

## Rachelle: the White Adoptee Raised by a Black Family

*Rachelle, a forty-year-old white adoptee who was raised in a large black family, had one consuming question all of her life: “Why, when I was so obviously white, did the adoption agency place me with a black family?” This story of confused racial identity shows that when adoptees search for answers persistently enough, they can usually find them. Rachelle needed some answers before she could move on with her life.*



**Carla, adoptee's mother:** In the summer of '52 when we went to Seattle to pick up two-year-old Annmarie, the adoption agency said “How would you like another girl?” so I said, “I’ll have to go home and think about it.” So we went home to Spokane and talked about it. We already had four sons, and I wanted a girl because I figured every baby I had was bound to be a boy. About three months later we went back and picked up Rachelle.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** I was born in a maternity home in Seattle, Washington, on May 10, 1952. Six months later, I was adopted by Carla and Will Webster, a black couple who had gone to Seattle to adopt a little black girl named Annmarie. Annmarie was as black as I was white. Carla and Will wanted to adopt her, but her birthmother never signed the release forms, so she ended up being their foster child.

Growing up in the Webster family, things were pretty crowded. There were nine kids: their seven natural children—six boys and Tonia—plus Annmarie and me. At one point we three girls were in one room and the six boys were split up

between the other three bedrooms. My parents built a bedroom for themselves off the kitchen.

With Annmarie and I being the two outsiders, you'd think we would have been natural allies, but we weren't. Annmarie was a real fighter, and if you did something wrong, watch out! For example, as I was getting older and my breasts were starting to develop, I thought I should wear a bra. I'd wait for her to go to school, then put on one of hers, hoping I'd get home in time to put it back in her drawer, but of course I never did. When she caught me, she'd come after me to punch me out, and I'd run to Mother, so finally Carla told me she would have to teach me how to box if I didn't start defending myself.

Carla was very sarcastic, distant, and cold. I didn't really understand her or know what she liked, but I knew what she *didn't* like, because then I got the belt or the back of her hand. That's how Carla controlled the behavior of her huge family. Aside from being Catholic, I don't understand why she would have so many kids, but there are always things we don't know about our parents. My younger sister Tonia told me when Carla married Will, she was pregnant with Neil, the oldest boy, by another man. As for Carla's habits and what she likes, I don't believe she drinks at all, and I know she likes the finer things in life. I can remember her saving for years and years and finally getting a new sofa. It was a beautiful sofa, but she put plastic on it and we couldn't sit on it. I can also remember one time she took me downtown and bought me a brand new coat. It was a really nice coat, so that experience was very special for me.

Carla was very strict and had certain expectations: every week she assigned each of us nine kids a job. We'd rotate washing dishes, drying dishes, taking the garbage out, and so on. My job after school every day was to dust and vacuum the living room and dining room. I can remember several times dusting around objects, thinking I was done, barely getting my foot on the sidewalk and she'd be calling me back in, saying, "You didn't dust under this!" When I was about ten, my job was to do this huge mountain of ironing every day. I absolutely hated ironing, but something happened where it stopped. Carla was pregnant and she was lighting a grill with gasoline, the gasoline exploded, she got third degree burns on her arms, and she lost the baby. When she came back home from the hospital she had a nervous breakdown, and she had to go back. Somewhere around then other women came into the house and I didn't have to do the ironing anymore.

We kids played together when we were smaller, but as we got older there were no shared feelings. We never talked, especially at the dinner table. When I wrote Santa Claus or when I wrote President Kennedy for a picture—which he sent me—the other kids laughed at me, so we never gave each other a pat on the back or any encouragement.

When I went to a psychotherapist several years ago, I finally confronted Carla in a letter about how she'd treated me and Annmarie as we were growing up, and

about being the dutiful Catholic wife by having all those kids. She was in the Peace Corps in Africa at the time, that's why we did this by letter. Even though I'm pleased to say she did respond, I didn't like the response I got, which was that she felt she didn't treat any of her children different and maybe we could be friends. I was devastated by that. But once I accepted what she said, I realized that the mother-daughter relationship I wanted, I would never get. As for being friends, we are more like acquaintances, to be honest. She rarely calls me. If there's any contact, the majority of the time I will call her.

My father, Will Webster, had his own business for a while, then worked as a janitor at night and wasn't around much. He didn't beat up on Carla, they didn't even argue between each other in our hearing, but he did hit one of us kids occasionally.

My memory of my childhood and teenage years is that I was a loner, without any friends. I remember lacking self-confidence, never feeling like I belonged, and feeling that my white, freckled skin, mousy curly brown hair and green eyes stuck out like a sore thumb in my family of blacks. I felt horribly ashamed and embarrassed by them, and whenever we went on family outings, I would try to separate myself from them. I remember one time when I was in a park with Annmarie, a boy playing on a swing had caught my eye, so I told Annmarie not to stand next to me because he might think we were sisters. See how cruel that was? I said some really cruel things, but at the time I didn't realize it. When I was growing up, I got the crazy notion that every Webster in the world was black, and anybody that heard my name was Rachelle Webster would say, "You're black." All those years I can think of only one close friend I had. Her name was Monica, she was white and she lived on the opposite end of town. I never, ever asked her to the house. I never once took anybody home.

