. None of us did. In the weeks after I got back home, once or twice she and I talked about sex and my getting pregnant, but it made her very uncomfortable. Because she had been so victimized by my father's abuse, she couldn't talk about her own feelings, so to try to help me with mine was beyond her ability. But I knew she loved me, I never doubted that.

A week after the baby was born, I went into Lutheran Social Services to sign the relinquishment papers and to give my baby a name. I named her Charlene Kathryn Hill, using my own last name, but I learned later the agency never told the adoptive parents I had named her. The social workers told me very sternly and explicitly, "You may never look for or see her again, this is it. You just go on with your own life." Because of my father, I am easily intimidated, so I was like, okay, fine. I would never have questioned it, ever.

I lived with Mom and my four sisters for about three months. Then our building was condemned and Mom had to move into a smaller place which didn't really have room for me. She hinted maybe I would want to get an apartment of my own, which I did through a roommate-wanted ad. In January of 1971, I took my little bag of clothes and moved in with this girl who was a total stranger. I was lonely and scared, living away from home for the first time, but I'm easy to get along with and I adjusted okay. I lived there about a year, supporting myself by waitressing at a little restaurant called le Petit Snack.

Then I landed the first job I felt somewhat good about, doing bookkeeping in an insurance company. It paid better than waitressing, so I moved into a nicer apartment with another girlfriend, where I lived for another year.

It was then I met this gentleman called Brent, and I moved in with him. He talked of marriage and children, but that idea scared me because I felt I wouldn't be a good mother. I never missed taking the pill, never. After about three years I felt I had outgrown the relationship, so I left.

By this time it was almost five years since I'd had Charlene, and I was working downtown at the City Attorney's Office as a receptionist. One spring morning a tall,

attractive man called Keith Stevenson came in to see one of the attorneys. He was wearing jeans and a Minnesota Twins sweatshirt. He sat in the chair nearest my desk and chatted with me while he was waiting. That afternoon a delivery woman came in and handed me a dozen pink miniature roses. The card said, "From a fan." About an hour later Keith called me for a date.

After we had been dating awhile, Keith asked me to live with him, but I wouldn't—I just wanted to get to know him in a normal way. As wishy-washy as I could be in those days, I was real adamant about it. This surprised him because I had been living with someone, but he didn't back off. After dating for seven months, he proposed and we were married by a justice of the peace on October 6, 1975. Both of us were twenty-three and we just wanted to get married. Neither of us had a lot of money so we didn't have a real wedding, but his family gave us a wonderful, big reception afterwards.

At one time Keith drank, but he had stopped drinking and had exchanged alcohol for downers, like Valium or Darvon. I don't know how often he took these pills, or what they were—he took them secretly. He got them legally from several different doctors in Minneapolis who would write him prescriptions for headaches and stress. When you fall in love with someone, you look the other way about a lot of things, and then there was this self-esteem thing—maybe I felt I didn't deserve anyone better.

Things changed gradually, until, after about a year, I became frightened by his behavior. I would find pills laying on the closet floor, and I realized, if I had a child, this would not be a safe situation. Keith was never violent, but he'd become irritable, restless and uncomfortable when he needed a pill, like an alcoholic who needed a drink. Things just weren't normal, so, even though I still had feelings for this person, I decided to leave him.

When I did leave him, it was to shock him into a decision. At the time, I was again seeing my father, so I went up to Moose Lake and stayed with him and his second wife, Florence, for about two weeks. Keith called me and I wouldn't come home. He kept calling and calling, and at some point, over the telephone, we worked it all out, and he agreed to go into treatment.

At that time I was working for a law firm in the IDS building in downtown Minneapolis, and we had a little apartment not far away. As soon as I came back to Minneapolis, Keith entered a drug-rehab program in Willmer, Minnesota, where he lived for ten weeks. I would visit him there on the weekends. By the time he had completed the program, his whole attitude had changed. It was wonderful having him back home and drug-free, but he would drive everybody crazy talking for hours and hours about his new insights. After awhile you'd think, we went over that before, let's move on, here. I was supportive, but I can't say I helped him change as much as he helped himself. It's like quitting smoking; you have to make the ultimate decision yourself, you can't do it because of someone else.

At Willmer Keith had learned how to write a résumé and apply for a job, so he

sent out résumés and eventually he got a job with a painting company. During the year he was there, I became pregnant and had a miscarriage during my fourth month. It was absolutely devastating—I was sure I was being punished for having given up Charlene. The doctor said, “Now don’t try to do anything for a while.”

