

Love Makes a Family: A Collection of Adoption Stories

by

Hannah Tybor

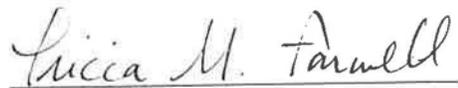
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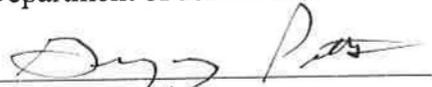
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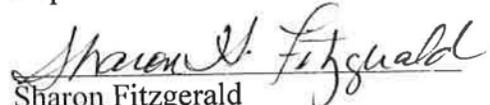
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To my friends: Thank you for reading through my stories and for listening to me struggle along this journey. Thank you for the advice you provided and the support that you gave.

To my birthmother: Thank you for choosing life.

## Abstract

*Love Makes a Family: A Collection of Adoption Stories* is a compilation of the different perspectives of the members of the Tybor Family on the impact of adoption on each of their lives. The collection includes a variety of opinions on adoption based on various factors including international adoption, domestic adoption, infant adoption, child adoption, and closed adoption. The book tells the honest stories of each of the family members in hopes of enlightening society on the complexity of adoption and how different aspects of the adoption system have both overwhelming and minuscule implications on adopted children. In addition to the adoption stories, research has been collected on the various effects that adoption has on adopted children according to trained professionals in the fields of social work, psychology, and therapy.

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## Introduction

Adopted children share a missing link, one that often goes unnoticed or ignored. This missing link's effects vary from adoptee to adoptee, including behavioral problems, attachment issues, or simply feeling out-of-place. This missing link is their history, their complete story. However, adoptees on both ends of the spectrum are affected by adoption in most aspects of their life, even if they do not realize it. For some, there is an instinctual craving to form a connection with their birthparents. For others, the pain they feel as a result of their birth family's initial rejection is enough to hinder them from ever seeking more. Sherrie Eldridge, an adoptee, writes, "Whether positive or negative, and whether we like it or not, our birth mothers are forever a part of us. How we choose to respond to that reality will deeply influence the course of our lives" (54). To put it simply, adoption has a profound impact on the lives of adoptees and their families.

While many adoptees choose not to seek out answers, others make the courageous decision to search for their birth relatives. Often, they are met with hostility from adoptive parents, friends, and confidants. This is primarily because people who only relate to adoption from an outside perspective have difficulty understanding what an adoptee feels and experiences throughout his/her life. In many cases, family, friends and confidants rarely focus on the emotional, and sometimes physical, pain that comes hand-in-hand with adoption. A study completed in 2007 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows that adoptees are more likely to be diagnosed with moderate or severe depression, ADD/ADHD, and behavioral disorders (5-6). The same study showed that 12 percent of adopted children also suffer from attachment disorders ("Adoption USA. A Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents.", 5). While there are

plenty of statistics to show the emotional trauma that adoptees endure, many choose only to perceive good as a result of adoption.

Even more surprising is the fact that some adoptees criticize other adoptees for having a different journey, which can be discouraging. As a result of the negative connotations associated with adoptees searching for answers, very few resources are available on the topic. Adoptees have a hard time preparing for what to expect on the journey, following through with searching for answers, and learning from others' journeys.

As an adoptee, I have always had the desire to find my missing link. This missing link pushes me to find answers and to fulfill my desire of knowing more about my history. As a result, I am beginning my search for my birthmother, and along the way, I am hoping to discover more about myself. While my adoption history has encouraged me to look for answers, it has played a very different role in the rest of my family's lives. All of my siblings are adopted, each with vastly different adoption histories. Because of this, our perspectives about birth relatives and the effects of adoption differ. This difference makes for a rich, if not challenging, set of stories that I plan to tell in my thesis.

The goal of telling each of our stories is to illustrate that there is not a right way or a wrong way for an adoptee to cope with his or her situation. I desire to show the beauty that comes from a diverse compilation of opinions, as well as how individual perspectives of adoption have shaped each of my siblings. Furthermore, two of my sisters are from international adoptions. The background of international and domestic adoption within my family provides an excellent source of information about the varying process of adoption as well as adoption of babies and older children. As a future public relations practitioner, my aim is to bring awareness to adoption, both the blessings and the misconceptions, in

order to help adoptees, adoptive parents, birthparents and others in the adoption community. I also hope that the creation of this book will open the eyes of many about the unnecessary negative assumptions that surround adoptees and adoption as well as reduce the perception that adoption is always easy. The creation of my family's adoption stories will provide insight into the life-changing journey that adoptees walk as they cope with the joyous burden of being adopted. Hopefully, other adoptees who are struggling with their missing link can have confidence to begin their own searches after reading about mine.

### Literature Review

Adoption is a complex solution to a difficult problem, although until recently it has not been viewed as complex. It was, and still is by many, seen as an easy answer to an unwanted pregnancy and a parentless child. With the help of leading social workers, psychologists, and counselors, in the past few decades, research about adoption and its effects has become more available and more relatable. Although research is key to understanding the potential outcomes of adoption, it is important to note that all experiences for adoptees are different, and as a result, all reactions, emotions, and decisions regarding adoption from adoptees are justified.

For many leading researchers and psychologists in the field of adoption, there is a consensus on a new perspective explaining attachment and behavioral disorders in adoptees. This perspective is known as the primal wound. Prior to the theory of the primal wound, it was believed that adoptees acclimated to their new adopted environments as a biological child would, forgetting a key aspect of the pregnancy and birth process – prenatal bonding. According to Nancy Verrier, who holds a master's degree in Clinical Psychology

and has studied numerous cases of adoption, the primal wound is a theory that focuses on the concept of bonding prior to birth, as opposed to the idea that bonding only takes place postnatally. Unlike past adoption researchers who disassociated the adoptee from life prior to birth, Verrier acknowledges an important realization that “the adoptee was there” (10), meaning that the adoptee remembers being safe in the womb of the birthmother, remembers the birthmother’s voice, and remembers being taken from all that was known and being placed in the arms of a stranger. In the case of adoption, Verrier argues that adoptees connect with their birthmothers in the womb, and once that connection is severed by adoption, the child is left to recover from postnatal separation, which often results in an subconscious imprint of abandonment in the adoptees’ minds. It is the effects of this separation and the separation itself, that Verrier refers to as the primal wound (1-2).

Many leading researchers agree with Verrier and take her theory of the primal wound further, using it to account for many problems that adoptees face during their development. Gregory Keck, Ph.D., a psychologist with two adopted children, and Regina Kupecky, a therapist who specializes in treating children with attachment disorders, blame the initial abandonment that adoptees face for many behavioral and attachment problems. One of these behavioral problems is digression, often to an earlier time of trauma, such as infancy when the adoptee was abandoned. In this case, it is not uncommon for adoptees to revert to times of trauma in their childhood when faced with a present trauma. For an adoptee abandoned at birth, the digression often includes refusal to participate in an activity, throwing temper tantrums, crying for unapparent reasons, and asking to be held like a baby (69-70). Verrier learned from one study of infant abandonment that the digression often acts out in reality through various coping mechanisms. The study involved

twins, one of whom had to be separated from her mother at birth to be in an incubator. Although the infant was reunited soon after, the effects of the child's separation were visible and are related to that of an adopted child. Verrier relates that in instances of trauma, adoptees will act like the separate baby in a few of the following manners: substituting things for people, choosing to not depend on anyone in a close way, feeling a constant sadness, fearing personal destruction, and reacting to mental pain with bodily feelings (36-37).

Although many adoptees fail to acknowledge their digression as a result of immediate postnatal abandonment, Verrier argues that the abandonment is the cause, saying "That abandoned baby lives inside each and every adoptee all his or her life" (25). Additional behavioral issues related to the primal wound are developmental delays, losing items, breaking items, stealing items, lying, hoarding food, overeating, and distorting reality (Keck, 69-71). Regarding attachment problems, many issues for adoptees center around separation, loss, trust, rejection, intimacy, and control (Verrier, 7).

The most overwhelming potential consequence of the primal wound, which can also apply to situations of older-child adoption, is Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). While many adoptees struggle with attachment, RAD is unique in its intensity and complexity. Adoptees who suffer from RAD are often categorized doing many of the following disruptions: having charming behavior but distorted engagements, having indiscriminate affection for strangers and lack of affection for parents, having minimal eye contact, having persistent nonsense questions and incessant chatter, having inappropriate demanding and clingy behavior, lying about the obvious and stealing, having lags in learning, and having a lack of conscience (Keck, 25-49).

While the primal wound is not the only explanation for many of the behavioral and attachment issues that adoptees face, it is the current leading perspective. Furthermore, not all adoptees feel that the primal wound plays a key role in their lives, and are often unaffected by their adoption, or at least are comfortable pretending not to be.

However, in many cases, adoptees may acknowledge a sense of uncertainty in their lives. They feel unsure of where they belong as an adopted child, some questioning if they even belong in their adoptive families. They have two identities. One belongs to the birthmother and the other belongs to the adoptive family. Many leading adoption researchers utilize this duality of lives as a means of further explaining the primal wound. The primal wound is where the initial problems begin, creating two identities for the adoptee, one from the mother who carried them and another from the mother who raised them. Then as the adoptee develops in his or her new environment, he or she must choose which identity to foster, creating a dilemma of denying part of himself or herself. This struggle of duality is often what researchers and counselors of adoptees contribute to behavioral issues, and later, use to analyze adoptees' desire to seek further information about their birth families (Lifton, 48-65).

Betty Jean Lifton discusses the confusion that adoptees often face as they learn to live with a dual identity in *Journey of the Adopted Self*. She argues that adoptees struggle with identifying who their real mother is – the one who raised them or the one who gave them away. As adoptees learn to deal with their identity, they must do so inside the current realm of adoption, which Lifton, an adoption researcher and counselor, argues is one that limits adoptees' abilities to fully embrace who they are. The system of adoption paints a picture of adoptive parents as rescuers and adoptees as rescued. By doing so, Lifton says,

“Adoptees, then, are caught between the loyalty they feel to the adoptive parents who rescued them and the invisible loyalty to the mother who gave birth to them” (57).

When adoptees are encouraged to embrace their adoptive parents and to encompass the identity given solely by the adoptive parents, they are forced to deny part of their history and part of what compiles them. This denial of self often results in behavioral issues, including anger, addiction, lying, and stealing (Lifton, 89-95). So, in a sense, an adoptee spends his or her life acting out in order to discover his or her identity or in hopes of having his or her adoptive parents acknowledge the alternative identity. Those parents who do acknowledge both identities are those whom Lifton believes to be the most beneficial for the development of the adoptee saying, “the real mother is the one who recognizes and respects the who identity of her child and does not ask him to deny any part of himself” (17). This is based on her belief that adoptees have right to acknowledge and develop both of their identities in order to fully embrace who they are as people. In doing so, Lifton believes that the adoptee will begin to overcome many of the common behavioral and attachment problems created by the primal wound (275).

Part of the journey of developing a complete identity lies with an adoptee’s desire to search for his or her birth family. A vast majority of leading adoption researches advocate for the adoptee searching for birth relatives. In Lifton’s words, “No one romanticizes blood relationships more than a person who has never known them” (118). It is the adoptees’ birthright to seek out more information (36).

An adoptee’s dual identity is partially founded on a lack of information (Strauss, 117). This missing piece of information is another contributor to the initial effects of the primal wound, encouraging victim mentality, hypervigilance, anxiety, feelings of

unnecessary abandonment, the desire to be perfect, and a lack of need for intimacy (Eldridge, 36-37, 66-67, 140-143). All of these things, and the role they play with the adoptee, are a factor in deciding if the adoptee chooses to search for their birth families.

In fact, many adoptees choose not to search. Many choose not to acknowledge an alternative identity, deciding to fit themselves into the molds of their adoptive families and living perfectly normal lives. However, almost, if not all, adoptees are affected by their adoptions, even if they choose not to act upon those affects. Jean Strauss, an adoptee and author, argues that this decision is as justified as the decision to search, acknowledging that all adoptees cope with their circumstances differently. Additionally, Strauss believes that many adoptees searches are not a denial of their adopted self, but rather simply a desire for a whole self (25-26). For this reason, Strauss says that there is one common characteristic among searchers – that they must “know” (26).

The search acts as a catalyst for adoptees to embrace their whole identities while gaining valuable information about their histories, which is needed to form a complete self, rather than a measurement of adoptees feelings about their adoptive families. In Strauss’s book, *Birthright*, she quotes David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schetcher, and Robin Henig saying, “The compulsion to search usually says little about the adoptee’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the adoptive family. Classically, the searcher is looking for a reflection, not a relationship; he already has a mother and a father” (117). With this ideal in mind, adoptees’ searches are often a time of personal emotional distress, as they must navigate embracing both identities without offending their adoptive parents.

The adoptive parents, in many cases, are highly praised among adoptees, despite the common feelings of not entirely fitting in with the adoptive family. For this reason,

adoptees often fear searching for birth families. They do not want to appear ungrateful, to seem disloyal, or to create a misunderstanding. Adoptees are placed in a difficult situation when they decide to search because they risk finding their birth identity and having their adoptive identity revoked (Eldridge, 184-186). While not all adoptive families are against searching, the adoptees also face further difficulties when they make the decision to search. They face a second rejection. The first rejection is the primal wound. The second rejection comes when the adoptee finally makes a connection with the birth family and is unwelcomed (Lifton, 261).

However, for adoptees who choose to search, the end result is usually less important than the process. In Sherrie Eldridge's book, *Twenty Life Transforming Choices that Adoptees Need to Make*, an adoptee, Bob Blanchard, says, "It doesn't really matter if the outcome of your search is good or not – it's just important to know the truth" (194). For adoptees, searching is more about finding who they are so that they can formulate a whole identity and less about creating new relationships. Searching is about growth and truth, even if the end is "life-giving redemption or heart-wrenching rejection" (Eldridge, 195).

Adoption is far more complex than offering a childless couple a child and a parentless child parents. The effects of an adoptees initial abandonment, the primal wound, are lasting and play a key role in the behavior and attachment capabilities of the adoptee. Furthermore, the adoptee is faced with two identities, one from the birthmother and the other from the adoptive family. As a result, the adoptee spends his or her life trying to hide one or find space for both. This can further complicate the behavior and attachment capabilities of the adoptee. Finally, as a result of the adoptee's abandonment and his or her acknowledgement of dual identities, the adoptee chooses to search or to be content with

who they are. The search places an integral role in the adoptee developing both identities wholly, as the main desire for searching is informational and not relational. The end result of the search, positive or negative, is generally accepted by the adoptee because knowledge is the beginning of forming a whole self, a complete identity.

## Methodology

Oral histories are a beautiful key to past, and they play a large role in accessing the future by providing context as well as personal opinions and experiences. In article entitled “The Importance of Oral History,” Ingrid Rowe discuss the fact that oral histories often provide in-depth insight to problems and issues that are seen from only a single perspective (1). They add immense valuable information to official documents, studies, and records, while providing information of additional, unexplored resources pertaining to the subject being discussed (Rowe, 1). Oral histories are excellent sources of personal content that help society to connect on a deeper level with the subject that is being shared. In addition to the benefits oral histories provide to society, they also prove to be of great wealth to families. Rowe says, “Until people are prompted by questions pertaining to their history or until they’re encouraged to delve further, family history can often be lost in the general course of present day-to-day life” (1). Because of these factors, I chose to write the oral history of my family for two reasons – to help those who are unfamiliar with adoption to understand the complexity of it and to preserve each of my family member’s opinions and stories for the future generations of our family.

The first part of my creative process entailed in-depth research of pre-existing information pertaining to adoptees. The literature available in this field is minimal, as many leading professionals in social services, therapy, and psychology fail to acknowledge that adoption plays a key role in the life of an adoptee. My primary focus was studying adoptees' stories about personal growth, embracing their identity and pursuing birth-relative reunions. Each adoptee experiences his or her journey differently, and by studying a multitude of perspectives, I was better able to explain the intimate experiences of each of my family members as I told their stories.

Furthermore, I conducted two forms of primary research. After seeking counsel from IRB officials to ensure that I did not need approval for my journalistic endeavor, I received an IRB exemption for the research for my thesis. The first form of primary research that I conducted was interviews of my family members. I interviewed each of my family members about their personal adoption journeys so that I could tell their stories accurately. I started each interview with a series of questions, which can be found in Appendices B, C, and D, and continued asking follow-up questions to enhance each family member's perspective and opinion. I reached out to the agency that handled my adoption, as well as one of my older brother's adoption, but was unable to find any information pertaining to our adoption. My eldest brother had a private adoption, which did not utilize an agency, and my two younger sisters' agency had already submitted all the necessary documents pertaining to their adoption so no additional information was needed.

The second form of primary research I participated in was having a DNA analysis performed through Ancestry.com. This process, which I started in October of 2017, involved purchasing a DNA analysis kit for \$79.00, collecting a sample of my saliva, and

sending the sample back to Ancestry.com to be analyzed. The company received my DNA, and within four weeks, I had my results.

