

Annette Schlafrig

This story is an extract from the author's Social Work honour's thesis, entitled 'Identity and the Late Discovery of Adoption', completed at Curtin University in 2003. All names used are pseudonyms.

Chapter Four: The Narrative

4.1 Legacy of an Adopted Child

Once there were two women
Who never knew each other
One you do not remember
The other you call mother
Two different lives shaped to make yours one
One became your guiding star
The other became your sun
The first gave you life
And the second taught you to live it
The first gave you a need for love
And the second was there to give it
One gave you a nationality
The other gave you a name
One gave you the seed of talent
The other gave you an aim
One gave you emotions
The other calmed your fears
One gave you up – it was all that she could do
The other prayed for a child
And God led her straight to you
And now you ask me through your tears
The age old questions through the years
Heredity or Environment – which are you the product of:
Neither my darling – Neither
Just two kinds of love
Author Unknown

4.2 A Narrative: From Rachel to Annette

7th October, 1991

A gentle zephyr of breeze wafted over from the nearby Sydney Harbour on a mild October evening. Friends and relatives, who had gathered on my sister Judy and her partner Paul's rear courtyard, enjoyed liberal quantities of good food, wine and excellent company. The occasion was Judy's 33rd birthday. Judy had decided to have a party to celebrate her birthday, any excuse for a party was Judy's theme. Little did I know that casual conversation would ultimately lead to an incredible journey that would alter our lives significantly and question our lifelong relationships.

In the wee small hours of the morning, after the guest numbers had significantly dwindled to a hardy few, Judy began what was starting to be a routine lambasting of Mum's latest transgressions. Judy complained that Mum was an "ogre" and she felt she couldn't possibly be related to her.

Judy insisted that one of our previous neighbours had said one of us was adopted, however Judy could not recall whether it was Judy or I who was adopted. I have no recollection of any neighbour saying anything about adoption. Judy seemed to be constantly harping on about how tough life was for her.

I mentioned to Judy that I had heard on the radio that the Adoption Law had been changed in New South Wales and why didn't she find out if she was adopted once and for all. In a way I thought it would put a stop to Judy's constant whining about her lot in life. Judy thought it was a brilliant idea but I had my doubts that Judy would actually do something about finding out if she was adopted. I believed, somewhat naively, that Judy enjoyed having somebody else to blame for her misfortunes.

To my complete surprise Judy rang me a few days later and said she had spoken to the Department of Community Services and was going to apply to find out if she was adopted. Judy, as was her nature, insisted that I should also apply. I was less than enthusiastic at that point. Judy mentioned that if there was a gap in the date of your birth on your birth certificate and the actual date you were registered with the State it could indicate that you were adopted.

After putting down the phone I couldn't resist looking for my birth certificate. I charged up the twenty stairs to our bedroom and began rummaging through the drawers. The first birth certificate I came across was my husband's David's, he was registered three weeks after his birth. Next I found our boys and knew they had been registered within a few weeks.

Finally I stared down at my birth certificate in utter astonishment as the date SEPTEMBER 1955 jumped out from the page at me. I had to look

again to confirm it. I was, after all, born in March. That was a gap of six months.

Disbelief invaded my every thought and I was beginning to regret my "off the cuff" comment to Judy that she should find out once and for all if she was adopted. My head was spinning and as I attempted to process my thoughts, I instantly reached for the phone to ring Judy, I had to tell someone. Judy was immediately and totally certain that both of us were adopted and I had to reluctantly agree with her that perhaps I was adopted too. I knew my only option was to apply to the Department for confirmation. I posted my information to the authorities that day and thus began the longest wait in my entire life.

For the first long weeks after lodging the application my only thoughts were around the impact of my possibly being adopted. Often Judy and I discussed how we would feel if we were adopted. As I have already mentioned Judy was hoping that she was adopted and said she would be devastated if she found out she was not adopted. How did I feel? I wasn't sure. Judy was three and a half years younger than I was and we had grown up living with our parents in the suburbs of Sydney. Our relationship was competitive but close, especially as Judy continued to experience conflict in her teenage years with her relationship with our parents.

Our parents often treated us quite differently and organised activities that meant we spent leisure hours apart. As is the case with sisters we often squabbled and had diverse interests and dissimilar ways of being.

I had a wonderful husband and two great sons. Mum and Dad were often demanding but life was pretty great. We all worked hard and things seemed fine just the way they were. I never felt comfortable rocking the boat and this was a giant step and I suppose the best way to describe how I felt was apprehensive. Deep down I was hoping that it would all turn out the way we both wanted and then our lives could continue on their way without too many hiccups. Judy was certain that not being adopted would be her worst nightmare. I was concerned about how she would handle it if she were not adopted. Even though I felt apprehensive I think I was more philosophical, curious to find out but not concerned with a decision either way. I was totally unprepared for what I was about to uncover.

