

Ingrid: the Audacious Adoptee

This story tells us about three things: what desperate lengths a woman will go to to adopt a child; what determination, tenacity, and a good friend's help can achieve in a seemingly impossible search for a birthmother; and what a stubborn adoptee can do when a birthmother says no to a reunion.



Ingrid, adoptee: The Christmas after Laurette Larsen and I became friends, she gave me a check to join the Adoptees' Information and Direction, a Wisconsin search and support group which met once a month in a Green Bay church basement. After she'd encouraged me to take that first step, I joined any national group that seemed to offer some possibility for a reunion because my case seemed like such a long shot.

Laurette is a wonderful woman. She's several years older than me, a legal secretary, and very smart. When we first met, I showed her a ten-page handwritten letter I'd sent to a judge in Missouri—the state I'd been born in—begging him for my original birth certificate, because I knew my birthmother's name would be on it. He never replied. But Laurette was fascinated by my adoption and the fact that I wanted desperately to find my birthmother. She offered to do everything she could to help me. But even though I wanted a reunion, I was scared to death of facing the reality of it all.

When we drove the thirty-five miles from Appleton to attend the Green Bay meetings, we heard other adoptees tell about being reunited with their birthfamilies, and we decided to get into it and see what we could do. And from there, things started snowballing.

We agreed on one thing: no matter what the outcome of our search was, we would always respect my birthmother's position and keep her anonymity if that is what she wanted.

The trouble was, even though Laurette and me were fired up to search, we had no idea where to turn or how to start because we did not know my birthmother's name.

One day she came over to plan some strategy. I dug out the pale gray envelope of my adoption papers that Mom had given me when I turned twenty-one and spread them on the table in front of us. Laurette picked up the Sackett Lab report and looked at it closely; she thought she could see some faint impressions in the top right-hand corner. She asked me for a magnifying glass and then took the paper to the window. Someone had penciled in a single name there and later erased it; it was the name Marthe. Not Martha, but Marthe, no question about it, but there was no last name.

However, on my Missouri adoption decree was the name my birthmom had given me when I was born: Pamela Larsen. So we *assumed* that Marthe was my birthmother's first name and we *assumed* that Larsen was her last name, either hers or my *birthfather's*.

We named my birthmother *Marthe Larsen* and prayed our guess turned out to be right.

I always looked different from everybody in our family, even though they passed me off as looking like my grandma 'cause we were both short and chubby. My sister Penny, the child my parents had a year after they adopted me, is very dark and thin and the spittin' image of my mom. But I always felt different; I *was* different. My grandma and I fought constantly. From the time I was about nine years old, she used to say things like, "If you don't behave yourself, some day you'll find out something."

By the time I was thirteen I put the pieces together and figured things out on my own. One Friday afternoon I confronted my mom. I stomped into the kitchen and said, "There's something funny about my background and I want to know what's going on here. I'm adopted, aren't I?" Turning over a piece of fish in the pan, she said, "Yes, you are."

I was devastated, shattered that my parents hadn't been honest with me and told me long before then that I was adopted.

From the start of their marriage, my parents had lived with my mother's parents in Madison, Wisconsin. My mother had a kind of unnatural attachment to her mother, who was the boss of the operation. My dad worked as an engineer for the Milwaukee Railroad. He was a small, quiet man; he just went along.

After twelve barren years, my mother finally applied to adopt, but somebody, likely my Uncle Russ who had adopted kids himself, contacted the agency and told them my father was alcoholic—which he was—so they were turned down.

Eventually their family doctor got them in touch with The Willows, a widely-known, prestigious maternity home in Kansas City, Missouri. After The Willows

had approved them, my mother began a bizarre charade to make sure their application wouldn't be sabotaged again: she wore maternity clothes over the bigger and bigger pillows she strapped over her stomach. Apparently this hoax worked because everyone—except my mother's parents who knew the truth—thought my mom was really pregnant.

Soon after my birth on January 9, 1948, my adoptive parents took the train to Kansas City and picked me up. On the way home, they made the decision never to tell me I'd been adopted. My grandparents had been sworn to secrecy, so no one would ever know. Back in Madison, they told friends my mother had given birth in Kansas City.

The whole situation was pretty bizarre, especially five months later when Mom actually *did* get pregnant with my sister, Penny, and put on her maternity clothes again.