I chose to write my collection of short stories from the perspective of each family member with some stories combining multiple perspectives. I aimed to tell the varying aspects of adoption that many people tend not to understand. I started this endeavor through my dedications, prologue, and preface. After this, I began with my parents' story, and continued in chronological birth order. My parents' story focused on why they chose adoption as the means of having a family, as well as how they chose to tell their children about being adopted. Stephen, my oldest brother, struggled with the concept that adoption is not always fair, especially when it leads to intense mental battles, which was the basis for his story. Zachary's story placed emphasis on indifference, because adoption is not always prevalent in every adoptee's life. The first part of my story focused on how I grew to be passionate about adoption and where it led our family. Following the first part of my story, I wrote a story from the perspective of all the members of my family telling the adoption of Elise and Emma. Elise's story related to the process of maintaining her Taiwanese culture while learning to live in America. Emma's story, the youngest sibling in my family, revolved around embracing the American culture whole-heartedly. The final story I wrote was the ending to my first story, and it focused on my experience as I searched for my birthmother and the end result of that search. I ended the book with a short epilogue about what I learned through the process of storytelling and how it helped me grow.

Love Makes a Family: A Collection of Adoption Stories

## Preface

The stories that follow are the result of interviews, family documents, journal entries, blog posts, letters, conversations, and experiences. In the endeavor to protect and promote the conversational and journalistic feel of the stories, in-text citations have been omitted. All information found in the pages to follow has been approved for publication by the author or possessor of the information.

## Dedication

To my parents:

Thank you for raising me to love. You taught me to have gratitude for my birthmother –  
an outlook that has changed my life.

I will forever be grateful.

To my siblings:

We may not be flesh and blood, but you are my family, now and forever.

I wouldn't choose anyone else.

Thank you for letting me tell your story.

## Prologue

Dear Reader,

Adoption isn't always beautiful. At its core, it can be ugly – though we often choose to cover that with gentle words and pretend realities. For some, adoption is a wound that refuses to heal. For others, it's an experience that is rarely acknowledged. The reality is adoption is the loneliness and humiliation faced by a birthmother. It's her agony as she endures her child being taken away. Adoption is a weeping couple broken by their infertility, wishing for a solution to their inability. It's the constant knowledge that an adopted child, though a joyous part of the couple's lives, is not flesh and blood. Adoption is the helpless baby passed from one mother to another. It's the toddler moving from foster home to foster home, looking for a place to belong. It's the orphans in Asia looking out the window of the orphanage, hoping to see their parents return to take them home. The reality is adoption is full of pain, of waiting, and of brokenness. It's not always easy. It's not always beautiful.

***But adoption is worth it.***

I'm not sure what journey led you to open the pages of my family's story, but I'm glad that it did. Be warned, this isn't another feel-good adoption story. The world has too many of those. This is a story filled with raw honesty and openness. This is a story that has hurt and pain. There is hurt in the world of adoption, maybe this is a hurt that you know all too well. My aim is not only to show the hurt, but also to show the hope that is a part of adoption. There is hope in finding a family, and in turn, building a bond that far surpasses flesh and blood. It's this hope that makes adoption worth every moment of pain, of waiting,

and of brokenness. It's my desire that you cherish my attempt to portray the complexity of adoption. May you reflect on these stories with tenderness and compassion, as I have done. But most of all, may you be filled with the desire to understand. Adoption – and all that it encompasses – is worth it. The stories that follow show why.

## Steve and Charmaine's Story

“I thought about what Charmaine’s mother told me,  
and I knew that no matter what, I loved her.  
If we couldn’t have children of our own,  
then we would just adopt.”

– Stephen Tybor III, Interview, November 26, 2017

## Overcoming Infertility

### *Charmaine*

In the spring of 1979, I quietly rested in my hospital bed at DeGraff Hospital in Buffalo, New York, recovering from laparoscopy surgery. My parents, Ernie and Jane Cline, sat in the pristine room, anxiously waiting the doctor's arrival and hoping that the results were positive.

At 16, blonde-haired and petite, I hadn't developed like most other girls, a cause for concern for my parents and my doctor. I was far less concerned, but I knew this issue wouldn't be put to rest without further investigation. Initial testing provided no answers to my delayed menstrual cycle and other feminine inconsistencies, so my doctor suggested a small procedure to help identify the problem.

Knock. Knock. The doctor quickly tapped on the door before boldly entering the room. My parents stood to greet him, and their hearts fell at the grim look on his face. Pleasantries passed between them before the doctor turned his attention to me.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, checking my chart for notes left by the nurses.

I paused momentarily, mentally checking my pain levels. "I'm okay," I responded, wishing that my parents' concern didn't warrant this surgery.

After ensuring that I was recovering well, the doctor again focused on the procedure. Turning to address the room, he began discussing my surgery and its results, "Everything went according to plan. While looking for the cause of the problem, we discovered that your reproductive organs are smaller than average. During your development in the womb, your uterus failed to grow normally, and as a result, it is

abnormally small. Several other of your female organs are also underdeveloped.” The doctor paused briefly before continuing, “I’m so sorry.”

“What exactly does this mean as far as Charmaine ever being able to get pregnant?” my bewildered mother asked.

“No, it’s impossible. Her uterus is too small to ever be able to carry a child without risking the safety of both her and the child,” the doctor admitted, his face darkening at the gravity of the news.

My mother burst into sobs, as my father pulled her into a hug, tears forming in his eyes. I sat still in the hospital bed, unfazed by the news, thinking to myself, *“What is so sad about this? So what if I can’t have kids? I wasn’t planning on having them anytime soon anyway. Besides, there are other ways to have children.”*

~~~

It was early spring of 1983, and I sat working the front desk of my father’s business Niagara Gutter, when a dark-haired, brown-eyed stranger walked through the front door of the office and introduced himself as Stephen Tybor.

“Hey,” he smiled nervously, stuttering out, “My father Steve Tybor, Jr. told me to, uh, drop this off for Ernie Cline.” His hands trembled slightly as he passed along the package.

Curiosity grabbed my attention and shone in my clear, green eyes. I reached out to take the package from his strong hands, pausing shyly introducing myself to him with a soft smile.

“So, uh, what do you like to do?” he asked me. I could tell by the playful glimmer in his eyes that he was trying to prolong his delivery.

“Oh, well,” I stammered, admiring his handsome olive skin and long eyelashes, while collecting my thoughts. “I work at a local racquetball club, and I enjoy playing sometimes.”

“Hmmm. Racquetball. That sounds like fun!” Stephen enthusiastically chimed. “Maybe we could, uh, go sometime or something.”

He caught me off guard, especially since I was already seeing someone else. “*Perhaps having a new friend could be fun,*” I contemplated before agreeing to his proposal. Shortly after that, the conversation dwindled, and he left, allowing me to return to my work.

~~~

*Steve*

“*Why in the world does my father have me running deliveries?*” I thought to myself, slightly irritated, as I walked through the front door of Niagara Gutter. A petite, blonde-haired young woman sat before me at the counter. I almost stopped in my tracks at the sight of her. “*Wow!*” I nervously smiled at her, reminding myself to be calm in the presence of such a beautiful woman. I was at a loss for words but managed to stutter out, “My father Steve Tybor, Jr. told me to, uh, drop this off for Ernie Cline.” I handed the package over, but my shaking hands gave away my nerves.

Then she smiled, and I was captivated. Her eyes shone radiantly, and I knew that I needed to see her again. She stuck out her hand and admitted rather shyly, “Hi, I’m Ernie’s daughter, Charmaine.”

“*Charmaine!*” I pondered on her name to myself, thinking that its uniqueness did her beauty justice.

“Well, Charmaine, what do you, uh, like to do?” I asked, trying to continue the conversation in hopes of charming her. I wanted to see her smile again. A look of understanding spread across her face, and I knew that she realized what I was doing.

She paused before responding, sending my nerves into overdrive. I waited as she eventually replied, “Oh, well, I work at a local racquetball club, so sometimes I enjoy playing.”

“*Yes, racquetball!*” I thought to myself. “*Maybe, I can find a way to use racquetball to see her again.*” I smiled at my plan, before enthusiastically admitting to her that racquetball sounded fun. I continued to carry on the conversation as long as I could before I needed to head out and finish the deliveries. I didn’t want to say goodbye.

~~~

I went to meet my father for dinner at the Summit Mall. Coincidentally, Ernie Cline was there as well finishing up some business. My father introduced me to Ernie before walking away to order our food. I decided to mention delivering the package to his daughter Charmaine.

“You, uh, have a beautiful daughter, sir,” I acknowledged.

“Thank you,” Ernie gently replied. “I really think the world of your father and have enjoyed working with him.”

“Well, uh, I was kind of hoping at some point that Charmaine would entertain the thought of doing something with me,” I admitted nervously.

Ernie looked intently into my eyes and spoke carefully, “Just promise me one thing,” he paused. “Always take care of my girl.”

“Yes, sir!” I spoke confidently, although confused by his statement. Turning around, Ernie left, leaving me to wonder at his words.

~~~

I couldn't stop thinking about Charmaine's beautiful smile, bringing up our meeting repeatedly to my father. Not a man of patience, my father quipped at me, “Why don't you stop talking about Charmaine and just ask her out?”

He was right. I was determined to see her again, so I found her home phone number in the phone book and called her.

“Hello, this is Charmaine,” she answered. “May I ask who is calling?”

My nervousness increased drastically at the sound of her soft, gentle voice. “*Stephen, how are you letting her affect you so much? You're a type-A, confident guy. You can do this,*” I encouraged myself before continuing the conversation. “Hey, uh, this is Stephen Tybor! I came into your father's store the other day to drop off a package, and I, uh, was wondering if maybe you would like to go and play racquetball sometime?”

I held my breath as I waited for her response.

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### *Charmaine*

From our racquetball outing, a friendship started to develop between Stephen and me. Often, I found myself thinking about him, despite being in another relationship.

“*Oh, he is so charming,*” I pondered. “*But this isn't serious yet. I mean, we are just two friends hanging out. Besides, Stephen just broke off a serious engagement. He can't be looking to get into another relationship so soon.*”

Aiming to keep things casual, I focused on enjoying our time together without building a romance. I could tell that perhaps Stephen didn't see our budding friendship in the same light though. Often, I caught him flirting and teasing me, begging me to join him for dinner. Eventually, his persistence succeeded, and I started to join him for family dinners.

With the time we spent together increasing, I asked myself, "*What am I to Stephen? I mean, could this potentially be a serious relationship?*" By the beginning of summer, my thoughts and questions were answered, and I realized that I had feelings for Stephen. With our relationship turning into a budding romance, I knew it was time to devote myself fully to him. So, I moved on from my current relationship to see what might develop between Stephen and me.

~~~

*Steve*

Our relationship moved slowly because Charmaine was seeing someone else. Although I had just been in a failed engagement, within six weeks of seeing Charmaine, I knew she was the woman I wanted to marry. Everything about her complemented me in a way that made us both better. She made me laugh, and she loved to have fun. When I moved quickly, she paused to enjoy the moment. In every way, she brought sensibility to my impulsiveness. As summer approached, she ended her relationship, and we became exclusive. I was ecstatic and ready to see our relationship develop further. Yet, shortly after this change, I learned of her father's worsening sickness and need for a kidney transplant.

While Charmaine was visiting her father at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, I realized that I had only met Ernie once before. I never got the chance to meet with him again, but

occasionally, as it did now, the odd memory of our conversation in the mall reappeared in my mind.

*“Could Ernie have known that Charmaine and I would end up together? What did he mean by ‘Always take care of my girl’?”* I wondered to myself. However odd his words seemed at the time, I now knew that I had to be there for Charmaine no matter what happened.

Ernie Cline passes suddenly. I held Charmaine close, helping her through the grief. No matter what, I vowed to keep the promise I made to Ernie. I loved Charmaine, and nothing could change that.

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### *Charmaine*

Spending time with Stephen was a regular occurrence now, and I loved how our relationship was developing. It didn't matter what we were doing, as long as we did it together. Long drives kindled deep conversations about our futures. Mundane tasks seemed like a spontaneous adventure. It was one of those driving around days when I realized that I hadn't been completely honest with him.

In the midst of planning our future, Stephen turned to me and exclaimed, “I want a large family! I can't wait to have children with you!”

Immediately, my heart stopped. I didn't know what to say to his excitement. Solemnly, I paused before forcing a smile. He hardly noticed the subtle change in my behavior as he continued elaborating about his dreams.

“We should also adopt,” he confidently stated. “Adopting my sister was a wonderful experience for my family and, uh, I think it would be a good thing to do.”

Eventually, I knew that I had to tell Stephen about my inability to have children. I had started to picture myself marrying Stephen and wanted to be open and honest about our future. But, he was so excited about having children, so I solemnly avoided adding to the conversation, knowing that I wouldn't be able to carry his biological children. I didn't want to disappoint him. Still, I knew he needed the truth, but I was too anxious to tell him. Instead, I shared my concerns and fears about the situation with my mother.

~~~

*Steve*

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* I rushed to pick up the phone, hoping to hear Charmaine's voice. Instead, her mother's raspy voice greeted me.

"Stephen, let's go and have dinner tonight," she quietly stated, ensuring that if Charmaine was around she wouldn't hear her. I picked up on the secrecy of Jane's request, but I didn't understand why.

"Sure, uh, is there something we need to talk about?" I asked, hoping that everything was okay with Charmaine.

Stubbornly refusing to give up any further information, Jane simply reiterated her dinner invitation, and we agreed to meet at Pizza Hut around 6 p.m.

As we sat down at a dingy table with the pizza, I patiently waited for Jane's news as pleasantries were exchanged. After a few short minutes, curiosity overcame me, and I asked Jane why she invited me to dinner. "There is something we need to discuss about Charmaine," she said. "Something that might make you reconsider your relationship with her, although I hope that it won't. I know that Charmaine wants to tell you this, but I sense that she isn't capable of doing so."

“Uh, okay. What is it?” I replied, knowing that nothing could ever change the way I felt about Charmaine.

“Charmaine can’t have children. It’s impossible. Her uterus is too small. I am so sorry.” Jane’s eyes filled with tears as she softly and slowly admitted this. “Charmaine didn’t know how to tell you, so I did it for her without her knowing.”

I thought to myself for a moment as devastation overcame me. I had always wanted a large family and hadn’t expected this news. “*How could this be?*” I angrily brooded, before reminding myself of the pain that Charmaine must feel knowing that she can’t have children. My heart broke for her. Instantly, I decided that kids or no kids, I loved Charmaine and wanted to be with her. “I love her no matter what, even though she can’t have my children,” I responded. “We’ll just adopt!”

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A few months after the conversation with Jane, I knew that I couldn’t wait any longer to marry Charmaine. We had talked about having children, and I promised Charmaine that I loved her despite her condition. To me, having children through adoption wasn’t a problem. Although she was irritated that her mother had told me about her condition, Charmaine was relieved and excited to move forward with our relationship. Still, she had no idea that I was seriously desiring to marry her.

In my head, I began to plan elaborate proposals. Although she was my quiet counterpart, I wanted to amaze her. “How about a billboard?” I thought to myself. “Hmmm. No, she might not see it.” My mind went a thousand different directions from a large party to a romantic candle-lit dinner.

As I contemplated the perfect way to ask Charmaine to be my wife, I knew that I needed to talk to her mother about this. I already had my parents' blessing, but I needed to ask Jane's. I called her to ask if I could come over and speak with her. Jane consented, and I made my way to her house.

As we sat down together, nerves consumed me like they did on the day I first saw Charmaine. "Jane," I stammered out. "Uh, I was wondering if, uh, you would be okay if I, uh, asked Charmaine to marry me. I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

Tears filled her eyes. "Of course!" she responded ecstatically. Although overcome with joy at her approval, I knew that I needed more time to plan, so I begged her to keep this a secret. Jane promised that she would.

Everything was coming together. I simply needed a ring. After visiting several stores, I knew that I couldn't afford anything too elaborate. I had a semester left of college and little extra money to spend, but Charmaine, although simpler in taste, deserved the best. I splurged, buying her a medium-sized diamond on a gold band – simple, yet elegant. It fit Charmaine's gentle personality perfectly, and I knew that she would love it. Now all I had to do was find the perfect way and time to propose.

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### *Charmaine*

"Oh, wow," I pondered to myself. "*It's March.*" I paused to count to myself. "*Stephen and I have been dating for ten months. It seems like a moment and forever all at once.*"

I daydreamed as I prepared to get ready for a night out with him and our friends. It was St. Patrick's Day and raining, but despite the bad weather, I knew that we would have

fun. We always did. Where I tended to be more cautious, Stephen encouraged me to let loose and enjoy the moment. We were perfect complements to each other. *“Oh, well, I wonder if maybe I’ll marry Stephen,”* I thought to myself. *“We haven’t been serious for very long, so I don’t think it will happen anytime soon, but I can definitely see myself spending the rest of my life with him.”*

An hour or so later, Stephen arrived to take me out. We spent the night laughing and dancing with our friends, but mostly enjoying one another’s company. As the night lingered on, I continued to picture myself with Stephen as his wife. As a slow song came over the speakers, he took my hand and pulled my body to his, swaying softly. *“What a fun life we would have together, so full of adventure and love,”* I pondered, wondering if he felt the same way about us. We had discussed marriage before, but it had never been in a serious manner. My mind went back to the moment at hand, soaking in the simplicity, yet marvelousness of being close to Stephen.

The rain continued all night, rushing Stephen and me from the taxi to the covered awning outside of my apartment. As I wiped some of the rain off my body, I turned around to invite Stephen inside. My heart leapt when I saw him kneeling before me on one knee and holding out a beautiful ring.

“Charmaine,” he spoke softly, but confidently. “I love you. All of you. And, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

Tears formed in my eyes, and my entire face radiated joy. I was shocked. Never did I imagine that Stephen would propose so soon, but I knew that he was the man that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. “Yes!” I exclaimed. “Yes, yes, yes! Oh, of course I will marry you! I love you, too!”

