

## STORIES AND SITUATIONS

This section is the heart and soul of this booklet, as it contains the personal accounts of people affected by adoption, state ward ship and donor assisted conception.

These accounts have been grouped, with the largest number of stories written by adoptees and a variety of experiences described. Both adoptive and natural families are represented by several contributions. There is one article from a state ward and two from the area of donor assisted conception.

### ADOPTees

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#### THE NORMALITY OF ADOPTION - Isabell Collins

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The impact adoption can have on an adoptee is clearly an individual thing. Having said that, it would seem that many of us have been negatively affected by the experience. The relationship that exists between the adoptee and his or her adoptive parents does not seem to influence the degree of negative feelings, or fears that exist within the individual adoptee. Additionally, the age of the adoptee does not appear to be an influencing factor.

Unfortunately, most of us do not discover that the feeling side of adoption is 'normal' until we start to mix with other adoptees. To meet up with other adoptees within the general community is rare. Therefore, many of us remain silent about our feelings, believing that if we express our views to non-adoptees, we will run the risk of being misunderstood, appearing ungrateful and possibly being rejected once again. Our reluctance to talk with non-adoptees often includes our adoptive parents.

VANISH, by providing support group meetings for adoptees as well as reading materials on the subject, facilitates the adoptee's understanding not only of the issues, but also of the 'normalness' of our own thoughts and feelings. This knowledge can empower us to feel safe about expressing thoughts and feelings and start us on the road to reducing our fears and putting our feelings in to a more realistic perspective.

The impact adoption can have on an adoptee is not easily understood by those who have not experienced it. Put simply, adoption to a non-adoptee means that a child is raised with a family who are not the adoptee's biological relatives. Community understanding of adoption is that the adoptee is raised as if he or she was the child of the adoptive parents.

To an adoptee the words **'as if we were their own'** sticks in our minds. What it means for many adoptees is that we are not really theirs.

Additionally, adoption for the adoptee more often than not means that our natural mothers gave us away to strangers. The fear of being rejected again has precluded many of us from being open with anyone about how we feel.

Another major difficulty in discussing the impact adoption can have on an adoptee is that we do not have adoptee language to explain what we mean when expressing our feelings. In other words, we use non-adoptee language to explain what we mean when expressing our feelings. For example, when we say, 'I don't know who I am and probably will never know,' non-adoptees more often than not respond by saying, 'I don't know who I am either, no one

ever really does'. When you attempt to explain the difference, you often fail to promote an understanding because the person you are talking to is constantly assuming what you mean, based on their own experiences. Their experience is based upon being aware of their family history all of their lives.

Adoptees on the other hand, if you can engage them in discussion about a lack of identity, not only understand what is meant, but are often able to complete your sentence for you and be 100% accurate in interpreting what you are trying to say.

This is the beauty of VANISH; it has allowed many of us to come together and talk about the feeling side of adoption for the first time in our lives. For the first time we are able to talk and not have to fear being negatively judged and misunderstood. We don't have to feel guilty, ungrateful, alone and unsafe in expressing our views. As a matter of fact, the best part about bringing adoptees together is that you discover that most adoptees feel exactly the same way, irrespective of their relationship with their adoptive parents. Interestingly, I had no idea what safety felt like until I started to attend support meetings at VANISH.

I guess this is the reason that I am now able to write about adoption. Having met so many adoptees and done some reading on the subject, I know that my feelings are common and normal for many adoptees.

Notwithstanding this, I need to point out that whilst adoption has had a major impact on my life, I do not regard it as the sole reason for every interpersonal difficulty I have had, or continue to have.

Additionally, it goes without saying that not all adoptees agree that they have a problem with not knowing their biological background. However, having said that, it would seem that most of us do. To deny a person their biological identity is, in my view, cruel.

Whilst many non-adoptees would argue that changes to the legislation have fixed everything, I would argue they have not. Given that the legislation states that the child is of paramount importance, why is it that we still have IVF programs/legislation which can deny children their biological identity. Whilst we continue this practice, we will never be placing the child first - we will continue to place them last.

For your interest, VANISH recently had visits from adults who were born of IVF. They were looking for their fathers. Nothing can be done to help them in their desire for their biological identity because there is no retrospectivity clause in the legislation which allows them biological information about their fathers.

