CHAPTER SEVEN

Ricky: the Impulsive Adoptee

With many states writing new laws to open sealed adoption records, adult adoptees may soon easily get the information they need to find their birthfamilies. This happened to Ricky, who was born in Ohio where adoption records are open to adoptees born between 1939 and 1964. After the clerk showed him his records and he knew the name and city of his birthmother, Ricky immediately drove to Dayton. Once there, he drove around for hours until he figured out how to find his birthfamily and had the courage to forge ahead. Ricky says his adoptive parents hate him for finding his birthmother and were really cruel to him. Yet despite that, he says he would look for his birthfamily again. His birthmother says the greatest thrill of her life was getting flowers from her son.

Ricky, adoptee: I was born in Columbus, Ohio on September 15, 1956 and adopted when I was twelve days old. I was the youngest of three adopted kids, two girls and myself, and I've known ever since I was very young that I'd been adopted. We grew up on a small farm in Napoleon, Ohio, a small community about thirty miles southwest of Toledo.

Being the only boy on a farm, and big and strong for my age, I was worked hard. Did chores every morning, every night. Sometimes I felt like I was a slave and I resented it. I grew up in the old school, where, if you spare the rod, you spoil the child. Like my dad always told me, I got spankings when I didn't need them, and sometimes I got one when I did. I have no bad feelings about it. I love my adopted parents very much, even though my mother and I have had some hard times, with, you know, my adolescence and running the streets and trying to go wild.

When I was fourteen I was a truant, a run-away, rebelling against the system. The gentleman—the truant officer—that helped me, he actually turned my life around. Matter of fact, he's the one that took me to the Army Recruiting Office the day I turned seventeen.

"Boy, you need out of here." He said, "You're a good kid, but you've got to get away from this situation." He meant my whole family situation and the peer pressure. So I went into the army and was stationed in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

I remember very distinctly one time just before I turned seventeen my mother and I had had a terrible argument 'cause one of my sisters had done something bad and then lied and pointed the finger at me, and I hadn't done anything wrong. My mother yelled out the door to my father, "Get your rotten bastard son out of here!" After that day I didn't speak to her for twelve years. I left the farm and went into the army and didn't speak to her again until I was about thirty years old.

A couple of weeks later she found out I didn't do what I was accused of; my sister had done it and blamed me. But my mother never apologized. She is a rather stubborn woman. Highly educated, but stubborn. She was the head nurse of a hospital back home. Her name is Janet Kerr and she was born in 1923, so she's seven years younger than my dad.

Now my dad's name is Lloyd Kerr and he was not well educated. He was one of thirteen kids growing up during the depression, so he had a very hard childhood. He farmed, plus held down a job in the city; he knew nothing but hard physical work. I love 'em both, don't get me wrong, but there was a lot of animosity there. Hard feelings. We don't speak very much to each other. When I went into the military to try to straighten out my life they just shunned me away from the family. Now my two sisters had no desire to find their birthfamilies; they've gotten everything they wanted from our parents. I come home and I'm lucky to get a meal.

So when it comes to why a person like me goes looking for a birthparent, I think in my case it was because I didn't have a really close relationship with my adoptive parents. I was in search for someone to care. When I first found my birthfamily, in a way I felt cheated 'cause I grew up in a farm house on a farm, a rural community, and here are these people in Dayton, Ohio, they've got everything I ever dreamed of!

But you know, that time in Dayton when I was driving around looking for my birthmother's address, there was a lot of time between two and seven o'clock that I did a lot of soul-searching. Did I really want to do this? I was afraid, I was really afraid of the outcome. I didn't want to be rejected.

I joined the army the day I turned seventeen, and during the next three years I married my first wife Jill and we had a baby girl named Kara.

In June of 1976 I was twenty, still in the service in Fort Knox and working part time off the base. I ran a little gas station owned by the local judge. He was a real good friend of mine—we also rented off of him. Just before then I'd had a

mild stroke: too much salt, too much good times, too much beer, and I decided no more salt, no more beer. It wasn't a serious stroke, it just kind of scared me and I decided that I had some things in my life that I wanted to do.