Judy then received her letter and it filled her with sheer relief, that she was not related to Mum. From her reaction, you would have thought Mum had poison in her bloodstream. The relationship between Mum and Judy had been a strained one since Judy was 12 and finding out she was adopted gave Judy permission to have very little contact with Mum and Dad.

The Friday prior to the letter arriving I decided to ring the Department to see if there was any progress on my application. As a safeguard it was necessary to quote a correspondence number and then this voice came on the line with the words, "YES YOUR FILE IS FINISHED, WE CAN CONFIRM THAT YOU WERE ADOPTED". I recall the lady on the other end asking how I felt. Numb would perhaps be the most appropriate way to describe my feelings. Too stunned to cry, I put the phone down, attempted to ring David at work and then went to my parents for dinner, as was our custom on Friday night.

It was approximately 4 o'clock and I just went through the motions of our weekly ritual. No one else knew what had happened and no one suspected. Mum always said that she prided herself on being able to tell if something was troubling one of her children. Either I was a good actor or Mum didn't really know me that well.

It is difficult to describe my relationship with Mum and Dad. Our house was a noisy one, lots of screaming and shouting, and I generally did what I was told and tried to keep out of trouble. Neither of my adoptive parents was demonstrative with their emotions and I was never encouraged to hug or kiss. As a teenager I lived in my own world of books and didn't socialise very often. Now as I look back as an adult and as a parent I realise that I was never really close to my adoptive mother and our relationship lacked the intimate bonds and connections that I have with my own children. I felt that Mum was distant but accepted that it was just the way she was.

As I began to absorb the implications of the phone call, my mind was racing with questions. How can I tell my boys in a way that would not damage them forever? Would I ever be able to see my parents in the same way again? Where do I go from here? Why had I been lied to? All I wanted to do was get the night over with, go home, speak to David and Judy.

Most of that week was a complete blur. Trying to carry on as per usual till the confirmation letter arrived. I discovered that my thoughts would constantly drift to my adoption and what it would mean for the future. Disbelief that I had been lied to for my entire life was the overwhelming emotion that penetrated my being.

It was increasingly difficult to comprehend what I had done to Mum and Dad to deserve this betrayal of my love and loyalty. I felt discarded and abandoned by the very people whom I had relied upon and believed my entire life.

10th January, 1992

The day dawned as typical as any summer day in suburban Sydney, hot and humid. I had spent a restless night, not unlike the day my Higher School Certificate results were due out. I stumbled through the morning routine attempting to push the magnitude of the day to the depths of my mind. No matter what transpired, this would be a significant day in my life.

Just as certain as day followed night, the letter arrived from the Department of Community Services that would categorically confirm that I had been adopted. I remember staring at the envelope, with its distinctive government logo, resisting the urge to open it, and not wanting to unleash the contents and confront the facts in black and white. I knew everything in my life would change forever once the letter was opened. I would no longer view things as I had previously.

My reaction to learning that I was adopted was totally different to Judy's. I thought I had an average relationship with my parents, a few ups and downs but overall life drifted along smoothly. I had always been compliant and life had progressed without too many struggles.

The arrival of the letter made my adoption finally a black and white reality that I could not ignore. I now had to face what the reality of the letter's contents would mean for my future. The first twenty-four hours after receiving the letter I was in a daze, doing all the routine tasks, however my mind was always focused on the one word, ADOPTION.

My entire world was torn apart once I opened that letter and nothing would be the same again. Unlike Judy it was not initially a relief to learn I was adopted. It was everything in my world turned topsy-turvy. So many questions needed to be answered and I didn't know where to start.

So while Judy was in raptures, my life was crumbling and everything I believed in from childhood was questionable and shaky.

One of the discoveries I made after learning about my adoption which shocked me totally was the extent to which other people knew about Judy and I being adopted. I guess I expected Mum and Dad's friends to know we were adopted. However, I never realised that all my peers and even my husband and his sister had known that Judy and I were adopted. As it turned out, David was informed by his sister, that I was adopted. David chose never to mention it as he presumed it was of no significance to me.

University life drifted on, I recall attending lectures and tutorials, but my mind wasn't there. I was in first year and had chosen to study German as a core unit. My main motivation in choosing German was that I had been unable to study German at school and German was an integral part of my heritage. My parents were both originally from Germany and had fled shortly before the war. German was often spoken at home, however I had a desire to be able to read and write German. I was beginning to question my choices.

As the days after the arrival of the letter flew past, the impact of my adoption began to sink in. I had been sent a booklet from the Department about adoption that, as yet, I had not opened. I found a few quiet moments and opened the guide. The guide provided me with unemotional solutions to a difficult situation. Judy had previously ignored the guide's advice on contact and had been rejected by her birth family. I was determined to use the guide, for those moments when my heart would tell me to jump in, which could prove later to be detrimental to the outcomes I wished to achieve.