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*Both*

Immediately, we began to plan our wedding, and on November 24, 1984, after nine months of engagement, we began our journey together. We knew that we wanted to begin the adoption process as soon as possible.

New York State law requires that couples wishing to adopt be married for a year before beginning the process. We couldn't wait for that day. As our first year of marriage passed, we often would share our hopes with one another about having a family. We pictured the perfect baby room and dreamed of charming baby names. We imagined what the baby would like and dislike and where we would go on family vacations. Finally, our one-year anniversary arrived, and we began the first steps of the adoption process. On our one-year anniversary, Stephen and I eagerly began the process of adopting. Each day, we anxiously answered the phone, hoping to hear of a baby who would make us parents. We knew the process of adopting was slow, but what we didn't anticipate is how much slower it is when a couple requests certain specifications, like we did. We desperately wanted a Caucasian infant, and unfortunately, so did many other couples. Patiently, we continued to wait to start our family.

## Stephen's Story

“I don't think I am missing anything,

but I'm not complete.

And I want to complete myself,

but that doesn't necessarily mean I'm missing something.

I want to find something that makes me whole.

There's something else that I need to connect to.”

– Stephen Tybor IV, Interview, November 23, 2017

## A Baby Isn't Always Easy

Personality isn't a direct result of one thing, rather it is the accumulation of numerous experiences, and for me, the experiences I hold have played a detrimental role in my growth and development. With the importance of experiences in mind, people often think that adoption is an easy solution to the common problem of unplanned pregnancy. By doing so, they completely forget that the experience surrounding it can be far from easy. Personally, I think it's important to remember that adoption isn't always what it seems. It's not always painless. The experience can have lasting effects. Similarly, life isn't always what it seems to be either. Perhaps adoption had a more significant role in my life and its outcome than I realized, but in my opinion, I must take responsibility for my choices.

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My adoption story isn't one that is filled with complete happiness. Yes, it's a beautiful story of love, but it's also filled with pain. Whether this is a result of my adoption or my own choices, I will never know.

It started in the beginning of 1991. Seven years of waiting had passed since my soon-to-be parents had started the adoption process. They still desperately wanted a child but had grown used to the unending wait. Their hearts no longer jumped at the sound of their phone ringing, as they knew it wasn't likely a call saying that there was a baby waiting for them. Through the struggle, they continued waiting, suppressing their feelings of hope to reduce the pain of not having a child yet.

In February of 1991, my parents were on a business trip in the Caribbean, when hope sparked in my mom's heart. The warm, sunny day was enhanced by her fun-loving

companion, Mary Anne. The two wives of building-supply salesmen enjoyed chatting mindlessly in the relaxing atmosphere while sunbathing by the swimming pool. Casually, Mary Anne brought up adoption to my mom, asking, “Are you and Steve still interested in adopting?”

“Yes, but we have been waiting for seven years without any luck,” my mom somberly replied while seeing Mary Anne’s dark eyes widening in excitement.

“I think I know someone who might have a baby for you. There’s a girl back home who is a friend of the family. She has two daughters and just had a baby boy. He is about four months old. She doesn’t want to keep him because he reminds her of his father. She’s afraid if she has to keep him that she’s going to hurt him, so she’s thinking about placing him for adoption,” Mary Anne quickly spewed out, hoping that my parents would be open to adopting him despite his potential history of neglect.

For the first time in months, my mom let herself enjoy a small amount of hope. She couldn’t wait to talk to my dad about this child.

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*Ring. Ring. Ring.* The home phone rang loudly. My mom hurried to answer, completely unaware of what news awaited her. Mary Anne breathlessly answered her greeting with a question, “Are you and Steve still interested in adopting the baby boy I was telling you about?”

A few weeks had passed since Mary Anne told my mom about the baby that needed a home. My parents had talked about it, but not extensively because no additional information had surfaced. Still, my mom told her friend that they were.

“The mother wants to give up her baby for adoption for sure. You should get an attorney if you are serious. She is hoping to have him removed from the home as soon as possible.” Mary Anne relayed the information hurriedly. My mom couldn’t believe what she was hearing, and immediately called my dad to tell him that this baby boy – that I – might be their son.

By mid-March, the birthmother’s attorney and my parent’s attorney had scheduled a weekend visit for me at my parents’ house with the aim of seeing if the adoption would be a good fit. When the attorney arrived carrying me, both of my parents fell instantly in love.

The attorney handed me over to my awaiting parents. Dirt covered me, and my clothes smelled. I desperately needed the love that they had to give. Throughout the weekend, we bonded as a family. When Sunday afternoon arrived with a knock from the attorney, my parents unwillingly handed me back. Their hearts broke with the uncertainty of the situation. It was possible that they would never see me again.

Monday passed, as did Tuesday and Wednesday. Each day that ended created more pain and fear in my parents’ hearts. An entire week passed without any news, and my parents worried that they had lost their first chance at being parents.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* My mom instantly grabbed the phone and listened as the birthmother’s attorney said he would be stopping by soon. Anxiously, my parents stared out the window, waiting for the attorney to arrive. They knew that if the attorney pulled up and opened the door behind his, then I would be their son. If the attorney came directly inside, they knew they would once again begin waiting for a child to make them a family. Time froze as the attorney arrived and carefully stepped out of his car. Turning around, he

opened the door of the car and pulled out the six-month-old baby. They collapsed with tears of joy. They were finally parents.

“He needs to have my name,” Steve cried. “He is my son, so he should have my name.”

In April of 1991, six months after my birth, I, Stephen Tybor, IV, officially joined the Tybor family.

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Growing up, my parents often told me about my adoption, although I was rarely interested. Even so, my mom took time to develop a gratitude within me for the sacrifice my birthmother made in knowing that she needed to let me go. For the first few years of my life, my mom wrote to my birthmother:

*“We want to thank you, again, for doing the best thing you could have done for him – give him life. He will always know how special you are to us because you gave him life. We hope and pray that you are happy, and that God will bless you, because you have blessed us. Happy Mother’s Day.”*

I imagine that the writing was therapeutic, for both my mom and my birthmother. I filled my parents’ lives with immense joy, and they knew that they owed their happiness to another’s sacrifice.

The first few months were tiring for my parents. They anticipated a normal, happy baby, unscathed by the effects of neglect. What they received was a far cry from their perceived reality. I never cried or made noise. I was cold and resisted bonding – like holding a rock. It was as if I had picked up in my previous home that crying didn’t result in any comfort and that cuddling didn’t yield love. For the first year, I wasn’t over snuggly,

but my parents never gave up, heaping endless love on me, eventually breaking my hard exterior. Within the year, my personality awakened, and I learned to smile, laugh and cuddle. I became vastly different than the baby I once was. I lit up every room I entered. My baby blonde hair and bright green eyes captivated everyone around me. I developed a love for trains, airplanes, and trucks, and much to my parents' surprise, I developed a love for talking.

My mom told me that I was smart for my age. By the time I was a year old, I could say over 40 words and a few sentences. Every morning when my mom held me after my dad left for work, I asked, "Where'd daddy go?" It seemed that at a year old, any negative effects of my adoption had disappeared.

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Although I was immensely bright as an infant, I developed a passion for challenging authority as I grew. Every day presented a new challenge to question. Constantly, I asked my parents, "Why? Why is the sky blue? Why can't I eat cookies before lunch? Why do I have to listen to you? Why? Why? Why?"

My parents didn't squash my inquisitiveness, sometimes catering to the endless questions and arguments. Other times, I pushed too hard in my arguments and frustrated them to the point of exhaustion. Despite my constant questions, most of which were to undermine authority, they never once blamed my personality and reactions on adoption and the lack of nurturing I had as a baby.

When Zachary joined our family in 1995, my parents found my challenges less overwhelming and focused their attentions to the new baby. Although I wasn't fond of not being the center of attention, I loved my new baby brother and devoted myself to caring

for him and playing with him. Zachary was my best friend, and like most younger brothers, my wrestling buddy. We played hard, until someone ended up in tears, which was typically Zachary.

When Zachary was about two, we decided that we wanted a baby sister. Every night before going to bed, we would pray with our parents something along the lines of: “Dear Jesus, thank You for this day, and thank You for our family. Thank You for our cat Simba and for our friends. Please send us a baby sister.”

I guess God heard our prayers and in February of 1997, Hannah joined the family. I loved having a sister to protect and play with. As soon as she was able to stand her ground, she joined Zachary and me in the family wrestling matches. With three boisterous kids and an upcoming move halfway across the country to Mississippi, my parents didn’t have to focus their complete attention on my desire to constantly challenge authority, sometimes leaving my argumentative attitude unchecked.

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Throughout grade school, middle school and high school, I maintained my love for being difficult, transferring it from my parents and sharing it with my teachers, much to their disdain. I was a scrawny adolescent, but my take-charge, first-born personality made up for my size and aided in my foolish pranks. Thankfully, I had an infectious personality, and for some reason, I easily made friends wherever I went. Although I tried my hardest to be difficult by hiding in closets to scare teachers and making average grades despite my intelligence, people couldn’t help but love me, or at least tolerate me. Thinking back on my life, I’m not sure why I strived to complicate things. It wasn’t that I enjoyed frustrating

people. I simply enjoyed getting attention. Perhaps my history of neglect manifested itself in my life as a desire to be heard or seen, even if it was in a negative light.

During my school years, I never asked about my adoption, although I knew I was. To me, there was never a need to ask. Being adopted was something that happened to me that was beyond my control. Even though I came from another woman, I was a Tybor, and nothing in my life made me feel consciously different. I often told my friends that I was adopted because they thought it was cool that I had two birthdays – one celebrating my birth and the other my adoption. But whenever my parents or siblings mentioned adoption, I acted indifferent to the topic, thinking to myself, *“I’m grateful for my birthmother’s sacrifice, but I don’t really need to know anything else.”* Because of my indifference, my mom never brought my adoption up unless I did first.

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At around 15, I began to experience serious behavioral disorders, and my mom worried that I struggled with anxiety or depression. I felt empty, like something in my life was missing and always had been, but I didn’t want to acknowledge that. Subconsciously, I needed to fill the hole.

It was as if demons yelled at each other in my head, always fighting about how I wasn’t good enough and that my life was a mistake. I felt my subconscious admitting that I wasn’t the child my parents hoped for, that I wasn’t truly their own. I couldn’t stand what was happening in my own mind, and I took my frustration out on those around me through disobeying, arguing and creating problems. All positivity drained from my life. I began emotionally hurting those around me, because I was hurting inside. I became skilled at deception, lying about both trivial and monumental things in my life. My argumentative

behavior worsened, and I refused to listen to anything my parents had to say. I just wanted to be alone, so I couldn't disappoint anyone else. Worried, my mom consulted my dad, and together they prayed about what they should do. Eventually, they decided I would see a psychiatrist.

I found the experience at the doctor's to be weird, but I didn't mind his findings. I knew that something wasn't right inside of me, even though I pretended otherwise. I was tired of the demons fighting in my head, so I wasn't surprised when the doctor concluded that I was depressed. The doctor decided that medicine paired with therapy would have the best effect on my personality, emotions and behavior, and I was intrigued to see if he was right.

My mom was glad that she had confirmation of what she expected, but unsure about giving her growing son medicine daily. She sought out the advice of her friend who was a counselor. Her friend vehemently disagreed with the doctor and warned about the effects of medicine on developing adolescents, swaying my mom. When my mom shared this with my dad, they agreed the route to take would be counseling. So, throughout the remainder of high school, I attended counseling, yet the empty feeling inside of me continued to deepen and my behaviors continued to worsen.

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While my emotions were constantly fighting one another on the inside, I pretended that I was like any other high school guy on the outside. I played football at a small, private Christian school and enjoyed weekend gaming sessions with my closest friends. I chased after girls and played pranks on my teachers at school.

At some point, gaming with my friends turned into drinking and drinking turned into drugs. The reality of a child unaffected by adoption slipped further from the truth. My new addictions numbed the voices in my head, and although my depression worsened, my life seemed more bearable. With the help of drugs and alcohol, I didn't have to feel. It was as if the hole in my life disappeared.

By the time I graduated high school, my parents were ready for me to grow in maturity and go to college, seemingly unaware of my substance abuse. Like many people in Northeast Mississippi, I decided to go to the local community college with my friends. I tried my hardest to do what my parents wanted me to, to get better and to live without the help of drugs and alcohol, but this new freedom was overwhelming and enticing. I attended classes for a week or so before the demons in my head won out, and I fell slave to playing video games and doing drugs. At the end of the semester, with failing grades despite my intelligence, I dropped out of college. And though I perceived myself as a disappointment – that I wasn't what my parents wanted me to be – I couldn't change that no matter how hard I tried. I knew that whatever expectations my parents had when they adopted me, I failed to live up to them.

Devastated with my grades and decisions, my parents demanded that I get help for my addictions. My body shrunk down to bones, and my skin developed a yellow paleness. I was chaotic, missing family events and never calling home. I lied about everything, from grades to what I ate for lunch. Everything in my life was going downhill, and my parents couldn't help but notice. Rather than listen to their advice about help for my addictions, I decided to join the Army.

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“Perhaps going into the military is what Stephen needs to grow up,” my mom expressed to my dad, her worried maternal instincts giving away her false acceptance of my recent decision. “I hope so,” my dad somberly replied. “He sure needs to.” Anxiously my parents thought about my upcoming training and deployment, hoping for the best for me. I, on the other hand, wasn’t worried at all about my decision, knowing that this was exactly what I needed to get away from the demons of addiction and depression that held tight to me. I knew that if I could get away from this small town, my friends and my addictions, that I would be more than okay.

In early 2009, I left my family for basic training at Fort Knox. We gathered in Memphis, Tennessee, where I was sworn into the Army and bussed to Fort Knox, Kentucky – my home for the next eight weeks. As my family watched me drive off, I aimed to succeed. I wanted to overcome my personal demons and finally make them proud. I watched as they waved goodbye to me, scared but ready for this new phase of my life.

Every week or so, I took time to sit down and write my family a letter, sometimes one for my parents, and other times ones for my siblings. I was still struggling with my depression, but without alcohol and drugs, I was able to think clearly and succeed at the training before me. My commanders noted that I was doing exceptionally well, despite the harshness of the training, a compliment that I was eager to share with my family through a letter. I finally believed that my success and praise would make them proud of me. I was proud of myself.

After several talks with my superiors, I understood that they wanted to provide me with additional special training after I finished basic training– sniper training. For the first

time in my life, I realized that I was good at something and not a letdown. When I was on the range, and I nailed target after target, I knew that I was making my commanders and my parents proud of me. In my mind, each shot that I took brought me one step closer to being the child that my parents wanted. Although the training was difficult, I woke up each day excited to prove myself. I sensed my depression lessening with each correct shot and each praise from my commanders. I was finally receiving attention for something that I was good at. The remaining eight weeks passed slowly, but at graduation, I met my family with excitement, and for the first time since middle school, the demons in my mind felt at peace.

I watched the worry on my parents' faces dissipate when they saw me. I looked healthy and in control, a drastic difference from the skinny, pale boy that left them two months ago. My mom greeted me with a tight hug and tears in her eyes. My dad was also filled with joy as he admitted, "I am proud of you son."

For a few weeks, everything was at peace. Soon, I would be leaving for my new base and further training in Georgia.

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The counseling for my depression that I had in my youth was not enough to prepare me for military life. As I moved to Georgia and continued my training, life grew more difficult for me. Without a nearby support system, I struggled daily with depression and anxiety, and there was nothing that alleviated the pain like alcohol and drugs. I was in a new environment, with new friends and new freedom. Because I wasn't in basic training, my buddies and I were allowed off base for nights on the town. Quickly, I reverted to my

old ways of coping, often finding myself intoxicated and high. As weeks passed, the problem deepened.

My commanders noticed my addictions and to avoid having me dishonorably discharged, I was sent to the medical examiner. My mind was poked and prodded through neurological simulations to uncover discrepancies. Machines measured the chemicals produced in my brain. MRIs provided insight into my situation. I knew that I suffered from depression and addiction, but I didn't anticipate the results that the tests found. The main cause for my addictive tendencies and depression was a chemical imbalance in my brain, something that couldn't be fixed through counseling, but could be helped with medication. The commanders knew this imbalance would prohibit me from being successful in the Army and told me that if I could conduct myself properly for a few more weeks, that I would be honorably discharged from the military for mental health reasons. I was heartbroken. I came to Georgia on an emotional high, finally proud of myself and my accomplishments. Now, I faced news that destroyed me. I knew that by returning to my addictions, I let my commanders and my family down. I couldn't face the emotional trauma on my own. I needed to find relief.

I tried my hardest to make it a few more weeks until my dismissal, but the inner demons told me that I couldn't do it. I believed them and continued turning to the only thing that made me feel better – drugs. My depression ruled my life, and one night, I put a pistol to my head and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. My Army buddies knew what I was facing and had figured I might try to commit suicide. In my defeat, I took the gun apart to see what had gone wrong. They removed the firing pin without telling me.

