ADOPTEE: Contact with birth father and mother proves to be a learning experience

issue, even if I consider it nature and nurture.

My family and I can push each other's buttons, just like any other family. I drive myself nuts, when I hear Mom's oft-repeated cautions about this or that come out of my mouth, just like any daughter.

But despite matchmakers at the adoption agency, I'm short. Shorter than nearly everyone else in the family. Noisy, too. I say what I think, come what may, while most of my family is actually polite.

I look like my birth mother. She's short, too, and we share what Mom calls honey-brown eyes. And I sing, like my birth mother did. And Lord, do I read. Mom read to me since forever, and I could have picked it up there. But we also knew my maternal grandmother earned a college English degree, and that my birth mother loved to read. Turns out my birth father does, too.

See? Nature and nurture.

UP-FRONT ABOUT ADOPTION

It was never a secret.

When I was just three, I sat on the floor with my knees twisted so my lower legs faced the wrong way. Mom and I were watching "Peter Pan," the Mary Martin version.

"Oh, Mother, isn't it wonderful?" I breathed, clapping my hands. "Wendy wants to adopt Peter!" It was wonderful, Mom agreed through her tears.

Everyone knew we were adopted, but the kids on our street wanted to know who our "real" mother was. We knew what they meant, but pretended we didn't.

"She lives there," we always responded, pointing down the street. But we knew society had a problem with the situation – with us. So much so, that agencies "matched" children with adoptive parents. And this wasn't matching personalities, or even race. This was no-tall-kids-go-to-short-people, no-redheads-for-brunettes. People might talk.

And we heard the horror stories – kids learning they were adopted from the loudmouth down the street. It sounded ghastly. Better, we thought, to know early on, even before we understood what it meant. We understood enough, because when our heads hit the pillow every night, Mom always told us our other parents loved us, and we kept them in our prayers.

I didn't object to laws that bar the door between adoptive and birth families. Years ago, illegitimate children were considered damaged goods, an unmarried mother a pariah.

The social worker told Mom that my 19-year-old birth mother was exiled to a home for unwed mothers. I later learned she was taught to crochet, while she missed a year of school. My birth mother had refused to marry. She didn't want a [illegible]

Reserves, and went to work.

My birth mother's decision, I believed then and now, was nearly heroic. The courage it must have taken to set her own course, rather than submit to the social norm, seems overwhelming.

CHANGING MY MIND

Medical information on my birth family stopped at my birth. My father had a twin who died at birth. There was nothing else. But when you develop medical problems, you wonder – is there more to come? If so, what?

Still, I resisted.

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Then, a few years ago, Michigan law changed. Adoptees and birth families can now ask the court for a confidential intermediary. That person, armed with the closed adoption file, tracks and contacts the other side.

Intermediaries arrange direct contact only with permission from everyone. Anyone can refuse. But even if there will be no contact, adoptees can ask for – and usually get – medical information.

Still I waited. Mom always insisted she had no problem with a search. But that didn't mean it didn't make her nervous. And she was the woman who gave me an extraordinary gift – not just a lifetime of love, a home, and a family – but a sense of worth that many adopted children just don't have.

But when I was 38, in the middle of yet another medical crisis, I caved in. We were all getting older, and it might be my last chance to learn what other medical surprises could be in store.

I hugged Mom, and told her that I was looking for medical information, but that there might be a meeting.

WAITING

But I was still ambivalent about actual contact, and said so in the letter I handed to my intermediary, Trudy Sumpter, for my parents.

My birth mother was in California, my birth father in Michigan. Trudy called, but the woman had moved. She sent a purposely vague letter, in case someone else opened it – and got no response. For months. She tried again. Same thing. And a third time. Nothing.

Trudy had delayed contacting my father, waiting to see what would happen with my birth mother. [illegible] was no [illegible] She called [illegible] years and years [illegible] away [illegible] letter. He [illegible] but still failed to [illegible]

Now I was getting [illegible] a letter telling me to get [illegible] from all of them?

FINALLY, A MEETING

[illegible] birth [illegible] not to [illegible]

died in 1995. She hadn't told him, either. This was one painful, deep secret.

Letters, funneled back and forth through Trudy, didn't identify us. But after Trudy read the first letter from California, she blurted out something I'd never heard before: "You're just like her!"

When no one ever told you that you have your Aunt Hazel's sense of adventure or Uncle Art's dry wit or ski-slope nose, the way most people do, that's a pretty startling statement.

My birth mother and I are both cautious with our emotions. We wrote similar letters, revealing not much, careful not to impose. She wrote that she had both dreaded and hoped for the day I would contact her, but now she was glad. Then this ever-so-cautious woman jumped right off the platform without a net.

Without deciding whether we would speak on the telephone, let alone meet, she told her daughter. That woman – my sister – was thrilled.

I wrote again. What happened to her dream of college? Was she a hothead, like me? Did she like to read, or write? What was important to her?

While I waited for a response, Trudy sent one last letter to my birth father. Maybe if he knew I had no intention of mucking up his life, he'd reply.

My birth mother wrote that she had told my brother, who is just a few years younger than I. He isn't interested in contact. Which is his right.