This simple publication provided me with stability and rational directions at a time when logic was deserting my thoughts and actions. Browsing through the book, it detailed guidelines about searching for members of birth family and reunions. First thing I needed to find out was, WHO WAS I?

For thirty seven years I thought I knew who I was. I was Rachel, eldest daughter of Eric and Marian, wife to David, mother to Adam and Ben, sister to Judy and aunt to Molly, Chris and Andrew, niece to Fred and cousin to Phillip, Susan and Danny. I was a first generation Australian, who identified strongly with the Jewish faith. During my entire life I had been told I looked exactly like my adoptive Dad's mother, who had perished in the Holocaust. Now all that was being questioned. What was my real identity? Who were my biological parents and where did I come from? How could I ever think of Eric and Marian again as my parents? I was having difficulty calling them Mum and Dad, it was as if the words stuck in my throat and could not come out!

Perhaps the most difficult part of learning about my adoption was the realisation that Judy was no longer my biological sister. We had shared a lifetime of childhood memories, school days, family picnics and holidays and now at the age of thirty seven Judy was no longer my sister. I knew in my heart that the discovery of our adoption was not going to alter the relationship I shared with Judy.

Shortly after learning of my adoption I had to explain to my teenage children, the consequences of my discovery. I recall my eldest son, Adam asking, with tears in his eyes, if that meant that Molly, Chris and Andrew were no longer his cousins? I felt a surge of anger towards Marian and Eric as I attempted to explain to Adam and Ben the intricacies of adoption and reassure them that their relationship with their cousins could retain its present closeness. It was at this moment that I felt the innocence of my children's youth was shattered as they struggled to come to terms with the changes in relationships that had previously been permanent and fixed. For all our sakes, I needed to answer the question of who I was?

The first step was to apply to the Department of Births, Deaths and Marriages for my original birth certificate. As with any government process there were forms to fill out and a fee to pay, and the now customary wait. After enduring the months of waiting for confirmation of adoption, the seven-day wait seemed tolerable. Thoughts continued to surge through my mind in that week. Why was I adopted and what would I discover from the birth certificate?

Judy and I talked constantly and frequently imagined that Louise was our mother. Louise and her husband Alec had no children. Louise and Alec had lived next door to Eric and Marian before our adoption and had frequently cared for us when Eric and Marian went on holidays. If only Louise was my mother, a difficult scenario could be made bearable. I had a wonderful relationship with Louise and it gave me a sense of hope that perhaps she was my 'real' mother. I was trying to grasp at something positive at a time when I was desperate.

I had not even begun to consider the implication of Louise's death a few years ago and how that would affect me if Louise was my mother. Spiritually I felt a strong connection to Louise. At this difficult period, I felt like I was drowning and as I slipped further under the water, in the distance Louise was there with a lifebuoy, encouraging me to reach out and cling to it. I was to discover the next day that it was only wishful thinking.

Once again I was faced with an official envelope with its telltale government logo. I was apprehensive and left the letter unopened on the kitchen table for hours. It was hopeless, the mere presence of the envelope was drawing me in and I knew I had to open it and uncover the reality of my identity. Slowly I pried the envelope open, careful not to damage it or the contents contained within it. I gazed at the simple blue form, not dissimilar to my other birth certificate, but with one noticeable exception.

Angled across the page was an official stamp, bearing the words, NOT FOR OFFICIAL USE. This caused a stirring of anger from deep within. The implication of those words tugged at the core of my being. Did it imply that this birth certificate was inferior and would never carry the same legitimacy as my other birth certificate?

Glancing down the page I saw her name, Kath Jenkins. It was strange seeing my birth mother's name for the first time. My eyes shifted to the space for father's name and I was struck by the realisation that it was an empty space. My initial reaction was that an error had been made, a government slip up. I raced through the house, trying to remember where I'd left the Department's guide. What did the book say about this omission? The answer was simple, according to the guide; fathers did not have to be named. It was another obstacle. How was I going to fill in the blanks?

I returned to the certificate in order to glean more information. My birth mother's address stated she lived in Melrose, New South Wales. I had lived in Sydney all my life, but had no notion of where Melrose was. I spread the touring map of New South Wales out on the table and scanned the map for clues as to the location of Melrose. It seemed like hours passed as I bent over the map and divided it into areas to search.

Finally success, there in the middle of New South Wales was the word I was looking for. This raised more questions as to how I had been born in suburban Sydney, hundreds of miles from Melrose?