One thing I wanted was to find out who my birthmother was, so I asked this judge, who kept up on the laws of all the states, what I should do. He knew that Ohio had just changed its laws to where the kid could find the parent, but the parent could not find the kid. So all he said was, "You just have to call them," and he told me where to call.

Okay, that was on a Wednesday that I made the phone call to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Columbus, Ohio, and they told me they could not give me any information over the phone and I would have to appear in person[6] with three pieces of identification.

By the time I could get time off from the military it was two days later, on a Friday. About 7:00 A.M. I took off from Fort Knox in my '65 yellow Nova and arrived at the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Columbus about four hours later. I showed them my I.D. and after what seemed like hours they handed me a big manila envelope that had been sealed since about eight months after my birth when all the paper work on my adoption was completed. I had to look at it all right there, I couldn't take anything away with me.

For the purpose of telling this story, I'm using the phony name of Ricky, but Ricky is actually the nick-name for Richard, the name my birthmother gave me, so it's a special name for me. I had always known she had named me Richard Stephen, but I didn't know the last name. Now, when they showed me my original birth certificate, I saw on there that my full name was Richard Stephen Clark. I also saw that my birthmother was Alana Sue Clark and the street address where she'd been living when I was born, which was in Dayton, Ohio, about an hour away.

After reading over all the papers in there, I left the office and got back in the Nova to head home to Kentucky on I-71. By this time I was getting pretty hungry, so I stopped and pulled into a big combination gas station/cafe and thought about it for a while, while I ate lunch. Afterwards I called my wife Jill down in Kentucky to tell her what I'd found out. Then I said "I'm going to Dayton; I'm going to find her." Jill had gave up a son for adoption when she was very young, so she was very, very supportive. All she said to me was, "Go for it!"

So I took a short connecting freeway up to I-70 and drove the fifty odds miles to Dayton. When I got there I just started driving around. I don't know what I was expecting to see, my birthmother jumping out from behind a tree waving me down, or what. This was on Friday, June 11, 1976. I got there probably two, three o'clock in the afternoon and I just kept driving around and driving around and driving around, hoping to find the street. I had went to a pay phone to look up for street addresses, and it just wasn't in there. It was a court, Stanford Court, and those normally aren't on major city maps.

I drove around about five hours, until approximately seven o'clock that night, all the time wondering what I would find and whether or not it was really a good idea. Finally I stopped a cop driving past and I explained the situation to her.

I asked her, "Do you know where this address is?"

She said "Sure I do. That was my beat nineteen years ago."

So I said, "Well, where's the street?"

She said, "When they rerouted I-75 through Dayton, they went right over that street; it's not there any more." So I had no address, nobody to turn to.

Then I told her my birthmother's name, Alana Clark, and said "Do you know these people?"

She said "No." Then she suggested that I go to the Dayton Herald newspaper the next day to give them a human interest story, and they might run it.

To be honest with you, right then I almost quit. I wanted to do this myself, I didn't want anybody else involved, but I sure needed a little help.

I had been squatting beside her squad car in the heat for almost an hour. It was so humid a drizzling rain had started, and I was in a bad mood, I was almost emotionally exhausted and hungry and I thought, Hell, this is fruitless, I'm not getting anywhere.

I was going to head home, but something in what she said, I don't remember what it was, but something clicked about her parents, and that's when I suddenly put it together: I mean it just hit me like a ton of bricks! My birthmother's name was Alana Sue Clark, okay? Why would somebody name their daughter Alana unless they had wanted a son but had a girl instead, and named her after an Alan?

I left the policewoman around eight o'clock and found a Rexall drug store that was open late, went in and got two *Oh Henry!* chocolate bars and roll of dimes from the girl there. I went into a little glassed-in telephone booth with a big, beat-up phone book chained to the pay phone and luckily the pages listing Clarks were still in it. There were several Alan Clarks, some A. Clarks and some with the spelling Clarke. I broke open the roll of dimes and started making phone calls.