Thirteen years later, during the months after I found out I was adopted, Mom tried hard to explain why she had faked her pregnancy and why they never told me I was adopted. She said they didn't want me to feel any different than Penny; they wanted us to feel like natural sisters. Then when she told me, "Penny knew you were adopted but she didn't tell you because she didn't want to upset the apple cart," I was angrier than ever. I didn't talk to my sister at all after that; I wanted nothing to do with her.

By the time I was in my teens, both my parents were drinking and were blaming it on me. The truth was, I was a real responsible teenager. In our dysfunctional, alcoholic family I took on the survival role of hero: I got the good grades and made the family look good.

When Penny first came to high school, I told the kids that she was not my sister because school was my special domain and I didn't want to share it with her. By then both my mom and my grandma had told me very clearly that Penny was the real one because she had their blood and I didn't, and I was jealous. But often I was glad I had different blood, because I have a real determination in me, partly genetic and partly survival skills, and partly just because I was adopted. I think we adoptees are driven to excel, to prove to the world that we're okay.

My grandmother told me that I should be grateful I'd been adopted instead of growing up in the orphanage with all the other kids whose parents didn't want 'em. The two of us were very stubborn and fought constantly, like the time she called me an ungrateful little bastard. But my mother never made grandma apologize; nobody ever took my side. Still, I think they all really loved me, but my anger and hostility got out of hand. I was unhappy and just wished I really belonged somewhere.

I was most angry towards my grandma for being so mean and my mom for siding with her. I was jealous of the two tight mother-daughter relationships in our house; I felt like there was no mother there for me. I didn't know what other

hurtful things I was going to hear, so when I was in the house, finally I just stopped talking altogether. Eventually they took me to a psychiatrist, but I wouldn't talk to him, either.

We were a well-off, middle-class Catholic family, but no priest, no teacher, no neighbor knew about our fights, or that I was adopted or that my parents were alcoholic. I am a classic case of how kids cope in an alcoholic home: "Don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel."

About this time my mom and dad started going to go to "club" on Thursday nights, which turned out to be Alcoholics Anonymous, so that's when my dad stopped drinking. I liked him a lot, but I could never talk to him about my adoption. Even though Mom went to the meetings, she didn't stop drinking.

Then, when I was sixteen, both of my grandparents died and my mom became a chronic alcoholic real fast. After school I'd find her drunk on the couch. She said the reason she drank was that I was adopted, and that I was so angry and nasty to her.

I graduated from high school and enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the fall of 1965. Although I was engaged to a guy called Mervyn, I didn't really love him and he was away in the service. The truth was, I'd met a man named Scott at a campus bar and had been dating him off and on for over a year. When Mervyn came home for my sister Penny's wedding in July of '67, I broke up with him that same night, took off my ring and threw it at him.

I was just too immature to be in college, so I quit and landed a job as secretary for a unionized trucking outfit. I made pretty good money. I bought this yellow Chevy Camaro sports car with red leather upholstery and I thought I was pretty cool.

I still lived at home and did mostly what I felt like; Mom was out of it a lot. When I'd be getting ready to go out with Scott, she'd be drinking and would say things like, "Don't come home with a bun in the oven!" or, "You're going to turn out just like your real mother," and I couldn't understand why she didn't feel like *she* was my real mother.

When the day came for us to tell them that I was three months pregnant and that we were getting married, my mom, who was already bombed, said "I *knew* it, I knew you were going to do this to us! You're a no good tramp just like your real mother."

My dad stood up and smiled and shook Scott's hand and said, "Welcome to the family, son."

I was nineteen, single, and pregnant, the same as my birthmom had been when she had me. But I was real self-righteous 'cause on November 18, 1967, Scott and I got married so *I* kept my baby. After Tiffany was born, I was happy because I felt connected by blood to someone for the first time in my life.

In the fall of 1970, when Tiffany was two and a half, Scott was laid off from his job. We packed up our '61 Oldsmobile, put Tiffany in the car seat, and moved

from Madison to Appleton to make a new life for ourselves.

A year later, I got pregnant with my second daughter, Tina. During my pregnancy I used to take out my adoption papers and gaze at them and think about my birthmom. That's when I stopped hating her for giving me up.

