

CHAPTER TWO

An Awakening



I tend to live in the past because most of my life is there.

— Herb Caen

Relinquishing Renee is a beginning; of this book, of my life, of the story I am about to tell. It was the first stone set in the construction of my identity; hardly a stable foundation upon which to build a whole and complete person.

The ensuing pages will trace my story, but I intend for them to be more than an itinerary of events or cast of characters. This book is about a bigger project. It is about finding and sharing the Truth; a truth I squelched for decades, certain my survival depended upon it.

I hope to define terms we carelessly toss around, certain they hold a universally agreed upon meaning; words like Self, Identity and Personal Truth. Without understanding what we are saying when we use these terms, they become nothing more than buzz words, fit for self-help pamphlets and commercials selling us products guaranteed to boost our self-esteem. They are important words, critical to experiencing life from a place of authenticity and living a life with purpose and meaning. Therefore, they deserve careful consideration.

Adoption is central to my story. Relinquishment comes with consequences. Being raised in a family one has no biological ties to carries a price. Neither of these experiences is free and, if handled carelessly, the cost to a person's soul can be substantial.

But what I hope to share here isn't limited to the adoption experience. Adoption done badly shares commonalities with any traumatic experience:

secrets, lies, abuse, manipulation, narcissism, authoritarianism; the list goes on. It causes guilt, crushes self esteem, damages identity and strips a person of authority over their own life. The world is full of wounded people. Sometimes, it isn't the initial injury that does the most damage, but the cover-up.

In adoption, all the participants have a vested interest in seeing the experience as win/win for the adoptee. That she lost her family, her heritage and her position in the natural order of her own life is subverted by the needs of others – by the adoptive parents' need to avoid their own losses, the agencies' need to run a business, the state's need to appease its constituents, the birthparents' need to assuage guilt and even the post-adoption counselor's need to pay a mortgage. Before an adoptee is even cognizant of her experience, it's been delegated to her – and so has the message that to be anything less than grateful for what has befallen her is merely testament to poor character.

As a result, many of us end up sleepwalking through the first decades of our own lives.

What resides in the pages of this book shall be my awakening. In part, I want to embrace the child I used to be, with apologies for failing to answer her cries all these years.

And this book will speak to surviving trauma, told through my life narrative. I view my traumas through the lens of adoption and its aftermath. You may have a different lens, be it abuse, assault, familial dysfunction or even war. But we should be able to relate.

Finally, I hope to ask and answer the question "How shall we then live?" To do anything less is to be forever damned to the past and to neglect one's responsibilities in the present. The past is for learning, growing and understanding, but it doesn't offer reparations or do-overs.

I don't offer easy answers. In my view, directives to "forget it," "recast it" or "think positive," only repeat the insult. Trauma reshapes us. We waste energy and sacrifice self esteem trying to become the person we used to be or should have been, as if it had never happened.

It is far better to understand who we now are.