I never said what my name was, I just said "I'm looking for a woman named Alana Clark, do you know her?"

The third number I came to, this lady said "Well yeah, I know who she is." I spoke with her probably five minutes and I was getting upset. I knew I was close but this lady was not giving me any information whatsoever.

"Damn it," she said, "I'm her mother, who is this?"

"Damn it, you're my grandmother!" I shot back.

"Ricky?"

"Yes!"

"Where are you?"

I didn't know the address of the drug store, but I told her the name of the restaurant I could see across the street. I was within three blocks of her house.

"What are you driving?" she asked. I told her an old yellow Nova, parked in the drug store parking lot. "Just sit in your car. Somebody will be right there." I hung up the phone and went outside.

Man, the rain had stopped and it was steaming hot. I got in the car and rolled down all the windows, I was sweatin'. That was the longest ten minutes of my life.

Being in the military we were on a fixed income, you can't afford the nicer things in life, so I was driving this old '65 Nova, and a gentleman—my grandfather, as it turned out—pulls up in a brand new midnight blue Lincoln Continental. He motioned me to get in, so I opened the door and sank down into the seat beside him, all the windows up tight and the air conditioning purring.

We sat there in the Lincoln and had a long talk, mostly looking straight ahead at the brick wall of the drug store.

"Listen Ricky," he said, "a lot of things have changed since you were born twenty years ago, and at the time we figured it would be better for you to be adopted instead of growing up in the environment of our home. So what we did, we did for you by giving you up, instead of putting you through it also."

"Okay, that's no problem," I said.

While sitting there in the car I had to give him a run-down of my life, how I grew up, how they treated me. You know, did I get what I wanted? did I get what I needed?

After a long talk I got back into the Nova and followed him over to his house and met my grandmother and of course had to do the whole run-down of the story again for her. Now we're going about ten-thirty, eleven o'clock at night.

Apparently my birthmother lived in another city about an hour from Dayton and my grandmother had called her right after getting my call from the drugstore. I kept wondering when she was going to show up, expecting to hear her car outside. Finally I asked them, "Is my birthmother coming here or not?" and they said no, she wasn't coming. I was floored, I really was. I stood up and was just getting ready to leave when they got a phone call and it was her, Lana. They never called her Alana, just Lana all her life.

It seemed she'd had second thoughts about refusing to meet me and had called her priest, and he had told her, "By all means, Lana, you must go to that boy." So she finally showed up there about midnight. My birthmother walked in the door, and there was tears. Lana is a pretty impressive woman: five foot eleven, about two seventy.

After my birthmother got there, they were running around like I just came back from a European vacation, offering me money, rolls of money, all kinds of food and drink. When they started to turn down the guest bedroom, I said "No, I can't stay here," 'cause the walls were starting to close in around me. I couldn't understand why these people were acting this way. I told Lana, "I want out of here, I'm leaving!"

About a month after I was born, Lana had married a man called James Saunders and they had four daughters and a son, which was a family I never knew I had. She and James owned a restaurant in the town where they lived and every night made donuts there to sell the next day to Seven-Eleven stores. The two older girls and my brother were working there making donuts right then, so naturally my birthmom wanted us to meet. We agreed I would follow her over to the restaurant.

So she drove her car—also a Lincoln—and I was in the Nova behind her. For fifty some odd miles I followed her and all this time I kept thinking, "No, I don't want to do this either." Emotionally I could not handle meeting any more relatives. Finally I flashed my lights and got her to pull off when we were less than a block from the restaurant. I could see the people inside, I could see my sisters, I was that close, but I did not want to walk in that door. At three-thirty in the morning we're standing here talking in a liquor store parking lot right next to the restaurant, and people are driving by that she knows. After a lot of questions, finally I left her and got back on the road to go home to Fort Knox.