I had never felt like I belonged anywhere. But after I had both my kids, we were all connected by blood, and something was okay after that. Tiffany and Tina have both been a gift; I have a special relationship with them that I never had with my mom or my sister.

After Scott and I had been married for nine years, we joined a little Methodist church where, two years later, God became real for me. That helped me to face an old problem:

I have an eating disorder and I am an alcoholic and for me, either food or alcohol worked to numb the pain that was inside. My addictions started when I was very young with the use of sugar in things like candy and ice-cream, and escalated when I became a teenager. At sixteen I started taking diet pills to lose weight, starting a long cycle of gaining and losing weight. A couple of years later, I started drinking a lot: beer, wine, and hard liquor.

When I got married, I quit the diet pills but kept drinking and using food. Finally, after I'd gained a hundred pounds in thirteen years, I joined Overeaters Anonymous and came to my first twelve-step program, which is an addictions recovery program. I lost a lot of weight, and I have been chemically free—no drugs, no alcohol—since 22 September 1980.

Finding God and the twelve-step program were the two events that helped me to get my life together.

Laurette, adoptee's friend: When it came to coming up with a name for Ingrid's birthmother, we just took a stab in the dark and made our best guess. But that's all it was, a guess; we had never seen her name on Ingrid's original birth certificate or any other official document. We felt lucky that what we *suspected* was her first name was the name Marthe, instead of Mary or Joan. I mean, how many *Marthes* do you know?

Ingrid, adoptee: The adoption papers my mom had given me included a little card from The Willows. It was titled: "Baby Pamela, (the name my birthmother had given me.) Arrived at The Willows Maternity Sanitarium via Dr. Stork's special,"—that was their little funny—and it said:

MOTHER: 19 yrs. old, 5' 2", 114#, blond, blue eyes, Catholic high-school graduate, German extraction, American born, employed as a stenographer, Catholic, attractive, wholesome, vivacious personality, well above average intelligence, negative Wassermann test.

FATHER: 30 yrs. old, 5' 8", 180#, curly black hair, brown eyes, three years of university, employed as a bookkeeper, five years in U.S. Armed Forces, good-looking, athletic, dependable and efficient. Nice personality, clear health records. Protestant.

Laurette, adoptee's friend: Our first move was to apply for Marthe Larsen's birth certificate in nine Midwest states, her marriage certificate in three states, and her driver's license in five states. Nothing. We contacted two hospitals in Kansas City to try to establish if Ingrid had been born there. We placed ads seeking Marthe Larsen in the Genealogy Helper and the Kansas City newspapers. Then, because we knew Ingrid's birthfather had been a serviceman, we wrote to the area military bases in case Marthe had been working in one.

Ingrid, adoptee: In July of 1982, after I wrote 'em three times, the Juvenile Court Services in Jackson County, Missouri, finally sent my birthparents' non-identifying social history. What really jumped out at me was that my birthfather had been an officer in the service and was of Norwegian origin. I was so excited, I ran all over Appleton saying, "Guess what, I'm half Norwegian." After that, I felt better, more connected, just learning my nationality.

I still didn't really *know* my birthmother's name, but I knew it would be on my original birth certificate, and to get that I needed a court order. A Wisconsin judge, the close friend of a friend, kindly issued one, but the Kansas City Courthouse refused to honor it because it was from out-of-state.

Laurette, adoptee's friend: We knew Ingrid had been born in Missouri, so we always started off with that state, but we realized her birthmom could have come from anywhere to stay at The Willows. Assuming her surname really was Larsen, a Danish name, we learned from books on U.S. immigration patterns that most Danes had settled in the Midwest, especially in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

We combined that information plus the known fact that her birthmom had graduated from a Catholic high school, to write a letter saying we were planning a high-school class reunion and needed to locate Marthe Larsen, our unconfirmed guesstimate of a name.

Ingrid, adoptee: We sent fake reunion letters to ninety-five Catholic high schools in Missouri and five Midwestern states. Laurette didn't own a computer or even an electric typewriter; she did all of the typing on an ancient, black Underwood she had at home. She made carbon copies of all her letters and she kept meticulous records. It was an incredible amount of work that we spent every spare waking hour on.

Even though I had the two girls and a part-time job, my search was an obsession with me. I lived for the mailman. I would run home on my lunch hour to check the

mailbox. Everything—my whole family—*everything* revolved around the mail.