Further scrutiny of this precious link to my past, my birth certificate, revealed the section headed 'Child'. Under the Christian name were the words

Annette Kath. These two words were as foreign to me as a stranger's moniker but in reality they formed the foundation of my identity. If the events of my entry into this world had been different these two names would not be contained within an aura of unfamiliarity. The question surfaced immediately as to why my birth mother would choose a name for me, when knowing that the likelihood of me ever discovering the name was remote given the secrecy that surrounded adoption. Or was there a faint modicum of hope that I would discover my real beginnings. My adoptive sister Judy's birth certificate contained no mention of her birth mother giving her a name. The importance of the name was wonderment to me, was there a familial significance to Annette? Kath was explainable, as it was perhaps the only thing that my birth mother could give me that provided a tangible link to her.

My birth mother chose to share her name with me and I took comfort in that and interpreted it as my birth being a significant event and not one to be swept into the distant confines of her memory. The whole encounter had the surreal feel of slowly and painstakingly assembling the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, only the puzzle was my life! I gradually came to the realisation that I need more information than my birth certificate had provided. This was a strange experience as previously I had imagined that once I had a name it would satisfy my curiosity.

Suddenly it was not enough; I couldn't rest comfortably with the names 'Annette or 'Kath' and the town of Melrose. Additional questions were invading my every thought. Who was Kath and where was she now? What was Kath's life like?

Did she ever think of me or was I merely a long forgotten mistake? What were the circumstances of my birth? Why was I rejected at so young an age? What did I do wrong? I had to find out more, or my life would never return to a new level of equilibrium and tranquility.

One of the key tasks that I needed to accomplish in order to commence to unravel the webs of secrecy that had engulfed every aspect of my life was to confront Eric and Marian with my new found knowledge. I longed to hear their explanation, hoping that some logical rationale could exonerate their actions. I desired to be able to understand and perhaps believe their reasons behind the years of lies and deceit.

Judy and I joined forces and together with David and Paul (Judy's partner) we invited Eric and Marian for dinner one Friday evening. The evening started out in a congenial mood, although I recall being extremely nervous in anticipation of their reaction and yet also fearful of their disclosure of any information I might not be prepared to receive. Dinner passed quickly and the moment arrived for Judy and I to relate what we had discovered over the past few months. I will never forget the first words that came from Marian, "so what it doesn't make any difference". I was shocked by Marian's lack of compassion and lack of understanding of the momentous impact of our discovery. Eric was visibly relieved and close to tears as he expressed regret that the secrets of our conception had been withheld from us for so long. Eric's explanation, although no less hurtful, was that, "there was never the right time to tell me". At least Eric cared enough to provide an explanation. Eric expressed relief that the burden of maintaining the secrets had been lifted. My relationship with Marian noticeably deteriorated from that evening onwards and today is still marred by her off handed comment on that evening.

As Eric and Marian prepared to leave later that evening I requested that I be given time to absorb the events of that night and explained that I would not be telephoning daily as was my usual routine. I assured Eric and Marian that I would make contact when it was the right time for me. Prior to the disclosure of adoption I was feeling the strain of ringing everyday but had never had the strength to assert my independence.

Perhaps one of the reasons that my relationship with Eric and Marian never regained its previous status was that they did not respect my request for time out and Eric arrived at my door within a week. He expressed his unhappiness at my decision to temporarily halt all communication and stated that, "I should be grateful that they had given me a home as my mother didn't want me". This statement angered me and forced me to re-examine the fundamental basis of our relationship.

It was this visit that precipitated my recognition that for thirty seven years I had agreed to all their requests and now I needed to stand firm and assert myself. I recall telling friends that I was indeed undergoing a teenage rebellious phase at thirty- seven instead of fourteen. For the first time in my life I was uncertain of my identity and exactly where I belonged. I realised that I needed to continue with my search and take the next step in my journey of discovery no matter how painful the outcome for me could become.

The discovery of my adoption lead directly to my questioning my religious beliefs and particularly the future impact on my children. As is traditional in Jewish law one's Jewish status is taken from the mother. The realisation dawned on me that if my biological mother was not Jewish, then I was not Jewish and this could significantly impact on my sons' future.

Shortly after discovering my adoptive past I made an appointment with Rabbi Dreyer. The synagogue I had been raised and married in was in the centre of Sydney, a 125-year-old ornate sandstone and stained glass building now dwarfed by skyscrapers. Rabbi Dreyer had officiated at our wedding and was familiar with our family. I desperately needed to confirm my Jewish status especially for my children, whom were teenagers and had not yet cemented their religious beliefs. I identified strongly with the Jewish faith and Jewish people and knew that whatever the outcome of my consultation with Rabbi Dreyer I would remain steadfast in my religious commitment.

