

Elaine: the Adoptive  
Mother/Former Nun  
Who Found Her True Calling

*What kind of adoptive parent fares the best in a post-adoption reunion? Perhaps one like Elaine, an extraordinary woman who, thanks to her upbringing, education, and faith, is understanding, accepting, and non-judgmental.*

*After graduating from high school, she had taken her vows and had been sheltered as a Sister of Poverty for eight years. Then she went away to summer school and was sexually awakened. Two years later she left the order to save the world, marry, and raise a family. Naively, she didn't foresee the cruel realities of the outside world, like discovering she was barren and married to an alcoholic, abusive, and cheating husband. Adopting a child led to her own validation as a mother. She instinctively understood her adoptive son's need to find his roots, and the need of his birthmother to be warmly welcomed into the extended family. Motherhood proved to be her crowning, happiest role.*



**Elaine, adoptive mother:** I lost my virginity during my twenty-seventh summer. It was my third summer session at Quincy College, a Catholic co-ed college in Illinois, where several of us nuns had been sent to take classes for our teaching certification. I felt quite liberated, because—instead of the old hot, black, full-length

habit—I had begun wearing our modern dress: a small, hair-revealing veil, and a navy blue suit with a below-the-knee skirt. Two years later, in 1969, I wrote to the Pope for dispensation from my vows.

The man who deflowered me was also a summer student and he, too, was a virgin. Brother Patrick was a very striking, Irish-looking fellow with dark, curly hair. He was the most outgoing person on campus, roller-skating down the halls and—I heard—swilling beer at college picnics. He liked to flirt and kid around, and half the nuns on the campus were mad for him, including me.

Of course, after hearing him say he loved me and feeling the wonderful rush of that one-day stand, my idea, my dream, was that we would both leave our Christian communities, get married, and have children. But he didn't see it that way. He saw our lovemaking as filling his needs, his gratification, period.

The church had instilled in me the seriousness of having a sexual relationship with someone: you should be married to him. The other thing was, I had broken my vow of chastity and sank into the depths of guilt. How would I ever be an authentic, honest nun again?

**Rose, Elaine's mother:** We lived on a farm a few miles from Bismarck, North Dakota. We had a wonderful time in our family, lots of music, lots of laughter. My greatest happiness, my greatest joy has always been our six daughters and our son.

I'd been raised in a strict environment, so it seemed natural that I became the strict, dominant one in our family. My husband Julian is the easy-going, funny one. Thanks to him, we could usually laugh at things. That's the way to stay happily married, like we have been for sixty-three years.

During the Depression, Julian worked at various jobs, then eventually—after taking night classes—he became a steam engineer in the local college. I took various office jobs to pay for extras like dental work and winter coats that were beyond our means.

My husband has a crossed eye which made him very self-conscious. We tried to have it fixed, but it's tricky surgery, and it didn't work very well. But that didn't matter to me, I love his beautiful, deep blue eyes. Everybody loves Julian; he doesn't have a mean bone in his body. The trouble was, our girls thought they would just go out and, boom, find a nice guy like Dad and have a good marriage like ours.

Elaine had been raised never to be prejudiced, so when she left the convent, partly to prove she wasn't prejudiced, she married a black man. His being black wasn't the problem, it was his drinking.

**Elaine, adoptive mother:** My parents wanted us kids to have a good Catholic education, but they couldn't afford it. Luckily, my aunt was a nun and she got us three oldest girls into a Catholic boarding school about two hundred miles from home. That's where I took my four years of high school.

In 1958, when I graduated, the vocational options for a young Catholic woman were to get married and have lots of children, go to China as a missionary, or go into the convent and become a nun. I hadn't made that choice yet, but I certainly had no intention of getting married and having a bunch of kids, because I saw the struggles my mom and dad went through. But I was the second of seven children, and I wanted to look after everyone. My thinking was that, if I became a nun, I could pray and save our family.