A month later, I got pregnant again. I gained about sixty pounds out of stress, I was so worried about miscarrying. My daughter, Nicole, was born in August 1979, and a year and a half later I had a son, Jordan. I had my tubes tied and stayed home with my children full time—I just needed to be with them. I know I was overprotective and somewhat smothering, probably because of having given up Charlene.

A couple of years ago, I started going through a mid-life crisis, becoming more and more unhappy and frustrated, and just questioning who I was and what direction my life should take. Approaching forty didn’t help.

One thing about Keith and me is, we enjoy talking to each other. Especially on a Friday night, we like to sit in the family room after the two kids are in bed and have a nice, long talk over a bottle of wine. One Friday, the end of July 1989, we were having one of our marathon two-in-the-morning talks when, out of the blue, Keith said,

“I know you’ve been feeling down a lot lately. Do you think it would help you if you found your daughter?”

My mouth fell open and I said, “I could never do that!”

“Why not?” he said. He’s so logical, it drives me crazy.

“Just think what that could do to her, to her family. She’d probably hit me or slam the door in my face. And how about our kids? It could ruin our marriage.” And Keith just sat there and listened to me raving on and on. “And another thing,” I said, “when I gave up my baby, the social workers said I must never, ever see her again. This was it.” Even though I didn’t sign anything and it was an unwritten rule, I’m the type of person who would die before I’d break a rule.

“Now let’s talk about the good things that could happen,” Keith said. He suggested maybe I would find out she’s had a great life and was happy, and I would find out she did not hate me or want to beat me up. He suggested maybe she could be in financial need and now, because of our situation, I would be in a position to help her, which was something I had never even thought about. He suggested maybe I would want to establish a daughter-mother relationship and she would want the same. He also suggested maybe our two children would like to know they had an older sister.

He thought having a positive reunion with my birthdaughter would let a little sunlight in and would cancel out all the bad feelings I had about that terrible, degrading event in my life. It would take my anger away if I could see this beautiful person, hopefully, who wasn’t the product of monster rapists. Keith himself was really very curious about Charlene.

It had never occurred to me that having a daughter out there somewhere had

anything to do with my problems or that finding her could help me give my life some direction. So we spent a lot of time talking about it, even though just thinking about it scared me to death. I didn't realize what lay ahead, what kind of people had adopted my daughter.

Meryle, adoptee's mother: When Dean and I adopted Charlene we already had our son Tad. He was born to us in the normal way and he was eight years old when we got Charlene. When she was tiny, we told Charlene she was adopted, before she really understood what the word meant. From the day we adopted her, my husband Dean and I just figured if we kept everything above board, it would make it easier down the line. We knew eventually Charlene and her birthmother would likely be reunited.

All we knew about Charlene's birthmother was that she was a young girl just out of school, and we always tried to make Charlene feel her birthmother had loved her. The social worker had never said to us, "You have to realize some day the birthmother will come looking for this child," and yet I always knew she would. That's why I wasn't surprised when it happened.

Charlene, adoptee: I was born in Minneapolis on October 15, 1972 in Deaconess Hospital and was adopted by Meryle and Dean Watters when I was six months old. Because there were eight years between me and my brother, Tad, and he went into the army when I was in the sixth grade, in some ways it was like being an only child.

Until I was in the eighth grade, both my parents worked full time—Mom at K-Mart and Dad as a plant accountant—so I always got myself off to school in the morning and let myself in at night. My mother and father have a very good relationship and our family has always been very stable. We're real affectionate and we talk pretty well with each other. My dad's probably the quietest one, but my mom and I talk especially well. I have great parents.

When I was about six, I asked Mom what the word adopted meant, and she told me that after they had Tad they had gone in to the adoption agency and said that they wanted a little blond-haired girl, and they gave them me to adopt and that's what adopted meant. From that moment on, I felt special and I bragged about being adopted to anyone who would listen.

Now I realize my mother's loving, open, relaxed way of talking about this whole thing was a real gift. She'd tell me my birthmother had loved me very, very much, but because she was so young she had to give me up, and she did it because she loved me. So the respect she taught me for my birthmom was a wonderful thing, too. But as I got older and started talking more about finding my birthmom, Mom injected a little realism in there so I'd be ready for anything and wouldn't get hurt.