When I was about eleven I started going out on my own, staying away from home as much as I could. I would spend a lot of my time at the playgrounds at Lincoln Park, about two blocks from our house, and then when I was a teenager, I'd spend a lot of time at the public swimming pool. No one ever asked me where I was, or what I was doing, at least not during the day. But if I was late getting home at night, I was hit first, then asked, "Where have you been and what have been up to?"

To Carla, discipline was fire and brimstone, a beating with a belt, and I've always felt Carla treated me and Annmarie differently from her seven natural children. But I know she believes she treated all of us kids the same, so I accept that. Still, I've had verification from Tonia, Carla's natural daughter, who said she used to cringe in a corner and cry when Carla would beat me. So Tonia remembers the beatings I got, and I remember the beatings Annmarie got. I heard a lot of beating involving Annmarie. I don't know exactly what brought it to a head, but one day when she was about sixteen, Annmarie was gone.

Around that time a peculiar change was made to the upstairs bedrooms: all

the doors were taken off the hinges. When I finally got my own bedroom as the older ones were leaving, I can remember that, if I wanted the door closed for privacy, I had to prop it up in the doorway. Perhaps Carla was afraid of incest, I don't know.

I was always scared to death of my mother. Until I was in my mid-thirties, if I talked to Carla on the phone, or once or twice when I'd see her in person, I'd still get sweaty palms. I feared her physically and verbally, and I think to some extent I still do. I didn't have a close relationship with my mother or my father—we never communicated. What they provided were the bare essentials: a roof over my head, food, clothing, and what's required by law of schooling. I never felt any love, any attention, or any encouragement from either one of them.

**Carla, adoptee's mother:** As a child, Rachelle always got good grades and family rules was no problem with her, at least not until she got to be a teenager and turned rebellious, like the rest of them.

All I ever wished for was that our nine kids not be a burden to society. To grow up with decent values, not to rob and steal from people. I tried to teach them to believe in God. They went to a Catholic school and church every day and I tried to keep their stomachs full and a decent roof over their heads. As for the rest of it, I wasn't that well educated and maybe I didn't do such a good job, I don't know. But over the years I did go to vocational school for a year to get my licensed practical nurse diploma and then I went to college and got a degree in journalism. I never used it—I just wanted to see if I could do it. Eventually I saw some of the world by joining the Peace Corps and working in third world countries. Now I work as an LPN in a hospital.

Rachelle had a problem simply because she was white, living in a black family. We belonged to a Catholic church group which was mostly blacks, but they also had Native Americans and whites and mixed. Any time they had any kind of event, we went to that. I know the children around there didn't think of Rachelle as any different from them, because she played with them all the time. Just the same, I'm sure she ran into prejudice, but she never said anything. She kept it inside.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** As a kid I was always a loner, but there was one adult in my life who gave me support, a lady named Mary that lived across the street. I used to run her dog every day, and after I had the baby I told her about it—that's when we started becoming close friends. Mary's been a wonderful friend ever since then. I just wish I could have found her sooner, because, as a child, I spent a lot of my time and energy trying to feel like I belonged to someone.

**Mary, adoptee's friend:** I've known Rachelle since she was a very small child. Being put in with a black family was hard for her because even though she does have black blood, she's very white. She looks like an Irish girl. So, although she'd

play with the little black children and the little white children, as far as bringing 'em home, or really having a close friend she could confide in, I don't think she ever did.

I knew her mother, Carla, well. She's a very nice looking lady, tall and slender. Rachelle's brothers and sisters all say Carla was rather cold as far as affection to them, and we don't know why. She may have had a hard life herself—a lot of those things are kept within.

Rachelle was a cute little girl, and the Websters dressed her nice. They got a lot of clothes from the Catholic church, so she was always dressed really cute for church. But I've seen many tears in that little girl's eyes, so I know it wasn't the best home for her.

One time a young neighbor man had offered to take her for a ride on his motorcycle, so she asked Will if she could go, and he said "Okay, but be home by 8:30," but the man didn't bring her home till nine. Will belted her so bad with a razor strop, and she come to me and put her head down on the table and cried, and here I am bathing those welts and it just about broke your heart to think that Will could do that. But do you know, in 1966, when my daughter and her family got killed in that terrible car accident, Will Webster baked a pie and brought it over. Do you see, even with the hardness within, there was goodness, too.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** Even though we lived in a nice neighborhood in Spokane, I guess I was just one of those kids that was some type of target for sexual advances. There was an old man that lived up the street that everybody thought was this nice, old man. I can remember, when I was four or five years old, he used to tell me to reach into his pants pocket to get candy and he wouldn't have any underwear on and he'd say, "Pinch it! Pinch it!"