Laurette, adoptee's friend: Using an old directory of Catholic schools, we wrote to the headquarters of each diocese. We said that we were looking for Marthe Larsen who we believed had graduated from one of the schools in their diocese in 1945 or '46, and then we'd list every single one that had existed in the '40s. Sometimes that would take a three- or four-page typewritten letter and the whole thing got to be awfully time-consuming. We finally decided to try a new approach.

About this time, a niece of mine was diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome, which was something few people had ever heard of it. It struck us that Tourette's Syndrome would be taken a lot more seriously than a high school class reunion, so we wrote a new letter and mailed it to about two hundred Catholic high schools.

This letter said that several members of the Larsen family had been diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome, a disease which caused tremendous emotional and social problems, including suicide. That's why we were desperately searching for Marthe Larsen, a lost family member who had graduated from a Catholic high school in 1945 or '46.

We asked them to please check their records and, if they found any trace of Marthe Larsen, to send it to us in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. We also enclosed a brochure on Tourette's Syndrome, and I signed the letter Laurette Larsen.

Since my last name happens to be the same as Marthe's, I could sign those letters honestly. Of course, if it hadn't been, I would have pretended it was. Ingrid and I are both honest, ethical people, but we would tell any whoppers necessary to further our search; we would have accomplished nothing without tremendous deceit.

Ingrid, adoptee: On a Monday, January 24, 1983, I was at my doctor's office for an M.D. referral so I could enter an alcohol treatment program at the end of the month. I'd been sober for two and a half years, but I needed to do something about the emotional pain inside.

I was sitting in my doctor's waiting room reading *Cosmo* when Laurette walked in the door and sat down beside me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I just stopped by to see if you were afraid to talk to the doctor about going into treatment."

"No, I feel fine with talking to him. What are you doing here?"

"Did you get your mail yet?" She was acting very strange.

"No," I said, "did you get your mail?" and suddenly she broke into this huge grin and I just *yelled*, and she handed me this piece of paper.

It was a letter from one of the dioceses saying that Marthe Larsen had gradu-

ated from their high school in 1946. Their most recent records show her living at the following address and they gave her current name, address and phone number. The last line of the letter said “Glad we were able to help.”

Just then the nurse called my name, so I walked into my doctor’s office, saying, “I just found my birthmom, please sign this paper, I’m goin’ to treatment next week, I gotta’ get out of here! Skip the Pap test for now.” And he thought I had snapped.

“Sit down a minute, Ingrid,” he said, “you’re going to talk to me. Where is your birthmom? Is she out there in the waiting room?”

“No,” I said, “my friend is out there. I have to leave. You don’t understand,” and I just talked as fast as I could talk, and I said, “Here, just sign these papers,” and I slapped them on the desk under his nose. He frowned.

“Who’s going through treatment?”

“Me!” I said, “I can’t talk to you about this right now.”

Still frowning, he signed the papers. I snatched them from him and rushed out. I guess he thought I needed to go through treatment, all right.

Laurette, adoptee’s friend: Finally, after twenty-six months of letter writing and phone calls we hit it lucky with this one diocese. Marthe was still living in the same town as when she had graduated from high school, so the diocese was able to tell us her married name and address and everything.

Ingrid, adoptee: We rushed over to Laurette’s house and I made several long distance calls to various people verifying that this was the correct person. Of course, I didn’t reveal my relationship to her.

Around supper time Laurette and I went to my house to tell Scott, and as soon as he walked in the house I told him.

His comment was, “What’s for supper?” So I opened three cans of Tab and jar of peanuts, and it was like, I can’t cook, I can’t think, I can’t do anything. Laurette had to go to a party, so Scott and me went out for pizza.

The waitress had just put our Pepperoni-lovers’ Pizzas in front of us when Laurette ran in the door, her face flushed. “I can’t go to the party,” she laughed, “I’m just too distracted.” So she sat down and had pizza with us and afterwards went back to my house.

About eight o’clock I started calling my birthmom, and I was really afraid ’cause I didn’t know what I was going to say to her. There was no answer. And I dialed fifteen minutes later and there was still no answer. I just kept talking to Laurette, trying to calm down. Then, about 9:30 I dialed her number again and a man answered the phone. I asked him if Marthe was home and he said,

“Why sure, just a minute, I’ll get her,” and I thought Ohhhhhhhh, now what do I say?