She told me, "She may have a family that doesn't know about you and maybe

she doesn't want to upset them. And you don't know if she could have been a prostitute and had you, Charlene. It could have been any situation." It never bothered me when she talked like that—I accepted that my birthmother might turn out to be less than the ideal person.

Kathryn, birthmother: After my husband Keith and I had that conversation at 2:00 A.M. that Saturday morning at the end of July, I agonized about what he had said, especially the positive things that could happen. Eventually I decided at least to look into it, so six months later I finally called Lutheran Social Services.

I called the agency on a Friday afternoon in February 1990. The skies were full of dark clouds and Minneapolis was going through a bitter cold snap. My feet and hands were freezing cold, and when the receptionist put me on hold, I had nerve attacks as I was waiting to talk with a social worker. I kept remembering those warnings from twenty years ago: "You realize this is it. You must never, ever see her again."

Eventually I talked to a case worker called Betsy Friedreich, and told her I was thinking of searching for a child I'd placed with them for adoption in 1970. She didn't say much, she just suggested I come in to her office the following Friday to talk it over. She advised me to write a letter to this unknown daughter and bring it in with me, because it was their procedure to give a letter from the birthmother to the adult adopted child, if they managed to find him or her. Then the adoptee could read the letter and decide whether or not he or she wanted contact.

That night I lay awake for hours. The wind was howling loudly and my feet and legs were stiff with cold because I was so stressed out, but the worst of it was that my mind just wouldn't quit. Finally at about five A.M. I got up and pulled on my high shearling-lined slippers and put on my heavy wool robe. I made a pot of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table with a big pad of yellow lined paper to try to write a letter to the birthdaughter I had named Charlene. As I started writing, I suddenly realized I wanted her to want me. I realized what I wrote in that letter was important, because somehow I knew she would be reading between the lines, so I was very careful how I wrote it.

It was fairly short, just both sides of one sheet of yellow paper. I tried to keep it factual and unemotional, about myself and my family. I didn't say anything about how she had been conceived. I told her I wanted to meet her. But then at the end, I got scared. I thought, Oh, my God, she's going to think I don't care, and maybe she won't come. So I kind of threw in a last sentence that said I cared for her in ways she didn't know. Charlene has reminded me several times—she probably knows the letter by heart—that because of that last sentence, she knew I wanted contact with her more than just for information.

When I went to the adoption agency the following Friday, it was the first time in twenty years I'd been back there and that alone was unnerving. When I was shown into Betsy Friedreich's office, she asked me to sit down and she explained

the Minnesota law with regard to post-adoption reunions. The law was if the adoptee was nineteen, and both adoptee and birthmother wanted contact with each other, the social worker had to facilitate that. Since my daughter was of age, Ms. Friedreich would contact her and read or send her my letter. Then, if she wanted to meet me, it would happen.

Ms. Friedreich smiled at me and I began to relax a little. I told her my whole background, we signed all the paper work, and I paid the fifty dollars to initiate the search. I handed her the letter I'd written and she said she would give it to my birthdaughter if she found her. After being there about two hours I got up to leave and she told me she'd contact me when she had any information.

I came out of there feeling maybe things could work out, but the strangest thing happened driving down the freeway—I bawled all the way home, just sobbed my eyes out. And it was a sad kind of crying, crying for the very first time about giving my baby up for adoption, because I had never cried when I adopted her out, never. Now, suddenly, I was just grief stricken, realizing what I had missed.

All at once I knew I had to meet my daughter. I knew she was the only person who could free me from my crippling guilt and shame, the only person in the world who could give me back my self-respect.

A month went by and I didn't hear anything from Betsy Friedreich. I was studying real estate at night school and I was having a difficult time concentrating, focusing on anything. Finally I called Betsy and she said they were backlogged with other cases but would give mine priority. Two weeks later she called and told me my birthdaughter's name was Charlene, and that she had talked to her mother. I just started bawling on the phone. I thought, It's here, it's really happening!

Meryle, adoptee's mother: It was around four o'clock on a Friday and I had come home from my number-one job an hour early so I could get my kitchen ready to paint the next morning. If it hadn't been for that, she never would have caught me at home. I was masking the glass on the cupboard doors when the phone rang and this woman said, "This is Betsy Friedreich at Lutheran Social Services. Is this Mrs. Watters?" and I said, "Yes," and I don't know why, but I knew what she was going to tell me. She said my daughter Charlene's biological mother was looking for her and wanted to know if she could get in touch with us. So the social worker wanted Charlene to call her at her office to talk about it.