I didn't want attention or pity, I just wanted out. Every night, I would leave the base in search of a new high. One night, I decided not to go back. A week and a half passed, and my commanders started looking for me.

~~~

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* An early morning phone call jolted my dad awake from his deep sleep in Mississippi. A sense of urgency rushed over my dad, and he instantly knew something was wrong with me. My commander on the other end of the line was asking my dad if he had heard from me, which he hadn't.

"Mr. Tybor, if your son doesn't return to the military soon, we will have to declare him AWOL. Are you sure you have no idea where he is?" the commander inquired, hoping to protect me from further consequences.

"Yes," my dad confidently replied. "But, I'm coming now. I'm going to find my son."

After ending the call, my dad felt God telling him to go and find me. My life needed to be saved. Briefly, my dad awakened my mother to disclose the situation at hand. Heartbroken, my mom encouraged my dad to leave quickly but to take with him several photo albums. She wanted to be sure that he could remind me of who I was – their son. Without an address or even a hint of where to look, my dad left the house, unsure if I was even alive.

He arrived in Georgia later that day and began his search, facing dead end after dead end. Just before night, when he was about to return to his hotel, my dad seemed led to a gas station just down the road.

I was there, behind the dingy building, inserting some new drug into my veins. I could barely stand up, my body bone-thin and weak from the abuse I made it endure. I had already attempted to overdose twice. Putting the gun to my head and pulling the trigger hadn't killed me, but I was determined to find a way. Through my bloodshot eyes, I looked up and saw the outstretched hand of my dad.

“Son,” he said, his mouth quivering in distress. “Son, it’s going to be okay. I love you. It’s going to be okay.”

With tears in his eyes, he sat down in the grass next to me and opened the photo albums from my childhood. I sensed his disappointment as we reminisced on my past life, but I could also sense his love. No matter how I had disappointed him, my dad meant his words. He loved me and simply wanted to remind me of that. On the brink of overdose again, I knew that my dad had saved me, and not a moment too soon. It was going to be okay.

A few days passed, and my dad encouraged me to return to my base in Georgia to avoid being declared AWOL. I promised to try to do better, to make it until I was medically discharged. As he left, I could tell he knew that I was better but not ready for the struggle ahead.

Within weeks, I was on the run again, this time as a fugitive. My first disappearance had been overlooked. The Army was not as forgiving the second time, declaring me AWOL. The police were after me. The commanders were looking for me. I didn't care. I just wanted to find my next high.

Once again, my commanders called my parents to see if they knew where I was hiding. This time, both of my parents came to Georgia to find me. They knew the

connections I had made and reached out to my roommate to see if I was still staying at the house. They warned her not to tell me that they were coming. When they arrived at the front door of the house I was staying at, I realized that they found me, and I snuck out the back door, hoping to escape the shame I thought I would face.

Immediately, my parents split up, hoping to catch me as I left. My mom reached me first. Her small stature grabbed a hold of mine, sobbing as she held on tight.

“Stephen! Oh, Stephen,” she cried out in relief despite the ragged condition I was in. I held my arms stiff at my side, waiting for her to let go, but she didn’t.

“Go home,” I quietly said, ashamed of my current situation. I felt empty and undeserving. Still refusing to let go, she looked up at me with love in her green eyes. Quickly, my dad caught up with my mom, and together, they convinced me to join them at Wendy’s for dinner.

As I ate my dinner, my mom secretly slipped a note to my father with the words, “Call the police.” Minutes later, I looked up as my commanders walked through the door. Instantly, I knew that my parents had called them.

“Oh, shit,” I spat out, angry at myself for placing my parents in such a difficult position and angry for being caught. When I looked up at my mom’s pained face, I immediately apologized for my harsh language. I know she didn’t deserve any anger.

Quietly, my commanders pulled up chairs next to me and asked how I was doing. Gently, they reminded me of my status as a fugitive. I knew the police were outside, and that my running was over. It was time to surrender. My commanders asked me to come willingly, so I wouldn’t have to be placed in handcuffs.

“Can I smoke one more cigarette before I go?” I nervously asked.

“Sure,” they generously replied, standing on either side of me and escorting me outside.

My mom joined me as I smoked my last cigarette, encouraging me that I would be okay, and that no matter what, she loved me. My dad went to speak to my commanders about the consequences to come. Because of the chemical imbalance in my brain, my commanders promised to remove the AWOL and dishonorable discharge from my record if I served my time in prison. As I finished my cigarette, my parents hugged me goodbye.

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In late 2010, I finished serving my time. The year in prison should have helped me to become clean and free of my addictions, but unfortunately, prisons are not substance-free like they claim. Occasionally, I was able to get high, keeping my addiction alive.

When my dad came to take me home, he informed me that the only way I could move back home and start a new life was to go to a rehabilitation center first. I believe that something within him knew that I was still struggling to overcome the demons in my mind. Hesitant, but without any other options available, I knew that this is what I had to do.

For the next four years of my life, I survived from high to high between rehab centers, which unfortunately, are also not substance free. Sometimes, between rehab centers, I was able to hold a job while living with my high school drug buddies. Finally, I found myself in jail again. The demons in my head controlled me, and I didn't want to let go of them because they helped me to live. After several rehab failures, thousands of dollars wasted, and me in jail again, my parents decided that they couldn't continue watching me kill myself. They gave me an ultimatum. I could go to a place called Teen Challenge after being released from jail, get my life together, and rejoin the family. Or, if I left jail and

didn't get clean, I would be cut off. For once in my life, I was alone, and I realized that I didn't want to be. I needed help.

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In September of 2014, I finished my jail time and left for Teen Challenge in Nashville, Tennessee. I was 24, and for the first time in my life, I knew that I wanted to get help, that I wanted to be better. This conscious decision of acknowledging my chemical imbalance and personally deciding that I could maybe overcome it wasn't something that I had experienced previously. In the past, it was always my parents who encouraged me to get rid of my addictions through rehab. Now, with no where else to go, I knew that I wanted to be better. I didn't want to run from my past and my pain, but I wanted to embrace it to build a better future for myself.

Rehabs used to teach me ways to cope with pain, but since they were filled with drugs, I combined various substance abuse methods with coping methods, leading me down an even darker path. But, Teen Challenge was different. Within days of being there, I knew that I could change and overcome my addiction, a hope that I hadn't sensed in a long time. On September 13, 2014, I decided that drugs weren't in charge of me and that the demons in my head only had the control over me that I gave them.

Uncharacteristic of my indifferent self, I began to question why I faced such harsh depression. Teen Challenge is the first place that I began to think about my birthmother as a potential factor of my mental health problems. The leaders shared with me that depression can be caused by the developmental years that children don't remember. With this information in mind, I wasn't seeking to know her; rather, I wanted to find myself and fix what was wrong with me. I realized that the hole in my life that I refused to acknowledge

as a young teenager was very real. I wasn't sure if the hole was my birthmother or the trauma I experienced as a child from being neglected. Or perhaps the hole was just a part of me. No matter how it came to be, I subconsciously tried to fill this hole with everything from drugs to alcohol to codependency. And then, I figured out that it is okay to have a hole. Simply acknowledging its existence helped me to learn to survive without help from harmful substances.

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It's been three years since I went to Teen Challenge and gained my freedom. After leaving Nashville, I found a job at a furniture company and surprised my parents by keeping it for a few years. I moved in with my friend again. His addictions haven't changed much in the past few years, but I manage to remain clean. I don't want to go down that dark path again. More recently, I've been visiting my family regularly, mending relationships with the older of my siblings and forming new ones with my younger ones.

I've come a long way, and I'm able to discern my addictive tendencies when they rise. For a while it was codependency before I realized that no one can fill the hole I have. Since then, I've decided that it's best to be on my own for a while, leaving the hole unfilled but always remembered. Knowing that there is void that I cannot fill with anything physical has helped me to cope with it, to learn to live with it and to not try to constantly fill it.

While I am finally beginning to feel okay with my life, this small town is suffocating. I've realized the need for a clean slate for a while now, and so I decided to do something about it. I applied for the position of a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer, filled out the paperwork and began the proper drugs tests, which all came back clean. I told my parents, and they were excited that I finally made this decision on my

own. They've been saying that I need to get out of this town for a while now. After the initial paperwork was processed, I received a call from the TSA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, only three hours from Zachary and our extended family in Buffalo, New York. I figure this is a good place to start over.

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I'm beyond grateful for my birthmother because she gave me the opportunity to be a Tybor. Looking back, I think when I was growing up, I was angry with her. Then I realized that happiness is a choice. It was beyond my control that she chose to give me up, but I know that her decision is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

I know for a fact that without adoption, I wouldn't be alive today. No other family on earth would have stuck with me through the life I lived. No one would have encouraged me to get better, prayed for me constantly and loved me unconditionally. I'm a Tybor, and I've always been one. Steve and Charmaine Tybor are my real parents, not a woman who gave me away. There's no desire in my heart to meet my birthmother or to even search for her. Maybe the hole in my life is my past that she holds, but even if it is, I'm okay to leave it empty.

While the effects my adoption and the neglect I faced as an infant play into the life I had, I am a firm believer that the person I am today is because of the choices that I made. The struggles that I endured are not a result of any one circumstance, but a combination of all the experiences that shaped my life. With my adoption and my life, not everything was as it should have been. Not everything in life is fair. Not everything you hope for becomes reality. But you have the choice to create your own happiness. You have the choice to

grow. You have the choice to dwell in the past or to create a new future. I'm choosing to do the latter.

## Zachary's Story

“I respect my birthparents’ decision to put me up for adoption.

But as far as, like, wanting to meet them,

I guess I just didn’t ever put much thought into it.

It was just one of those things like,

‘Yeah, I was adopted.’

I’ve always known, so it was never a big deal to me.”

– Zachary Tybor, Interview, December 26, 2017

## Indifference Is Okay

I've spent most of my life chasing after my dreams in hopes of turning them into reality. But, at 5 feet 8 inches, it's hard to create the reality of being a professional athlete. Still, that's what I aimed to do.

You see, academics has never been one of my strengths. I'd even go as far to say that it was my biggest struggle. The reality is that dyslexia doesn't make learning easy, especially when it's more than a mild case, like I have.

My mom says that dyslexia is a genetic disorder, and it's likely that I got it from my birthmother. Whether or not that's true, and my birthmother is to blame for my academic struggle and my athletic pursuit, I really don't care. The struggles I face are mine, and the successes I achieve are mine. Besides the fact that my birthmother gave me up to a loving family, she has no real relevance in my life.

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Although I don't really think about my birthmother, I know that her sacrifice was great, and I truly appreciate it. But you see, in all honesty, I don't think about my adoption much. I've heard the story of my adoption countless times, but it doesn't have a huge effect on me.

A year after my parents adopted Stephen, they began seeking another child through a private adoption. Although they had waited a long time to adopt Stephen, they still didn't want to use an agency. In early summer of 1992, their attorney reached out to them with news of another child, a baby boy. However, this time was different from the last, since the birthmother had not given birth yet. The attorney informed my parents that the baby boy

would be born within the next few weeks, and that if they agreed to adopt him, that they should begin preparing for him immediately.

“A newborn?” My mom smiled brightly, imagining herself holding the tiny baby, feeling the soft skin of a new infant, cradling the delicate head, and possibly even breastfeeding him. She was ecstatic at the thought of raising a baby boy from infancy. She turned to look at my dad and exclaimed, “Yes, Steve, we have to say yes. We’re going to have another son.”

Together, they prepared a nursery and decorated it in soft shades of blue. The crib. The rocking chair. The changing table. All sat perfectly in place, waiting to be used by a new baby. Every day, my mom sat by the phone and waited for the call saying they could go and get their new baby boy. And every night, she prayed to thank God that he allowed her to be a mom.

Finally, my parents received the phone call they had been waiting for.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* My mom rushed to answer, like she had done countless times before, hoping to hear the attorney say they could go and pick up their son.

“Charmaine,” the attorney spoke enthusiastically, “your baby boy has been born. You and Steve can go and get him.”

When my parents arrived at the hospital, the attorney passed their new baby boy into my mom’s arms. “Oh, Steve,” she softly spoke. “What are we going to name him?”

“How about Jordan Daniel after my mom’s brother.” By the weekend a baby shower was thrown in his honor to welcome him into the family!

That night Jordan joined the Tybor family, making my mom and dad parents for the second time. Unfortunately for my parents, I was not Jordan, and their joy of having a new baby would be short lived.

As it is with many private adoptions in New York State, there is a transition period of roughly 10 days. During this time, for whatever reason, the birthmother or adoptive parents can decide to cancel the adoption. While this rarely happens, it's not unheard of. However, my parents never considered this to be a possibility for them. Jordan was their son and always would be.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* It had been nine marvelous, yet crazy days since they had adopted Jordan. Two children kept my mom on her toes, but she loved every moment of it. *Ring. Ring. Ring.* My mom, who had just laid Jordan and Stephen down for naps, answered the phone in a hushed tone. "Hello, this is Charmaine. May I ask who is calling?"

"Hey, Charmaine," the attorney responded. "Are you with Steve? I have some news."

"Oh well, yeah, let me go and get him." My mom grabbed my dad by the arm, and pulled him into their bedroom. Turning the phone to speaker phone, she said, "We are both here. What did you need to tell us?"

"Unfortunately, I really, um, hate to do this to you guys, but, um, the birthmother has decided that she no longer wants to give her son up for adoption. She wants Jordan back."

The bed beneath my parents threatened to cave in as the air in the room disappeared. "No, she can't have him back," my mom cried out. "He's our son. She can't take him back."

Angrily, my dad cried out, cursing the pain and anyone who could hear him. “How could this happen?” He erupted. “It’s almost been 10 days. This isn’t fair.”

The attorney listened to their sobs, just as heartbroken as they were. The next day, Jordan, along with the gifts that were given, went back to his birthmother.

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My aunt came and took Stephen for the weekend so that my parents could go away to grieve alone. The emotional pain became physical, and my parent’s felt like someone was reaching into their chests and pulling out their hearts. For the next few weeks, my mom cried herself to sleep as my dad stared silently at the ceiling in the bed. “*How could life be so unfair?*” He demanded to know. “*No one should have to feel this pain. No one.*”

Slowly, the months passed, and my parents learned to enjoy life again and to be grateful for the son that they got to see every morning. They figured that when the time was right, they would be able to adopt another child.

In early 1994, the attorney came to my parents with news of another child, a baby girl. My parents were more reserved this time, knowing that without an agency, they could possibly lose the baby like they did with Jordan. Still, they agreed to adopt her.

On the day the baby girl was born, my parents enthusiastically headed to the hospital to welcome the newest member of the family. That’s when they got the phone call.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* My mom answered the large car phone only to hear the pained voice of the attorney.

“Oh no, what’s wrong” she asked, dreading the response.

“You guys should go home. The birthmother doesn’t want to, um, give her daughter away after all. I’m so sorry.”

Devastated, my parents turned their car around, and headed home to face an empty nursery once again.

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The adoption system had failed them. My parents needed a new solution, a safer one – one that ensured a child wouldn't be taken away from them again. A private adoption was no longer a safe option, like it was with Stephen, so they turned to an agency adoption.

In general, agencies maintained a much safer adoption path, meaning that they rarely told an adoptive family about a baby unless the birthparents had signed their parental rights away. After thorough research, my parents decided to start volunteering with a local pregnancy help center and adoption agency called SonRays Ministries. The center specialized in helping unwed, pregnant mothers make an educated choice about what their next step should be by either counseling girls if they chose to find homes for their babies and teaching them parenting skills if they chose to keep their babies. Satisfied that SonRays would provide a safe adoption, my parents decided that they needed to involve themselves with the ministry.

My parents knew that building a relationship with the ladies in charge, Alice and Cheri, would better their chance of becoming a potential adoptive family with SonRays. In summer of 1994, my parents started volunteering their time. They helped with fundraisers, event planning, and any other thing that Alice and Cheri asked of them.

By fall of 1994, my parents had captured the affection of Alice and Cheri. They decided it was time to put in their application as a prospective adoptive family. Alice and Cheri were thrilled to learn that their outgoing and involved volunteers wanted to become parents again. With everything in order, my parents prepared to wait again for a child.

In early February of 1995, roughly six months after submitting their adoption application, my parents received a phone call from Alice and Cheri. My mom listened as Cheri adamantly requested a meeting with the couple within the next few days regarding the status of their application. Worried about a potential disqualifier for adopting, my parents rapidly sought a time to meet with the women, settling on Valentine's Day.

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My parents walked into the pristine home that housed SonRays Ministries 15 minutes early for their meeting with Alice and Cheri. Quickly, another staff member ushered them into Alice's office, where they were surprised to see a baby napping in a play pen.

My mom gazed at the sweet, sleeping child, and then up to my dad. "Do you think this baby is why they called us here so urgently?"

Before he could answer, the two women entered the room – Cheri boisterous as usual with Alice following quietly behind.

"Hello dears," Cheri's bright eyes quickly discerned my parents questioning looks toward the sleeping newborn. "Oh no, that child isn't for you. I'm so sorry if you got your hopes up. He's just staying here until the paperwork is completed, and he can go to his new adoptive home."

Alice gently chimed in, silencing her usually louder counterpart. "But, we do have a surprise for you." She and Alice took their seats and motioned for my parents to do the same. "A birthmother has selected you to be the adoptive parents of her baby. She's due in at the end of March. Are you guys ready for a baby?"

The sun poured into the cozy office, matching the bright mood in the room. “Yes!” My mom exclaimed without even checking to confirm with my dad. “Yes, we are ready.”

Tears filled my dad’s eyes and overwhelming gratitude poured from his heart. He pulled my mom into a tight hug. They sat there in peace, knowing that this baby would be theirs and that nothing could change that now.

With an empty nursery already at home, my parents focused on buying decorations – which were all Winnie the Pooh – and countless new baby clothes. My mom spread the tiny outfits throughout the room, so she could remind herself that this was really happening, that she was really going to have a newborn.

On March 20, Alice and Cheri met my birthmother at the hospital to welcome me into the world. Immediately, the paperwork was signed, and my birthmother passed me into the nurturing arms of Alice.

At that same moment, my parents were eagerly waiting at SonRays Ministries for Alice and Cheri to arrive with me. For my parents, the minutes passed slowly, each feeling longer than the last. Plagued by the thoughts of the past two painful adoptions, my parents worried that this couldn’t be real, and that I would be taken away again; even though it was impossible. My birthmother had already signed away her parental rights.

Alice and Cheri finally arrived at the home of the ministry and passed me – 8.5 pounds and 20 inches long – to the open arms of my mom. Instantly, my parents knew that this was real. On that cloudy, cold March day in Buffalo, New York, I joined the Tybor family, making my mom and dad parents for the second time.

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As a newborn, I enjoyed eating. I slept soundly and for extended periods of time. I always loved to go to strangers, to be cuddled, or to simply sit when I was placed. I was content. And then I reached about four months old.

For reasons unexplained by doctors, I developed colic. Every day, around 4 p.m., I cried out with rage at the digestive pain in my stomach. My parents tried everything that they could. They rotated taking me for car rides. They changed the baby formula I used. They fed me at different times. Occasionally, I would calm for a half hour by being placed on a moving dryer. Most of the time, nothing eased my pain or my insufferable cries. My family struggled to find a solution, listening to my cries until I fell asleep around 7:30 p.m. My colic continued for four months, and then, one day, it just stopped.

Besides my struggle with intestinal discomfort, I maintained a happy and laidback demeanor as an infant, which followed me into my toddler years. As I hit my twos and threes, I developed into a short, round child with bright blue eyes and baby blonde hair. The combination of my chubby, tan body, my sharp features, and my raspy voice caused quite the impact on women around me. Ladies always held me, passing me from one to another. At family parties, I sat on everyone's laps and answered all the questions they asked. I loved being around people, and it didn't matter much to me about what was happening around me, so I tended to go with the flow.

This included playing with Stephen. Even though he was older than me by four years, he never treated me like I was smaller than he was. Like most older brothers do, Stephen picked on me relentlessly, but I didn't mind. I loved playing with him, wrestling with him, and getting in trouble with him. When I was two and Hannah came along, I knew

that it was my job as an older brother to always take care of her. No matter what she wanted to do – wrestling, dress-up, coloring – I joined her. We were the best playmates.

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When I was four, my family moved to Tupelo, Mississippi. With the transition away from family and into the unknown, my mom decided to homeschool Stephen and me. Even though I wasn't school-aged yet, I wanted to learn. I wanted to spend time with my big brother and my mom. The first year or so of my education mainly focused on interactive activities, such as coloring or watching informative videos. When I reached kindergarten, my mom decided that it was time for me to learn to read.

I sat down next to her on our green plaid couch, while she opened a bright picture book. I loved reading with my mom. She would read the most amazing stories of adventures, and I couldn't wait to be able to read on my own.

“Zachary,” she said. “Do you see this picture of a dog?”

“Yes,” I earnestly replied.

“Do you see the letters underneath the picture of the dog?”

“Yes, mom!”

“What do you think those letters spell, honey?”

I stared down at the three letters before me, wondering to myself if perhaps they spelled dog. “It would make sense,” I reasoned. But to me, the letters didn't look like they spelled dog.

“Umm, mom, I'm not sure.”

Patiently she encouraged me. “Why don't you try to sound it out like we've been practicing?”

“Okay, I can try that. Ba-ah-gh. B-au-gh. Bog. Is it bog, mom?” I looked up at her kind green eyes, hoping to see a twinkle signaling my correct response.

“That’s close! But, I don’t think that first letter is a ‘B’. Why don’t you try one more time?”

I stared at the letter I thought was a ‘B’. “If it’s not a ‘B’, then it has to be a ‘D’.” I smiled proudly at my new discovery. “I’m gunna get it right this time.”

“Da-ah-gh. Daugh. Dog. It’s dog, just like the picture mom!” I exclaimed, as a soft smile appeared on her face. We continued reading, but within a few minutes, I reached another confusing word with a ‘B’, and I struggled to read it. Gently, my mom helped through the situation, not dwelling on my mix up.

My favorite part of the day was playing outside. School was okay, but I didn’t have the easiest time reading or writing. But every afternoon, my mom would send Stephen, Hannah, and me outside to play. For hours, we would run around, playing tag, hide-and-seek, and other games. My favorite activities involved any type of ball – baseball, basketball, football, soccer. I loved them all. At nights, my dad taught my park and rec teams. My favorite was baseball. Even though I was only four, I excelled at hitting the ball from the tee, running the bases and sliding in the dirt. I loved being outside, playing ball and having fun. Every day, as I sat inside practicing my reading, I dreamed of being outside playing, where everything came naturally.

A few weeks passed before my mom started to become concerned with my continued reading struggle. Because I was never a difficult child, she knew that I wasn’t failing to learn out of spite or for attention. She knew that something else must be causing my inability, and she immediately began to search potential sources.

