

# In Search of Self

## Sarah Gallagher (1<sup>st</sup> year Writing)

We are all born with an identity; one that usually begins in a maternity ward in a hospital and continues to develop as we journey through life. It is shaped by our experiences in, and interpretations of, the world. Most people question their identity at some point in their life, usually during adolescence, and acquire a unique view of themselves and their environment.

But what if our identity is altered almost immediately; if we are prevented from becoming the person we were born to be? How does an individual shape their identity knowing that they could have been someone entirely different?

This question could plague the minds of all those children and adults adopted soon after birth, including Julia Crawford. After falling pregnant at eighteen, Julia's birth mother gave her up for adoption in 1969, ending her short-lived time as Suzy Bowles and beginning her life as Julia Forrest.

Her adoptive parents welcomed her into a family already comprising of two adopted children. Julia and her siblings were always told that they "didn't grow in Mum's tummy". It was so early in her life that she doesn't remember it, but she clearly recalls her parents assuring her that she was still their child.

It wasn't until 1981, when Julia was twelve years old, that she started to wonder who her birth mother was, and where she might live. Six years later, at eighteen, she seriously began her search for the woman who had given birth to her.

"I was always inquisitive," Julia says. "I had a very, very big interest in family history, so that probably had a bit to do with it."

Sitting in her house, I am dissuaded from believing otherwise. As I enter I am greeted by the smiling faces on the walls; the smiles of infants and adolescents from the past and the present. A black and white army photo of Julia's father hangs proudly in the front room. Displayed horizontally on one wall like a ladder are her children's school photos, organised into three lines of milestones in their education. As we move further down the hall, baby portraits and kindergarten photos become a main feature of the room. A table in the lounge room is crowded with frames of all shapes and sizes, housing photographs of her five children and two grandchildren, as well as faded pictures of people who passed long ago.

There is no mistaking what matters most to the woman sitting before me.

Julia's decision to find her birth parents was generally supported by her parents.

"They only had limited information, but they were able to tell me what her first name was and other little things."

With the introduction of the Victorian Adoption Act 1984, Julia was legally able to access identifiable information about her birth mother. When she turned eighteen, her adoptive parents bought her the forms she would need to begin her search.

"I don't think they really understood why I wanted to find my birth mother," Julia says, her voice lowering and the excitement that had filled her eyes now gone. "Especially my adoptive mother. They didn't understand why I wanted to pursue a relationship with the person who gave me away. I think Mum was scared of being replaced."

Julia searched for her birth mother with the assistance of VANISH, a self-help organisation supporting adoptees looking for their birth family. Twelve years later, her VANISH worker called with incredible news.

"My VANISH worker rang and said she may have found my mother's sister...so I sent a generic letter off, not saying who I was; just who I was looking for and some of the details.

"I got an email back from this woman, who wanted to know why I was looking for her sister. So then I had to make a decision whether to say who I was or not, because obviously you don't know who knows that you exist."

Julia and her aunt exchanged several emails before she was able to make contact with her birth mother. They communicated through email, and then by phone. Julia found out that she had a half-sister, and through her own research, discovered that she had also had another sister, who had passed away 18 months earlier.

Finally, six months after their initial contact, they organised for Julia's mother, Linda, to fly down from Queensland so that they could meet for the first time in 36 years.

Julia's voice still sounds higher than usual, and the tempo of her speech increases as she talks about meeting her birth mother, even five years after the experience. Her hands gesticulate more regularly, opening and closing like double doors above her lap.

She waited at the airport with a fake flower in one hand and a chocolate rose in the other. As the plane landed, she felt her stomach turn and her breathing verged on hyperventilation; in, out, in out.

"I'm not normally someone who gets scared or nervous," she is quick to emphasise. "I started to hyperventilate to the point where a person, another woman waiting, came over and asked if I was okay, and did I need to sit down."

While the plane carrying Julia's mother moved to the terminal, Julia explained to the woman about her adoption and that she was meeting her birth mother for the first time in 36 years. She remembers that the woman was quite excited, and even made her own impatient family wait in the terminal to see the reunion.

"And then, of course, my mother was, like, the last person to come off the plane," Julia says, rolling her eyes dramatically, but grinning so widely that the lines under her eyes crease. "Finally my mother came off the flight and we just hugged, and hugged, and hugged, and hugged. And then we were walking down the concourse and she needed to stop and do up her shoelace, and she said 'Can I hug you again?'" She laughs at the memory, her eyes wandering away from the visual contact we had maintained until that point. They soften and she blinks slowly, as if she is far, far away in her own little place.

Julia had booked a hotel room in Melbourne so that she could spend the first 24 hours alone with Linda before introducing her to the rest of the family. They spent five hours in the same restaurant, having lunch and talking about everything they had missed in the last 36 years.

"We agreed that we would be honest with each other and she said she would answer any questions that she could."

After a night in the hotel, Julia took Linda home to meet her adoptive parents, and her husband and children. Julia hesitates before she describes the experience, an unsure smile curving her lips.

"You know, my parents were nice and my mother put on a nice little afternoon tea." Again, she pauses, eyeing me questioningly as if she wants to know if she should continue. "Apart from a snide comment from my mother, I think it went ok."

She fidgets uncomfortably, uncrossing her legs and pushing her fringe aside. It seems inappropriate to push further.

The departure produced many tears from both parties. Julia's mother, Linda, had not returned to Melbourne since giving her daughter up 36 years earlier, so it felt as if she was leaving all over again. Julia's face transforms from one of euphoria to dejection in only a few seconds as she recollects the inevitable event.

"I just remember standing, watching the plane move out, ready to take off, and I just had my hand pressed against the window and was crying my eyes out." She lifts her hand to demonstrate, and I envision the scene; a look of abandonment in her eyes.

"I'm quite sure people thought 'what the hell is that woman doing?', but it was like in a movie when you've got your hand pressed against the glass...it was pretty hard."

Since meeting Linda, Julia has met her half-sister, Melinda, and has briefly started searching for her birth father. Linda was able to provide her with her father's name, but, after identifying 40 to 45 men with his name on the electoral role, Julia has set the search aside to continue with her busy life.

"The only thing with my father is that he also had another woman whom he got pregnant," Julia reveals, grinning a little at the controversy. "So I have a sibling about three months younger than me out there somewhere."

Julia and Linda remain in contact, emailing occasionally and talking on the phone once a month. It is a relationship they are both comfortable with; although Julia wishes Linda did not live quite so far away.

"She's still got her life and I've still got mine," she says. "We don't live in each other's pockets."

Even though they are only in occasional contact, Julia is grateful for the opportunity to meet her birth mother and appreciates the good relationship they currently have.

"Not every experience is as positive as mine," she says, her voice low and taking on a tone of wisdom. "It's quite a complicated issue and everybody's story is very different."

But has Julia found her identity after finding her birth mother?

She pauses, inhaling deeply. "There's still some things I don't know, but there's certainly a lot of things I thought, like 'oh, I can see what I look like', and I noticed where I got certain traits from.

"I don't *feel* different, but there is just this sense of accomplishment."