I only made it about twenty minutes before I was falling asleep at the wheel. I was emotionally drained. So I pulled over to sleep for a couple of hours. When I got home, Jill said there'd been like five or six phone calls from my birthmother, Lana. They were worried about me 'cause I had told Lana I thought I could make it, and I should have been home 'way before then. But I was just exhausted—I had to stop and sleep.

She told Jill that, after I had left, she had went in to the restaurant and took my two sisters aside and explained things to them. They were teenagers at the time and had seen their mother standing in the parking lot talking to some strange young guy.

I've told the story many times, and I don't exaggerate. That's exactly the way it went down.

So now I'm thirty-four and when I found my birthmother in June 1976, I was twenty. I only wish I could have done it sooner. To be honest with you, it's been a worthwhile experience. Now I'm married to my beautiful second wife, Karlyn, and we have a brand new, two-week-old boy.

Sometimes at the beginning though, my biological mother Lana was very, very pushy, very demanding. She expected me to spend Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter with her. But I said "Listen, I'm in control of the situation. I don't want hurt you or be rude to you, but I grew up with a lot of family and friends that I need to spend time with. Every so often I'll come down or you can come up and we'll see each other, but you're not getting my full, undivided attention."

I'd give her my phone number and my address and where I'm at, and she's never taken advantage of that. But there have been times at her place when I've been sitting at the table eating, starting to feel the pressure, and I've gotten up

from the table and walked out of the house. To this day I have never called Lana Mom and I never will. She didn't raise me.

Lana, birthmother: Many years ago Ricky asked me "Well, just what am I to call you?" and I said, "I don't care whether it's Mom, Lana, kiss-my-ass, or go-to-hell, just so you call me." I told him, "I'm not your mother. I am your natural mother, but the lady that changed your diapers and nursed you through sickness, she is your mother." When she's gone, I'll step back into those shoes where I belong. But I will not overstep that lady and I have a million thank-yous to go to her. But of course, from what he says, his growing up years were not all that pleasant.

Ricky, adoptee: I mentioned that my birthmother is very large and has been since she was very young, so she was able to keep her pregnancy with me a secret; even her sister did not know. It was just for the last three weeks that she went away to this home for unwed girls.

Lana, birthmother: I was very upset when I had to give Ricky up for adoption because of my parents' insistence. Of course, in 1956 if you got pregnant and weren't married, you didn't keep your baby. You went off and hid and had it and then gave it up for adoption.

I lived at the Salvation Army's Booth Home in Columbus, Ohio. They had a wonderful home there and I can not say enough for what they did. While I was there, we all had our duties. Eventually I worked my way into nursery duty before Ricky was born. After I had him they told me I could no longer go into the nursery to see him or hold him. I told them, unless they wanted to go to delivery early, they had better let me in so I could hold my baby. I was hefty so they did what I wanted, and, for three days, when the main nurses were not on the floor, I was with Ricky.

I felt relieved when they told me that my baby was going to be with professional people who had one other adopted child, and I felt that he was wanted and therefore he would have a better life than what I could have given him. The day that they took him, I kissed him goodbye and said "Son, look me up one day, because I do love you and I do want to see you again, and I'll always be prayin' for you."

Ricky, adoptee: Three or four days after my birth, Lana arrived back home from having me. My birthfather, whose name was Ed Edwards, came to the door. He said, "I'll marry you now that it's gone," and she ran him off—never saw him again.

About two weeks later she met this other gentleman, James Saunders, and they married a few weeks later.

Lana, birthmother: When I was eighteen I was so very insecure that I married James Saunders six weeks after I met him.

I was married to James for twenty years and had five children by him, but on Ricky's birthday every year, and umpteen dozen times through the years, my mind would go to him. Like one time around his sixteenth birthday, when, after being asleep, I suddenly sat up in bed and began screaming his name, "Ricky, Ricky, Ricky!"

"Shut up and go back to sleep!" James said.