When I was just out of high school, my mom got me my first job, working as a file clerk for the telephone company. Then a few months later, in November of 1958, I went away on a church-sponsored weekend retreat where you could see all the sisters who were in training. I remember looking down from the choir loft at those future holy nuns in their little white veils, chanting in Latin, and I fantasized what it would be like to be one of them. Then, at the end of the service, when the organist pulled out all the stops at the end of a Bach fugue, I actually shivered, feeling the vibrations. I had tears in my eyes, I was so moved.

That weekend I made up my mind to become a nun-in-training. In January, 1959, four of us entered the convent as postulants and immediately became secluded, locked away from the world. I ended up being a Sister of Poverty for ten years, and I was very happy. But, when I look back on it now, it was all in preparation for my life as it continued and evolved.

When they trained me to become a Sister of Poverty, the Church gave me an excellent liberal arts education at Mary College, Bismarck. It was a Catholic women's school and was on Apple Creek Road, just up the road from my parents' farm, which I had to drive past every day going from the convent to the college. I was never permitted to stop in and say hello—something that really infuriated my mother—who longed to see more of me than the two-hour convent visit they were permitted every other month. Once I had made my final vows, I was at last allowed to go home and live with my parents for one wonderful week.

After I'd received my bachelor's degree, my superiors decided that I would make a good teacher. They assigned me to teach fifth grade in a remote little town in North Dakota where I stayed for three years. During that time—so I could become certified—they sent me to Quincy College, Illinois, for three summer sessions.

The first summer I sat in a Quincy classroom was very stimulating because it was my first co-ed experience since grade school. Then, by the time my third and final summer rolled around, I had just begun wearing the modern habit and ended up meeting the roller-skating Brother who made me so aware of my own sexuality.

That fall, for the 1967 school year, I was missioned to Minot, North Dakota, where one of my married sisters, Moira lived. The Souris River had flooded and people were devastated. Everything in their homes—the floors, carpets, drawers, cupboards, furniture—was covered with mud. We nuns were told to get out and help people clean up their homes, so we dug in and did all we could. I was very happy

in Minot, because I felt like a valuable, worthwhile part of the community.

Then the church sent me to a town near Minneapolis, where eight of us Sisters of Poverty taught at St. Francis of Assisi School. We lived across the street in a large house owned by the parish, which was largely Croatian. We sisters were like a big family, sharing the laundry and cleaning chores. During the week a cook came in to prepare our dinner, but on Sundays we were on our own and took turns.

About this time I developed a large cyst on my right breast. I went into a big Catholic hospital in Minneapolis, where, the night before I was to have the surgery, the doctor told me that I might wake up afterwards with my breast gone. I was twenty-eight, a Sister of Poverty, and I wasn't terribly worried about that; I just accepted it. They removed the cyst and it was benign. I went home the next day.

It was the mother of one of my students who picked me up, not one of the nuns I lived with and considered family. When I walked in the back door, no one said, "Do you feel okay?" or "We missed you." I was completely ignored. I felt terribly disappointed because they were so cold. I felt that I could spread love better by being out of the convent than by being in it. And I made up my mind to leave the order and go home.

That same night I wrote a half-page letter to the Pope asking for a dispensation from my vows. I said my feelings about the need for celibacy had changed, and I wanted to be free to marry and have children so I could raise my own Christian community.

By now, most of us nuns were wearing the modern habit. That, plus my brief fling with Brother Patrick, made me feel more sexually alive. So I have to admit to myself that, although there was much more involved, sex was the catalyst in my decision to leave.

The other thing was, this was 1969, when so many young women were leaving their orders, it almost became the thing to do. In the early days, a sister who wanted to leave would creep away in the middle of the night, and you didn't dare whisper to one of the others, "What happened to Sister so-and-so?" But by the time I left, it was okay to speak of it.

At our convent house, Sister Teresa was our school's art teacher, and my one close friend. She had been dispensed from her vows the same time that I had, so in June we left together and flew to New York to visit her sister. She was a travel agent, got us cheap tickets, and showed us her favorite haunts in the city for three fun-filled days. Then Teresa took a job teaching, and I went home to Bismarck, where my parents had a spare room ready for me.