Charlene and I had talked many times about searching for her birthmother, and I was going to try to help her do it. But things being always a little tight at our house, I just thought, Well, we'll just wait until maybe Charlene can dig up some money for them to bring up the files and start the search and then we'll go from there.

So I said to the social worker, "Yes, I'm sure Charlene will want to call you about the possibility of meeting her birthmother, because we have discussed it many times." I told her I thought her birthmother would be proud of her because she

was a bright, intelligent, very pretty young girl. I took the social worker's number down, and then, right after I hung up the phone, I knew I had to tell Charlene immediately. I was going to work that night, so I just took a big blue marking pen and printed a note in big thick letters and left it on the table for her. It said,

I need to talk to you tonight!
*If you're going out, **DON'T!** Stay home.*
I need to talk to you!

I came home from work at 10:30 and she was in her pajamas, lying on the floor of the family room watching TV. She figured she was in trouble for something and when she heard me come into the mud room she called out, "What's up, Mom?" I thought, Oh, boy, here we go, because Charlene gets excited and upset real easy.

I came up the steps and before I sat down I said, "How about giving me a big hug?"

She got up and she put her arms around me and she said, "Okay?"

And I said, "I love you, you know that?"

"Yeah," she said, "I love you, too," and she sat on the floor again.

"I have something I have to tell you," I said.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking at me with a little frown on her face.

"Well, it's not really anything wrong," I said, and sat down on the edge of the couch. She was looking up at me intently.

"I had a call today from the Lutheran Social Services."

"Yeah?" she said, never having it dawn on her. It went right over the top of her head.

"Somebody wants to meet you," I said.

"Who?" she asked.

"Your biological mother," I said.

"Really? *Really?*" and each time she said "really" her voice went up an octave.

"Yes, she wants to meet you and you have to call this lady." And I gave her the social worker's name and number. "She will tell you what you have to do."

And she jumped up and she flung her arms around my neck and she said, "Does she really? She *really wants to meet me?*"

"Yes, she does."

So then she was jumping all around and you could tell the height of her excitement because when she gets excited Charlene's face flushes a bright pink, like a rosebud.

Then she said, "Did you tell Daddy?"

And I said, "No, I haven't told him because I didn't want him telling you before I got home. I didn't know how you'd take it, and I didn't want you crying and being upset before I could get home to be here with you." I hadn't told my husband Dean because I didn't know how well he would handle telling her. He's visually

disabled, so I try not to put more pressure on him than he needs. At that point I went downstairs and told him. He was happy to hear the news, and, as usual, he was pretty quiet about it. But Charlene was just bouncing all over the house. A few minutes later she came downstairs, her eyes all shining in her pink face, and chattered to her dad and then—by now it was getting on for midnight—she called her girlfriend and they talked about it. Then she called her boyfriend, and, oh, my goodness! I'm sure Charlene didn't sleep much that night.

Kathryn, birthmother: It was Thursday when Betsy Friedreich called to tell me she had talked to Meryle Watters, Charlene's mother. Betsy relayed to me Meryle's comments that Charlene was very bright, outgoing, and funny. She said Meryle was going to tell Charlene that evening that I had contacted the agency and was searching for her.

The next day, Friday, Betsy called me again. She said Charlene had called and asked her to mail her my letter right away, which she had done before calling me.

After my letter reached Charlene, she decided to initiate our meeting herself, and she wrote me a letter, which I received the next Tuesday. It was two pages of ruled school notebook paper, written on both sides. In part, she wrote:

"I have so much I want to share with you, Kathryn, but as you said in your letter, I'd like to tell you in person. I have nothing but the deepest respect for you and all the decisions you have made in your life. You have always been present in my thoughts and I need to meet you to fill that missing part of my life. I can tell from your letter you are everything I dreamed you would be."

When I read her words I lost control of myself. I sobbed through this letter, sentence by sentence. She included her phone number in it, but I was so scared of calling her I didn't call her for two days. Finally, on Thursday, April 5, I made up my mind to do it. It was about seven o'clock at night and I went in my son's bedroom, sat on the floor and picked up the phone. Keith kept the kids out of the room, but everybody in the house knew who I was calling.