So I lay back down and I went immediately into prayer—I am a Pentecostal person—and let the Holy Spirit take over. After James went back to sleep, I got up and went into the living room and I prayed for about an hour under the Spirit.

After Ricky came back into my life, one of the first things I asked him was, "What happened at that particular time of your life?" and he said he'd been in a very serious car wreck and they told him he wasn't going to make it, but suddenly he took a great change for the better. I believe the Spirit woke me up and, through prayer, God interceded and spared him. I really believe that.

When Ricky found me in 1976 I had been married to James Saunders for nineteen years. I had told James all about Ricky before we got married, but later on he always told me not to tell our five kids because he said they would never have any use for me afterwards. That's why they didn't know of Ricky's existence until he came back, and I didn't know how to break it to them. But the truth is, they have accepted him with open arms.

Ricky, adoptee: With regard to these other kids Lana had, one boy and four girls, I've met and love them all. When I found my birthmother, my brother Jim was in reform school because he grew up in the big city with all the big city problems, and he had some felonies against him. It took a long time for Jim and I to be friends, not because of the reform school, but because—before I walked in—he had been the oldest kid, he had been the King. Giving that up was very hard for Jim. Actually, him and I are not close. He's got his life straightened out now, but he's a busy person and he's hard to catch hold of.

Lana, birthmother: I count myself blessed and I thank God for bringing me such a great, big, tall, wonderful son that's a beautiful person. He and my other son, Jim, look so much alike. They have different daddies, but they both have a lot of me in them.

Ricky, adoptee: When I came back into the picture, James, my birthmother's husband, said "You never told me about him," and raised hell about it, and he divorced her. Of course, Lana had told him all about it before they got married. She says it was just an excuse to get him out of the marriage. After twenty years of marriage, five kids, two businesses went bad, you're thinking to yourself like a lot of men do, here's this young, cute lady over here … But still I have a lot of guilt for that, because I was the cause.

Because I believed what my birthmother told me about my birthfather, Ed Edwards, coming to her door and saying "I'll marry you now it's gone," I had no desire to see him. He was a drunk, he lived at the Salvation Army in Dayton, Ohio. She would see him on the street every so often, and they would chat for a minute or two. But he was a bum, he was a bum. Even so, when I found out about three months ago that he had died, I cried, I don't know why. Maybe because I did want to meet him some day.

Now, eighteen years after our reunion, my relationship with my birthmother Lana is super; I hear from her about every two weeks. Awhile back I was going to buy a convenience store in a little town in Indiana, across from Cincinnati. Even through the deal fell through, she helped me by trying to put together the money and paperwork.

Lana, birthmother: As far as telling my grandchildren about having had Ricky, I mentioned it to my son-in-law and I said, "I worry about telling the eleven grandchildren." And he said, "This is life. If they can't accept it, that's their problem." I figure life is one big story anyway—maybe someone can learn from my mistakes. When I look at the hand I've been dealt, I think I've done a fantastic job with what I've had to work with. God lets us walk through all these valleys and these shadows and these problems so we can help someone else down the road and if we didn't do that, then life wouldn't have no meaning.

Ricky, adoptee: I found my birthfamily in 1976 when I was twenty, and for a long time after I felt bad, being so secretive about it to my parents; I guess I just wasn't brave enough, or confident enough to tell them at that time. Then the next year after that, in 1977, I'd gotten out of the service for a while and went home to Ohio and was living in a town twelve miles away from my parents. That summer one of my half-sisters from my birthmother Lana came to visit me and I loaned her my car and she had an accident and the two sisters I grew up with, Norma and Arlene, found out about it. I'm positive they met her and my half-sister told them who she was, but to this day I've never admitted it and they've never questioned me about it. We just don't talk about it. But, still, they do know I found my birthfamily.

The last time I saw my folks was about 1989; my dad and me had a long talk out in our back yard. I told him there's so many things I did wrong as kid growing up. I told my dad I loved him.

