

Poem from the Heart

Never be afraid to try something new.
Remember amateurs built the ark.
Professionals built the Titanic.

Wolfgang Riebe

2009

It is dark. My thoughts swirl. The digital clock reads 3.00am.
I fumble for the light switch, throw back the covers and climb
out of bed. I find a pen and paper and record my words.

Baby was born and sent on her way,
So innocent she had no say,
When her life changed on that fateful day.
'What might have been' held no sway,
As baby was tragically carried away.

When she was grown,
She trudged the mire,
To find mother, father,
Her heart's desire.

Her mother knows
It was a dreadful sin,
To give her own
For a stranger's kin.

With baby gone
her soul felt wrong.
Her heart was heavy,
She must move on,
Forever with an empty space,
Nothing new will ever replace.

Her heart is on fire,
She knows for sure,
When she was born
and life was poor,
No family celebrations
Passed through her door.

No blue and pink and lemon trims,
No cards and ribbons and lacy whims,
No flowers and toys and happy pics,
No nursery sets and building bricks.

Her father never held her hand,
Counted to ten,
Nor helped her stand.
Popped the cork and drank a toast,
Sent her flowers or did his most.

His heart is on fire,
He feels the cost,
He will never know the child he lost.
He will only know her in his mind
Society disapproves his kind.

Her heart is on fire,
the mind is a liar,
her spirit is full of strange desire,
Sorrow, anger, fear and strain,
'What might have been?'
Brings on the pain.

Her heart is on fire,
She is growing wings,
To fly above the hurtful things.
She questions which road she should take,
To try, deny or maybe break?

Her heart is on fire,
She would love to know,
How did they cleave,
Then let her go?
The answer nigh may not be true,
Where and when and why and who?

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Miasma

*When your mind is full of indecision,
try thinking with your heart.*

– *Believe in Yourself Journal* by Heather Zschock, Sophia Bedford-Pierce & Beth Mende Conny

1950s

My adoptive mother, Mary, and I often examined the memorabilia contained in her camphor-wood chest and especially enjoyed looking at the baby clothes I had worn as a newborn. Although the garments were discoloured and faded, they retained their fragile beauty.

January 1982

I pressed my nose to the windowpane and observed the sky as it transformed into shades of orange and gold. My heart raced as shadows of the unknown beckoned me. Tonight I would cross a boundary. Tonight I would phone my birth mother.

I squinted through the glass and watched the darkness grow. Lights appeared in neighbouring houses as the blackness softened untidy grass and straggly hedges.

The season was high summer. My family had sweltered since dawn and dusk brought small relief. The broiling air was trapped in the ceiling and radiated a furnace-like invasion into the small rooms of the cottage.

I was aware only of my heartbeat as I twisted my clammy hands into contortions.

Without warning, a din echoed through the cottage. My husband glanced up at the ceiling and I realised it was only the

pop and crackle of the iron roof as it retracted in the night air. I turned back to the window and pushed the frame upwards.

That night I had chosen to contact my birth mother for the first time since she relinquished me thirty-four years ago. Would I recognise her voice? Maybe. Incredulous as it sounds, a foetus can hear in the womb by the second trimester.

I was aware I spent my first ten days in the Brisbane Women's Hospital with my birth mother. Did she cuddle me, caress me and feed me? Perhaps I had repressed memories?

The bond between my birth mother and I was severed when I was two weeks old and the event would have devastated us both. Many studies have proven that babies know and recognise their mothers. Would I?

It is also acknowledged that when a baby and mother are permanently separated, the baby is traumatised. First, the foetus bonds with its mother physically, psychologically and spiritually, then the bonding continues after birth as the mother's scent, voice and face imprint upon the child. The act of feeding (breast or bottle) enhances the intimate relationship. After the separation from my birth mother, I would have experienced abandonment, and felt it stamped on my unconscious mind forever.

My thoughts returned to the oppressive atmosphere in the cottage. The atrocious heat wave did nothing to help my anxiety. Suddenly my mind infused with a state of derealisation; my eyes were unfocused; the room's perspective warped; my arms and legs felt like lead.

Despite the heat, our children slept. A rare but welcome puff of air ruffled the curtains and as the scent of frangipani wafted inside I visualised thousands of pink blossoms displayed in our garden and tried to focus.

The little cottage, situated on my adoptive parents' farm, was home for my husband, John, and our three children Christopher, Lachlan and Andrew while our home was under construction. My adoptive parents, Mary and Jack Gordon, lived three kilometres away in the old Queenslander where I

grew up with my adoptive brother, Ian, who still lived there with them. I had the support of a loving family all around me. Why was I doing this?

I grabbed a notepad from the coffee table and noticed my sweaty hands had dampened the paper. I stared at the phone number. John, who had promised his support, waited patiently.

Ten minutes later John walked across to the sofa and plonked himself down.

I shuffled over and sat beside him. "I'll phone soon, but I need to calm down first," I mumbled.

I imagined lifting the receiver and dialling. Butterflies fluttered recklessly in my stomach, making me nauseous. My thoughts of rejection magnified. I cringed and wondered how my birth mother would react. In my mind she had rejected me once and I feared rejection more than anything. My childhood had been happy and I was married to a kind husband and the mother of three adorable sons. A quote floated through my mind: 'Why reach for the moon when you already have the stars?' I wondered if I should heed the message.

I slumped on the sofa and struggled with my emotions. The parable of Pandora's Box floated into my mind. I remembered it well as my adoptive mother had often recalled it. It felt so relevant at that moment as I wondered, should I use caution and remain safe but ignorant? Or should I open the box as Pandora did?