Another issue that needs to be raised is that historically many adoptees were placed with couples who by today's standards would not be regarded as acceptable parents. I am told that a large number of adoptees who come through the doors of VANISH have experienced some form of abuse by their adoptive parents.

When I asked a social worker at the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau what criteria was used in deciding who were acceptable parents, I was told they had to be married and Catholic. There are many adoptees including myself, who are angry that we were not seen as important enough to require further investigation of our adoptive parents' motivations for adopting prior to the adoption taking place.

For example, I was born in 1948 and adopted at 12 months of age. Both my adoptive parents were middle aged. My mother had been married previously and bore 3 children from this marriage. She then underwent a tubal ligation. Some 20 years into her marriage, she discovered that her first husband was an illegal immigrant and was still married to another woman. He had three children from this marriage. He was deported back to his country of origin and my mother later married my father, who had not been married before. He wanted children, so they adopted two of us. I was the youngest, and at the time of my adoption my mother was already a grandmother, and all of her natural children old enough to be my parents. She did not need or want additional children.

I cannot not remember being adopted. I grew up in a Catholic environment where the concept of having bad blood still existed, where women who had babies out of wedlock were loose women to put it mildly. There was an expectation that I would turn out just like my mother. The word bastard was often used and every mistake made was explained as being due to the bad blood that ran through my veins. Additionally, my mother was adamant that my natural mother did not want me. My mother told everyone she met that she had adopted two of us, and they in turn told her what a good person she must be for doing same. As a result, I never grew up with any sense of belonging. Thus, I never once discussed adoption with my parents or the feeling side of adoption with anyone else until I was in my forties. To suggest that these experiences are uncommon for many adoptees of my age group would be to display ignorance of what went on after we were taken home by our adoptive parents. To think that these attitudes have been completely eradicated would also be ignorant.

Many adoptees who were not reared in negative environments also talk of the feeling of never really belonging anywhere.

Unfortunately, this feeling does not always go away when we meet our natural mother and other biological relatives.

Indeed, for many of us, we discover that life will be to straddle between two families, never really belonging to either of them. The discovery of this fact can be quite an emotionally painful experience.

If I explain what it generally felt like to be adopted, I would describe it as being on one side of a picket fence with everyone else on the other side of this fence. I want to get over to the other side of the fence and be with everyone else. Although I can see and talk with everyone on the other side of the fence, I cannot join them on their side of the fence. Something stops me from doing this. This feeling has not changed, even though I have met my natural mother and her family. My sense is that I do not and never will belong to anyone; I will always be on my own in a family sense.

I first met my natural mother some 14 years ago. I started looking for her when I was 18 years of age and found her when I was 33 years old, two years before the law changed allowing adoptees to make contact with their natural mothers.

Many non-adoptees say that it is only natural to be curious - that seeking out your biological mother is simply a curiosity. Given the obstacles that were placed in front of many of us in seeking out our natural mothers, the driving force is not simply explained by curiosity. Our culture places much emphasis on family, the bond with and love of parents for their children, in particular mothers. Who do you look like, who do you take after, blood is thicker than water,

etc. are phrases that impact on the child adoptee. It is this impact, the things that are missing in us, which drive many adoptees to search out our biological identity. It would be no exaggeration to say that addressing the issues of adoption can be an all-encompassing, totally obsessive, overwhelming emotional and painful task. It is a task that we choose to take, and by all accounts the research indicates that 99% of those who seek their natural relatives do not regret it even if the reunion was not successful. Clearly, there is nothing like standing in front of someone that you look like and learning that many of your traits are genetic rather than learned.

The impact of adoption on an adoptee can perhaps best be explained by Heather Carlini's book, *Adoptee Trauma- A Counselling Guide for Adoptees*. It is the most articulate book I have read, and whilst it does not cover all issues, it does cover most important issues.

Carlini indicates that the disconnection with the birth mother at birth breaks an emotional bond between the two which is now believed by the experts, to be felt by the child as a devastating, painful experience which becomes a powerful force in the lives of many adoptees.