And she had been expecting my call, poor little thing, she was sitting by the phone, hour after hour. She had calculated exactly when I would get her letter and when she thought she'd get my phone call. So when I called she was in the house, but her dad answered the phone. I said, "Is Charlene there?" and I almost hung up, I was so scared. Charlene came to the phone and you could tell she knew it was me. After she said hello, I said, "Hi, Charlene, this is?" and I couldn't think of what to say. I couldn't say, This is Kathryn, or This is your mother or This is your birthmother. I just paused.

And she said, "Kathryn?" She had to say it for me. And instantaneously we clicked. We chattered away, couldn't get the words out fast enough. We talked for

three hours, exchanging all that wonderful information. We arranged to meet two days later, on Saturday morning. Finally, about ten o'clock, I got off the phone, and when I stood up I almost fell over because one foot was asleep.

My poor husband, Keith, I charged into our bedroom, and I'm laughing, and I'm crying, and I'm jumping up and down, and I'm hugging and kissing him, the poor man. He's about six two and I'm five four and I'm just all over him like a puppy dog. He was being devoured by all these emotions and I'm babbling away, telling him how much I love him for encouraging me to do this thing.

There aren't any words to express how I felt. I was experiencing something beyond happiness—it was absolutely wonderful. I was happier than I'd ever been in my life. I know I will never experience a feeling like that again, ever.

Charlene and I had talked Thursday night and had agreed to meet at eleven o'clock Saturday morning at my house, which is a ten-minute drive from hers. So I had one day in between to prepare for Charlene's visit. Keith and I were full of nervous, neurotic energy, and we cleaned the house from top to bottom, even places that made no sense like the tops of twelve-foot-high window frames.

The other thing we did was, we sat Nicole and Jordan down and told them about Charlene. We had a little family discussion. Jordan, a typical ten-year-old boy, went "That'll be fun to have a new sister." He was nonchalant. The only thing he wanted to

know was, "Was I adopted?" I burst out laughing, it was so funny. But suddenly Nicole started crying, and I'm thinking, Oh my God, this is it, this is going to be the problem part, dealing with an emotional teenager. And she said, "Mom, I've always had a secret desire to have a big sister, how could you have known?" So she wasn't unhappy, she was happy.

Without going into detail, we told them how Charlene had been conceived, and answered honestly every question we possibly could. That night I didn't sleep much, waiting and waiting for morning.

Meryle, adoptee's mother: The hardest point for me was when Charlene went over to meet Kathryn by herself at eleven o'clock on Saturday morning.

I was at my second job, cashiering at Woolworth's, and when I first came on duty at nine, I had mentioned to my close friend, the cashier next to me, that Charlene and her birthmom were going to meet for the first time that morning. After coffee break I was back at my cash register ringing up a customer, and I looked up at the clock and it was ten minutes after eleven. I just lost it—I started to cry. And I thought, Oh, my God, what am I doing?

My friend looked over at me, and she said, "What's the matter, Meryle?"

I said, "I can't tell you right now," and I said to the customer, "I'm sorry, but something just came to my mind and I'm not functioning quite right." I finished up with that person and, thank goodness, there was no one else in line, so I walked over to the Easter display and starting packing it away. When I walked back to

my register, I told my friend that Charlene and Kathryn were meeting right then, and I was worried because I didn't know how it would go. I was more afraid of Charlene being hurt than anything else, and because, normally when anything important or scary goes on, like going to the dentist or to the doctor, you go with your child, but this was something she had to do alone.

Kathryn, birthmother: Saturday morning came and we were all up early. Keith and Nicole and Jordan left about eight-thirty in the morning and I'm having stress attacks, trying to figure out what to wear. I threw all my favorite clothes on the bed; I must have changed six times. I ended up throwing on a pair of jeans and a blouse. I didn't know how to be, if I should be matronly or what. I didn't know what I should look like.

Charlene was late, it was after eleven. She was only ten minutes late, but I paced. I was crying, I was praying to God—the one I'm afraid to go into the church to worship—and I was praying to him, Please make Charlene come, please! I was afraid she'd decided not to come. I was petrified she wasn't coming, and I was pleading with God, I'm racing up and down the stairs, totally having a heart attack, and all of a sudden I hear a car door slam. So I knew she was here and I'm, Thank you God, I'll make it up to you.

I had shut the Venetian blinds on the long window beside my front door, because I didn't want to see her before I opened the door. So I opened the door, scared to death, and standing there was a mirror image of myself—another Kathryn on the other side of the door looking back at me! She had a little bouquet of flowers in her hand. I looked at her, and I slammed the door in her face! It was only a shock reflex, you know, where I drew in my breath and reflexively shut the door. And then I quick, opened it back up again, and I'm apologizing. It was just so awesome for me to see her, I needed that fraction of a second to collect myself.