For weeks, everything she read pointed her in random directions. None of the potential causes seemed to fit my situation. Then, she picked up a book about dyslexia and noted that my challenges and behaviors all pointed to this learning disability.

She read: Many dyslexic children tend toward athletics and away from academics. She thought to herself, *“That explains his love for the outdoors and sports.”* She continued: They struggle with spelling and reading. *“Oh wow, that explains Zachary’s difficulty with reading and inability to differentiate ‘Bs’ from ‘Ds’.”* Astounded at the similarities, she kept reading: Many often have problems with becoming easily frustrated. She paused. *“Hmm, Zachary’s complacent personality hadn’t pointed to this symptom yet, but everything else does. I just know that he has dyslexia.”*

After my mom pieced these things together, she consulted my father about her concerns. Because I was so young, they decided to hold off on having me officially tested for dyslexia. They also chose to continue schooling me at home to encourage my academic advancement at my own pace. This way, my mom could focus extra time on the areas that I struggled with, like English, and less on the areas I understood, like math. I didn’t mind their decision as long as I could still have long hours to play outside in the afternoons and play sports with the park and rec teams.

In third grade my parents had me tested with a pediatric neurologist in Memphis, TN and the diagnosis was confirmed – dyslexia. They got a 2nd opinion with another pediatric neurologist in Birmingham who, did more extensive testing and helped them to put together a treatment plan.

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Halfway through my fourth-grade year at home, my mom began to have some medical problems and decided that it was necessary to send Hannah and me to school. Stephen had started attending a local, private Christian school a year prior, and my parents decided that Hannah and I should join him.

Despite my dyslexia, which doctors had officially diagnosed me with a few years prior, I entered the fourth grade at the same time as children who were the same age as me. However, my parents knew the challenges of a classroom would be more than they were at home, so they decided to enlist the help of a trained professional, Mrs. Tina Finch. Twice a week, for an hour a day, I would meet with Mrs. Tina and she would spend that time teaching me a new way to process the information my brain was receiving because Dyslexia is a processing disorder of the brain. Slowly, she helped me through my struggles. She provided my teachers with instructions for testing and giving notes – both things I struggled with. Copying notes often resulted in intense frustration because I misspelled words and fell behind. I couldn't complete timed tests before the time ran out because I couldn't read the problems and understand them. Every day I struggled with academics. But with each new problem, I threw myself into my athletic pursuits. My struggle in the classroom pushed me to my success on the field.

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Sometimes in school, I would tell my friends that I was adopted because I thought it was cool. Most of the time people wouldn't believe me, which I loved because then I would pretend to be from an exotic location, like the Bermuda Triangle, and attempt to convince the other person of my crazy story. Sometimes I succeeded.

While I thought adoption was neat and it was cool to mess with my friends, it didn't really matter to me that I was adopted. I never wondered about my birthmother or about the life I may have had or whether I struggled academically because of her. I simply didn't care. Besides, people often didn't believe me when I said that I was adopted. I look like my parents. I act like my parents. Most of the time, I eventually had to get my parents to explain to my friends that I really was adopted. So many people were amazed because my looks – light eyes, tan skin, blonde hair – favored my mom and my passion for sports reflected my dad.

As I was growing up, I always felt like my mom and dad were my real parents. I was never told that I was adopted; like my siblings, I just always knew I was. Sure, as a young child, I'd get in trouble and spit cruel words at my parents, saying, "You're not my real parents." But beyond disliking discipline, I rarely thought about or mentioned my birthmother or adoption unless Hannah or Stephen did. I was comfortable with the fact that I was adopted, but also comfortable in my identity as Tybor.

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When middle school hit, I wished for puberty to bring me height. I had been short in elementary school and desperately wanted to be tall to further compete in the field of athletics. Unfortunately, as my face started to grow hair and my voice deepened, my body only sprang up a few inches. I was about 5'6, medium weight, but ready to play.

Every day after class, I headed with my friends to practice. Sometimes it was for football and others for baseball. Honestly, it didn't matter much what sport I played, and long as I had something to play.

Throughout my middle school, I strived to become one of the top athletes at the small school I attended. I went to work out daily. I hung out with my teammates. I arrived first to practice and stayed longer than the others. It didn't matter to me that I couldn't achieve high marks in the classroom because I achieved excellence with my hands and my body.

"Tybor," my coaches would affectionately call me. "You gotta keep your grades up to play."

"Yes, sir, Coach. I know," I would confidently reply. I knew that while I struggled with my classes, that I couldn't afford to lose my chance to play. So, each day after practice, I studied. And, twice a week, I spent an hour with Mrs. Tina.

Although I was small in middle school, my diligence with practice enabled me to join the varsity teams early. By the time high school arrived, I already held a prominent role on the football team and baseball team.

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While I didn't think of my adoption or birthmother much growing up, my time in high school and college changed that. The complacent, laid back attitude that I carried as a child developed into a more passionate display of whatever emotion I felt. Perhaps this was partially due to my struggle with dyslexia. However, I think it related more to my desire to fit in with my friends.

As I realized as my athletic talent increased, so did my invitations to attend parties and other social gatherings. I started to measure how successful I was on the field with my popularity off the field. I attended every party that I could, enjoyed alcohol, weed and cigarettes, and in doing so, I turned myself into someone I wasn't.

I never let my partying affect my ability to play, but it was around my junior year when I noticed that my birthmother became more relevant to me. I would come home from practice to my home where my mom would greet me with a hot plate of dinner.

“Zachary, how was practice?” she asked. “Do you have any homework or studying to do?” She looked at me, trust never wavering from her eyes.

“No,” I always shortly replied. “I’m gunna go hang out, umm, with some friends, if that’s okay?” I knew that I was lying to her, but I didn’t care.

“Are you sure, Zach?” my dad would ask, not quite as easy to convince as my mom.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Within an hour or so, I was back out the door and headed for another crazy night with my friends.

Of course, a crazy lifestyle can’t stay hidden for long, and when my parents noticed my bad habits, they grew increasingly worried, especially after Stephen’s poor choices.

“Zachary,” my mom softly spoke to me. “We’re worried about you. We know you haven’t been hanging out with the right crowd, and we don’t want you to get caught up in things that could hurt your future.”

I could see the tears fill her eyes, as she poured out her love for me. But all I sensed was negativity and babying. “*She doesn’t understand,*” I thought to myself. “*How could she? It’s not like she’s my real mother. I bet if I stayed with my birthmother, my life wouldn’t be so restricted.*”

I refused to admit these thoughts about a difference to anyone, because I hardly dwelled on them. Even so, I didn’t want to live by my parents’ rules anymore. I felt controlled and I was tired of it.

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For the next few years, I ran. I wanted to be my own person. I graduated high school, and went to a local community college for a few years. I stayed close with my friends from high school, enjoying parties on the weekends and managing to maintain most of my grades.

I was unable to play sports there, so a few years later, I transferred to Bethel College in Tennessee where I was a red shirt on the baseball team. For the next year, I practiced and worked to play on the team, but I didn't make it. When I realized that I wouldn't get the chance to play, I decided to move closer back home.

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I wasn't proud of the lifestyle that I had been living, and I knew that I wanted a change – a change in scenery, in friends, and in life. I approached my dad about the topic one afternoon a few months before my graduation.

“Dad, do you think that Provia would hire me?” I asked. For the past few summers, I had worked at the siding plant my dad managed in Booneville, Mississippi. I had thought about relocating to Ohio where Provia's headquarters were located.

“Zach, of course. They love you down at the plant. I would love to let the other leaders know that you are looking for a job.”

“I know that, umm, I need to get out of this town. I want a chance to start over, to have new friends and a new identity. I'm sick of the person that I am.”

Tears filled his brown eyes as he looked into my blue ones. “Zach, I am so proud of you. I always have been and always will be. No matter what. Making this decision to move and to start a new job is a mature one. I hope that it helps you grow up.”

In December of 2016, at 22 years old, I completed my associate's degree in business. One month later, with a job offer in hand from Provia to work in the warehouse, I packed up my belongings and moved to Ohio to begin again.

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It's been a year since I moved to Dover, Ohio, and began my life over. In such a short amount of time, so many things have happened. Initially, I started off working with a large crew during the daytime, but since then, I have been switched to a two-man, night crew shift. I don't love it, but I'm making good money.

On my journey from being easy going to becoming selfish to finding myself, I discovered who I was – a child of God. When I finally decided to surrender my life to Jesus, I realized how crazy I was to assume that my parents were overbearing. I saw the reality that they simply wanted to protect me. I know that life with my birthmother would have been vastly different, and that if I had been allowed to freely access the harmful lifestyle that I enjoyed, I would not be thriving as I am today.

Adoption was not that important to me growing up, except when I wanted things to only go my way. I never felt the desire to search for my birthmother. I never wanted to know more. In regard to adoption, I was like the content infant version of myself – happy with simply going with the flow. As I have matured and learned more about myself, I am still content with my decision to remain in the dark about my adoption. I am not searching for answers because I am not missing anything. I don't want to know my birthmother because I already have my mom and my dad. Perhaps the greatest effect that adoption has had on my life is the calling that I now feel to adopt. It's like the Bible says in James 1:27,

“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (KJV).

My journey through life has been largely uneventful, especially in relation to adoption. Sure, I may have struggled with academics and excelled at athletics because of my DNA makeup, but my experiences, decisions, failures and successes are 100 percent me, which is 100 percent Tybor.

## Hannah's Story Part 1

“As He also says in Hosea,

‘I will call Not My People, My People, and she who is Unloved, Beloved’.”

Romans 9:25 (HCSB)

## Where the Road Begins

There was never a definitive moment in my childhood when I remember my parents sharing that they adopted me. This was simply a fact that I always knew, like the sky gets dark at night and Mississippi summers are hotter than the pits of hell. My being adopted just was.

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I was born on February 18, 1997, in Buffalo, New York, and within a few short days, I passed from the embrace of my birthmother to the eagerly awaiting arms of my mom.

My mom had always dreamed of having a little girl, but God had already blessed her yearning for children with two blonde-haired, rowdy boys. Never did she imagine that her secret desire of pink bows and ruffled tutus would become a reality. But on that crisp, frigid February day, one young woman's selfless sacrifice would soon fulfill another woman's most precious longing for a daughter.

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On February 22, 1997, four days after my birth, my soon-to-be family was spending the day at New Covenant Tabernacle Church, practicing for the upcoming Easter passion play.

I've heard the story a thousand times, and each time the picture grows more dramatic in my head. My dad was cast as Jesus, his dark hair and medium skin combined with his intense passion were complementary to the part. It had been a long day, and the

actors had finally reached the scene of Jesus dying on the cross, when the sympathetic and understanding women from SonRays Ministries, Alice and Cheri, arrived at the church.

Quickly, Cheri, a witty brunette, left Alice, her opposite in personality and appearance, to wait in the car as she sought out my parents. My Aunt Chrissy, who was also in the play, intercepted her as she searched for my parents and asked Cheri why she was at the church. Without providing much background, Cheri replied, "I'm looking for Steve and Charmaine." Something in her dancing eyes told my boisterous aunt that they had a surprise.

Flipping her curly blonde hair, my Aunt Chrissy jokingly exclaimed, "Tell me you have a little girl with dark hair in the car for them!" Cheri, usually not one to suffer from a loss of words, almost fell to the ground at Chrissy's mocking prediction but managed to say, "Ah, no, we need to talk to them about T-shirts for the Walk-A-Thon." With that, my Aunt Chrissy pointed Cheri in the direction of the sanctuary where my parents were.

Just as Cheri arrived at the sanctuary, my dad walked out. She grabbed him by the arm and called out to my mother, "You guys have to come outside with me." Although Cheri's voice expressed urgency, my parents stressed that they had to be on the stage in one minute for their scene. Cheri hurriedly said, "It will only take one minute," before going on about special T-shirt sizes for the Walk-A-Thon. My parents fell for her story and followed her out the door where the patient Alice was waiting in the car.

Upon seeing the group approach, Alice jumped out of the car and went to the trunk. She opened it, and a pink "It's a girl!" balloon floated out. My dad stared in disbelief at the symbol, while my mom pointed at herself as if to say, "Is this for us?" Alice and Cheri smiled and nodded in confirmation, bringing both of my parents to tears. Completely

forgetting the freezing cold, my crying parents hugged each other close, unable to contain their joy.

My parents were being blessed with another child, a brown-haired daughter, just like Aunt Chrissy joked. Five days later, on February 27, I joined the Tybor family, making it complete.

I added a level of excitement that my parents had not experienced with their boys Stephen and Zachary, even as a baby. The house filled up with pink balloons, pink gift bags, pink blankets and pink dresses, bows, and shoes. Plush stuffed animals and dolls replaced the toy cars and Legos previously strewn across the floors. My delicate, 6.3-pound body required numerous feedings throughout the night, so much so that my mom took to cuddling with me in her bed. Since I slept cuddled next to her, my white bassinet sat empty in the corner of the room, but my mom was sure to drape a soft pink blanket over the edge as a constant reminder that she finally had a daughter.

While I was surrounded by doting brothers and a captivated dad, I developed into a momma's girl. Even from an early age, our connection went beyond a typical mother-daughter relationship. Whenever my dad would hold me, tears would pour as I begged for my mother's arms again. It became such a challenge that my mother would have to leave the room just to give my dad a chance to bond with me. Yet, the moment I saw her bright green, welcoming eyes and soft, caring smile, I demanded to be placed into her open arms.

This closeness delighted her after desiring a daughter for so long. The years of little boys' clothes, mud puddles and bugs excitedly turned into pink princess dresses and endless bows. Of course, I, filled with an incredible sense of individualism, refused to enjoy the frills of elaborate headbands and large bows as much as my mom and pulled each of

them out. To say that I was independent with a strong personality might be an understatement. However, much to my mom's pleasure, I was a girly-girl in all other ways. Throughout my toddler and early childhood years, dolls and their clothes covered the floors and at least three bags full of accessories accompanied me wherever I went. Costumes and glitter were a regular part of my daily clothing choices as was wearing varying shades of a single color, despite my mother's gentle yet wistful suggestions of wearing something that matched. Eventually, she surrendered the clothing battle, much to my happiness.

Time passed and much changed. My family moved to Tupelo, a small town in Northeastern Mississippi, when I was two. A change of scenery, a new accent and new friends invaded our lives. As I grew older in this quiet town, my personality began to develop. Shyness never encroached upon me as a child; in fact, I thrived when surrounded by others.

My confidence and tendency to lead often turned into unwavering desire to fit in with my older brothers. I wanted to be just like them, sometimes trading my beloved baby dolls for imaginary spy games and intense wrestling matches. Rough-housing and strength declared superiority among the siblings, and my small size was a disadvantage. However, I played my strengths and with a bold voice and unwillingness to back out of wrestling matches, I secured my position as one of my brothers.

In my preteen years, I developed my dad's personality – outgoing, witty and tenacious. I already possessed his dark hair and brown eyes, a similarity in appearance that implied a biological connection. The uncanny resemblance resulted in my mom lovingly calling me my dad's "mini me." I loved being likened to his bold personality and striking appearance and enjoyed seeing other's surprise at my declaration of being adopted. At a

time when most kids grew apart from their parents, I began to cultivate very unique relationships with each of my parents. The similarities between my dad and me drew us together in an overwhelming way. We enjoyed countless father-daughter dates and endless fun. While my dad was bold, my mom favored a softer personality. She often showed me the gentleness that I sometimes lacked. Her light hair and bright green eyes were a stark contrast to my darker features, though many people often stated that we had similar facial structures. The differences in personality and appearance between my mom and me did not pull us apart, rather they brought us together. Our relationship evolved from the close connection of my infancy to an even deeper connection built on trust, understanding and friendship.

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I had a rudimentary understanding of the concept of adoption as a child, and as a result, it played a minimal role in my early development. I understood that my entrance into my family was different than biological children into theirs, but I never really focused on that difference. I didn't consider the fact that adoption meant my birthmother gave me away because she couldn't take care of me or that she didn't want me. Furthermore, I never took the time to think that adoption might have any effect, other than a positive one, on my life.

To me, adoption was simply the means of my parents having children, and although we were not connected by the blood running through our veins, we were a family. With this knowledge in hand, although a much more trivial version of it at the time, I adjusted well into my family – just as I assumed biological children did to theirs.

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At about the age of 14, my parents approached my brothers and me about the prospect of adding more children to our family through adoption. There was a group of siblings that needed a home, all of them around our age. Even more important was that two of them were girls. I would have sisters! The possibility thrilled me and then disheartened me when the plans fell through.

However, it was this instance that lit a flame in my heart to know more about my past. I was curious about where I had come from, and for the first time, I asked my mom for information. A look of understanding spread across her face, and it was as if she had been waiting for this exact moment to happen. Zachary and I were sitting on the tan living room couch when she said she would be right back and went upstairs. Nervousness filled me in anticipation of the answers that I might find. Several long minutes passed before she came back down, her arms were filled with files – one for me and one for Zachary.

She paused a moment before handing out the files, gently saying, “Your birthmothers were beyond courageous and loving in the sacrifice that they made when placing you for adoption.” Her green eyes were filled with love as she shared, “Your dad and I will help you once you’re 18 if you would like to search for your birthmothers through legal means, like registering with New York State.” With that, she handed Zachary and me our files.

Hands trembling, I opened the pink folder to reveal all the documents pertaining to my adoption from amended birth certificates to court fees to letters with pictures that my mom had sent my birthmother. And then, I saw what I was searching for – a sheet with minimal non-identifying information about my birthmother and my birthfather. That day,

I learned ages and brief medical histories, and I began to seem whole, realizing in that moment that perhaps I had been missing something. I saw the love and respect that my mom had for my birthmother. This created a foundation for the loving and respectful feelings that I developed and formed toward my birthmother. But most importantly, I was satisfied with what I knew, mainly because I didn't know what I was searching for. Content, I subconsciously moved on with my life.

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It was in the early part of November of 2013, my junior year in high school, when my quiet, content life changed dramatically. Clouds speckled the otherwise sunny sky and a stillness filled the air in my mom's blue minivan. Our closeness revealed itself as I anticipated that she needed to say something from her quiet, still demeanor. Earlier that morning, I heard hushed tones in my parent's bedroom, but after a moment of eavesdropping, I concluded that since my name wasn't mentioned, and the tone didn't seem serious, that the matter didn't involve me.

My mom causally approached the topic while we were driving down Main Street in Tupelo. As we stopped at a red light, her soft, green eyes glanced my direction.

"Hannah, how do you feel about our family adopting again?" she asked, going on to explain that there was a little boy in Taiwan who needed a home.

After listening to as much information as I could handle, I cried out in excitement, "Yes, we have to adopt him!" Ever since the last possibility of adopting fell through, I had imagined having younger siblings, even though my heart's secret longing was for a sister.

My parents worried about bringing only one child into our family, since Stephen and Zachary were already out of the house, and I was a junior in high school. They decided

to let another local family with a son around the boy's age adopt him. I was devastated that the adoption plans fell through again.

However, within an hour of my family's decision, our pastor, Chad Grayson, called my dad and presented him with a portfolio of two Taiwanese girls, ages 8 and 10, who needed a home. My mom and I were enjoying lunch at one of our favorite places, Sweet Pepper's Deli, when my dad called with the information that he had received. Listening to their conversation, I picked up on the rough lives that they had as orphans, transferring from foster care to children's homes to birthparents. My heart broke for the pain that they had endured. As soon as my mom hung up the phone, I begged for my parents to consider adopting them.

My mom called the number for New Beginnings Adoption Agency that was handling the girls' adoption. I waited in anticipation to hear what additional information we would discover. "We have to make our decision about adopting them by tomorrow at 4 p.m.," my mom explained to me after hanging up with the adoption agency, a sense of hesitancy filling her voice. The girls' paperwork was scheduled for transfer to another agency in the United States to increase their chances of being adopted. She was already dialing my dad's number to fill him in on the information.

Later that evening, my parents asked Zachary and me our opinion on adopting the girls. Confidently, I replied, "We have a home and those two little girls don't. Why shouldn't they share ours?" With my and Zachary's approval and with further consideration, my parents signed the first document and began the process of adoption the next morning.

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I was thrilled with the decision to adopt again. I knew that having sisters would be amazing. As my head filled with thoughts about sharing clothes and secrets, I thought back to our family's last attempt at adoption and the effect it had on my life. Once again, my birthmother popped into my head.

My two Taiwanese sisters came into my mind. *"How strange it must be to know your birthparents, to know that they are never allowed to take care of you again, and to be given new parents in an entirely new country,"* I thought to myself. I couldn't believe how painful that must be. I wondered if they would one day want to return to Taiwan to reunite with their birth family.

The prospect of their potential return led me to think about a reunion with my own birthmother. *"It may never be possible,"* I argued with myself. *"But even if I don't find any answers, I need to at least try to find her."*

My family's decision to adopt again turned the flame in my heart for answers into a fire.

## The Tybor Family's Story

“It blows my mind that there are people in America, and around the world,

who would be good parents,

that would provide a safe, clean home, and yet,

the paperwork, and the people trying to make money,

and the delay stop them from adopting.

It shouldn't take two and half years to adopt kids.

It just shouldn't.

That's roughly 10 percent of the child's life spent waiting for a family.

We are better than this as people.”

– Stephen Tybor III, Interview, November 25, 2017

## Love Makes a Family

*Elise*

It was a day like any other day at the Children's Home in Taichung, Taiwan – dreary and full of loneliness. But it wasn't a typical loneliness. It was one felt by hundreds of children whose parents loved drugs and abuse more than them. It was abandonment.

The days all ran together because of the strict routine. Each day, I was pulled out of my bed at 5 a.m. to do chores before being sent out the door for school at 7:30 a.m. Then, every hour, I switched from one class to another with a short recess in between. At 4:00 p.m., I was sent back to the Children's Home, my home, where I completed more chores, homework and cooking until it was time for bed. Every day the same thing. Every day the same loneliness.

I guess the feeling wasn't as bad for me as it was for others because I had Emma. Since we left our birthparents four years ago in November of 2009, we had only been in the same foster home once, and even then, it was only for two weeks before I was moved somewhere else. But a little over a year ago, in August of 2012, we were both moved to the Children's Home. I was excited to be together, but also worried because of our ages. When I was little, I had hopes of being adopted, of being wanted. But we were older now. Who could ever want us?

“Someone wants us?” I asked, certain that my teacher from the Children's Home was lying to me. “Both of us?”