Prior to my discussion with Rabbi Dreyer he had consulted the synagogue's records and assured me that both my sister and I had undergone a religious conversion according to Jewish law as infants. As I walked out of the building I felt a weight lift off my shoulders, re-assured that according to orthodox Jewish law my sons would be regarded as Jewish. Having clarified this perspective of my life I felt free to embark on the journey of searching for the other aspects of my identity.

Returning to the Department's guide I scanned the pages and read and re-read the advice on searching. Engrossed in thought, days passed quickly until the realisation struck that it was imperative for me to undertake a search. This was the only approach that would bring me peace and attempt to answer all the unexplained questions.

My first step was to cocoon myself at the State Library and peruse the electoral rolls until a clue to my family's whereabouts was unearthed. As it was University holidays and the boys were back in school I started out just after eight o'clock on my journey. As I entered the New South Wales State Library I was overawed by its enormity. Seeking out the librarian I was directed to the electoral lists and my first job was to ascertain what electoral division the town of Melrose was classified in 1955.

Then the painstaking search began, scrutinising the electoral rolls for any sign of the family surname 'Jenkins'. The first entry was in 1950, when the name 'Jenkins' appeared at James Street Melrose. The number of entries waned out to just one solitary entry that was constant since early 1950's. This was my sole clue and now after several days of searching I had uncovered the only apparent lead to my family and my identity.

The next crucial step required my penning a letter to my mother that would only be meaningful to my birth mother. Once again I followed the

suggested format in the Department's guide, which was as follows:

Dear Kath,

I am writing to you in the hope that you might be able to help me.

I am trying to find Kath Jenkins. We were very close in 1955, while she

was in Sydney, but unfortunately, due to circumstances, we have lost

contact over the years and now I would dearly love to contact her again.

I would greatly appreciate any assistance you may be able to render me in

finding her present address. If you know her whereabouts, but feel for

some reason you would not like to inform me of it, would you please

pass this letter on to her so that she can contact me if she wishes.

Yours sincerely

Annette Kath.

After writing the letter I settled into the now familiar routine of waiting for a reply. The days passed with a new anxiety as I contemplated all the possible responses that could eventuate. How long would I have to wait? What would I do if no reply eventuated? As each day passed with no reply I began to prepare for the prospect that no answer would be forthcoming.

At eight o'clock one Friday evening approximately six weeks after I had sent the letter the phone call came I had been anticipating. The caller identified herself as Mary, the sister of Kath Jenkins and asked how I was connected to Kath. The moment of truth had arrived and I briefly explained who I was. There followed a brief but poignant silence and Mary broke the news that Kath had passed away just two years previous. My mind attempted to concentrate on the rest of the conversation, but to this day it remains a blur. Mary promised to write as soon as possible and give me any details I requested. I recall placing the receiver of the phone back onto its hook and walking into the family room feeling in a daze and struggling to comprehend the details of the conversation I had just finished.

I was barely able to articulate the gist of the call and recall a wave of anger surge over me. How could Eric and Marian deny me the knowledge and therefore the opportunity to connect a face to the name Kath? My anger was intense and my ever-supportive husband David sensed that I needed to express the anger in any way possible. Picking up the phone, the very instrument that had brought distress once again into my life, I contacted Judy and could feel her anger join with mine as the true impact of Kath's death slowly sank in.

As the days since the conversation with Mary lapsed I began to re-run the content of the exchange and try to piece together vital information. I recall her telling me that Kath had married in 1973 and had a daughter Linda who was just sixteen and was born just fifteen months before my son Adam. I had a half sister! Would I someday have the opportunity to meet her face to face?

Mary had expressed reluctance to tell Linda of my existence until she had finished High School. Linda had lost both her parents and Mary was now her legal guardian. As a parent I respected Mary's decision to protect Linda from further hurt but as an adoptee I didn't want to be part of any more secrecy. One of the most vital pieces of information Mary had given me that night was that Linda's father was not likely to have been my father.

For the first time in nearly twelve months since discovering my adoption, I eagerly awaited the arrival of Mary's letter and longed to glean essential information that could piece together extra segments of my personal life's puzzle. When the letter finally arrived I poured over the contents, reading and re-reading, memorising the new members of my family and the limited snapshots of the Jenkin's family history. I had an uncle, Neil who had passed away several years ago. It was his wife, Phyllis who still lived in Melrose and had passed my letter on to Mary, when she was uncertain what to do with the letter. I often wondered what the outcome would have been if Phyllis had not forwarded it on to Mary.

As I read on I suddenly realised that there were three aunts; Alice, Lisa and Mary. My delight was overwhelming when I discovered I had a grandmother, Sylvia whom shared the same birth date as my son Adam and at age eighty-three she was still active and well.

As I absorbed all that was contained in Mary's letter I prayed that one day I could meet these strangers who were as much my family as Eric, Marian, Fred and Judy were. Once again my patience was to be tested as the months slipped by and no further contact was forthcoming.