When I was about nine, we lived next door to a divorced man with a son my age and one time he had a backyard picnic for us kids. Afterwards he asked me to help clean up—I was always taught to do this—so I took things up into the apartment for him. He came in behind me and locked the door, and I thought it was strange but I wasn't alarmed. I brought the stuff into the kitchen and then he asked me to come into the bedroom and I went in there and he jacked off in front of me! I just stood there, too terrified to move. Then he proceeded to pick me up—I remember this distinctly—and laid me down on the bed, and at that moment my sister knocked on the door. Whenever I think about that incident, I think, God, she doesn't know what she did for me!

The summer I was sixteen, a group of young white guys moved into a house up the street from us. One of them was named Doug, he was about twenty-three, and he started noticing me, flirting with me. I was starving for any kind of attention, and I thought I was in love. One thing led to another, and by fall something was wrong. I wasn't even aware of my own biological functions, I just knew something was wrong. I told a girl at school about it and she told her mother and her mother

told the priest at the Catholic high school and everyone kind of got involved. Finally I brought the priest home with me to tell my parents.

Afterwards my mother, Carla, asked me why I had brought the priest home and I said, "I thought you'd kill me," and she said, "You're probably right." At the time, she wanted to send me down to Mississippi where she'd grown up, but instead, she talked to the Catholic Social Services, and they had me move in with a foster family from January until March, when I had the baby. While I was living with this foster family, the father came on to me! But with this whole thing, I think I handled the situation fairly well. I did confide in Monica, my only friend in high school, and she gave me moral support. Sometimes I would think about my birthmother, wondering if she had been a young girl pressured into surrendering me, and what it had been like for her, having me. Thirteen years later, I got some answers and I learned her name. It was Suzanna.

**Suzanna, adoptee's birthmother:** I was raised in this white neighborhood of Seattle, raised as an Indian. I look black, but my features are quite Caucasian. My great, great, grandfather was Scottish, a civil war veteran, and he married an Indian woman. My father was a mixture of Scottish and Indian and black, and he had a Scottish name, so I have a very varied background.

In 1947, when I was eighteen and he was twenty-two, I married Walter Koleski, a white Polish-American, and moved to Tacoma. We had two daughters, Gail and Ruth. After three and a half years, our marriage ended because we were very poor and I think just immature. He didn't want to work and I wanted to work, and at that time women didn't work, so I said, "Just let me help out," and he said he wanted to go to school, but he didn't go to school. He'd been through World War II, seen the atrocities in Poland and everything, and he wasn't exactly lazy, but I just figured he should get on with things. Anyway, in 1950 we divorced and I moved in with my mother and got a job in a hospital diet kitchen. Mom helped me with the two girls.

The next year I met Stan, a white married man with four children, and we got involved sexually. He had brown hair and green-blue eyes. Stan was almost a chemist. He'd gone to UW, but he didn't get his degree, so he was a chemical technician. Before I went to work for the company, I just ran into him one time and we started talking. I'd just gone through my divorce and I was vulnerable. He was a lot of fun and he was so sympathetic—oh yes, he knew just what to say to a woman. He was these other things, but he always said everything you wanted to hear. He was thirty-six and an expert at seducing women while I was just a dumb kid, what did I know? But you just have to get your knocks and maybe learn a thing or two. As you can guess, I got pregnant.

In January 1952 I entered a Catholic maternity home in Seattle for the last four months of my pregnancy. I took my two little girls with me. Ruth, who was not quite two, was allowed to stay with me while Gail, who was four, was put into the

orphanage temporarily. Every Sunday I was allowed to take Ruth and we'd walk to the orphanage to visit Gail. In the maternity home we weren't called by our real names. I was called Shelley. I like romantic names like Shelley and Rachelle, which is what I named my baby girl. On May 10, 1952, when I was twenty-four, Rachelle was born.

I didn't want to give her up for adoption, but then when I thought about how I was barely coping with raising Gail and Ruth, there was really nothing else I could do. Of course, Stan was scared to death I would keep her—he was all for adoption.

Something that makes me quite angry is that the agency didn't tell me the truth. They said the adoptive father was an engineer and they had two boys and they wanted a girl but the mother couldn't have any more children. So I thought that was just great, and that Rachelle would have a better life with that family. Since I'm Indian and black, what actually happened was that, even though her birthfather Stan was white and Rachelle herself was undeniably white, the adoption agency put her in with a black family where the father was a janitor and they already had four sons, not two. As if that weren't enough, the mother ended up having a total of seven kids of her own. When you add the two adopted girls, Annmarie and Rachelle, there were nine kids in that family, so it was nothing like they told me it would be. If I'd known all that, I would have asked that she be placed in an Indian family.