“Hello?” she said.

“Hi. My name is Ingrid Phillips and I was born on January 22, 1948. My birthday was two days ago. I’m adopted and I’ve been searching for a long time for a woman with your name. Are you the person that I’m looking for?” And without one moment’s hesitation, she said,

“Yes, I am.” And then I didn’t know what else to say.

She said, “Can I have your name and address?” and I spelled my name and I gave her my address and phone number.

Then I said, “You are the person that I’m looking for, right?”

Ignoring me, she said, “Your correct name is Ingrid Phillips, right?” and she was not going to say any more. Then she said, “I will be in touch,” and she hung up.

That phone call cost seventy-eight cents. After spending a hundred and fifty dollars a month on long distance calls for over two years, my culminating call cost seventy-eight cents.

And right after that, I was just *nuts*. That night I hardly slept, in fact I tossed nonstop for about a week. I *watched* the phone. At that time I did not have an answering machine, so I couldn’t go to my office; I couldn’t go anywhere.

Finally, three days later, she called me back and she said, “Before we get any further, I want all the information you have, so I know I have the correct person.”

And I told her everything—almost. I told her my birth date and birth weight and about The Willows, and all that, but I did not tell her about the thousands of hours we had put into this search or how we found her, which was something she was extremely curious to find out.

And she told me that she wanted to meet me but right now she just couldn’t, there was just too much going on. She had worked full-time as a personnel manager until her husband retired; now she works as a hospice volunteer looking after cancer patients. He’s eleven years older than her; he’s now about seventy-three. So she couldn’t do anything at present because they would soon be going in their van to visit their kids. She talked to me about twenty minutes.

Then I waited eleven weeks more, and I was just wild, living for the phone to ring.

And one night in April when I was in the aftercare phase of my treatment, I told the group that I had been waiting eleven weeks for my birthmother to call, and they confronted me on not doing anything about it. So the next day I called her. She said she couldn’t talk right then, but that she’d return my call, and, not to be left hanging again, I demanded, “When?”

“I will call you back tomorrow night at seven o’clock,” she said.

The next night was a Sunday night and Laurette and her husband came over. At seven o’clock the phone rang and it was her and she talked to me for about half an hour.

She told me that she had four kids of her own—and I thought, Aren't *I* your own?—and it was really hard to listen to what she had to say, because I knew I wasn't going to meet her. She'd had enough time to think about it all, and she was really afraid because no one knew, not her kids or anyone. I asked her then if her husband knew, but she wouldn't answer me and she wouldn't tell me if he was my birthfather.

She talked a lot about her early life, growing up during the Depression as the oldest of five kids. When she was nineteen and got pregnant with me, her father deserted the family and they'd had it rough. I got the feeling that she hated his guts. Marthe said she did what she did because she had to do it, and she wasn't going to feel guilty and I wasn't going to *make* her feel guilty.

"I don't want to," I said.

Then she said, "I don't know what else to say," and the call was just sort of left hanging. That was April of 1983. No one prepared me, no one could have prepared me, for the way I felt afterward. Being rejected for the second time was terrible.

After having found her the previous January, that was our second phone call. Then the next month, on Mother's Day I sent her a non-Mother's Day card and Leo Buscaglia's book, *Living, Loving and Learning*. But there was no response.

Church and Alcoholics Anonymous were very important parts of my life, and hearing a sermon entitled "Let Go and Let God," gave me the courage to attend my first *closed* A.A. meeting where I would not just listen to others but would have to say something myself. When I got there and it was my turn to talk, I said, "I really do believe in God and if I do, then I have to trust him to help me let go of my dream of having a mother."

After the meeting, I got into a car accident and was hospitalized for two days. That gave me lots of time to think, and I decided to write Marthe a letter. Hoping to soften her a little, I told her about the accident, and that I wanted to let go of our relationship but I didn't know if I could. And I still never heard from her.

My friend Laurette had been very concerned about my accident and she took the next step a few months later.

Laurette, adoptee's friend: I did write Marthe one short letter, thinking that since I was more her age, I might be able to reach her. I told that she'd be proud of a fine woman like Ingrid, and suggested that we meet somewhere well away from her town. Then I mailed it to her at her office so her husband wouldn't see it. Two days later she called me, sounding very angry and frightened. She said sharply, "Don't you ever, *ever* do that again! Sometimes my mail comes to me already opened and I don't want anybody to find out."