~~~

It was late December of 2013, and I was 10. My dark, coarse hair hung past my shoulders and down my slender body. My deep brown eyes were wide and bright, giving the impression that I was younger than my age. Emma was eight, almost nine. Her face was round like a young child, and her eyes were soft and big like a baby animal. Her silky-smooth hair and small figure kept her from looking no older than seven. Despite our young appearances, we were older than most of the children being adopted, and yet, somewhere half-way across the world, in a place called Mississippi, a family wanted us. I couldn't understand what I was hearing, but I thought maybe that it was too good to be true. My teacher reassured Emma and me that it wasn't, and that we were getting a family.

“Emma, we're gunna have a mom, dad, brothers, and sisters. A family!” I exclaimed, completely overwhelmed that someone wanted me. Emma's eye lit up with excitement, but I could see a flash of fear in them. I sensed her worry, and of course, I was worried about moving to America and leaving my home behind too, but someone wanted me! And they wanted Emma! I could feel the pain of abandonment being soothed by the feeling of being wanted. We finally had a family.

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*Zachary*

I sat anxiously next to Hannah and my parents. The room was quiet, and my parents fidgeted nervously, their hands interwoven. While my family sat around me and prepared for this life-altering moment, I thought to myself that these two girls wouldn't change much of my life. *“I'm already out of the house and on my own. I'm glad that we are adopting these girls, but it's not like we are going to be as close as I am with Stephen and Hannah.”*

The clock was ticking slowly. It was almost 9:00 p.m. on December 11, 2014. On the granite kitchen countertop sat a black iPad, propped up so that we could all see the screen. As the long-awaited moment approached, I thought back to the day my parents asked me about adopting again.

They sat Hannah and me down on the olive-green couch in our living room. Stephen was away at Teen Challenge, too busy overcoming obstacles of his own to be involved in this family decision. It appeared that Hannah already knew the situation as they filled me in on the phone calls they had received about Taiwanese orphans. I listened silently, understanding that this addition to our family would mean change. I could see the excitement on their faces as they asked for my opinion. Figuring that if this was what my parents wanted to do, I agreed with their decision to adopt because I thought it would hardly affect my life.

Since then, the past few months had been filled with confusion – mixed up paperwork, prolonged court sessions and little information. We had been waiting for this day to come for months. Now it was finally here. We sat in silence as the minutes ticked slowly by.

8:52 ...

8:53 ...

8:54 ...

8:55 ...

In typical Tybor family fashion, we linked hands to pray. My dad calmly smiled at my mom before he bowed his head and asked God for peace to overwhelm us and for a bond to form between us. I could sense everyone's worry, but for the most part, I was at

ease. To me, the reality of two more sisters hasn't set it. The clock on the stove switched to 9 p.m. Half way across the world in Taiwan, a clock switched to 11 a.m. on December 12.

*Ding.* The Skype app on the iPad chimed to tell us of an incoming call from the ChungYi Adoption Agency. The room was quiet enough to hear our hearts beat. Confidently, my dad tapped the "Accept" button, and the image of two small Taiwanese girls appeared on the screen.

"They exist," my mom whispered to us. "They're more than a picture; they're real." She smiled radiantly at them. My dad was beside himself, exclaiming to the rest of us, "They're adorable." Hannah sat still, but excitement shone on her face. I could tell that she was beyond ready to have sisters after growing up with two older brothers.

I stared at them in wonder, as my previous indifference to their adoption disappeared. As they giggled nervously, I realized that I had been wrong about how they would impact my life. I knew that from this moment forward, our family wouldn't be the same.

As the call continued, I watched the nervousness go away from everyone's faces. I eagerly listened as Elise, who was 11 at this time, did all the talking. She reminded us of a protective mama bear. Emma, who was almost 10, pretended to be shy, but her big personality couldn't help but shine through. "*These are my sisters,*" I wondered to myself. "*I'm sure I won't be as close with them as I am with Stephen and Hannah, but these two girls are still my sisters.*"

Every time my dad made a funny gesture, they smiled at each other before giggling. They wore matching yellow outfits that resembled a sweat suit. Blue trim outlined the

collar and the sleeves. Curious about the clothes, my mom asked, “Do you guys always wear matching outfits?”

We listened as the translator Julia repeated the question to Elise and Emma in Mandarin. Elise laughed, while Emma blushed before responding to Julia. The young, cheerful woman then repeated back to us in English, “No, these are their school uniforms. They are at school right now.”

My dad looked at the bright yellow color of the clothes, and then picked up a banana with almost a matching color. In a large, dramatic gesture, he held it to his ear and pretended to talk on the phone. Although the clothes and the banana weren’t related, Elise and Emma giggled endlessly at his foolishness. Emma spoke, and Julia repeated to us that she said, “He has good humor.” We laughed as a family at the translation of Emma finding my dad funny before the conversation transitioned to something new.

When the Skype call ended an hour later, talking filled the room. We repeatedly recalled what happened and the things the girls said. Overall, there was a peace that filled the room because we knew that we made the right decision by choosing to adopt again. Seeing their faces and having a conversation formed the first bonds of a new family. I was surprised that the language barrier didn’t restrict our connection, rather, it seemed to increase the smiles and laughs that we shared.

I knew that my life would be drastically different when they finally arrived in America. Unlike Hannah, who was awaiting the day she would join my parents in getting the girls from Taiwan, I opted out of the long plane trip because of college and a fear of flying. However, after seeing their beaming faces on the screen of the iPad, I couldn’t wait to meet my new sisters in person.

~~~

*Emma*

*Beep.* The computer screen in front of me went black. The dirty white walls of the small room couldn't contain the electric atmosphere. Unsure about what had just happened and how I felt about it, I looked up at Elise and then to the translator, Julia, and then to the social worker in the room. Elise's soft, round face lit up with excitement, while the older women in the room seemed content.

*"I just saw my new family,"* I thought to myself. *"How weird."* I wanted to sit and talk with Elise about all we had seen and heard. I needed to share with someone that would understand how I felt, but my school teacher promptly marched into the room and ushered Elise and I back to our classrooms. My stern teacher figured that a new family shouldn't stop learning.

I entered the large classroom and faced the other 29 students. My friends looked up at me to see how it went, but no one said a word. No one wanted to risk getting in trouble. I took my seat at desk number 21, because I was student number 21 in class, not Emma.

While, my teacher began instructing us on math, my attention turned to the Skype call. *"My new dad's crazy. He's so silly, holding a banana to his ear for no reason. And my new mom, she seems nice. I've never had a brother before, so I'm kinda nervous about that, but I'm excited for another sister."*

I stared at the white board in front of me, while my teacher wrote out a complicated math problem. *"My new dad did say we could talk about getting a dog. I've always wanted a dog! And, they have two cats. The fat orange one is so cute! What was his name again? Hmmm ... Dorito?"*

I continued to daydream about meeting Dorito and playing with my new puppy, when I faintly heard my teacher calling, “Number 21. Number 21, do you know the answer to this math problem?” Slowly, I turned my thoughts back to the lesson before me, waiting anxiously to talk to Elise about her feelings later.

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### *Charmaine*

It was March of 2015, almost two years since we began the process of adopting my two new daughters. It had been a couple of months since we had received an update from the agency or had a Skype call with Elise and Emma. Fear that something wasn't right overcame me. We were all trying to be patient, but when we began the process, our agency told us that adopting the girls would take approximately nine months to a year. We had long surpassed this time frame, and we had no information as to why. Like so many times before, we were stuck waiting, and I was unsure of why. I wanted answers.

On one chilly March morning, I received a text message from our partner Amanda at New Beginnings Adoption Agency. My heart stopped at the words, “Please call me.” Immediately, I dialed her number and waited to greet her.

“Hello, this is Charmaine. You said to call you. Is something wrong?” I stopped myself from asking more questions even though I was filled with worry. I couldn't stand for any other obstacles to separate me from my girls.

“Nothing's wrong,” Amanda replied. “You have a travel date, and it's in two weeks!” I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

“Two weeks?” I asked, before the realization of what Amanda said hit me. “Two weeks! I’m going to get my daughters in two weeks!” Amanda promised to send more information along shortly, while I called Steve to share the news with him.

*Ring. Ring.* Tears of joy filled my eyes as I waited from him to pick up the phone. It was early, only 6 a.m., but I knew he would answer. “We have a travel date!” I exclaimed as soon as he picked up the phone.

“A travel date!” he exclaimed. I could hear joy fill his voice, as he shared in long-awaited excitement. Our two-year wait was almost over. I listened as he typed on his laptop, booking tickets and planning the agenda.

After hanging up with him, I realized that Hannah needed to be told. “*It’s so early,*” I thought to myself. “*But, I can’t wait.*” I burst into her room cheering, “Two more weeks, Hannah! Two more weeks!”

Still half asleep, she groggily responded, “Two more weeks until what?”

I cheered again, exclaiming, “Two more weeks until we go to Taiwan and bring home our girls!”

With that news, Hannah was out of her bed and cheering right alongside me.