Another thing that upset me was that, when I gave Rachelle up for adoption in 1952, they said never, ever could I see her again and never get in touch and never do anything. I think someone should have given me some warning that she might find me.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** My baby was born in March 1969 when I was sixteen and in my junior year of high school. I surrendered her for adoption right away, and she was adopted before I left the hospital. I didn't put a name on her original birth certificate because I knew it would be changed. Now I wish I had done it, because I did have a pretty name for her, Rachelle Claire. At that time I didn't know what name my own birthmother had given me, so it was really incredible when I found out years later that my birthmother had named *me* Rachelle Joan, and that's why I chose Rachelle as my pseudonym in this story. During my baby's adoption proceedings, the judge asked me if I had any requests before I signed the final papers. I said "Yes. I don't want my baby to grow up in a black family like I did."

Afterwards I went back home, switched schools, and was working with a counselor, taking some correspondence courses so I could graduate on schedule. After I'd had the baby, my parents never allowed me to date. When the boy up the street asked me out, I couldn't go because his parents were Republican, that was their excuse.

That fall, during my senior year, my girlfriend Monica was having a party after

a school football game. Of course I'd been told I couldn't go, but I went anyway—the typical rebellious teenager. When I arrived back home after the party, Carla was waiting up for me. She ordered me up to my room to write a set of rules I would live by in her house. While I was up in my room, Will came storming in and yelled at me to get the hell out of his house. I didn't pack, I didn't say a word, I just left, I left! The only place I could think of to go was to Doug's, the father of my baby. He was not real pleased to see me, but he did help me find a place where I could live for a while. I finished my senior year living wherever I could. The one thing that still bothers me is that, to my knowledge, not once did Will or Carla make an attempt to locate me.

**Mary, adoptee's friend:** After my daughter and her family were killed in a terrible car accident, Rachelle used to come down and run my German shepherd, which had been my daughter's. So this was when I really got to have a lot of talks with her, when she was fourteen, fifteen years old. Then in the spring of '69 I didn't see her for a month or two, until finally she came over and told me she's had a baby in March and had already adopted it out. She couldn't see any way to keep it; she was just too young. The baby's father was a white guy who came from a family where there was lots of drinking and abuse, so that's the way he treated Rachelle. Once she called me in tears and he was right there laughing, making a big joke out of it.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** I graduated in June of 1970, which is exactly when I should have graduated. I wish I could remember that counselor's name so I could thank her, because she helped me graduate on time. My mother, Carla, did have a small graduation party for my brother Kyle and me, because he was also graduating, but from a different school. I wanted to mention the party because sometimes I forget that Carla did do some nice things for me. Before the graduation ceremony, I can remember feeling so proud, walking around in my black gown. When I pushed my way into the bathroom and up to the mirror to put on my cap, the girl beside me said, "What are you doing with that? You shouldn't be graduating!" I didn't say a word—I just cleared out of there. Apparently more people than I was aware of knew I'd had a baby.

After graduating, I managed to get a job in a bank as a teller. I was there about six months when the personnel director ordered me into his office and grilled me as to why I hadn't told him about my black family. At the end of our little talk, he kind of hissed at me, "You may *look* white, but you'll know you're black when you have children, because *they'll be black!*" A few weeks later, at a big function for employees, the vice-president of the bank pulled me aside and snarled that I was shooting for the stars and I had no right to do that, and I should just back off. Maybe he thought I should go out and be somebody's maid.

I'd get comments not only from the whites but from the blacks, too. When I was

a teenager, I'd meet guys who would say, "Well if you were my sister, I'd sure get you in bed," or the white guys would make reference to my being black. When I'd go to a black function the blacks would call me half-breed. I can't remember all these things—I tend to bury a lot of those remarks. But I can remember I always felt I wasn't accepted by anybody, white or black.

In 1972, I moved to Everett, a much bigger city quite close to Seattle, and my family stayed in Spokane. I was twenty years old and thought I could just live my life as an ordinary white woman, and never mention my black family to anyone.

Still, whenever I really started to like new people, I would tell them about my black family and all of a sudden they were gone. One exception was a woman named Margaret who became my closest friend. Years later she told me that the first time she saw me with my hair dyed this auburn color that looked flaming red in the sunlight, her first impression was that I had a huge chip on my shoulder. Her mother had scarred her emotionally—which was worse than my physical beatings—and I think that was one of the reasons she befriended me.

Finally, in 1978, when I was twenty-six, I met Michael Bonacci. He was eager for me to meet his family, which I did two days after meeting him, but I didn't talk to them or to Michael about my family background. I was so afraid that, if he knew about it, he would just disappear, like so many others had. However, within a month of meeting him, I told him about being raised in a black family, because I was going to weed him out or not. Luckily, he passed the test handsomely.

At that time I was selling carpet in Everett. Before working there I'd been fired from two jobs, mainly because I did have a big chip on my shoulder, just as Margaret thought. I brooded about the past a lot and felt a lot of pent-up anger from all those years living with my black family. If someone would look at me the wrong way, or they would say something sarcastic to me, I would just blow up. Later, when I got counseling, I understood that, especially if a comment came from a woman, it reminded me of my mother, Carla.