By reading want ads, I landed a job teaching in the public school system in St. Paul, Minnesota. I found a new bachelor apartment with a Murphy bed across from Minnesota Public Radio, where I enjoyed living alone for the first time in my life. I learned to dress my slender figure attractively, and to apply makeup skillfully.

I started dating right away, both white and black men. I was very attracted to black men, who seemed to sense that I was willing to date them.

One Saturday in August of 1970, when I was out doing errands, my car broke down. I went to a pay phone and called Ray, a young black man I'd met in my dance class, to see if he knew a good mechanic. He said yes, and that he'd call his friend Walt who owned a Volkswagen repair shop. Ten minutes later this tall, macho black man appeared. In another ten minutes, he had my car going.

A few weeks later, Ray and some of his friends were invited to a party at Walt's home and asked me to go along. I was knocked out by his gorgeous home and complimented him on it, but he acted cool and practically ignored me. Starting my car that time, he'd been in grubby overalls, so I was stunned by how different he looked.

He had on expensive-looking black slacks and loafers, a black T-shirt and (I heard him tell Ray) a camel hair sports coat. Walt's virile, well-dressed image, together with his dark good looks, were very exciting to me.

Amazingly, two weeks later he phoned and invited me to dinner at the Marquette Inn. I had never been taken to an elegant restaurant—or any place special—by a man, so I splurged on a new dress and a pair of high-heeled shoes, borrowed a string of pearls from my girlfriend, and did my best to look glamorous.

He picked me up in a brand new MACH I Mustang with running board lights. At dinner, we had some wine and a wonderful meal. He was charismatic and intelligent, and made me laugh constantly. I was impressed and very flattered by his attention. He seemed impressed by the fact that I'd been a sister for ten years, by my education, and by the things I could discuss intelligently.

During dinner he told me he was thirty-four. Five years before, he had divorced his wife Mary, a white "hillbilly-type" woman from Oklahoma. He told me that Mary had cut a mole from her own leg and died of melanoma six months later, which could have been true or (as I learned later) just one of Walt's lies. He said Mary was wonderful but had a drinking problem. *His* drinking problem was well developed already, but I didn't want to see it. I wanted to fall in love, and nothing could stop me.

I was eager to marry and have children so, as I had written the Pope, I could "raise my own Christian community." It never occurred to me then that, as a trained, licensed teacher, I could easily have supported myself and remained single forever. I thought that, if I were married, sexual intimacy would complete and fulfill me; that was another of my naive, romantic, notions.

Five months after meeting, we got married. I had guiltily avoided church since leaving the order, so, on December 20, 1970, we went to this little secular chapel overlooking Minnehaha Park. I asked the justice of the peace for the civil ceremony, not the religious one. Then, if I ever divorced Walt, it would be easy because, in the eyes of the Church, I would not have been married in the first place. Strangely enough, it was okay to leave the religious order, but to divorce was a sin.

One of my disillusionments on leaving the order was discovering that the aver-

age person is out for himself. One time a cook at the school where I was teaching showed me her bruises and begged me to loan her three hundred dollars to escape an abusive husband. I gave her the money. That night she left town and never sent me a dime.

Another disillusionment concerned money. While I was a nun, we believed that, since everything belongs to God and not to us, we lived by a spirit of detachment where we were never possessive of anyone or anything.

It's ironic that, after marrying Walt, my spirit of detachment was so quickly replaced by materialism. We had all kinds of money, thanks to my teaching and his booming Volkswagen repair shop. In spite of my years as a Sister of Poverty, I became infected by his frantic need to acquire things and soon found myself spending lavishly and carelessly.

Walt liked to go shopping and buy nice things for me. One time he took me into a posh fur salon and, after an hour of V.I.P. treatment, he counted out a thousand dollars in cash for a deposit on a full-length Tourmaline mink coat. He told the furrier the Tourmaline showed off my dark hair.

Then there was his new Mercedes sports car that impressed all his friends. I learned later that he wasn't making the payments on it. When he was out drinking, he'd buy drinks for everybody in the bar. Oh, yes, he was Mr. Big.