She's standing there with this little look on her face. I usher her in and she hands me the flowers. She didn't say, "Hi, Mom," or "Hi, Kathryn," she said, "I need a hug!" and we embraced for a long, long, time.

My foyer has closet doors faced with mirrors, and we pulled ourselves over in front of them and stood there staring at each other's image in the mirror. We looked incredibly alike, the same height and weight, the same coloring and facial features. Although I was thirty-seven and she was twenty, we could easily have been taken for sisters.

Then we came into the living room and sat on the floor. She stayed for seven hours, and we talked non-stop, pausing to eat cold pizza, because I'd found out she liked cold pizza. Charlene handed me an album of her childhood pictures her mother had sent as a special gift for me. I had pictures for her of her four grandparents and everybody on my side of the family, plus pictures of me growing up, and of my high-school graduation. Then I gave her an old music box I'd had for a very long time. It played the song, "We've Only Just Begun." Hard as it was for

me, after talking about the lighter things for several hours, I finally told Charlene as much as I knew about that whole night when I was raped. I did not tell her the name of the man I think was her birthfather, Ryan, the man I went to the party with. Hearing that part of the story made her uncomfortable and angry, so I stopped talking about it.

Around five o'clock—Keith and the kids were still over at my mother's—it was finally time for her to go, but I couldn't let her go. We stood out in the driveway for about half-an-hour and she kept assuring me she'd be back.

She came over again the very next day, on Sunday. She wanted to meet Keith and our two children. One of my fears had been that Keith wouldn't be able to accept a child of mine who wasn't his. But after her visit, he said, "How could I not like her? She's just another you, a young you." So he sees me in her, and they're very, very comfortable with one another.

Charlene, adoptee: As for how this whole thing has affected my parents, especially my mom, the only time when I thought I saw any sort of—and I'd call it apprehension rather than jealousy—was the Saturday when I went over to meet Kathryn. All that day, working at Woolworth's, Mom had been worrying, not that Kathryn would be a bad person, but that she wouldn't be what I expected and that I'd be disappointed. I'd been at Kathryn's all day and when I got home at 5:30 Mom and I talked about that. Even after I told her about Kathryn, there was still a little bit of apprehension there, and I realized right away that she needed to meet Kathryn.

So I called Kathryn and said, "We need to have you meet my parents, so let's do it as soon as you feel comfortable with it." I met Kathryn's family on the following day, Sunday, and it was the Monday evening after that that Kathryn came over to meet my mom and dad. The minute she walked in the door, all of my mom's apprehension went right out the window, because somehow Kathryn put their minds at ease that she wasn't trying to come in and take me away from them.

Meryle, adoptee's mother: The night Kathryn came over to the house to meet us, Charlene brought her up the stairs and said, "Mom, this is Kathryn, Kathryn, this is my mom."

I said, "Hi Kathryn," and I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a big hug. You know how a very young puppy feels when you pick it up, how their whole body trembles? That's the way Kathryn felt when I hugged her. She started to cry and her whole body shook because she was coming in here cold to strange people and she didn't know how we would treat her. That's a very hard thing to do, very tough. Then my husband gave her a hug and he started to cry too. She said, "I wasn't going to do this!" and we all laughed, and of course, laughter helps.

So there were Kathryn and Charlene and Dean and I sitting in front of the fire

Dean had made because it was damp and cold outside and he wanted the place warm and welcoming.

We just sat there, and I said, “Kathryn, I have to tell you that Charlene is my daughter. She’s always going to be my daughter.”

And Kathryn said, “Yes.”

“You have a girl yourself,” I said, “so you know what I’m talking about. We’ve had Charlene for nineteen years, but you gave birth to her, so from here on in we’ll share her. She’s part of your life, too, now.”

I told Kathryn she could call Charlene and she could be friends with her and be with her and stuff, but she better not hurt her, because she was going to have to answer to me if she did. I told her that because I didn’t want Charlene hurt. But as soon as I met Kathryn I could see she was a good person, so I had nothing to fear on that score.