She goes on to say that many adoptees feel a strong sense of abandonment resulting in much self doubt, feelings of being defective, unlovable, worthless and deficient. No amount of reassuring discussion convinces them it was not their fault. The comment I would make here is that the feeling side of adoption is very different from the thought side of it. The thought side of adoption is the adult view of things. That is, my natural mother did not have any choice but to give me up for adoption. There was no single parent support pension, she would not have had family support, and society would have condemned her.

The feeling side, on the other hand, represents the views of the child and how we really saw it as children. Whilst the feelings may not be logical, or fair on natural mothers, they are very real and will override any thought we may have. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the feelings, when they do come to the surface, come from the depths of our souls and can be quite overwhelming and in some instances frightening; certainly they are very painful.

I think that many mistakes have been made by health professionals in advising adoptive parents how to deal with adoptee issues. One mistake is that the advice was given through an adult's eyes and not through a child's eyes. Children have wonderful imaginations, and it is those imaginations that have formed the feelings that most of us will probably carry for the rest of our lives.

Carlini also identifies 3 types of adoptees.

The resilient adoptee who appears calm and in control of their behaviour and emotions and is capable of being reflective. They experienced encouragement and support in discussing the feelings associated with being adopted from their adoptive parents throughout their life. It is my view that one of the mistakes made in raising adoptees is that the adoptive parents are not proactive enough in discussing adoption with 'their' child. They need to raise the issues rather than wait for the child to raise them, otherwise, the issues may never get discussed.

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The acting-out adoptee operates out of anger and often feels unable to live up to the

adoptive family's expectations to be perfect and fit in. Behaviours include being rebellious, argumentative, having intense anger, being disruptive and socially and emotionally alienated. They frequently take mind altering drugs to cope.

The compliant adoptee on the other hand, operates out of guilt and shame and tries to please everyone. They are usually 'high achievers' who feel the need to be 'better than others to deserve love'. They need constant approval from others to validate self-worth. They put forward a desirable image in order to hide the emptiness that is felt.

The latter two types develop a facade in order to deny their feelings. There is the exterior or false self and the interior or true self. The false self allows feelings to hide and a pretense that everything is fine to exist.

Carlini's research also resulted in identifying what she refers to as 17 core issues of adoption for adoptees. I have only referred to a few of them.

Whilst I know that non-adoptees can identify these issues as affecting them also, from what I understand from reading the research, they seem to be more prevalent and stronger in their impact on adoptees.

The first issue is fear of rejection. This fear is a very real fear. One automatically feels that if people get to know you, they will reject you.

For many of us, this fear finds many of us failing to initiate relationships and friendships, leaving the work of initiating and maintaining friendships to be done by the other person. Some of us even push people away if we think they are getting too close.

Impaired trust is another issue (61%). This is linked very much with the fear of rejection. If there is one person on this earth that a child ought to be able to trust it is its mother. In an adoptee's case, the mother gave them away to strangers. If there is one thing I discovered when I undertook my midwifery course it is that a baby knows who its mother is. The probable impact of being removed from that person cannot be underestimated.

Another issue identified by Carlini is what she refers to as 'control madness', that is, being on guard all the time. Certainly one learns to be cautious, especially with your adoptive parents. For example, I never once spoke to either of my adoptive parents about adoption; I never asked any questions, or expressed a view. I did not tell them I was looking for my natural mother. Nor did I tell them when I had met her. Additionally, whilst assertive professionally, I never stood up to my parents, even when I thought their views or actions were unfair. I was too scared of being rejected.

This also applies to my natural mother. Whilst she recently passed away, I found that in the 14 years that I did know her, I was unable to relax in her company. At times, her behaviour towards me could cause my emotions to go up and down depending on what she might have said to me on any given day. No one has ever had such emotional control over me.