~~~

*Elise*

It was mid-March of 2015, and I had known for a few weeks that my new family would be coming to get me soon. I wanted to go to America with them because I hated my life at the Children’s Home, but I didn’t want to leave my friends from school behind.

Although I lived in an orphanage, at my school, I was popular. I loved my friends. During our 10-minute breaks from class, we would play games like hide-and-seek in the

school yard. And even though I wasn't super interested in boys, my long hair and big eyes attracted the cutest boy in class, which made a lot of other girls jealous.

*"How can I make new friends if I don't speak English? America is going to be so different from here."* I argued with myself that everything would be okay, and that even if I didn't make new friends, I would at least have a family.

Life at the orphanage had gotten worse than it was when I first arrived. I used to live with girls my age, but since the orphanage teachers needed more space for younger girls, they moved me to living with girls much older than me. My roommates were all 13 or older, and I was only 11. Often, they treated me like trash. They picked on me and made me do chores or work for them. I hated living with them because they were mean, and because I was no longer with Emma.

As I prepared to move to America, to eat new foods and go to a new school, I focused on the fact that Emma and I would be together, and that I would have a family. Leaving my friends wouldn't be fun, but at least my life would be better.

~~~

*Hannah*

The obnoxious ring of the alarm clock jolted me awake. From a fuzzy haze, I forced my body to roll out of the bed, jet lag begging me to stay under the warm covers. After a moment, my brain registered what day it was: April 13, 2015. Excitement spread from my head to my toes, energizing my sleep-deprived body. Quickly, I dressed in green shorts, a black tank top and a burnt-orange cardigan, an outfit I would forever associate with this day. With a quick brushing of my hair, I headed out the door, with my parents trailing behind.

I walked out of the hotel and onto to the busy street, the wet heat washing over my body. It was a clear Monday morning in Taipei, Taiwan. A few clouds dotted the otherwise clear, blue sky.

My parents followed behind me, calling for me to slow down, but my eagerness could not be halted. My mom's short, blonde hair bobbed as she tried to keep up. Her delicate hand intertwined with my father's larger one. A look of pure joy filled his face as his eyes twinkled with excitement.

Our translator for the trip Serena, a middle-aged, friendly woman, met my family outside of the hotel. She hugged me, exclaiming, "Hannah, I am so glad you came with your parents. You are very important." A rush of movement followed her declaration, and we were ushered into an old, white van. My family's adoption journey was beginning again.

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*Emma*

A day or two before my new family arrived, my teacher at the orphanage told me that it was time to pack my things. Quietly, I listened to her instructions, thinking about how I couldn't wait for a fresh start.

Although I excelled at academics, I struggled with making good friends – and just being good in general. I needed to protect myself from being abandoned again, so I made sure that if someone left me, it wouldn't hurt me. I distanced myself from others, acted out for my teachers, and even found myself at the Police Station sweeping floors as a punishment for stealing money.

I didn't want to be the bad girl. I just didn't understand all of the rules, and why we as orphans were labeled differently from others. Most of the time, when I took money or got in trouble, it was to help another one of my classmates or roommates out.

I was worried that my new American parents would learn of my bad behavior, and they wouldn't want me anymore. But they were coming soon, and they hadn't mentioned leaving me behind, so I quickly headed to my room to pack the list of things my teacher mentioned.

A bright, pink suitcase sat in front of my bunk in the room. Hastily, I threw in new clothes that my teacher brought for me to pack – two winter outfits, three summer outfits, jackets, shoes, towels and underwear. My orphanage teacher also gave me a photo album, and my school teacher gave me the white ukulele that I loved to play. In another small bag, I put in going-away presents from my friends.

I didn't have much, but I was ready to start a new life in America with a new family, new friends and no "bad girl" history.

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### *Charmaine*

Anticipation and excitement flooded my mind as I prepared to have every aspect of my life to be uprooted. Ever since Steve and I married, I knew that I wanted children. Stephen, Zachary and Hannah fulfilled my dreams, and I never thought that God would continue to allow our family to grow. Then, I found out about Elise and Emma, and for the past two years, I dreamed of this day.

The two hours in the crowded van were torturous. Each bump of the vehicle brought me back to reality and back to focusing on my fears and my desires. Thankfully, the chatter

between Serena, Steve, and Hannah distracted me. After what felt like years, we arrived, exchanging the crowded city streets of Taipei for the calmer streets of Taichung.

A huge, white building loomed before me, acting as a barrier that prevented me from reaching my dream, from reaching my daughters. But in that moment, a building was no match for me. I had already faced almost two years of waiting, months of agonizing over court dates and weeks between Skype calls. I hopped out of the rickety van and into the bright sunlight, peering before me at the building that so many orphans called home. I couldn't help but think that walls, chipped and faded, reflected the brokenness of the souls dwelling inside.

~~~

*Steve*

Serena led us through the front doors of the building and into a waiting room. Every step I took increased my anxiousness. Adopting babies was easy, and the bonding happening almost instantly. I knew that adopting Elise and Emma would be different, especially for me since I was an adult male. We knew very little of their histories, but we had reason to suspect that they had been abused. I assumed that they would have no problem bonding with Charmaine and Hannah, and for that, I was grateful.

The bleak, dirty walls caved in on me. The moment was drawing closer – and I was unable to control the outcome. I thought to myself, *“I hope they know that I don't ever want to hurt them. These are my daughters, and no matter what it takes, I will always love and protect them!”*

We were taken down the hall toward another room. My eyes darted all around, taking in every detail of my surroundings – the chipped paint on the wall, the cracked blue-

green tile floors and the basketball courts surrounded by netting. These things will always be embedded into my memory.

In a moment of chance, I peered to the left across the basketball courts and into an open courtyard. That exact movement allowed my vision to settle on the most beautiful sight, and instantly, my life changed.

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### *Charmaine*

Steve gasped, squeezing my hand reflexively. I turned to see what he was looking at, and I let out a cry of excitement, “There’s our girls!” I pulled him along to see if we could get closer. I ran across the green flooring of the basketball court to the edge and grasped the net that encased it. As I stared at my daughters between the holes of the net, all the doubts, worries and fears that I had washed away.

Two skinny girls sat in front of me. The sisters were timidly waiting for something as they gazed around the courtyard of their children’s home. They seemed frightened and unsure of what was happening. I looked at them, wishing I could talk to them, but the language barrier prevented it. I yelled “Elise” and “Emma.” The two dark-haired heads turned to face me.

A smile encompassed my entire face. I was bursting with joy.

The beautiful girls staring back at me were my daughters. We were finally going to take them home. Happiness and love flooded my entire being. Although the girls stared shyly, they radiated nervous excitement. Then, Emma offered a simple wave and a big smile. Elise held tight to her younger sister and softly smiled too.

I glanced over at Steve and Hannah as I took in the fullness of the moment. Tears filled their eyes as the girls captured their hearts. Even though we couldn't hug them yet, our family was finally coming together.

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*Elise*

On the morning of April 13, 2015, my teacher from the orphanage gathered me and took me to meet Emma and her teacher in the courtyard of the large, white building. Shortly before 11 a.m., our teachers left us sitting alone, with the basketball courts to our left and the kindergarten playroom to the right. They went to meet with our new parents and told Emma and I that they would be back with our parents in about an hour.

I took Emma's small hand while we waited for their return. It was a warm, sunny day, so sitting outside was nice. I could tell that Emma was anxious by her fidgeting. I tried my hardest to not let her see how nervous I was too.

It had been about ten minutes, when I heard a commotion near the basketball court, and turned to see what it was. A tall, dark-haired man stood staring at us, while a short, blonde woman came running toward us. They screamed my name in English, but the rest of what they said, I couldn't understand.

Emma turned to see what I was looking at, and together we stared at our new family. "*Americans look odd,*" I thought, my nerves disappearing slowly. "*But my mom is so pretty – like models look in magazines with fair skin and blonde hair.*"

I watched as Serena and the social worker pulled my new parents away into a meeting with the teachers. My new sister, Hannah, stayed behind a moment longer to wave goodbye. I waved back.

~~~

*Hannah*

I couldn't believe how beautiful my sisters were. I wanted to stand there and look at them forever. They were real, and they were mine. Thankfully, the basketball court's net didn't keep us separated for long. Serena and the girls' social worker led us into a short meeting. I fidgeted the entire time, thinking about Elise and Emma.

As soon as it ended, we were taken to see them. Although we were strangers, the connection was immediate. Elise and Emma led us to their different living spaces, showing us their beds, showers and their pet turtles. Then, they asked Serena if they could show us where they went to school. They were so excited to show us the life that they lived, the life that they would have to leave behind.

We gathered their belongings, including four suitcases, numerous bags two ukuleles and a guitar, and piled into the rickety van. A two-minute drive brought us to the front of their school. We quickly jumped out of the van and into the bright sunlight once again. In front of their city, what they knew to be home, we discovered my sisters' love for laughing and their shy smiles.

Soon, the necessity for food outweighed my sisters' desire to show us around. As we headed back to the van, Emma – shy and guarded – reached up and grasped my hand. I couldn't believe the love that flowed from my heart to hers. I can still hear Serena saying, "You are so important for this transition. The girls will bond with you because you are a sibling." Serena was right. Little did Emma know that she didn't just take my hand, she stole my heart. I looked over as Elise ran to catch up with us. Sisters united at last. Together, we got into the van, ready to finally start our adventure home as a family.

## Elise's Story

“I didn't believe [that I would be adopted].

Uh, I was kinda excited, and kinda confused.

Confused because I was older and excited that I had a family to adopt me.”

– Elise Tybor, Interview, January 8, 2018

## Home to Me

My mom dropped me off to the auditorium early, so I could warm up with the other musicians. Dressed in all black, I hopped onto the stage and took my seat among my peers. My shiny, cherished violin was safely tucked in my arms. The group settled in and prepared to practice.

*Ting. Ting. Ting.* The orchestra instructor tapped on the music stand to grab our attention. She lifted her hands to begin conducting, and every student prepared their instrument. As her hands moved, so did the violin bows. The horns kept their pace, and the practice finished smoothly. All that was left to do was to wait for the auditorium to fill with people.

I fidgeted nervously as I talked with a few girls around me. Then I saw my parents and sisters walk in. I rushed to give them a hug before the lights dimmed, announcing the start of the concert.

“Good luck,” my parents whispered to me. Hannah smiled reassuringly.

I headed to the stage and settled into first chair. As the lights turned on and the stage lit up, I breathed in and out, calming myself. I lifted my violin to my chin and placed my bow in the perfect starting position. Carefully, I focused on my teacher’s hands as she began to conduct. I moved my bow up and down, according to her cue, and as those around me followed, a wonderful melody of holiday music filled the room.

The song grew and shrank. Each note precise and purposeful. As I played, my nerves calmed, and an enjoyment filled me unlike any other that I had experienced. I

couldn't believe that I was in America, sitting first chair for violin, and playing in front of hundreds of people.

When the song ended, the crowd stood cheering. I could hear my family yelling, "Go, Elise!" and my face blushed red. I couldn't wait to play first chair again.

~~~

I grew up as a child of the government. I had a mom and dad, but they weren't really my parents. I only spent three and a half years of my childhood with them. In fact, I had many moms and dads if you include my foster parents with my birthparents – four to be exact. It didn't really matter to me who I called "mom" or "dad," as long as I could please them enough to have food and a place to sleep. In many ways, I felt alone growing up. I always had a family, but they weren't always my family.

When I finally stopped switching from house to house, and was placed in the Children's Home, I was content. I wasn't moving around anymore, and I had Emma, my sister, in the same building as me. Life was good, and I never imagined that it would be any better. I never imagined that I would be adopted. I knew I was too old, too shamed.

Now, almost three years after my adoption, I'm realizing how nice it is to have a family that stays the same, to have a mom and dad who won't return me after a few months, to have the same bed to return to when I come home from school. To have a family. My family. Yes, I miss Taiwan. I miss my friends, my school, my food, and my language. But without adoption, my life would be much different.

~~~

I was two and a half years old when I went to my first foster home. I don't remember much about being taken from the home or why it happened. But as I grew older, I figured

out from my social worker and my friends that my birthparents weren't really good at being parents. At this time in my life, in 2007, they were mostly involved with using drugs, which led to the neglect that resulted in social workers taking Emma and me. We didn't get to stay together.

The aim of the government was to eventually reunite our family once my birthparents stabilized and improved their ability to parent. In the eyes of the government, this happened a year and a half later, in 2007, when I was returned to my birthparents. I was four. Emma stayed another six months with her foster family, before joining me at home.

Although the government had declared my birthparents fit to parent us again, that was far from the truth. Of course, foster families weren't exactly the greatest place to live, but the neglect I faced with my birthparents was far worse. I arrived home to chaos. My birthparents grew from using drugs to dealing drugs, which left them at the mercy of those they dealt for.

One night, it was late, and Emma was by my side. We were together at last. As we lay trying to fall asleep, we heard yelling in the other room of our house.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.* Someone pounded heavily on the door. We listened as our birthparents whispered to each other, more concerned about their drug supply than the consequences they were about to meet.

Emma moved closer to me, and we winced together as the door crashed in. A drug group – money collectors for the drug lords – had come to get the money my birthparents owed them. I pulled Emma to me and held still, hoping that nothing would happen to us.

The men angrily yelled at my birthparents as they tore apart our home, ruining furniture, breaking windows, ripping clothes. Everything was a mess.

And then they found Emma and me.

In my fear, I hid Emma behind me. She was only four and terrified. The large, scary men came at us, pulling us up from where we slept and bringing us out into the room where my parents sat quietly.

“Méiyǒu!” I yelled in Mandarin. “Tíngzhǐ!”

The man pulling me didn’t listen to my cries for him to stop, yanking me in front of my birthparents. My long, dark hair whipped around as my small, thin body flailed in reaction to his strength. Pain jolted through my arm, and I knew that something was wrong.

“Ouch!” I cried out, but the man silenced me with a shake. I didn’t make another sound or movement.

Sternly, they commanded my parents to find the money and repay what they owed immediately. And just as quickly as they came, they left. My arm throbbed, but I took Emma back to our room. Her big, brown eyes spilled tears as her bottom lip quivered. Afraid of upsetting our parents, she cried as silently as she could. I couldn’t help but cry too. I pulled her shaking body to mine, found a blanket that would cover us both, and consoled her until we fell asleep.

The next morning, social workers came. I guess the neighbors heard the screaming coming from my house the night before. Emma and I unknowingly left our birthparents’ home for the final time. I was numb and my arm was broken.

~~~

For the next two years, I moved between two foster homes. I stayed with Emma for a few months, but then I was taken away to a different family, a different “mom” and “dad.” At the beginning of this time, the court sentenced my birthparents, who were convicted of selling and using illegal drugs, to time in prison. Their new situation left Emma and me in a place of uncertainty. In April of 2011, the social worker in charge of Emma and me filed for us to fall under government control. By December, my birthparents had lost their parental rights. Emma and I were orphans, shamed by our culture for having parents who only cared about themselves. I didn’t like not knowing what would become of us.

I lost the only home that I ever knew, and while it wasn’t much, it was all I had. I felt nervous about what would become of me and Emma. Part of me wanted to go back with my birthparents to our home. Abuse was all I knew.

I figured that I didn’t stand a chance of being adopted since I was soon going to an orphanage for children whose parents lost their rights as a result of being imprisoned. Many kids, especially ones my age, didn’t get adopted by other families in Taiwan – we were shamed since our birthparents were in prison.

The following year, in August of 2012, Emma and I moved to Central Region Children’s Home in Tai Chung, Taiwan. For the first time, I had some sense of stability. I had a schedule for every day, a safe place to sleep at night, a school to go to regularly. I made friends and went on fun outings. I started to have a decent life. But I couldn’t get rid of the lonely feeling. No one at the Children’s Home could.