After Kathryn came into our lives, we expected Charlene would naturally turn her attention to this other family and neglect us for a while, and that’s just what happened. In a way, it was like a romance. The first year, they’d call one another on the phone almost every day. If Kathryn woke up in the middle of the night thinking, I wonder if Charlene’s there—she’d pick up the phone and call. It was not a problem because she knew it was okay with us. The odd part is that our two families live only fifteen minutes apart, so Charlene would go over there two or three times a week, and I expected that.

Kathryn told me how, every year on Charlene’s birthday, she used to take out the items from when she had given up Charlene: the note off the end of the bassinet, her baby I.D. bracelet, and some Ann Landers clippings about adoptive mothers and birthmothers. She’d sit and read those and think about Charlene and cry. So when Charlene’s birthday was coming up, I told Charlene, “Kathryn has to know that you can be with her on your birthday so that she can try to put some of that behind her, so she doesn’t have to feel guilty any more.” So the night before her birthday, we had to have her usual birthday dinner, which as a little girl she used to call “pisghetti,” and then on her birthday she and Kathryn went out for dinner together. Just after Charlene had left the house, the phone rang and I said, “She’s on her way.” Kathryn said, “No, no, Meryle, I just called to thank you for letting me spend the day with her.” So Kathryn has always shown us her appreciation. She has thanked Dean and me many times for doing such a great job raising Charlene.

Charlene and Kathryn have been building their own special relationship and I’ve tried to give them the space to do that. For example, both of them like riding horses. Well, I like horses too, and I’m sure they would let me go along if I wanted to. But I don’t enjoy riding horses that much, so why should I nose in there? Let them have the time together to do these things they enjoy.

When people have asked me why I’m not jealous of Kathryn or fearful of los-

ing Charlene, I think it's because Charlene and I have always had a really close relationship. We love each other and that love will always be there. Nobody but Charlene can take that away, and I don't think she would do that. She knows you can love more than one person, and Kathryn has to be a part of her life.

The good Lord put us on this earth to try to help one another and he let us have Charlene for all those years to raise and the least we can do is to share her life with Kathryn. *I always raised Charlene with the idea that someday she would meet her birthmother, and, because that young woman had entrusted her baby to me, I did my best to make Charlene somebody she could be proud of when they finally met each other.* Even though I didn't actually give birth to her the way I did my son, she came to me as a tiny baby, to cradle, to hold, and to love. Just because you don't have 'em come out of you don't mean that they're any the less yours. Not at all. They're just as much a part of you as anything in the world. I love her so much.

I'm not a real religious person, but I would like to think that if I had been a birthmother, someone would have had a little compassion and love for me.

Charlene, adoptee: After that Monday when Kathryn came to our house and my parents met her, my gosh, we were just one big family. My dad calls Kathryn his adopted daughter because of their age difference and because he loves her. My mom and dad both love Kathryn; they have a unique respect for her. Daddy loves kids, and he's become a kind of adoptive grand-dad to her son Jordan, taking him fishing and to baseball games. If Kathryn doesn't call for a while my mom wants to know, "Is Kathryn okay?" or "Is anything wrong?" She bakes things for me to take Kathryn to fatten her up. So our two families being close is just the most normal, natural thing in the world.

It was funny when we went out for my birthday. Both my moms took me out, and we went out and we were sitting there and we were listening to some people sing, and I was singing along with them, and probably getting a little more rambunctious than usual, and Mom and Mom were just looking at each other, and my mother looked at Kathryn and said, "That's your daughter!" it was just an offhand comment, and Kathryn said, "No, no, no, she's *yours!*" It said so much, just by them saying something like that, there was no threat there for either of them. Kathryn wasn't a threat to my mom because Mom knows her place in my life and Kathryn knows hers. I think I was the one who drew those boundaries out.

Kathryn, birthmother: From the beginning, Charlene has called me Kathryn, and she still calls me Kathryn. She calls me mother in all her cards, but when she speaks to me she calls me Kathryn. She said we both hold different positions for her, and they're both mother positions, but different mother positions. She said her mother is Mom to her, and I could never be Mom, but she said I'm kind of like—and she used this word—the *sacred* mother, and that's how she put it. And

I hold this little position, and she has it totally figured out. She has everything placed very well.

Charlene, adoptee: When Kathryn first found me, I thought the best I could hope for was to end up getting a really good friend. Kathryn ended up being more than a friend, but with different boundary lines than with my mother. I don't want to say I was a different person with each of them, but there's a different part of me that goes with Kathryn that was waiting for nineteen years. The word mother has come to mean two completely different things for me. It's like two circles that partly overlap, and I'm in that middle, overlapping part. And the more time I spend with Kathryn and with Mom, the more the parts become defined and the more they fit together. It doesn't cause conflict for me because I know everybody's place and I know my place when I'm with Kathryn's family.