I was paying most of the household bills, so he got away with it until the Mercedes disappeared and collection agencies started calling. But the bitterest blow was when the bank repossessed my dream house, because we could easily afford the \$250 monthly payments. On moving day, everything but a couple of wooden tea chests had been moved out. We sat down on them and ate some hard-cooked eggs and apples. Then, without saying a word to each other, we left. I cried, but not in front of Walt.

We filed for bankruptcy on our first anniversary, and moved to a tiny apartment. Walt sold his repair equipment and went to work for another shop. I kept on teaching.

My father and mother had been happily married for over sixty years with perfect faithfulness, and, for some reason, I expected that same fidelity from Walt. But Walt was a heavy drinker, and the byproduct of his alcoholism was frequent infidelity. He'd stay out late and, when he did come home, I'd see signs of his having been with somebody else. I had always been eager to have children, but now I was having second thoughts.

**Rose, Elaine's mother:** Walt stepped out on Elaine a lot. She knew it, but she kept him because she was in deep denial, trying so hard to change him and to be there for him through good times and bad. Her ingrained idealism—being kind and helping people—worked against her at that point in her life. She caught him with women on several occasions, so she was very unhappy, and yet she took a long time to get out of the marriage.

One time she went looking for him. She had an idea where he'd been going and eventually, cruising around St. Paul in her white Volkswagen, she spotted his car parked outside an apartment block. She asked one of the kids outside, "Whose car is that?"

Right away the boy said, "It's Walt's. He's up at Toni's in 201." So Walt was no stranger to those kids.

Elaine went looking for the apartment block's super and told him Toni had called in a panic from the airport asking her to pick up her passport and take it to her. "No problem," he said, handing her the key.

She went upstairs and unlocked the door quietly. She stood still for a few minutes, then walked to the bedroom and turned on the light.

"Hello, Walt," she said, "how are tricks?"

When he saw her standing there, his comment was, "Uh—oh, I'm busted!"

It must have broken her heart, but she took it, in spite of the pain.

**Elaine, adoptive mother:** After two miscarriages and three years of marriage to an unfaithful alcoholic, I left him. I remembered how happy I'd been working in Minot, North Dakota, so I got on a plane and flew there where I stayed at my sister Moira's. In a matter of days, I had a job teaching.

Two months later Walt followed me up there and we reconciled immediately because, being Catholic, I didn't want a divorce on my record. Before he had gone into the car repair business, Walt had been a long-distance trucker, so he decided to try that again. Right away, he landed a job with Freightliner U.S. where he made more money than ever.

Although I had conceived twice, pray and pray as I would, both times I lost the baby, and that was a void in our lives. The fact that I seemed to be barren—to use the Biblical term—was another gust of reality I got hit with after leaving the order. After we reconciled, each of us went to the doctor. Walt's sperm count was very low, and I had some female complications that may have contributed to the problem.

Things were going along pretty well for us then. After our bankruptcy, we were both being more careful and had even saved some money, thanks mainly to Walt's big pay checks from Freightliner. Then, too, he was staying sober, and, so far as I knew, faithful. He was afraid I'd leave him again.

Out of the blue one day Walt said, "Why don't we adopt?" And I thought, What a great idea!

We went to Catholic Community Services right there in Minot and applied to Sister Alma. They immediately did a case study on us, and it was very expensive. They told us the process could take five years, but that we were a good, possible couple to adopt a baby.

Two years later, a 17-year-old pregnant girl walked into Sister Alma's office, and, when she heard about us, thought we'd be perfect to raise her bi-racial baby,

because we were a mixed couple. It helped that we were willing to pay her doctor bills, too.

**Kristy, Birthmother:** I was born on April 1, 1959, in the tiny town of French Lick, Indiana. My mother wasn't married, but she was a strong-willed woman determined to raise me on her own, and that's what she did for the first two years.

During that time, Mom worked and my grandma cared for me during the day. Then my mother married a man named Toivo Haukaas, who adopted me right away. Soon after that, we moved to Minot, North Dakota, where I grew up and where Toivo and my mother had three children, two boys and a girl.