Right after Michael and I got married I got a job doing general office work and stayed there for eight years, so marrying him really helped to stabilize me. In 1980, when we decided to get married, I told Michael's family I had been adopted and placed into a black family, and left it like that.

The wedding date rolled around, and of course I invited Carla and she came. By then my father, Will, was dead, and I didn't know where everybody else was. So the night before the wedding, Carla came to Everett for the rehearsal dinner. That was the first time my future in-laws had ever laid eyes on my black mother. All of them were very gracious to her, but it was tense. Luckily, my old neighbor friend Mary had come too, and she sat with Carla. That helped a lot.

Sometimes I feel Michael's family are like ostriches: they would sooner put their heads in the sand than to think about their son's black in-laws. So I don't talk about it and they don't ask.

**Mary, adoptee's friend:** I think marrying Michael was the best thing that ever happened to Rachelle. He's in importing-exporting, so he travels abroad often and sometimes he takes Rachelle. He must have a very good job 'cause they have a lovely new home. I have a lot of contact with Rachelle. I have a soft heart for people that have had to fight hard to find their own identity.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** In 1981, the year after I married Michael, I started looking for my birthmother. I had this compelling need to find her and to resolve the questions I had. I wanted to know why she gave me up, who she was, and what she looked like, because I was tired of the fantasies. When I was sixteen and pregnant, a social worker had told me my birthmother had been blond-haired and blue-eyed. That turned out to be nonsense, because it was my birthfather who was blond and blue-eyed.

I was thinking about having children, but I was terrified because I kept remembering the personnel director hissing at me that I'd have black children. Michael and I never talked about it, but I thought if I could only find my birthmother it might answer some of my questions.

I got in touch with an old friend who was an attorney in Everett, and he wrote a letter to the adoption agency in Seattle. In April 1981 they sent me two pages of non-identifying information which contained the following details:

The social history stated that my birthmother was a twenty-three-year-old Negro who had contacted the agency when she was four months pregnant. She had recently been divorced from her husband, with whom she'd had two daughters, aged two and four, and the three of them were living with her mother. Her ex-husband was also seen by an agency worker. Despite his ex-wife's pregnancy—which he was aware of—he felt he was still in love with her.

The social history said my birthmother had graduated from high school and had one brother in the U.S. Army. She was musical and a convert to Catholicism. She was five feet five inches tall, ordinary weight about a hundred and thirty-five pounds, had dark brown eyes, black curly hair, and Negroid features. She worked in a hospital diet kitchen.

It said my birthfather was white, thirty-six, and married with four children. He was five feet seven inches tall, had brown hair, green-blue eyes, and a light complexion. He had some college education and was employed as a chemist. He did contribute to the cost of my birthmother's confinement and toward my care prior to my adoption.

The social history gave no family health history for either parent, apart from saying my birthmother's health was good, and that her only hospitalizations had been for childbirth.

It stated I was born on May 10, 1952, gave my weight and length, and mentioned I had been baptized Catholic. It said I stayed at the maternity home until my birthmother could decide whether to keep me or release me for adoption. She

visited me and took me articles of clothing.

“Record indicates the birthmother ‘loves the child and sometimes feels she would like to keep her, but because of a limited income, the welfare of her own two children and that of the baby, she feels it would be best to terminate her rights to the child,’” and that five months later, she did terminate them. One month later I was placed with the Websters. Afterwards, my birthmother called the agency requesting a picture of me and was told I’d been adopted. I was legally adopted in December 1953 in King County Court.

Some time after I got that non-identifying information, I hired a private search professional in Seattle called Jen Bush. I sent her a down payment, copies of the non-identifying information, and my amended birth certificate. I have no idea how she did it, but several months later, in April 1982, she gave me my birth-mother’s name, address and phone number. Jen said she had not contacted Suzanna Koleski, the woman who was my birthmother.

When you’re an adoptee about to contact your birthmother for the first time, writing is easier and kinder than phoning, but with me, back then, I never thought of consequences. I had to make contact right away, so I kept trying to call. I kept calling all through the next week, my heart pounding in my throat every time I dialed her number, but I didn’t get an answer.

Finally, on Saturday, May 1, I sat down and wrote her a letter, using my nicest little note card and trying to keep my hand steady enough to write legibly. I wrote a real brief, to-the-point letter, ‘cause I didn’t know what else to say. I said I’d like to hear from her, so would she please phone me. All the next week I expected her to contact me, but for some reason, she didn’t.

**Suzanna, adoptee’s birthmother:** I’d gone to California in the spring of ’82 to see my daughter Ruth for a couple of weeks, and I had come back home on Saturday, May 8. After I unpacked and got straightened away, I sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee to look through all the mail.