Kathryn's two children, Nicole and Jordan, are wonderful. I care for them a great deal, but those feelings are developing more slowly than the relationship between Kathryn and I—that was just there. I was totally unprepared for this instant connectedness between Kathryn and me. It's like an unconditional love in a lot of ways, because you don't have to work to make it be there, it just *was* there, the minute I walked in the door. And it feels so good, it really does. I love Kathryn, I love her with all my heart.

Kathryn, birthmother: Charlene is beyond, far beyond, anything I dreamed she would be. She's had a good upbringing and wonderful parents. She had the kind of life I wish I had had—very loved, very nurtured. I like her parents extremely well. Last year I had Charlene's family over for Thanksgiving dinner, along with my mother, Ardith. Charlene and I laughed our sides out because I was so worried the enormous turkey I had bought wouldn't be cooked on time. But that was my only stress, everything else was really comfortable.

Even though Charlene denies having any interest in her birthfather, half of her heredity is from him and I feel sure it will come up some day. Besides looking so much like me, she looks very much like Ryan, so there's a high probability he's her birthfather. My mother and I know Ryan's last name, but as for the names of the other two men who raped me, I could never remember them. When Charlene is older and starts having children, I think she will want access to that name for medical reasons. Somewhere along the line, I think she should have it.

Charlene, adoptee: Kathryn found me in April 1990, and our whole story is better than anything I expected. It has changed my life because now I feel complete, my life's puzzle has been completed. When you grow up and everyone in your family has brown or black hair and you have blond hair, you want to know why. And Kathryn and I are both natural blonds and our faces both flush a bright pink when we get excited.

Everybody in my family, my mom and dad, my four grandparents, are extremely extroverted, very loud people. And I have always been very within myself, very quiet. At home alone or at family gatherings, I'd sit for hours and not talk and be perfectly content. Nothing would be wrong, I'd just be thinking and quiet, and the rest of my family doesn't have quiet times. And then when I met Kathryn—Mom noticed this right away—I found Kathryn is quiet too. Another way we are alike is we are both very emotional and cry easily.

I seldom think about my birthfather, but when I do, I think if I were to meet him I'd probably hurt the man, because I feel for Kathryn and the pain she went through. Right now I have no desire to try and find him or to know anything about him. If I have something of him in me, I guess I don't see it, because everything I see in myself I see in Kathryn. His part is such a minute part.

Kathryn thought I'd blame her for the situation, and that was the farthest thing from my mind. There was no way I could feel any resentment toward her. If I had been raped by three men and got pregnant, I can't imagine carrying the child and not feeling some kind of anger toward it. But Kathryn said that when she was carrying me she felt sorry for me, this poor little baby caught in that situation. I'm not a product of how I was conceived. I'm here, and I've got Kathryn and my family and the rape part doesn't bother me. Kathryn and I are both proud we have risen above the rape question to build a strong relationship with each other.

Ardith, birthmother's mother: Kathryn and Charlene have had one or two minor problems, probably due to some immaturity in Charlene, but they've worked them out. Things have worked out wonderfully well.

Over the years, Kathryn's main heartache was the guilt she felt over giving up Charlene. She always worried about whether her daughter was okay and had a good home. Now Kathryn's more at ease because she knows Charlene did have good parents who gave her a good life, the life she was supposed to have, the life Kathryn and I couldn't have given to her. That was Kathryn's greatest gift to Charlene: a chance at a loving, stable life.

Charlene, adoptee: Several years have passed since Kathryn found me. I have graduated from college in accounting and have married a wonderful man named Craig Werner. Craig's stood by me through this whole thing with Kathryn. He just sits back and kind of laughs at us because I don't think he knows just what to think, sometimes, when he sees a mother and daughter acting the way we do. It's not quite the same as Mom and I, because Kathryn and I get kind of dingy at times.

Kathryn, birthmother: For twenty years I had thought I was a bad person because I had sinned against God by giving my baby away. But when I found Charlene, she

took away all the guilt and validated me as a good person. How can one person do all that?

Two years after finding her, I graduated as an L.P.N. and then was accepted into the R.N. program. I love it and I'm doing well in it. Charlene has saved my soul and has freed me to go after my dreams, to reach out for something good.