In the meantime I decided to apply for what is referred to as Prescribed Information. I was once again following Judy's lead as she had already obtained her prescribed information. I had initially hoped I could glean this knowledge directly from family members but decided after all to go through the official channels. Prescribed information can supply the adoptee with non-identifying data on their birth parents in addition to limited medical history.

Unfortunately I was to receive the news from Department of Community Services that adoption files prior to late 1950's had been destroyed. This was a devastating blow, particularly as my birth family had little idea as to the identity of my father.

The next avenue open to me was to write to the hospital of my birth and request any medical records they had recorded surrounding my birth. Disappointment was becoming expected and I was delighted when I received a one-page record of the hospital birth register. It may seem trivial for some people to know their time of birth, weight and length of labour, however for me this information gave me a tangible link with my mother. During the course of my two pregnancies Marian had been reluctant to share her experiences of childbirth with me and at the time I shrugged it off as her old fashioned ways. Only now do I realise Marian had no experiences to share.

My patience for contact with other family members was rewarded with the arrival of a letter from New Zealand. It was from my aunt Lisa, who had been informed of my contact by Mary. Lisa wanted to welcome me to the family. As Lisa was older than Kath she had a vital clue as to the possible identity of my father. Lisa informed me that on the family farm in Melrose there was a one-teacher school which all the Jenkins children, as well as some neighbouring children, attended.

Apparently Mossvale School had one male teacher who was only at the school briefly and was sent back to Sydney. It is hypothesised by Lisa that this teacher may be my father. After perusing Lisa's letter several times I acknowledged that I needed assistance from people skilled in adoption in order to know where to go with this new information.

As my father's name had been omitted from my birth certificate, the local post adoption service suggested I either contact the local Melrose School or try the Department of Education for assistance. I decided to write to the Principal of Melrose school inquiring if there were any records

or information about Mossvale School. This time luck was on my side as the secretary of Melrose school had lived in Melrose all her life and recalled the Mossvale School.

Through her position at the school she provided me with a list of all the teachers who had taught at Mossvale until its closure in 1967. As I stared at the list of eight teachers, all males I began to fantasize who could be my father. The first and the last names on the list I could safely eliminate as the approximate dates would be either too early or too late. As the realisation sank in that checking every State's electoral roll for five names and then making contact was indeed a Herculean task I became discouraged and decided to postpone the search until I had at least met my birth mother's family.

Towards the end of 1992 an opportunity arose for me to meet Mary. My husband had to attend a conference in rural Bedford, New South Wales and it was only one hour's drive from Coben where Mary and Linda lived. Straight away I wrote to Mary and eagerly awaited her reply. Mary rang to say she would love to meet and would drive down to Bedford on that next Saturday morning. That morning I woke feeling full of both trepidation and anticipation. What if I didn't make a good impression on Mary?

How would I recognise Mary and would she disapprove of my generous size? Eric and Marian had always made an issue of my large size and I was feeling extremely uncomfortable about how I looked, particularly for the first meeting with Mary. Gradually as the hour of Mary's arrival inched closer I convinced myself that I was basically a nice person and if Mary was as pleasant as her letters indicated, my size would be irrelevant to her.

In fact Mary and I instantly recognised each other and after overcoming the introductions, we settled into conversation like two long lost friends trying to catch up on a lifetime of family chatter. Lots of photos were taken and after Mary departed I was hopeful that, without too long a wait, I would soon be able to meet Linda and Mary's husband Bill.

Life seems to provide opportunities without warning. Early in 1993 David and I decided to relocate to Perth. It was my desire to visit my mother's grave once before we left the State. Kath was buried in a small country town, East Warwick, which was a two hour drive from Coben where Mary, Bill and Linda lived.

Once again I put pen to paper and informed Mary of our relocation to Perth and of my desire to visit East Warwick. To my surprise Mary invited me together with David, Adam and Ben to spend a few days with her and to meet Linda. The date was set and all four of us undertook the five-hour drive to Coben.

As space was limited Linda and I shared a room and that was strange to be thrown into a bedroom with a half sister twenty years younger, especially since we had never even spoken before. We overcame our initial hesitations and started to discuss interests and hobbies. We discovered a shared interest in history and a love of cooking. The next morning we set out in two cars and headed for East Warwick. I had asked Linda's permission to take a photo of her mother's grave and she agreed. It was a strange sensation standing at the graveside of someone who had given me life but was nevertheless a stranger. Linda and Mary showed us around East Warwick, her old school and her home.