At least I pried two facts out of her: that Ingrid was not the product of rape or incest, and that she had told her husband about Ingrid.

Ingrid, adoptee: That call of Marthe's to Laurette in 1983 was the end of any contact we had with her for over three years.

In March, 1987 I began my year of training to be an addictions counselor so I could open my own office, and Growth Group started that July. It was an awful part of my training because we had to talk honestly about personal problems. Naturally, I talked about my adoption and my futile attempt to have a relationship with my birthmother. I said, "I wrote her a letter after my car accident four years ago, but she didn't respond so it's obvious she doesn't want me in her life." Immediately they confronted me. "What are you going to do about this?" At first I didn't answer, but as we talked about it, I began to see that I needed to do something.

Several weeks later, early one Saturday at the end of August, Scott and I left Appleton early to drive our older daughter Tiffany to Eau Claire to start her second year of college.

After we dropped her off, we got back in the truck.

Scott said, "Well, what do you want to do now?"

I said, "I want to go and meet my birthmom." He hadn't known of my plan, but he was afraid I didn't really mean it because I had sat on it for so long.

My birthmother lives in a small town named Rice Lake, Wisconsin, about fifty miles north of Eau Claire, so we didn't have far to drive. We're going up the highway and there's this little church on the edge of Rice Lake with a reader board on the lawn, and it said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." And I said, "See Scott, we're supposed to be doing this today." That sign gave me hope, because I knew my birthmom did *not* want to see me.

In Rice Lake, I couldn't go right to her house, I was too afraid. So we went to Hardee's and I went to the bathroom and then we got a cup of coffee and a double bacon cheeseburger, which didn't taste that good because of my nervous stomach. After lunch we drove around town till we found her neighborhood, cruised up and down until all of a sudden Scott said, "There's her house! There's their van! This is where she lives." And we turned down a side street and parked.

My birthmother's house was on Hemlock Street, and right next door to it was a house on the corner of the block, and it faced Fourth Avenue. So we parked on Fourth, across from the corner house, where we could see right into the backyard of my birthmom's house where a small, elderly man was raking the grass.

We sat in the truck and talked for a while, while Scott munched on one of the Granny Smiths I'd brought from home. Suddenly he said, "Someone just came out and hung some clothes on the line," and it was *her*.

I got all excited and rattled, afraid to get out of the truck. I just kept babbling for about half an hour, and finally a man came out of the corner house and sat in a rocking chair on his screened-in porch, watching us.

Scott said, "We have to either do what we came to do or we have to leave because we look a little weird just sitting here in a pickup truck."

So we got out. I'm 5'2" and my husband, Scott, is 6'2" and he's walking behind

me, and we walked up Fourth Avenue past the man on the porch, turned the corner onto Hemlock and slowly walked towards *her* house with all the shades drawn even on the glassed-in porch. We stopped in the middle of her driveway that led to the garage behind her house, and I got really scared. I suddenly whirled around and faced Scott.

I said, "I can't do this, I can't do this! Will you go and knock on her door and see if it's her and see if she's there?"

Scott never pushed me into anything, ever. Very calmly, he put his hands on my shoulders and looked down at me.

He said, "Listen, Ingrid, we've come this far, and now you're going to do it, and you *can* do it."

At that time I was thirty-nine and my birthmom was almost fifty-nine, and I knew her husband was eleven years older than her, so the man raking was seventy. I was wearing my favorite turquoise pants with all the pockets, and in the right pocket I held onto my medallion from going through treatment. And Scott stayed right behind me, I squeezed my medallion and when we reached the back yard I said to the man, "Hi, could you tell me if your wife is home?"

And he said, "Sure, I'll get her," and he opened the back door and said loudly, "Marthe, come out here, somebody wants to see you." And as soon as he said that, my heart was in my throat.

It was a perfect summer afternoon, about 75°. We stood on the grass in the shade of a huge yellow maple tree, and I looked at the sheets drying on the clothesline. The back door had a little roof over it but no porch and it gave directly onto a narrow cement walkway.

Suddenly she came and opened the screen door and stepped just outside, holding the door ajar.

"Yes?" she said.

"My name is Ingrid Phillips," and as soon as I said that he stopped raking, picked up his rake and walked down the driveway to the front yard. He knew who I was.