But my birth mother seemed as worthy of admiration as I'd suspected. She had grit, determination, and more than a little steel. She started out skip tracing – finding deadbeats. She finished a specialized business course at 39, president of her class. With that course and an attitude under her belt, she bumped her way into the executive office of a good-size financial institution.

She enclosed a note to Trudy: She would be in Detroit soon, and wanted to meet. We didn't know each other's full names, hadn't spoken on the telephone. And we were going to meet.

MY BIRTH FATHER REACHES OUT

Then Trudy dropped another bombshell.

She spoke to my birth father – three times in a day. He'd been so excited she wasn't able to figure out what he wanted. He had finally read my letter. He had thought of me "fondly" over the years.

"He's so sweet!" Trudy crooned.

[illegible] My birth mother had [illegible] "you [illegible] what [illegible] what [illegible] ner- [illegible] much for letter writing – but [illegible] He'd given up on ever hearing [illegible] his only child.

[illegible] telephone [illegible] with my birth [illegible] well, [illegible] and-cli- [illegible] didn't [illegible] and [illegible] didn't

balanced relationship – he the creative one, she the grounded financial manager – before he died after 33 years of marriage.

I called Mom with the news, and Gram got on the extension. They were happy for me.

I spoke with my birth mother a few more times, and with my sister and her husband – even my 5-year-old niece. Red sent letters and pictures. Photos proved what I'd long suspected.

I look much like my birth mother – hair, eyes, mouth, eyebrows. My new brother and I share our mother's features, but my sister and I look like we're from different planets. She's blonde, green-eyed, lovely.

My birth mother and I have a similar sense of humor, and a certain reservation in our spending habits. We love a deal.

Red, a widower, was warm. He sent every kind of picture – his parents, family, baby pictures. He had kept his and my mother's prom picture.

One picture clearly shows him confronting a superior officer in the Reserves. I'd say they went nose-to-nose, but Red's not tall enough, just a few inches taller than me. That photo is one of my favorites. A picture taken at our first meeting took our breath away. We're built just alike – a couple of fireplugs, with chins to spare.

Red, bless him, handed me the reins. I would call, not him. He knew he could be a tad, well, like me. Overwhelming, if you will. He didn't want to blow it. It was tough. He clearly really wanted to rush over and sweep me up.

Finally I called, but we missed each other. I kept his first call on the answering machine for several months. I liked his voice.

THE FIRST MEETINGS

At Trudy's emphatic urging – she's an adoptive mother, she's been there – my birth mother and I met alone. Plenty of emotion in the room, Trudy said, with just the two of us. More would be too much.

I knocked on her hotel room door on a Sunday morning. We didn't speak. She held out her arms, and I went into them. We talked there, then over a meal.

I learned more about the difficulty of her family situation when she was pregnant. I'd always hoped to tell her, and Red, I had never resented either of them, or the adoption.

When I finally did, her eyes welled, and she bowed her head. "I always thought it must be just the opposite," she said.

I took her home to meet Mom, and that, finally, is when she cried. Their arms went around each other, and they rocked, quietly.

"Thank you for our daughter," Mom said. The lady from California nodded.

hospital. A moment after my birth, someon forgot she wasn't supposed to see me, an put me on her stomach. Then I was gone.

She liked Mom's pound cake – good call. W took some pictures, and hugged some more and then she was the one who was gone.

I waited a few weeks, then met Red. W had a few hours alone, then Mom and Gran joined us.

Red, a diemaker who has worked in the same factory near Detroit since shortly afte I was born, owned a 10-year-old pickup truck and one good suit. He showed up in a big new rented car, and the suit.

He was freshly barbered and bearing roses – separate bouquets for Mom, Gram and me. I met him at the car and the roses were forgotten. I was swept into a bear hug. He brought along a silver necklace he'd made years ago, and gave it to me in a blue velvet case, along with a real "Dad" gift – a couple of knife sharpeners.

Several times that day Red reached over and hugged me, or held my hand, and told me he was happy. I was, too.

He's visited many times since then, meeting my new kittens, and my niece. We traveled to New Jersey in December, to visit his mother, sister and brother, Gray, and his wife and children, Gail, Erik and Tracie.

> *I have no idea what is right or wrong for other adoptees and their families. But I do know this seems to be going right for my family – families.*

We gab on the phone and, true to his word, Red stands politically to the right of Genghis Khan, so we've already had a "discussion" or two. In a note, he pronounced himself a "daughter addict," and signed it "Dad." When he calls now, he announces it's "The Old Man."

Red held Gram's hand for a long time the week she died this winter, and she said it felt good. The plant he brought to the funeral read simply, "I wish I'd known you longer."

As for my birth mother, she's invited Mom and me to her home, to meet the rest of the family. She might visit again this September. Her brother turned up at my office recently, and introduced himself.

THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR US

I have no idea what is right or wrong for other adoptees and their families. But I do know this seems to be going right for my family – families.

I finally told my birth parents I was proud of them. I was even able to tell them they really had done what I considered the right thing.

And we did it just the right way. They could have refused contact, and that would have been the end of it. Had they not had that choice, especially in my birth mother's case, I'd have been holding smoke. Even I could have backed out if I changed my mind.