Another issue identified is being out of touch with your feelings: Again, for many of us, the feelings can be very deeply buried, and it takes hard work to bring them to the surface so that they can be dealt with. Unfortunately, for many of us, it takes much longer and is harder than we ever thought it would be. For example, when many of my feelings came to the surface some two years ago, I had an incredible feeling of being totally overwhelmed. I knew that I could not deal with them all at once. The picture I had in my mind was that the adoption issues

all together made up a huge rock, the rock being made up of small stones. The stones represented different issues that I needed to deal with. I decided that I would take out a stone at a time, deal with it and then throw the stone away. Eventually there would be no more stones and I'd be a happy, contented adoptee. To my absolute amazement, each time I thought I had dealt with the issue, or stone, and was about to toss it away, I found someone was throwing more stones back at me. For example, my natural mother did not tell any of her family of my existence until some 12 years after we met. I wanted to meet them because I thought that they would be able to fill me in on family history, something my natural mother has always refused to do. Instead, I found myself grieving the fact that I had not been able to grow up with them and that I would never really belong no matter how much they tried to make me feel welcome.

A feeling of guilt and shame is another issue identified by Carlini. Superficially, I am not ashamed of being adopted, but I would venture to say that if you asked every adoptee if they had an opportunity not to be adopted, all would take up that option- all would say yes. They may choose their adoptive parents as their natural parents, but they would definitely not choose to be adopted.

To have as part of your curriculum vitae that you were given away at birth is not something to brag about in our culture. The feeling that we must have done something wrong, or there was something wrong with us, for our mothers to give us away, is very real for some of us. This is even though we know that the feeling is not logical. For example, if you take the word bastard, the dictionary definition is 'someone whose parents were not married to each other at the time that he or she was born.' If you consider the use of the word in everyday language, the word is used to describe anyone whose behaviour is bad. They are the rogues of our society. As children many of us experienced being referred to as bastards; in other words, we were bad. Some people, albeit fewer, still see us in that light today.

Research also indicates that 78% of adoptees have difficulty with intimacy. I am told that 30% of adoptees never marry, and that those that do marry often experience a failed marriage unless the issues of adoption have been dealt with. I do know from personal experience that it takes me a very long time to trust on a personal level.

We also have an apparent tendency to bond with objects rather than people. Whilst I do not see myself as more materialistic than the average person, I know I do not bond closely with people. Whilst I have four very close friends that I know will be my friends until the day I die, their friendship has largely developed through their efforts, not mine. I tend to be very independent and do not ask for support, even when I am in real difficulties. It is only in the last 6 months that I have taken a proactive approach in developing a friendship. With each contact, I expect this friend to say they do not want contact with me anymore. To say that I feel incompetent, awkward and frightened would be an understatement, even though this person is the only non-adoptee I have felt safe enough with to discuss my most personal views and experiences. Professionally, I am quite different; I am assertive and usually confident when meeting people and dealing with them at work.

A lack of self esteem (76%) and denying feelings is also mentioned by Carlini. I do not know if I ever denied my feelings. I do know they were buried. For example, once when I was visiting VANISH, a worker asked to see the soles of my shoes. I showed her and she responded by saying I'm surprised your shoes are not leaking. I asked what she meant given that there were no holes in the soles of my shoes. She responded by saying, 'You carry your feelings so deeply I'm surprised your shoes don't leak with your tears.' This situation is true

for many adoptees. It is only recently that I have allowed my feelings to come to the surface. For the most part, in the past when they did surface, I could feel them coming up, and I could feel me pushing them back down. It feels like you have got a large stone in your food passage that you are trying to stop from coming to the surface.

There is also a demand to behave perfectly (71%). Until this year, I have no recollection of ever wanting to deliberately do something that I knew was wrong. If I can make a confession, this year, another adoptee the same age as myself and I went and painted on a Catholic Church wall, 'Adoption Sucks x 2 A's.' Whilst I know that this was wrong, immature and against the law, it was the most therapeutic thing I have ever done for myself. I could not stop myself from regularly driving past the sign, and I could not get the grin off my face for weeks. God, it felt good to behave badly for once.

Aggressive feelings (69%) are also an important issue for an adoptee and one that can strike with so much feeling it can be frightening. If you recall, I spent some 15 years looking for my natural mother. On my second visit to her, she made a remark as I was leaving. She was standing on her front veranda and I was walking down her front path. She called out, 'You won't leave me again will you?' I turned around and looked at her; I could not speak. The rage inside of me came from nowhere. I had not felt such rage before this and I have not felt it since. To put it bluntly, I wanted to scream at her, 'You left me you goddamn bitch. I did not leave you.' I think had I been within reach of her, I would have hit her.