Even though we four kids were sent to Sunday school when we were young, that half-hearted stab at religious teaching was soon dropped. Toivo was an alcoholic and there was lots of tension in our family. When I was ten or eleven, I started going down the wrong path.

After I started hanging out with the wrong kids and smoking and doing other harmful things, Toivo and me clashed constantly. Lots of men have trouble raising another man's child—and I looked more and more like my real father as I grew older—but I think it also depends on how secure they feel inside. Toivo was very insecure. He was a good provider and we never wanted for anything, but emotionally, we were starved.

He had a drinking problem, and would hit me when he was drunk. This, of course, led to problems between him and my mother, who was home with us kids all the time, in line with Toivo's keep-her-barefoot-and-pregnant philosophy.

The other thing was, Toivo was a racist. I've always been attracted to darker skin, but knowing that going with Native American or black boys would tick him off just added to their appeal.

When I was seventeen, I met Duane, who became the father of my baby. He fueled planes at the Strategic Air Command base just north of Minot, and he was black. I thought it was great because he was older, and I wanted to escape my home situation. At the time I didn't realize how much older he was, but, I thought, this is a man, he's got a car, and he'll take care of me. I went with him about a year.

In those days, we didn't know about AIDS, and birth control was basically the pill, which underage girls couldn't get, so I wasn't practicing any form of birth control. After I'd gone to a family planning clinic and my test came back positive, I was like, What am I going to do? They are going to kill me. So I went home and secretly packed a suitcase. In the middle of the night, I left home.

At an all-night cafe, I ran into a long-distance trucker friend of Duane's, and he offered to take me along to Fargo so I could get out of town. Riding in the cab of his truck, I was so wound up I talked almost non-stop—but he liked that, it kept him awake. I was upset with myself because I realized that I could have gone to my mother, because she would have understood, but I'd left, so I had to go through

with it. After the trucker disposed of his load in Fargo, he headed right back to Minot—a round trip of nearly 600 miles—and dropped me off at a boarding house he knew.

I didn't know what to do, but I finally got hold of Duane, and he took me to a big, state-run house for problem kids, where—I've learned since—he'd taken several underage pregnant girls before me. I was the only one there just then; the rest were runaways, or from abuse situations, or had done crimes like burglary. They had some excellent counselors living on the premises, and I have to thank them for inspiring me to study for and pass the G.E.D. after I had my baby.

When I was settled in the home, one of the counselors called my mom with the news that I was pregnant and expecting a black man's baby. She was a little upset, but she never abandoned me. Every other day she'd visit me bringing maternity clothes and special treats like whole milk and Twinkies—things that weren't supplied by the home. She never once said anything mean to me. In fact our relationship seemed to get closer, probably because she'd gone through the same thing when she'd had me.

Toivo, my stepfather, was furious when he heard I'd gotten pregnant, especially with a black man's baby. Once he called me at the group home and, after his usual obscenities, told me not to even think of bringing my black bastard home, said he disowned me, and hung up. He ordered my mom not to go near me, but he found out that she did anyway when he was at work. They'd been married fifteen troubled years, and now my mom took my side, got her back up, and kicked him out.

I moved back home for the last two months of my pregnancy, and Mom started divorce proceedings. Supporting me and three younger kids was tough, because she hadn't worked in fifteen years, but she brushed up on her typing and managed to get a job. In fact, February 16, 1976, the day she took me to the hospital, was the first day of her first job in fifteen years, and she had to phone in sick!

**Elaine, Adoptive Mother:** When the birthmother's due date got close, we were told to get ready. We were renting a little one-bedroom house for two hundred dollars a month. My sister Moira had loaned us a little bassinet and some baby clothes. In spite of her husband's bigotry—he wouldn't have Walt in his house—she was always supportive of me.