While we were having that talk I didn't say a word about finding my birthmother. My dad didn't bring it up either, but he knew because he made reference to it. I didn't acknowledge that's what he was getting at because I didn't want to discuss it. But not for the fact of hiding it from him, that's not it. It was for the fact of—not wanting him to feel like they let me down. My mother didn't even invite me in the door for lunch. I haven't been there since; I haven't called and I haven't

talked to them.

It does upset me to think that they turn their back on their own grandchildren. My ex-wife Jill and two of our three sons live in the next town to my folks. When they see my parents in the grocery store, my parents turn and walk the other way. My dad wants to be friendly with his grandsons, I know he does. When he and I had that talk a few years back, he told me he'd seen the boys and stopped and chatted with them, but to keep peace with my mother, he ignores them when he's with her. It's a shame, but it's their decision.

Around Christmas of 1990 I finally did write my folks about finding my birthmother. I let them know it was nothing to do with how they raised us or the love I had for them, it was just something I really wanted to know. Afterwards I never heard anything from them until I got letter from my mom in December 1992, while I was stationed in Japan.

Living in Japan, I tried to send my folks a letter every few months to let them know how we were doing, not really expecting to get a response. One day I went to the post office and there's an envelope from my mother. Inside was a letter with all of three sentences in it: "Life has been hard. But the Lord is good. Things have happened." That's about all she had written.

But she had enclosed two obituaries. One was for my elder sister, Norma, who had been killed in a car accident three weeks prior to that. The second was for my only nephew, who had been killed playing basketball when he jumped up to dunk the ball and the backboard fell down and crushed his skull.

I am sorry for my sister Norma's death, but I have no respect for my other sister, Arlene. My mom and dad put a house trailer within fifty steps of their back door for her and her three kids. She's not married. She has free run of whatever she needs in the house and has borrowed so much money from them.

I have never asked for a dime. Alls I wanted was the relationship, I didn't care for anything else—nothing at all. I can honestly say, and I feel good about it, I am the only one of their three kids that has not tried to bleed them to death borrowing money.

I did have a lot of respect for my sister Norma, though. My folks got her because the court system took her away from her birthmother who had pretty much blinded her with a needle when she was very young. Her night vision was bad, and she shouldn't of been driving at night. Her and her husband supplied C.D. music for wedding and parties, and she had driven up to be with him for that one job Thanksgiving weekend. Afterwards, late at night, they were driving home, she in the lead car, and he behind her driving the equipment van. Because of her bad night vision, she missed a turn, hit a tree, and was killed.

If I'd known sooner, I could have flown back for Norma's funeral. I could have tried one more time to make up with my folks. But I felt that was the final slap, getting that mean, inconsiderate letter from my mother.

Lana, birthmother: When Ricky and Karlyn got married they invited me up for their wedding and Ricky handed me a bouquet of flowers. I think that was the greatest thrill of my life, getting flowers from my son. I was not seated as a member of the family, but I was honored, and I felt that was more than what I was due. His parents weren't there. I don't know why and I didn't ask. That part of his life is off limits to me.

I feel I did the right thing by giving Ricky up when I was eighteen, but if I could go back and do it over again, I would have rearranged some things.

I'm glad he's in my life now. I don't make any demands on him, but sometimes I'd like to shake him because I'd like him to come down more. We don't make any demands on each other but we both know the other one's there in case of a need. I feel God has blessed me with Ricky returning, which was more than I thought I'd ever experience.

Ricky, adoptee: When I was in Japan and read that note from my mother with the two obituaries, I figures, Okay, this is obviously the final thrust, the final act. If they couldn't call me or at least drop me a note telling me about Norma's and my nephew's deaths—well, I had a nervous breakdown right there on the spot. I wasn't the same person for about a week, 'cause I felt, How can they be so cruel? How could they hate me that much for finding out who my birthmother was?

So I've closed that chapter of my life—I'm done with it now. Still, in spite of my parents' reaction, I would look for my birthfamily again. Yes, I would.