I could feel an aura of sadness and silence settle over us all as we drove back to Coben. It seemed that we were all immersed in our own memories and I was trying to come to terms with the finality that seeing my mother's grave imprinted on me. It is difficult to remember that day without a tear surfacing. To grieve for a loved one I never had an opportunity to know and love still, elicits a deep sadness from the depths of my heart. I often hypothesise as to how things may have been different if Marian and Eric had told me about my adoption at an earlier time.

The remainder of our visit to Coben was spent becoming acquainted with Linda and Bill and pouring over dozens of family photos slowly gathering together pieces of history and snippets of my heritage.

Leaving Coben knowing we were moving across Australia was wrenching and none of us knew when we would meet again. In 1993 relocating to Perth occupied the majority of our time and for the next few years, cards and catch up letters at Christmas time, was the only contact I had with my new family. It was during this time that I realised how unstable my relationship with my birth family could be especially when contact had been minimal for so many years. Life reached a new equilibrium until the latter half of 1997.

My sister Judy was diagnosed with terminal cancer in August 1997. I focussed all my time and energy into spending every available moment with her in Sydney. At the same time Ben was doing his Tertiary Entrance Examinations and all free efforts were concentrated on keeping him on an even keel whilst I crisscrossed the country grasping at every available moment I could spare to spend with Judy. The day before Ben graduated dux of his High School I was leaving Sydney and saying goodbye to Judy, not knowing if we would ever see each other again. The day after Ben's graduation I was meeting my Aunt Alice and her husband Neville. They were touring Australia and had delayed their departure from Perth to meet me. After spending the day with Alice and Neville, I had a clearer picture of what Kath had gone through in her decision to give me up for adoption.

Alice and Neville's first child was born six months after me and Kath spent hours helping her sister with the baby. Alice felt that Kath was able to commence learning to cope with her loss and Kath poured out all her love she was unable to give her own daughter on Alice and Neville's daughter. Neville told me that he regretted that Kath was not alive to join their journey and meet me. That simple statement of Neville's acknowledged to me my family's acceptance of me and will always stay in my mind as significant. I now truly felt that I belonged to my birth family and would always be a part of their clan.

As Judy's illness progressed I continued to traverse the country and both David and I were able to attend Judy and Paul's wedding in the November of 1997. The wedding was held in Eric and Marian's front garden and it is the only wedding I have been to where all the guests and the bridal party, with the exception of the bride, were in tears. We all rallied together to draw strength from each other knowing this was Judy's final party. Photographs that were taken at Judy's wedding are a constant reminder to me of the tenacity of Judy's spirit and the vigour with which she fought to cling to life.

Three months later David and I were once again in Sydney to see Judy prior to leaving for a trip to New Zealand. Judy was in a hospice and no coherent conversation was possible. The day we were due to leave we agonised over whether to postpone our trip and wait for the inevitable to happen. The decision to leave Sydney that day was a difficult one but I knew in my heart that if Judy could have spoken she would have told us to leave.

It was a Monday evening when we left Sydney and we were in constant telephone contact with Eric and Paul. On the Wednesday morning we

landed in Norfolk and it was there that I finally had an opportunity to meet Lisa and her family. Lisa picked us up and we spent the entire day at her house, sharing family history and exchanging stories of our childhoods. It was as though we had only been separated since school days and had a lot to catch up on.

We discovered similar interests and it was a day that I would not have wanted to miss. The next morning we flew to Christchurch and as David and I walked towards the city centre the dreaded phone call came to say Judy had lost her brave fight with cancer at the age of thirty nine. As I began to grieve for the sister I had grown up with and shared a special bond with I recognised the irony of life. As one chapter of my life ended another chapter had opened just the day before. If we had postponed our trip to Norfolk, to remain in Sydney, the chance to meet with Lisa would have been lost.

When I returned to Perth, Judy's death hit me with full force and I began to comprehend the enormity of my loss. Since discovering that we were adopted, Judy and I had cemented a special bond and we both understood where the other was coming from in relation to the effect of the late discovery of adoption.

Although most of our friends were supportive of our adoption discovery, after an initial period they generally felt we should move on and get over it. However Judy and I gave each other permission to speak freely about the effect the late discovery of adoption was having on our lives.

So I was doubly devastated when Judy died, as I had lost not only a sister with whom I had shared a childhood, but also someone who could instinctively understand my innermost feelings and thoughts, particularly around adoption. Today I still, five years later, deeply miss the sister I lost. My grief was intense and I now realise that for the first time Judy's death gave me the permission and opportunity to grieve for my birth mother.

As is life's way it moves in cycles. In July 2000 we received a special invitation that contained a dual blessing. Linda was getting married and David and I were invited to Coben to attend the wedding. I was excited, as it would give me the chance to meet my grandmother for the very first time. Since we had relocated to Perth, my grandmother had also moved to a Nursing facility in Coben.