I worked at Opportunities America, finding jobs for people on welfare. One day, we were closing early because a blizzard was starting. I was putting the cover on my Underwood when Sister Alma called and said, "Congratulations, Elaine, your baby is born!" I just melted, I was so thrilled. There was a ten-day waiting period in case the birthmother decided to change her mind, but on the twelfth day we went to the Catholic agency office and received him. Walt and I had been close to these people for years, and it was just a wonderful day.

It was snowing hard and there was thick snow on the ground, but the three of us got into our little white Volkswagen and ploughed right through it. We named

our new son Ivan, and he was a wonderful, good baby.

A few days later, Walt had to leave on a long haul to Los Angeles. By the time I took Ivan in for his six week check-up, I was throwing up and thought I had the flu, but I found out I was pregnant. When I saw Father Walsh I blushed when I told him about it, but he laughed. "I'm not one bit surprised; this has happened before."

Then I said, "I was afraid you might take Ivan away from us when you found out."

"We would never do that," he said.

After Ivan's adoption had been finalized, Catholic Adoption Services had filled out a form requesting his original birth certificate and mailed it to Vital Statistics in Bismarck. But they hadn't sent enough money, so Vital Statistics had stuck a note on it which said, "You owe us one more dollar," and had mailed it to us by mistake. There were four names on it: ours and those of the birthparents. I copied the latter in the back of my address book and then took the form to Sister Alma.

"Oh, Elaine," she said, concerned, "you have to keep this a secret. You can keep these names in your memory, but don't try to find her." Then she called Vital Stats and reamed them out.

After I gave birth to Walter, Jr., whom we called Wally, we bought a three-bedroom house. In spite of having the two boys and a new house, our marriage was rocky because Walt had gone back to drinking. He got involved with bad people, started smoking marijuana and then snorting cocaine. He'd always put me and the kids down, but he hadn't hit me since before I left him and moved alone to Minot. But now, the boys—both under two—saw him raise his hand to hit me. Wally ran between us and screamed, "No, Daddy!" and Walt lowered his hand.

A few days later, when we were visiting friends near the air base, Walt and this other black man went somewhere together. They came back two hours later high on cocaine, and Walt drove us home. He parked our Volkswagen in the garage, and we got all out, except for Wally, who had somehow gotten out of his car seat and was asleep in the cubbyhole behind the back seat. Walt reached in and grabbed his arm and yanked him out, yelling, "Wake up, you little shit!"

To escape from him, the two boys and I flew to Minneapolis in June of 1979, supposedly to visit my sister, Joyce, who lived on a farm near Hastings. Once I was safely there, I called Walt and told him I wanted a divorce. He was furious, and shouted at me that he didn't want a divorce, that he wanted to straighten out. I wanted to stay near my sister, so I got a job teaching there.

Two months later, Walt drove down from Minot and begged me to give him another chance. He was trying not to drink, but I knew he was drinking. Still, rather than face the shame of divorce, I went back to him again. He rented an apartment, and the two boys and I moved in with him. Immediately, I conceived our daughter, Carmen.

It just didn't work, though, and I had to threaten to call the police to make him leave. On June 20, 1980, a month after Carmen was born, our divorce became

final. After a year on welfare so I could stay home with the three kids, I returned to teaching.

When Ivan was four years old, I told him in simple terms that he'd been adopted, and how his birthmother wasn't able to take care of him herself, but she loved him so much she wanted to make sure he had a good home and that's why he was with us. He accepted that really well.

**Ivan, adoptee:** In school, until about the sixth grade, I was a slow student. In junior high we had a project about different cultures and where our families had come from. My adoptive parents told me my name before I was adopted had been Baby Boy Zaitsoff, which sounds Russian. So for this project, I tried to research that name, but since I had no Zaitsoffs to talk to, I ended up having to use my adopted family's history. So that began a small fire inside of me to find my birthfamily.

When I got to high school, of all the kids that I knew, I was the only adopted one. I was angry because I felt I had been abandoned by my biological mother, and I was jealous that my brother and sister were related to each other by blood and had their biological parents and I didn't. That bugged me.