Her mouth fell open and she just stood there, looking at me.

And Scott told me later, he said, "You know, when you get one of those dumb looks on your face, like 'Ah, I don't believe this,' it was like looking in a mirror, 'cause her face looked so much like yours."

"What do you want?" she said.

"I want to meet you. I want to see what you look like. I want to know who I look like. I don't want anything except to talk to you. And I want to know that you're real."

On the drive over, Scott had asked me what I expected of the meeting, and I said, "I need to see her, to talk to her and to touch her." And he said, "You may get two out of the three, but I wouldn't hold out for all three."

And she stood there with the door ajar for maybe ten or fifteen minutes, like she was afraid to come out.

Then finally she came out of the doorway and she stood about five feet away from me, and Scott stayed right behind me, never saying anything. And I started talking and I started crying. I have a really hard time with crying. I just stood and I cried the whole time that I talked to her. And I was very, very open and I was very honest and I told her I didn't want to hurt her, I only wanted to see what she looked like. I wanted to know who I looked like, where I came from.

She said "Well, you're a chip off the old block, all right. I knew what you were going to look like." she said, "You look just like me, you're short and fat, just like I have been my whole life," and Scott and I burst out laughing because no one's ever said that to me before and lived to get away with it. She smiled for a second then, and we do have the same nice smile, even though it took a lot to get that, she was so afraid.

I'd say she was attractive in a real average-looking way, like me. I am heavy, but at that point I had lost over sixty pounds; I used to be a lot heavier. She has bigger boobs than me, but we're real close in height and size and coloring, including our blue eyes. She wore makeup, including mascara, even on wash day, and had on green and gray plaid polyester slacks with a white knit top. Her hair was shorter than mine, kind of wavy and graying. She wore bifocal glasses in flesh-colored plastic frames. They were proper-looking, unlike the flashy red Sally Jessie ones I wore. My voice is lower than hers, but we do sound alike.

She didn't say anything about my recovery or my addictions counseling business or nothing, even though I had written her about that. She never asked me what my kids look like or to see a picture of them, never asked me a thing about them, and that surprised me. She did ask me about my parents and if I was raised with love when I was little and did I have everything I needed? And I grew up with all the material things I could have wanted and then some, but it's like *that's* what was more important to her.

She told me that two of her four children couldn't have kids and had to adopt, and that was really hard on her because of what she had done to me, and I said, "That's really sad. Maybe some day you can tell them about that," and she got real defensive and snapped, "That's my choice."

Just as she said, "I suppose if I told you how I really feel, you wouldn't believe me," Scott decided she needed some space, so he walked out front where her husband was raking.

After Scott left, she came over and put her arms around me and she said, "I do love you. I have always loved you. Not one birthday went past that I didn't think of you. I've prayed for you every day of your life." Then she kissed me on the cheek, and I cried the whole time. She never did. It seemed to be much more emotional for me than for her, and I might be wrong on this, but from outward appearances,

she seemed distant and controlled and I think it was to *protect* herself so she wouldn't have to endure any feelings for me that might cause her to weaken and let me into her life.

I did ask her who my birthfather was. She said, "I choose not to tell you that at this time, Ingrid." Then I looked towards her husband, and I said "Is that my birthfather?" and she said, "I choose not to tell you that at this time." On the adoption papers I have, my birthfather was eleven years older than her, 5'8", Protestant and Norwegian. I know from our research that her husband is eleven years older than she is, belongs to a Lutheran church, and was born on a boat coming over from Norway. So either he *is* my birthfather, or she just used all his information on the forms she filled out when I was born.

I think she was afraid I was going to be nasty or give her a hard time, and I didn't do that at all. I told her I had spent most of my life looking at the faces of women who were twenty years older than me, wondering who I look like. I told her I just didn't want to do that for the rest of my life, and that's why I came to see her. I asked her if I could have a picture of her, and she said, "I'm not very photogenic," and wouldn't give me one.

She asked me never, *never* to drop in on her like that again. She said they are rarely home on a Saturday afternoon and that if they are, they have family there.

After a while, she came over to me a second time and she put her arms around me kissed me and hugged me and told me she loved me, and that time I said, "I believe you." It was real special; it was the first time in my life that I ever heard everything I wanted to hear.