She was now 92. It was an opportunity I could not let pass. From Perth to Coben was quite a journey, not only in kilometres but also in discovery. We left Perth on the midnight flight to Sydney and I was so excited I didn't get any sleep. After a two-hour wait at Sydney we flew a twelve-seater plane to Coben. I recall sitting on this tiny plane, in a queue on the tarmac, surrounded by jumbo jets and trying to comprehend the enormity of this journey. I was to meet the only person who knew the real truth surrounding my birth even though I knew she was unwilling to discuss it. I had accepted the reality that perhaps I could never uncover the details surrounding my birth. I was however, still just pleased to have the opportunity to meet my grandmother Sylvia. I wanted to make a good impression and secretly hoped that after Sylvia had met me, her reluctance to discuss the events surrounding my birth would dissipate. As we taxied along the runway I tried to relax and savour every moment of the trip.

Mary's son Simon, who transported us to the Motel we were staying at, met us on arrival at Coben. There was barely enough time to shower and change for the wedding. As we were preparing for the afternoon's festivities a knock on our door distracted us. Standing there was a couple, in their early sixties and without further ado the woman introduced herself as Linda's half sister Melanie. I was totally confused momentarily till Melanie explained that she shared a father with Linda. We all introduced ourselves and decided to travel together to the wedding.

As I entered the Church I remember thinking this was a strange situation. Here I was a practicing Jew in a Church at the wedding of my half sister that I had only met once and I was surrounded by family who were nearly strangers.

Within a few minutes I recognised Lisa from New Zealand entering the Church with an elderly lady on her arm. This was my grandmother. David and I looked at each other and acknowledged the similarity between mother, daughter and myself. Lisa seated her mother directly in front of us and for the entire service my mind was racing with anticipation at our meeting.

At the completion of the service Melanie suggested that it would be appropriate to have a photo of Linda, Melanie and myself. Truly a one of a kind photographic memory that I cherish. Prior to the reception the relatives and close friends were invited to the local Bowling Club for afternoon tea. This was to be my only chance to meet Sylvia. Due to her age, Sylvia would not be attending the reception in the evening. As the introductions were made, I took a seat opposite Sylvia and joined in the casual chatter of relatives and friends. Sylvia knew who I was but we didn't have any direct conversation. I was grateful to have met Sylvia and observed her interactions with the family. Several more photos were taken and today I cherish those photos.

At the reception we were seated at a table with several long standing friends of the family and met people who remembered my mother well. Some still live in Melrose. Addresses were exchanged and offers of hospitality were forthcoming should David and I every travel to Melrose. I still keep in contact, at least once a year, with several guests whom we met at the wedding and hopefully one day I will be able to go to Melrose and see where my mother spent her childhood.

The two days we spent with my family were very precious and I am thankful that I was given the chance to meet so many family members and friends. The trip to Linda's wedding helped cement my place in the close family unit of my mother.

However, I still felt that I wanted a more tangible connection with my new family.

After long consideration I made the decision to change my name from Rachel to Annette. I had now made the connection with my birth family and felt it was an appropriate time to show the world that I was proud of who I am and particularly where I came from. Not all of my immediate family understands my need to alter my name but I feel it gives me a tangible link with my mother. It also acknowledges Kath's courage, pain and heartache, which family members have explained, Kath experienced surrounding her decision to relinquish me for adoption.

Eleven Years Later

The late discovery of my adoption set me on a tremendous journey of discovery. I uncovered a whole new family of aunts, cousins and above all a half sister and grandmother. I also discovered myself in the process. I now know who I am, where I came from and most importantly my identity. I can now proudly declare my heritage as third generation Australian. My religious beliefs have not wavered during this journey and I still identify as Jewish. My desire to continue with my faith stems from my personality and genetic background. All my birth family, although of a different faith are deeply religious. This journey of 'late discovery' of adoption has personally been extremely challenging, however, it is a journey that I am glad to have been able to undertake and one that I has given me the chance to finally know the truth about my origins.

Since undertaking this thesis Eric, my adoptive father, passed away and this has lead me to think more about my birth father. I feel I am now

ready to engage in the search for my birth father. The relationship between Eric and myself has traversed a rocky road but I understand better the implications and perspectives of his infertility.

The decision of Eric and Marian not to disclose my adoption was steeped in their belief that the adoption would never become public knowledge. Eric was also motivated by a strong desire to re-establish a family unit as he had lost his entire family in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

Although I have, since the 1991 discovery of my adoption, accepted the decision of Eric and Marian not to tell me of the circumstances surrounding my birth I feel our relationship has undergone a metamorphosis and is today presented in a different form than prior to the disclosure. I still regularly contact Marian, however our relationship is on a superficial level and both of us no longer confide in each other our innermost thoughts. I guess that is the tangible aftermath of a lifetime of deception and secrecy.