My dad was going through addiction problems, so I felt it was my job to take on the role of family hero. During the school year, I worked in a pizza joint thirty hours a week, so that when my mother needed money, I could help her out. I respected my dad and my respect came from fear. Now, years later, he's been dead almost four years, and I still fear him. It's like a pit bull, you respect it because you know what he can do. My dad was the male figure in my life society said I was supposed to love and emulate, but there was nothing there that I wanted to emulate.

Beside showing us by the example of his drug abuse what not to do in life, he would always tell us, "If you love me, you won't do what I do." So that's one of the things I did learn from him.

Finally, when I was seventeen—between my junior and senior year—my mom and I were talking about family and she said, "Hey, Ivan, I think you're old enough to meet your birthmother, do you want to talk to her?"

I said, "Yeah, I sure do. I have some questions I'd like some answers to."

So I asked my mom if she'd call Catholic Adoption Services in Minot to see if we could have contact, and they said, "No problem. Kristy (that's my birthmother's name) contacts us every year on Ivan's birthday." Then Mom wrote a letter to Kristy.

**Elaine, Adoptive Mother:** I sat down and wrote her a seventeen-page letter. I told her how much Ivan wanted to meet her, and how I hoped it would be possible because I understood his need and was therefore very open to it. I added that I felt his need represented unfinished business for all of us, including her. I was honest with her. I said my only concern would be if she had an alcohol or drug

problem, because I didn't want Ivan to have to face any more problems, and that I hoped she was herself in a good position in life. I mailed it to Sister Alma, who forwarded it to the birthmother.

**Ivan, Adoptee:** After she got my mom's letter, Kristy wrote me a real long letter telling me all about how she had me and about her life in general.

When she was nineteen, a while after she'd had me, she married a white man. They were married for six years, but she never had any more children. She divorced him in 1984 and since then has lived common-law with a black man named Ed. They distribute a line of athletic shoes to retailers and drive between Milwaukee and Chicago. Ed is attending University of Wisconsin part time, studying to get his degree in business administration.

I'll never forget my first conversation with Kristy. I'd put in a long day at work and I was home alone, sleeping on the couch, and the phone rang.

I yelled out, "Somebody pick up the phone, I'm kinda tired, you know," but nobody was there so I picked up the phone and I heard this voice go, "Hello? Is Ivan there?"

And I was like, "This is Ivan."

"Hi," she said, "this is your mom."

**Elaine, adoptive mother:** When we got home, Ivan was in ecstasy. He said, "Mom, my mom called! My birthmother called and we talked for two hours!"

"Ohhhh," I said, "that is wonderful!"

Later that night I remember going into the room he shares with his brother, and he's telling Wally all these neat things she had told him about herself. "Oh," he said, "she just sounds so neat! We have a lot in common." That night he went to sleep with a big smile on his face.

**Ivan, adoptee:** At first I was not sure about calling Kristy "Mom," because my mom Elaine is who I consider my mom. But when Kristy comes to visit I call her Mom. It's more like a deep friendship than a mother-son relationship. But to me, there's no difference between Kristy and Elaine. Well, there is a difference, but it's so little, it's more technical. So even though I see my biological mother Kristy as a deep friend, I don't consider her any less my mom than my mom. But, you know, if push came to shove, Elaine, my adoptive mom, is my mom.

My mom has five sisters, and my Aunt Moira says that, even though she spent ten years as a nun, Mom's the best mother of them all. I kind of agree with her there; she's pretty special.

When Kristy and I met at the Minneapolis airport, she gave me the biggest hug and, at that moment, I felt that my life was pretty much complete. It seemed like this huge boulder had been lifted from my shoulders. My whole family was there, being videotaped by my cousin Carita. I felt so loved, so happy about the

situation, nothing could bring me down from that high!

**Elaine, adoptive mother:** Everyone was there, even Walter, who I'd divorced thirteen years earlier. He was working in St. Paul as a real-estate agent and was struggling to stay on the wagon. He was there as a friend, and he looked good, dressed in a handsome suit.

Ivan was dressed up, too, in dress pants, a white shirt and tie. He had a bouquet of flowers for her. Because the plane was about an hour late, he was pacing back and forth, something Carita caught on videotape.