There was this envelope and it said Rachelle Bonacci on the return address, but I really didn’t look at it carefully and I thought it said Ramona and I thought, Oh, Ramona got married and changed her name again, she’s always getting married. I’ll save that letter for last and see where she is. Finally I opened it up and it said, “Thirty years ago, Mrs. Koleski, you gave up this baby daughter...” and I go What, what, *what?* “and call this number.” It really caught me by surprise.

Meanwhile Rachelle had thought, because I didn’t answer her letter right away, that I’d had a heart attack or something, which I darn near did! But before I made that first call to Rachelle, I just had to call my old friend Joan and tell her the news. She’d been my roommate in the maternity home and she was the reason I had named my baby Rachelle Joan. So Charlie, her son, answered the phone.

“Charlie, let me talk to your mom,” I said, and he said something which I ig-

nored because I was bursting to tell Joan my news.

“Oh yeah, I know, but let me talk to your mother.”

“Aunty Suz, Mom died!”

“What? Let me talk to her.”

“Aunty Suz,” he said, “listen to what I’m saying: Mom *died* two weeks ago!”

Joan had died right after I’d left for California, and Charlie had been phoning and phoning, trying to get hold of me, so that was pretty sad.

Once I recovered from this double whammy, Rachelle’s letter made me happy, happy she’s okay, is married and has done well. I called her right away, and we talked and she came down to Tacoma the next day, which was Mother’s Day and there was a lot of crying. I called my two daughters and told them about it, so everybody was happy.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** When Suzanna finally called me, we were both very nervous, but we made a date to meet the next day, which was Sunday, May ninth. I was so excited I hardly slept that night.

When morning finally came, I got up early to get myself ready and to drive the sixty miles from Everett to Suzanna’s place in Tacoma. We were to meet at her apartment, so I drove around looking for it and finally I spotted it and knocked on the door. Since Suzanna is a mixture of black and Indian, I wasn’t sure what to expect. As for whether she looked more black or more Indian, she looked definitely black to me, with black, kinky hair which she straightens. Of course I was used to blacks, but frankly, I was quite shocked to see how dark she was.

Then, because it happened to be Mother’s Day, I took her out to a nice restaurant for a special Mother’s Day brunch. I gave her flowers and pictures of myself and Michael and our animals. We sat there and visited for several hours and everything was great. After that, I’d see her in Tacoma once or twice a year, and then always on Mother’s Day, I’d visit and take her out somewhere nice.

**Suzanna, adoptee’s birthmother:** When Rachelle and I first met, I told her that if I was the adoptee, I might hesitate to contact my birthmother out of loyalty to this mother who took care of me all these years. Then she told me Carla had strongly encouraged her to look for me, even if she had to hire a private detective. When I was sure her mother approved of us meeting, I wrote Carla a letter and sent her a little gift. She was in the Philippines with the Peace Corps at the time. She wrote me back and said Rachelle had been the usual rebellious teenager, and then we kind of lost touch. Rachelle said Carla’s an aloof person, and they don’t see much of each other. Still, to her credit, she raised Rachelle and eight other kids.

**Carla, adoptee’s mother:** When Rachelle went looking for her birthmother, it was to find the answers to questions in her own mind, and I encouraged her to do that. When kids want to find their birthparents, I think adoptive parents should

be supportive and not try to hide anything. I always told her she had two sets of parents. I feel Suzanna's her blood relative and she should know her, if for no other reason than for the medical reasons, to know her medical history and what she has to face when she gets older. I haven't met Suzanna but I've talked to her on the phone, and she sent me a gift when she and Rachelle first met.

**Suzanna, adoptee's birthmother:** I can understand why Rachelle needed to find her roots and came looking for me. Every person needs roots, that's why I got involved with one of the Indian tribes here in Washington State. I thought, Geez, I could try to fit in with blacks, but there was just something in blacks that wasn't in me. Then I remembered something: my grandma and mother had always talked about this rare Indian tribe, and I found them.

Now I'm on their tribal council. We try to get together at least once a year. Now that I've retired after forty years as a lab technician at the mill—I was trained on the job—I have time for my hobbies: music, going to plays, traveling. I'm going to buy a computer and do work for the tribal council on it.

I haven't seen Rachelle for some time. She said she had fixed up a guest room, so I told her maybe my girlfriend and I will come up to Everett and spend a weekend with her.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** I know Suzanna feels her roots are with that Indian tribe, but I don't identify with them at all, even though many of them are white, like me. Because of Suzanna's connection, I was secretary of the tribal council for a brief period, but I went to their meetings out of mere curiosity. I definitely do not feel they represent *my* roots.

Although when I first met Suzanna I was shocked because she was such a dark black, meeting my half-sisters, Gail and Ruth, was very reassuring—they look as white as I do. Gail is four years older than I am, lives in Portland, and used to mail me tapes and articles about finding God, which really turned me off. Ruth, who's two years older than I am, lives in California. I would like to know what it was like growing up with Suzanna, but it was real hard for me to talk to them about that. Just from the tid-bits I'd get the few times I've talked to them, it wasn't a real happy experience.