Shortly after that, Scott came back down the driveway. He told me later that when he saw mascara all over her white blouse and lipstick on my cheek, he knew that I had touched her and that I had done and said everything I had wanted to, so we decided to leave. Scott and I walked down to the end of the driveway, and I turned around. She had been watching us and she blew me a kiss goodbye. We were there probably an hour. She never did ask me in.

The next month, on her birthday, I sent her a perfect card enclosing a friendly letter, but there was no response. I sent her a Thanksgiving card, and still I didn't hear from her.

And then Christmas I did. She sent me a really nice Christmas card and a letter thanking me for stopping by. She said she knew it took an awful lot of courage and she was glad that I did, but please don't do it again. She wanted to stay in touch and she would write.

The following month, January 22 was my fortieth birthday and that was the first birthday I ever heard from her. On birthdays before that I had cried myself to sleep thinking about her. But that year I got a card and a nice letter from her, and that was wonderful.

By September, 1989, I took stock. By then I had gotten five cards and I wanted

more. I wanted a relationship, but it was painfully obvious that she did not, *does* not want a relationship with me.

I wrote her a really nice letter saying goodbye, I let go and I'm done. I was swinging on a rainbow, and it was screwing up my life waiting to hear from her. That letter was the end of any contact between us. After my one impulsive, emotion-laden meeting with her on August 29, 1987, I have never seen her again.

I got divorced from Scott five days before Christmas in 1990, and handling that was worse than handling my adoption, because I didn't think it would ever happen to me. His alcoholism and infidelity, those were the reasons. And it was the typical scenario: I was the last one to find out about Scott's affair, and it was just horrible. After twenty-three years of marriage, it was a very, very painful divorce.

Now, instead of wasting any more energy trying to have a relationship with my birthmother, I went back to school in November of '92 when I was forty-four. I wanted to do something to honor the memory of my late mom, my real mom—the mother who raised me—because she was always saying, "You're smart, Ingrid. I want you to be sure to finish college." So I'm in the extended degree program for a Bachelor of Science Degree with an emphasis on women's studies. I'm swamped with school work, but now I have a much better attitude and a grade-point average of 3.25.

I did make peace with my mom back in 1983 as part of the five-week treatment program I entered to get rid of the pain I had inside. I wrote her a long letter and afterwards went to the nursing home to see her. Penny was there, too. I told Mom how painful my adoption had been and asked her, "Why didn't you just tell me the truth?" And she said, "We did the best we could; we thought we were doing the right thing by not telling you so you wouldn't feel different from Penny."

Then she took off her engagement ring, which I've always wanted, and put it on my finger and told me she loved me. She said, "I've always loved you, Ingrid, and I don't know why you never knew it." She hugged me and we all cried. Penny wants to have a relationship with me, but—and this is my issue, not hers—I have to learn to trust again before that can happen.

I don't have a relationship with anyone and I don't want to date, I just want to finish what I started when I was seventeen. I still drive a jeep and I still make snow angels and I have a dog named Mark, and a cat named Gertrude, and Mark and Gertrude and me, we just have a great time.

The way I feel about my birthmother is that she is a really good, Christian person with a big, dark secret. As for why she refuses to tell her four children about me, I think it's got to be about shame and guilt; I was raised Catholic and I know all about that stuff. Or maybe it's just plain old pride, her thinking to herself, "What would people say?" Her great, Christian image would suffer, or so she may imagine.

My whole narrative is really a God story, because there was no rhyme nor rea-

son I should have found her. We had no first name, no last name, no place where my birthmother came from, no nothing. After *surmising* her name was Marthe Larsen, we got lucky.

If I had to do it again, knowing how things would turn out, would I still do it? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, without a doubt! And I would suggest that anyone who really *wants* to do it, do it. And anyone who really doesn't have a burning desire, don't do it. Because it takes a whole lot of energy, time, and money.

The best thing that came out of this has been the satisfaction of having *some* answers, and I am emphasizing the *some* answers because I don't have them all. But knowing at long last who I look like by seeing my birthmother that one time, that was very, *very* important to me. Even though she wouldn't give me a picture, her image is burned into my soul forever.

After this was all over, my dear, kindhearted friend Laurette made a search scrapbook and gave it to me. On the last page, she wrote three words that sum up my story nicely: "To be continued," because it's not over yet.