

# Holding my mother in my heart

*When Lizzie received the news that her birth mother was searching for her, it opened up a mixture of complicated and conflicting thoughts and feelings. She writes about the circumstances of her adoption in the 1960s, her reconnection with her birth family and the ongoing impact that adoption has had on her life.*

I was born in 1968 and adopted at the age of nine months. I'd been told I was adopted but it was the era of closed, forced adoptions and it wasn't talked about. I certainly didn't feel able to bring the subject up and talk about my feelings. It was difficult because at times I felt very angry yet had no way of expressing this. I didn't understand why I'd been given away and I felt abandoned, even though my adoptive parents told me how glad they were to have me.

Throughout my childhood I thought about my circumstances and who my birth mother might be. When I was eight, I was sent to boarding school and it felt like I'd been abandoned all over again. I knew I had two mothers and it seemed that neither of them wanted me – something that sounds ridiculous as an adult but felt very real as a child. One day I ventured into my father's study while my parents were out and found my adoption file. I was curious about where I came from and really wanted to find out more. I discovered my original name and the name of my birth mother. There was a letter in the file explaining that she had requested a photograph of me a few weeks after I was born. It was confusing – did she still care about me? I thought about her every day after that. Every single day. I wondered if she thought about me too.

During the Covid pandemic year of 2020, I received a letter saying that someone wanted to make contact with me, although it didn't say who. The letter came from an adoption intermediary agency. Initially I was quite shaken by the letter and had no idea what to do about it, so I hid it in a drawer. I was desperate to know who was looking for me, but at the same time I was terrified. Who was looking for me? My biggest hope was that it was my birth mother, but I couldn't allow myself that thought yet. Instead, I told myself it must be a sibling or a cousin. I was protecting myself against more hurt. Eventually I rang the agency, even

though I was more nervous than I'd ever been before. The woman I spoke to was lovely; she very sensitively explained to me that it was my birth mother who was trying to reconnect with me and that there was a letter for me from her. I honestly couldn't believe it. It was one of the happiest times of my life!

My mother's letter explained the circumstances around my conception. I always guessed I was a mistake and so it was no surprise when I learnt the story. My mother was 16 and unmarried. She explained that these circumstances brought great shame upon a family in the 60s, so she felt she had no choice but to put me up for adoption. She held me once for a few seconds before I was whisked away. She told me she had regretted giving me away ever since, that she wished she had fought harder to keep me and that she wanted to make it up to me now. It was a lovely letter and I was over the moon.

I didn't write back straightaway because I needed time to come to terms with our reconnection and everything she had told me. Her explanation seemed so straightforward, yet it felt so complicated in my head. I kept thinking of all the consequences of her decision and how it had affected my life, her life and that of my adoptive parents. I felt like a different person, someone I didn't recognise and I thought I was going crazy.

I wrote back a few weeks later and looked forward to her reply, but it never came. What I didn't know was that my mother had suffered a stroke three years earlier and then another just before our connection and was physically unable to write. I wrote several times more and couldn't understand why I didn't hear back. I started to think that she didn't like my letters and after the joy of being found by her, it felt like the worst rejection of all.

A few months later, a friend of my mother messaged me and told me that my mother wanted to speak to me on the phone. I was delighted and absolutely terrified. What would I say to her after all these years? What



if she didn't like the sound of me? In spite of my fears, the call went ahead and it was both wonderful and very strange. The sound of her voice stirred something in me, like I had some sort of implicit memory of it. (I spoke to her several times after this and every time her voice triggered something in me). My mother said she was delighted to speak to me and that she would remember every word. Afterwards, I felt like I was in shock; I could barely remember what we had talked about, and out of the blue I felt furious with her and with her parents. I had always thought positively about my mother and this new emotion hit me like a freight train. I had never liked being adopted but the full impact of what I'd lost didn't hit me until I had spoken to her.

I received some counselling from the intermediary agency and it really helped. I was able to continue our relationship and get to know my mother better over the phone. Sadly, because of the covid pandemic we were unable to meet. About six months after our first contact, I had a call to inform me that my mother had become extremely ill and only had hours to live. I was in a complete panic – I knew I needed to meet my her, hold her hand and tell her I loved her. We lived at opposite

ends of the country and because of the lockdown, there were no flights. I jumped into the car and drove through the night to try and get to her. It was a gruelling 12-hour drive, which wasn't permitted under the restrictions, but I was desperate. Sadly, I was about an hour away when I got the call to say she had died.

So I never met my mother, but I did go to her house, see where she lived and get a feel for the sort of person she was. I met my step sister there, who let me have photographs and other possessions, which I treasure. I've since met my cousins and an uncle too. I have an idea of where I came from and have seen relatives that I look like and have answers to some questions. I still feel incredibly sad about all of it and although I hold my mother and her family dearly in my heart, I feel angry that nobody took a stand on my behalf and stood up to the societal norms of that time.

I've been having therapy to help me deal with all of this and I'm now able to start moving forwards with my life again. At some point I will go back to the agency and ask them to find my father for me, but I need to gather some emotional strength first because I know what a huge journey it is.

Lizzie and her birth family were supported by Joanna North Associates Ltd in Exeter.  
They can be contacted on [joannanorth.co.uk](http://joannanorth.co.uk) or 01884 233723.