Finally her plane landed and we all watched her hurry down the jetway, smiling, and when they met, it was absolutely fantastic! She hugged all of us and we loved her right away, like she was part of our extended family.

**Ivan, adoptee:** During her visit, my birthmom and me spent three days reminiscing about our lives, and it was just overwhelming. I realized that I was blessed, because I had a mother who wanted to meet me, not like some kids whose birthmothers want nothing to do with them.

Someday I want to try to contact my biological father, to meet the man who fathered me, even if it's only once. Kristy has told me his name and says she'll help me find him if I ever want to. I'd get a picture of myself standing beside him so I could see if my face is a copy of his.

I want to meet him after I finish my graduate degree. I just graduated technical school, so now I want to go to an actual university and get one or even two academic degrees. Then, when I've done that, if he's still alive—'cause he was a lot older than my birthmom—I'll try to find him to show him, "Look what you have lost, what you could have had as a son."

As for whether or not I'll like him, I have bad feelings about him for abandoning my biological mother and me. I could never do that. Still, I don't believe things are always black or white; there are shades of gray. I'll hear his side of the story and compute it into the equation.

**Kristy, birthmother:** Meeting Ivan has made my life complete, because before that there had always been this big, open hole. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think about him with a real deep yearning. Especially around his birthday and at Christmas, I felt that longing for him, wondering, and wondering about him.

Ed had pushed me into writing the agency every year, so they knew how to reach me and that I was open to contact with him. Still, it was Ivan's mother's contacting the agency that brought us together when he was seventeen. I was happy that we met when we did, because I got a chance to meet Walter, his adoptive dad who raised him. Walter died of a heart attack a year or so later.

Ivan has met all of my family. He's met Ed, my significant other, my brother,

my sister, my mom, and Tim, the great man Mom married the year after Ivan was born. We have taken him up to visit them and to go fishing on Lake Darling, north of Minot.

Ivan's mom, Elaine, is a pretty wonderful person, the perfect mother for my son. She's about the most down-to-earth, mellow kind of person, never judges anyone. And because she's a teacher, Ivan knows how important education is. I may be ambitious and hard-working, but he's even more so, and he's the way he is because of her. In fact, if it weren't for Elaine and her openness and understanding, our reunion might not have been so blessed. It's really been an Oh, my God! kind of miracle.

**Elaine, adoptive mother:** Since leaving the order in 1969, I've had challenges and disillusionments I didn't expect, but one part of my life has been all I dreamed it would be: motherhood. All three of my children, Ivan, Wally, and Carmen, are in college and are working to pay their way through. I'm so proud of each one of them.

From that first moment I met Kristy back in 1993, she and I just clicked. During her visit, Ivan and I took her out to visit my sister Joyce's farm near Hastings. It was a beautiful sunny day and we took a lot of pictures. Joyce wanted Kristy to have a picture to take back home with her, so she got out her Polaroid and took a wonderful picture of Kristy and me with Ivan standing between us, our arms around each other, big smiles on our faces.

After Kristy had gone back to Wisconsin, several of my friends asked me, "How did you feel, being around her?"

I told them, "It's been a real gift for me." Not only that, but since then she's become part of our extended family, so it's pretty special.

I have to admit, the first time I heard Ivan call her Mom, it gave me a little twinge in my stomach, but it's okay now. But Kristy and I have been a real good mix; we hit it off well. If I answer the phone when she calls Ivan, she asks me how I'm doing and we talk for awhile.

One of the high points of my life, one of the sweetest moments of all, was when Kristy came for her second visit on Mother's Day weekend.

Ivan took the two of us out for lunch, and it was very relaxed and fun. Afterwards Kristy handed me a gift-wrapped box with a beautiful Mother's Day card. When I opened the box, there was a white sweatshirt with the Polaroid picture of Kristy and Ivan and me transferred onto it and these words printed underneath: *Together at Last*. I looked at Kristy's face—which was all blurred because I was crying—then we all hugged and cried together.