One summer Ruth and her two children, Kent and Cherry, flew to Everett and we visited most of the day, but it was a strain. She rented a car and was going to drive to Tacoma to visit our mother. When I asked her how long she'd be staying with Suzanna she said, "We're going to see her one night, then we'll get a hotel room and we'll fly home the next morning. I can't stand staying with her." Ruth came right out and told me she doesn't like Suzanna visiting them in California because it's usually over the holidays, and Suzanna ends up getting drunk and starting an argument and spoiling the whole holiday. All these things tell me I'm glad Suzanna gave me up. Even though the situation wasn't idyllic where I grew

up, I think things would have been worse with her.

Seeing how fair Kent and Cherry were made me feel a little more comfortable, a little more confident, about having children myself. Up until then my feelings about getting pregnant had been mixed. After eight years of marriage, I never wondered why I wasn't getting pregnant, I just resigned myself to the fact that we weren't going to have children. The next thing you know I'm pregnant and not real happy about it—my old fear was still alive. It took me a good six months into the pregnancy before I even accepted it. I had Grant on October 13, 1988, and everything turned out okay. He's fairer-skinned than I am. He is blond-haired and has his father's brown eyes. I'm so glad he's here.

I did meet my birthfather, Stan, one time. It was in May 1983, about a year after I first met Suzanna. We made a date through Suzanna—she helped me arrange it. When she first talked to Stan about my wanting to meet him, he said something like, "What does she want?" Apparently he was worried I might blow the whistle on him or give him a hard time or ask him for something. He asked Suzanna, "What should I say to her?" and she said, "Just go and meet her and be honest," but he was really scared.

I met him at a motel about seventy miles from here. I was expecting this real handsome man, tall and slender, like Paul Newman. I was standing in the motel lobby beside a fake ficus tree waiting for this attractive man to come in and I notice this guy standing several feet away from me. He's wearing baggy jeans and a navy and aqua satin baseball jacket with Seattle Mariners written on it, and he's short and roly-poly, like Santa Claus. I thought, *Nah!* So I watch him. He's standing there, I'm standing a few feet away watching him out of the corner of my eye, and finally I went up to him and said, "Are you Stan?" and it was Stan.

We went into the bar and of course I was so nervous and wound up all I could think to ask him was, "Do I look like anyone on your side of the family?" and he said I resembled one of his sisters. I asked him about his kids, how many he had. I can't remember if he said he had three or four daughters. As far as health problems, there were none he told me about. We didn't relate to each other very well. When I left him, he didn't even shake my hand or hug me or anything like that.

As for what I thought of him, I just don't know. I did learn something interesting about him from Suzanna, though. She told me that one night when she was taking a friend home from some function, this lady told her that she had had an affair with Stan also. I know that really hurt Suzanna, because he had the affair while Suzanna was in the maternity home waiting for me to be born. So Stan was one of those. God knows how many kids he may have wandering around.

Stan died in September of 1989. Suzanna sent me the obituary, which didn't mention the cause of death. To be honest with you, I felt I got cheated. I felt Stan owed me something for everything I went through. I wasn't looking to get rich, but just something, some little token to acknowledge that he was my birthfather, that he recognized me as his child.

A month after Stan's death, Suzanna and I were at the tribe's annual meeting, and we talked about it at dinner afterwards. I told her, "I didn't get anything from my adopted father, Will Webster, but maybe Stan left me something. Maybe I should check into his estate and see if there was anything for me." She got very upset and called me money-grubbing and said I'm not her daughter, and she stalked out and stuck me with the bill.

That was October 1989, and we didn't speak for a long time after that. Eventually I tried to apologize, even sent a card, but it just didn't seem to work. When I talked to my half-sister Ruth, she said that's how Suzanna is, she's never happy unless she can create some kind of turmoil. So I thought, Okay, fine, I'll see you at the Indian meetings, and that's it.

**Suzanna, adoptee's birthmother:** Something which caused one of the major bumps in Rachelle's and my relationship was that, after Stan died, Rachelle wanted to dig into his estate to find out whether or not she had anything coming. I said, "Leave it alone, just let it go." But she did go to an attorney and he said, seeing how she was adopted, there was nothing she could do about his estate. I said, "As far as I'm concerned you're my daughter, and it ends here." She said, "I still have half-sisters," meaning Stan's daughters. Heck, they don't even know Rachelle's on earth and I feel they don't need to know.

Rachelle assured me that she wouldn't do anything while I'm alive 'cause she wouldn't want to embarrass me, but that down the road she wants to find them. I know Stan's family is half Rachelle's heredity, but Stan's wife, Carol, is still alive, and finding out about Rachelle would really hurt her. I've known Carol most of my life and the poor woman thinks highly of me, in fact we like each other. She knows nothing of my affair with her husband and I prefer to keep it that way. Rachelle knows I know Carol, so I sure hope she waits till Carol's dead before contacting the daughters.