Although I was a comparatively happy person, I hated being adopted. I had always despised the words adopt, adopted and adopting. On hearing them, I always experienced a sharp jab of emotion.

I looked at the phone. Would my birth mother reject me again? Could a mother be so cruel? Maybe I was naïve, romantic or optimistic, but my adoptive parents had given me the gift of feeling special. I was convinced I exuded enough charm to win acceptance. The woman was my birth mother so surely we would weave a relationship.

I wilted in the heat and stared into space. John took my hand and squeezed. I asked him, "What if she rejects me?"

John's clear blue eyes looked into mine with compassion. "It might be better if I phoned. I don't think you should be directly involved. We've no idea how she'll react."

"Are you sure? I feel sick with nerves so I'd be very relieved." I squeezed John's hand and thanked him. The pressure was off as I convinced myself using a third party was the right approach.

"Where's her number?"

I handed John the pad and he lifted the receiver and dialled. I took a deep breath and held my ear to the receiver, listening to the ringtone over the loud thumps of my heart. A minute passed then the phone rang out. What an anti-climax!

"She might be away on holidays," I said, my body surging with adrenalin. "My birth brother might know where she is. We could phone him but we don't have to say who we are."

I discovered his existence in 1981 but did not know his name and I assumed he knew nothing about me.

"Good idea." said John. "If he finds out, it doesn't matter. After all, you're his sister!"

My adoptive parents had presented me with my adoption certificate the previous year. My birth mother's name was Edna Doris McBroom (nee Fechner) and we found her address in the phone directory. She lived only thirty minutes away in Loganlea.

McBroom was an uncommon name, as it had only three listings. The second McBroom lived at West End and the third, a William C. McBroom, lived in Woodridge.

My hands shook as I flicked through the phone book. I scribbled down the number and handed it to John. He dialled and after four rings someone picked up.

"Hello," answered a pleasant female voice.

"Hello. I'm trying to get in touch with Edna McBroom. We thought you might be related."

"Yes, I'm her daughter-in-law. She's away at the moment staying with her friend, Bert, in Rosewood. I'll give you his number."

John took down the number, thanked the woman then hung up the phone. I had assumed correctly. William C. McBroom was my birth brother.

"She sounded nice," said John, "and very friendly."

I thought it odd we did not know her name but I was pleased she sounded agreeable. Maybe I would meet her someday.

"I think we should use Christian names for my birth family otherwise it's too confusing," I suggested.

John agreed so we referred to my birth mother and brother as Edna and Bill.

I said, "I'm not sure we should phone Edna at her friend's place. On the other hand I'm too hyped up to wait."

"I think we should phone her, or something might happen and we'll never do it," said John.

"OK."

John dialled. Eight rings later, someone picked up.

"Sorry to trouble you. Could I speak to Edna McBroom, please?"

"Yeah, just a minute, I'll get her," answered a man in a gruff voice.

As John and I waited for Edna to come to the phone my resolve crumbled. I rejected the drama of the moment and ran into our bedroom, threw myself on the bed and pulled the covers over my head. I curled into a foetal position, clasped my hands over my ears, and squeezed my eyes shut, aghast at what I had done.

As I lay in the dark, wrapped in my misery, my intestines churned and my heart raced. When everything returned to normal and curiosity got the better of me, I eventually poked out my head from under the bedclothes just as John peered around the doorway.

"What happened?" I gasped.

"What happened to you?"

"I had a panic attack. Did you speak to Edna?"

"Yes. After she said hello, I told her my name and explained I was married to her daughter and you'd like to contact her."

"What did she say?"

“She didn’t say a thing.”

I imagined Edna’s shock. No wonder she was speechless.

“Edna didn’t speak so I asked ‘Could your daughter phone you sometime and have a talk?’ and she said, ‘I’ll be home in two weeks and I’ll ring her then’ so I gave her our name and number and hung up.”

“Did she seem upset?”

“She didn’t show any emotion at all.”

“What did she sound like?”

“She sounded a bit hard as if she’d had a hard life.”

Poor Edna. How did she get through her pregnancy then my relinquishment? I wept. We were mother and daughter but sadly would never know each other as such. For us, time lost could never be regained.

I retired to bed but could not sleep. The sense of loss stayed with me for hours as I contemplated our mutual grief. How had she coped? What pain did she endure? Adoption and loss were natural acquaintances and affected all members of the adoptive triad. I counted out the members of the triad: the adoptive parents, the birthparents and the adoptee. I listed the joys and losses for all of us hoping to help myself fall sleep.

I was still awake after an hour when the story of my friend, Joy, filtered through my mind. Joy, whose father was dead, was seven years old when the authorities removed her from her mother’s care. Her mother, who had schizophrenia, was hospitalised unexpectedly. Joy’s aunt arrived immediately and snatched her away to avoid the State Children Department. She fought the courts later and was granted custody.

Joy and I have often discussed her loss and my status as an adoptee. On one occasion Joy commented, “You were so lucky, Jean. You had your [adoptive] mother all to yourself. I didn’t have that. Aunt May had three daughters and she was good to me, but it wasn’t like having my own mother. I really missed having a mother all to myself.”

“Yes, I was very lucky to have a lovely relationship with my [adoptive] mother. Joy, I have a question for you.”

“OK.”

“What would you choose if you had the choice? Would you choose to be adopted with a mother to yourself and never know your biological relatives? Or would you choose to stay in your biological family?”

Joy was silent for a few moments before she replied, “I would choose to stay in my biological family.”



Carolann in her adoptive mother's arms in 1948.
Photographer Jack Gordon.



Carolann in her adoptive parents' garden in 1948.
Photographer Mary Gordon.



Carolann in 1972 with Chris. Photographer John Dowding.