For some 2 years after this, I could not bear her to touch me. All I felt for her was anger. I did not understand it. Whilst I felt awful about my feelings towards her, no matter how much self-talk I did, nothing could alter my anger. I am yet to meet an adoptee who does not at some stage feel this rage.

Loneliness (biological identity crisis) is another identified issue. I do not know if I have ever felt lonely apart from the normal everyday loneliness that we can all feel from time to time. Having said that, I have always felt alone and believed this could not be changed until recently. Whether this is due to becoming more aware of adoption issues and that the feelings I had, whilst real, are not realistic I do not know. As a child, we lived on a farm up until I was 8 years old. I remember constantly going off on my own and hiding. I can recall trying to think through what adoption meant. At that early stage of life, it meant I was on my own. I remember thinking that when I grew up and got married and had children, I would be the first member of that family, that there was nothing behind me, I was on my own. Having said that, I am experiencing feelings of wanting to change this situation. I think it is a result of work I have done on adoption.

Restlessness has also been identified as an issue that is, feeling that something is missing. I am yet to meet an adoptee who hasn't mentioned the feeling that part of them is missing, that part of them does not grow, that part of them is immature.

Dislike of special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas (54%) has also been cited by Carlini. Many adoptees I have spoken to have confirmed this. Personally I hate Christmas. A couple of weeks beforehand I start to feel a sense of sadness. Christmas for me means family, and I have always felt on my own at Christmas even though I may be surrounded by people. Going to a Christmas party at VANISH is like going to your best friend's funeral. Interestingly, one year it was held earlier than usual and it was a much happier occasion.

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Most adoptees (79%) feel like two different identities, that is, they have a false self and a true self. It was this situation that led me to address my adoption issues. I do not know if this situation changes with work. What this situation means to me is that I have a public face, a behaviour that I must demonstrate in order not to get rejected by my adoptive family, my

friends and work colleagues. I must at all times not demonstrate my feelings to them. In other words, I must keep my professional hat on at all times and hide the adoptee hat. I must not only do the right thing, but be seen to do the right thing. This driving force stems from having to appear good so that people will not say I have bad blood.

Unfortunately, sometimes the adoptee hat appears from nowhere. Then I become emotional, stressed and feel I have lost control. To say that I hate this hat would be an understatement. There are only two people in my life that I feel able to share this side of me with. One is a natural mother (not my own) and one friend.

Identity diffusion or the inability to identify with a nurturing figure is the last issue I will mention. I can honestly say that I have never regarded my adoptive mother as my mother. I called her mum, but whenever I thought about her this voice would always say, 'She is not really your mother'

Like all other adoptees, I had a fantasy mother. Actually I had two; one was perfect to look at, to speak with, intelligent and clean. The other mother swore like a trooper and always had a cigarette in one hand and a beer can in the other.

Interestingly, my natural mother does not swear, she has always attended Mass, she is clean and intelligent, but she drinks beer. When I first saw her drink a beer in front of me I felt very disappointed. I wanted to yell at her, 'A gin and tonic, whisky and dry, anything but a bloody beer.' Whilst I know that my feelings were ridiculous, I never enjoyed watching her drink beer.

Carlini also indicates that 50% of adoptees said they did not like being hugged as a child and many stated it continued into their adult life. Sixty three percent talked of being anxious all of the time, and 52% indicated they felt anxious as a child for no apparent reason. It is only in recent times that I have allowed others to hug me in my personal life. This is in contrast to my professional life as a nurse and advocate - I quite readily hold people if they are in emotional or physical pain. I feel no discomfort in doing so.

In conclusion, according to Carlini, adoptees also talked of the need to be cautious, alert, watchful and hyper-vigilant as a method they used to avoid another abandonment. They also talked of the difficulty with giving and receiving love.

In summary, being adopted can present many problems of grief, pain, anger, confusion and fear. To work through those issues, many of us seek the assistance of family therapists. Unfortunately, the experience of those of us who have sought assistance find that the level of knowledge regarding the impact of adoption on adoptees is very much lacking. If health professionals are to become more informed about adoption and future adoptees less affected, then those of us who have the knowledge need to begin to share it so that we hopefully lessen the pain and confusion for those who are currently addressing the issue of adoption and for those who are adopted in the future.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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