That whole thing made me very uncomfortable. I think you're just going to be hurting a lot of people. What do you get out of it? Nothing, nothing, unless you get some revenge out of it. But it happened long ago, so let's forget about it. The way I feel is, what's done is done. Let's get on with our own lives.

**Rachelle, adoptee:** I never did pursue anything on Stan's estate. If I was going to be that greedy I could have gone many routes, along with upsetting his family. I wasn't going to do that, partly because do realize that Suzanna and Carol, Stan's wife, have been friends for years. But after Carol dies maybe I'll contact the four daughters she and Stan had. Since the five of us share half the same genetic background, I'm curious to meet them.

Even though Suzanna and I don't have a close relationship, I'm still glad I found her and I think she's very happy I found her. Although the Catholic Social Services sent me the non-identifying information which told me the basic story, I

just couldn't stop there. I had to meet her no matter what I found.

I was disappointed in Suzanna because I wanted her to be more than she was: nicer, smarter, prettier, the whole thing. She wasn't fat, but she was a little bit dumpy. Another thing is, Suzanna does have a drinking problem. According to my two half-sisters, she's an alcoholic. But of her three daughters, I would have to admit I have characteristics most like Suzanna's. I smoke, and I think I practically have a drinking problem because I don't stop at one. So normally I don't drink at all, but there are certain times when I do. My husband travels, and sometimes when he's away and I've had a real stressful day, I'll have three or four glasses of wine at night, after the two children are in bed. I'm not totally out of it, I don't get up in the morning with a headache—I'll drink just enough to relax me.

I started getting some insight into my problems when I was in my late twenties. That's when I really started understanding my own reactions and putting things together. Beginning with my best friend Margaret's understanding and people like my old friend Mary pointing things out to me, and then going into counseling, all these things helped me. Getting the answers to my questions about my adoption capped things off for me. That helped to clear the old clutter from my mind.

When most adoptees search for birthparents, their big question is, Why was I given up for adoption? I wanted to know that too, but I also burned to know why I had been placed in a black family when I was white. Today I believe there were two reasons that happened.

Back in the early fifties there were many white babies available for adoption and adopters were choosier. Most did not want biracial babies. The Seattle social workers had to tell them that I came from a white birthfather and a black-Indian birthmother. They could also have mentioned that I had Mongolian Spots—areas of darker pigmentation—on my buttocks. In 1952 doctors believed those spots meant I was a bi-racial child whose skin could become darker as time went on, something we now know doesn't happen. My mother Carla always believed she and Will were asked to take me—in addition to Annmarie—because the white families didn't want me. Apparently she was right.

But if I had been placed with a white family, I think it would have made a great deal of difference. My racial identity wouldn't have been as confused and hopefully my self-esteem would have been better.

I was very unhappy growing up in my huge black family, but at least there was more stability there than there would have been with Suzanna. She was a young, black, divorced single mother with two other little children to support, and if I had lived with her in Seattle as her illegitimate child, it just would not have worked out. It didn't work out very well for her daughter Ruth who, like me, had a child when she was sixteen. Ruth left home and went to live with her father and never returned. Oh, yes, I'm glad Suzanna gave me up.

The child I had when I was sixteen, Rachelle Claire, will be twenty-six years old

the end of March, 1995. Years ago I filed a waiver of confidentiality with the agency in Spokane so if she approaches them and wants to contact me, it will happen. So I have thought about her, maybe even doing a search someday, mainly because of Grant and Natalie. I do want them to know they have a half-sister somewhere. When they're old enough to understand, I'll tell them all about her.

Marrying Michael helped to give me the security I always needed. We have pretty much a happy marriage, even though he's not the prince on the pedestal he was when I first met him. He puts me down a lot, and sometimes more so in front of company. Usually I don't say anything about it—I tune him out a lot.

We now have two children: Grant, who just turned six, and our seven-month-old daughter, Natalie. All three of the children I've given birth to have been white, so it's easy for me to say this, but, now I'm more mature, I realize my worries about having a black baby were stupid. I know Michael and I would love any child God sent us.

I have to admit, though, that when people discuss families, I say I grew up in a large family and I didn't get along with my mother, and that's all I say. I don't have any childhood pictures of me and my black family around, so I guess I'm still ashamed of them. I thought I was getting over that and maturing, but perhaps I'm not.

Today I'm a forty-three-year-old extended degree student at the University of Washington-Everett. I'm going for a B.S. in business administration with an accounting minor. I enjoy being a university student. I'm surprised at all the things each new course opens up for me, how much it expands my thinking.

Now I know why my birthmother gave me up, and why they placed me with a black family instead of a white one, I can stop dragging around the emotional garbage. Instead of ruminating about the past, I can look more to the future. My life is good and I feel terrific.