I knew that this wasn’t how life was supposed to be – lonely, without parents, and without a home – but I figured that my situation was better than nothing, and I settled into

making myself comfortable. Besides, I was lucky to at least have Emma with me. Most kids didn't have any family with them. I was eight and prepared to stay at the Children's Home until they no longer had room for me, which I hoped would be when I was ready for college. I never thought that a family would adopt me.

~~~

When my social worker showed up at the Children's Home, I was immediately concerned that I would be moved again. It was 2013, and I had stayed at the home for a year and a half. I didn't love my current home, but it was structured and predictable. Something I didn't always have. Something I didn't want to lose.

On that chilly winter day in December, I came home from school at 4:30 p.m. and passed my social worker on the way to my home within the Children's Home.

Each floor of the building housed tiny apartments, which were divided by age and gender. I shared my living space with eight other girls, all over the age of 13. I was the youngest of the group. Emma lived on a different floor of the tall building with girls closer to her age in an apartment that mirrored mine. There were four rooms that held three people each, but some of the girls in my home were away at college, leaving behind empty beds. When I entered into the living and eating area of my second-story home, I found my teacher, who lived with us, waiting for me. Rather than starting to work on the evening chores assigned to me – a distraction from the typical loneliness of the home in the evenings – my teacher called me aside to talk with me.

“Elise,” she spoke quickly to me, her Mandarin running together. “Emma is waiting for us with her teacher and your social worker. We have something to talk to you about.”

I wanted to know what it was right away. A few scary thoughts came to mind. “*Are mom and dad out of jail? Did they come back for us? Do we have to leave?*” I was worried and couldn’t stand not knowing.

“Calm down,” she stiffly tried to comfort me after seeing the panic on my face. I followed her to the elevator, down to the first floor of the building, and into an open meeting room. Emma sat nervously next to her teacher and our social worker, and I immediately joined her.

At 10, I was considered small for my age, although my friends and classmates told me I looked older because of my long hair and deep brown eyes. I had soft, delicate features that often attracted the boys in my class. Thankfully, I made friends at school easily, and I got along okay with the girls I lived with, even though they bullied me into doing their chores because I was the youngest.

I looked up at my social worker, who smiled brightly back at me. “*She seems happy,*” I thought. “*Maybe that’s a good sign. I don’t want to have to move again. Maybe I can stay here with my friends.*”

My teacher closed the door behind her and sat down. All eyes in the white, plain room turned to my social worker.

“Elise, Emma,” she pleasantly spoke. “A family in America wants to adopt you. They’ve signed all the paperwork, and if everything goes as planned, you’re going to have a new family. How does that sound?”

I couldn’t understand what I was hearing, because I thought it was too good to be true. I looked over at Emma. She seemed to be thinking the same thing I was.

“Both of us?” I asked. “Are you sure they want both of us?”

My teacher reassured Emma and I that the family in America wanted us both.

I was shocked. *“I’m too old to be adopted. Who wants an older child? People only want babies.”* I couldn’t believe that Emma and I were going to be together in a family.

“Emma, we’re gonna have a mom, dad, brothers, and sisters. A family!” I exclaimed, completely overwhelmed that someone wanted me. At my excitement, Emma smiled, but I could see her hesitancy. I sensed her worry. I felt it too. But, I was sick of the loneliness of the Children’s Home and the uncertainty of the future. Yes, I was worried about moving to America, leaving my home behind, and getting a new family. But, at least we would finally have a family.

~~~

The week my new family came to get me in April of 2015 was crazy. It was filled with packing, saying goodbyes, and eating my favorite foods for the last time. I was going to miss Taiwanese food.

But the moment I saw my new family, I knew that my new life in America would be good. I hated to leave everything behind. Taiwanese culture was all I ever knew. But, I decided that leaving would be okay because I would finally have a forever home.

Each day that my mom, dad, and new sister Hannah stayed in Taiwan, we took a different adventure, partially so the social worker could monitor the bonding process and partially to show my new family popular places in Taiwan. One day it was to the Taipei Zoo, and another day it was to the science museum. At nights, Emma and I would stay at the hotel with our new family. Twice, we ventured out to the night markets, where Emma and I showed them our favorite treats. I couldn’t believe when they could afford to buy multiple things for us from fun strawberry-sugar desserts to the chicken that I loved.

On our last night in Taiwan, I looked around me at the crowded streets, full of faces that looked like mine, and couldn't help but be afraid of a new world where my skin color alone would be isolating – not even considering the fact that I spoke Mandarin and not English. For a moment, a part of me didn't want to leave.

*“All of my friends are here. The food I like. People that look like me. I don't wanna leave my home,”* I thought in a panic, looking over at Emma who was holding our new sister, Hannah's, hand. Softly, I reached up and grabbed Hannah's hand too as we continued down the street. The warmth of her body trickled to mine, and I felt comfort. *“Everything is going to be okay,”* I reassured myself.

The next morning, my mom, dad, Hannah, Emma, and I headed to the airport. Three long plane rides later, we arrived in Tupelo, Mississippi – my new, forever home.

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The first few weeks in America were hard. They had their good moments and their bad moments. Somedays, it would take hours to communicate something simple through Google Translate.

My mom would bring Emma and me together and pull out her sleek iPhone. I watched with impatience as she typed out something into Google Translate. Emma looked on with curiosity.

“What would you like to eat for lunch?” the automated computer voice would read to Emma and me in Mandarin. Then my mom repeated the phrase in English, so we would understand what she said before passing the iPhone to me to type a response.

Slowly, I typed out “what is there to eat?” in Mandarin as Emma looked over my shoulder. Clicking the “translate” button, I passed the phone back to my mom and listened as the automated voice repeated what I typed in English.

About 30 minutes later, I finally had an answer for my mom about what to make for lunch. The entire process of translating was chaotic and frustrating, but for a while it was the only way to communicate.

Most days, I missed Taiwan, my friends, and my culture so much that I reverted to angry fits. When I became too overwhelmed with Google Translate, I would scream at the phone and at my mom, refusing to type a response. I would shut myself off from my new family, whispering angrily in Mandarin to Emma about how I hated America and wanted to go back to Taiwan.

That wasn’t the truth though. I was just struggling to get used to a culture that was extremely foreign to me. I loved my new family and all they had done for me, but learning a new language and eating strange food and seeing only white faces was hard. I felt alone, like I had in Taiwan, but in an entirely new way. This time, I had a family that loved me, but I didn’t have a place to call home that I loved.

Thankfully, I arrived in America in April, which meant that I had the entire summer to start learning English before going to school in the fall. I was very nervous about going to school.

My mom decided that Emma and I should both stay back a grade, which would give us more time to learn English skills before going to high school and college. I didn’t really mind that, figuring school would be easier if I had already done most of the subjects in Taiwan. I was wrong.

In the fall of 2015, I entered the sixth grade in Tupelo. Rather than attend private school or be homeschooled like my siblings, my parents decided to take advantage of the public-school system's English as a Second Language (ESL) Program. After a summer of practice with my mom and sister Hannah, I tested into a first-grade reading level.

I figured that being in ESL classes would help me learn English faster, but they turned out to be only mildly helpful. The teachers didn't spend extra time teaching the difficult concepts of the English language, such as forming plurals and choosing the correct tense. They simply slowed down the pace of a sixth grade English class, assuming that we would pick up on the things others our age already knew. Because I was in a class that was paced slower than other students and I struggled with English, making friends was difficult.

I met a few girls from Japan in my ESL classes, and they were nice. I also met a few girls who were popular in my other classes, but they weren't always nice. Unlike in Taiwan, where I had a bunch of friends, in America many of the girls were loud, bossy, and mean. I didn't understand why they yelled so much or followed the boys around giggling loudly. Thankfully, I did make a few friends my first year, and even decided to try out something new because of one of them – the violin.

I struggled academically and socially because of the language barrier, but I excelled musically. By the spring semester of my sixth-grade year, I transferred out of my elective art class into orchestra. It was time for me to get my own violin.

When my mom and I went to pick it up, I was ecstatic. The dark case held a beautiful cherry brown instrument, perfectly tuned and sized for me. No other violin was as wonderful as mine.

“Mom, see, it's so pretty!” I held up my new treasure.

“Oh, Elise,” she smiled gently at me, her green eyes shining. “I want to hear you play.”

Slowly, I picked up the instrument, checked by ear to see if it was tuned, and played a part of the song I had learned in class.

When I finished, mom clapped happily and hugged me. I still wasn’t used to all of the hugging and physical contact, but I let her do it anyway and smiled back at her.

“But mom, it costs so much money,” I said nervously. Renting my violin was about \$100.00 a month. I couldn’t believe my family would pay that for me.

“Oh, honey,” she looked at me with a soft smile. “Don’t worry about that! If you like to play, then it doesn’t matter how much it costs.”

I held my violin with delicacy and respect, promising to take the best care of it that I could.

After a few weeks of orchestra class, I started to enjoy going to school and playing violin with my friends. Playing music was an escape. For once, I was just like everyone else. I fit in. In fact, maybe I stood out, but this time it was in a good way. Without having a single formal lesson, my teacher chose me to sit first chair at the end of the school year concert. I couldn’t believe it!

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Throughout my first year in America, my parents tried their hardest to incorporate Taiwanese culture into our lives. My mom encouraged Emma and me to maintain our language by buying countless books in Mandarin. We often played with another family from our church who had adopted a little boy from Taiwan named David. We called him

Gui-Gui after his Taiwanese name. For Chinese New Year, we had a huge party with other families with Chinese and Taiwanese children.

But the thing I missed the most was the food. Thankfully, my parents made a great discovery about three months after Emma and I arrived in America. A local Asian restaurant was run by a couple from Taiwan.

On Sunday afternoon after church, my family headed for lunch at Chopstix because Gui Gui's family recommended it. The small restaurant was off Main Street in a worn-down shopping center. The outside boasted Chinese symbols and when we walked through the glass front door, I couldn't help but laugh at the large Buddha near the checkout counter. The walls were dingy and white, and the restaurant wasn't well lit. To my left was a fish tank, and Emma grabbed my hand and pulled me over to it, while my parents stood in line to be seated.

That's when I noticed that the lady working was Taiwanese. I tugged at Emma and pointed, hoping that this was our chance to finally have Taiwanese food. She smiled back at me, and I could tell she was thinking the same thing. Moments later my mom, dad, Emma, and I were seated in a red booth, and the lady took our drink orders. She smiled shyly at us, and then turned to my parents.

"Are the girls adopted?" her accent clouded her English.

"Yes, they are from Taiwan," my dad smiled widely.

"Oh! Taiwan? I am from Taiwan," she exclaimed, and then looked at us. Speaking in Mandarin, she asked us many questions. "Do you like your family? Do you miss Taiwan? What food do you miss?"

Emma looked at me, afraid to respond, so I mumbled out a response about the food that I missed, and then the lady was gone.

Ten minutes later, she came back with a tray of steaming dishes and a man trailing behind her. She introduced my family to her husband.

“He made you some traditional Taiwanese food to help you from missing Taiwan so much,” she said as she set the dishes down at our table.

I looked at the food before me and saw home. I took a deep breath and smelled home. I ate a piece of the vegetable dish and tasted home. Happiness flooded me.

“Mom and dad, we have to come back. I love this food. It tastes like Taiwan!” I exclaimed. My parents promised that we would return.

After our first visit there, the couple started looking out for Emma and me. Whenever we would come in, they prepared traditional Taiwanese foods for us. It was a little bit of home in my new home. I loved it.

Unfortunately, after a few months, the couple decided to close the restaurant and reopen it as a Southern-style restaurant, since they were losing money. I lost the connection to the part of my old home that I missed the most.

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The summer of 2016 was better than my first summer in America. I had a few friends from school and church that I could hang out with. It was better than school because I could make art and play music all day instead of working on homework and going to bed early.

But, since I didn't have much to do, and my mom didn't want Emma and me to fall behind academically, she continued to give us English lessons throughout the summer. We

practiced reading, writing and grammar, but the main focus was on reading for 30 minutes to an hour each day.

I hated reading. I still only read at about a first or second grade reading level. I struggled with reading because I didn't understand many of the books that I wanted to read. And then there was Emma. She excelled with English and had almost caught up with the reading level she was supposed to be at. It wasn't fair. In Taiwan, I was the one who did well in school and had a lot of friends, but in America, it seemed to be the opposite. So, while Emma spent her summer days reading for fun, I spent mine practicing the violin and working on my art. I loved to draw and to paint with oil paints. In fact, the only reason I was excited to go back to school in seventh grade was because I could do both orchestra and art. Otherwise, I was content to stay at home, away from the homework, mean girls, and hard classes. But eventually, the long summer days turned into fall, and it was time to head back to class.

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Seventh grade isn't fun for anyone, or so my mom tells me. As it turns out, when I got back to school, my popular friends from sixth grade decided that I no longer fit into their group, so they stopped hanging out with me. I was alone.

Having music and my family was nice, but there was a place in my heart that could only be filled by a friend. I sorely missed my friends in Taiwan. I wanted to be popular like I was in Taiwan. I wanted to fit in, but I was different. And most of the time I didn't care about my appearances or having the coolest things, but occasionally, I just wanted to be seen like one of the popular girls and not the weird girl from Taiwan who hardly speaks English. I wanted my friends in Taiwan to be here in America.

While I didn't have very many friends, I did make a few. I wasn't close to any of them though. I continued to create artwork and work on my violin skills. This year, my parents decided that since I loved violin so much, I could take lessons. I was ecstatic. With the addition of lessons, my orchestra teacher continued to push my talent by giving me harder pieces to practice and allowing me to sit first chair more often in performances. Every day after school, I would put off working on homework to spend more time practicing my violin. The winter show was coming up, and I was hoping to be selected for first chair again.

As I walked in to the house from the garage, I tossed my backpack on the floor near the dining room, and took my violin into my room. I set the case on my white bedspread and opened it. My beautiful, cherry violin gleamed up at me. Gently, I picked the delicate instrument and placed its body under my chin.

I plucked at the strings first, measuring to see if the instrument was tuned. After listening to each of the four strings and their sounds, I decided the violin was ready to be played and set it back in its case so I could go pull my sheet music out of my backpack.

I ran to the dining room and pulled out several stacks of paper. Rummaging quickly through them, I found the songs I needed to practice for the upcoming winter show and headed back to my room. I laid the sheets of paper side-by-side on the bed and resumed my violin to its position under my chin. I reached down into the velvet green case next to the papers and picked up my bow.

With a deep breath, I placed my right hand with the bow to the "A" string and the fingers of my left hand to on their proper notes. Slowly, I pulled the bow down and began practicing my favorite song, *Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky, as a warm up.

I listened to the melody of the notes and practiced holding my bow so that it didn't rub two strings at once. Every switch of a note with my left hand was precise and gentle, minimizing any harshness in the sound. When the song ended, I glanced at the pages before me that would prepare me for the winter show – *Sleigh Ride*, *Jingle Bells*, and other Christmas favorites.

I again prepared my starting position, and starting with *Sleigh Ride*, I practiced every song, perfecting each note and transition, until I was satisfied with how the song sounded. Gently, I put my bow away, and laid my violin back in its case. I gathered the sheets of music together and returned them to my backpack. I was ready for the winter show's practice at school the next day.

When it was time for orchestra class, I grabbed my violin and headed to my seat in the practice room. The white walls surrounding me desperately needed to be painted, and the tile floors were clearly worn. My teacher stood in front of the class, instructed us to pick up our instruments and prepare to play. I played every song exactly as I had practiced at home. I was so excited and couldn't wait to see what my teacher would say. After class, she smiled at me and came over to talk to me.

“Elise, how would you like to sit first chair at the winter show?” she asked happily.

My eyes lit up, and I couldn't help but smile back. “I would love to!”

~~~

When I finished seventh grade in the Spring of 2017, I hadn't tested out of ESL classes like Emma did. In fact, I was still only reading at a third or fourth grade reading level. So as summer approached, my mom took the time to ensure that I read every day and prepared for classes in the fall. She understood that I struggled, and most of the time,

worked to meet me where I was. She quizzed me on what I read to make sure that I knew what I read. She explained difficult words to me. She gave me harder books to keep me learning.

When I entered eighth grade this fall, in 2017, I had made it to a sixth-grade reading level. Learning a new language in an entirely different culture isn't easy to do. But, I am trying my hardest to do the best that I can. Every afternoon, when I come home from school, I look forward to being with my family, but I dread the homework. Even now, as an eighth grader, I struggle to understand what other children my age understand. It's extremely frustrating.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, tutors help me in some of the subjects that I struggle with, mainly history and English. But on the other days, when I arrive home to the golden walls of my living room, I avoid pulling out my homework until I can't put it off any longer.

I change my clothes, eat dinner and practice my violin, but eventually, my mom calls me into the living room from the comfort of my bedroom.

"Elise, it's time to go over your homework," her voice chimes.

Slowly, I pull myself out of the mess of blankets and sheets and onto the white tiger rug on my floor. I kneel next to my bed and lay my violin carefully in the green velvet of the case, taking my time ensuring that it is put away properly.

"Elise," my mom calls me again. "It's time to get started on your homework."

I know that I can't delay anymore, so I stand up and slowly take in my room before leaving. The tan walls hold drawings of wild animals and metal masterpieces of flowers and a soft deer skin. My fish tank sits in the corner of the room, across from my bed.

*“Oh, I need to feed my fish,”* I remind myself and quickly do so before my mom comes to see what is taking me so long.

After a few sprinkles of fish flakes, I shut the light off and head down the short hallway and into the open floorplan of the dining room, living room and kitchen. I grab my gray backpack from its spot on the floor of the dining room and begin to pull out its contents, brushing my long hair away from my face. I sit down at the wooden table, which is now scattered with the subjects I have to complete before returning to school the next morning – history, science, and English. I already finished math at school. Because there’s so little English involved, math is one of the few subjects that I understand.

My mom sits down next to me, her computer in front of her checking the assignments from the school’s online system. I roll up the navy-blue sleeve of my snowman sweater and prepare for the typical frustration of homework.

“This says that you have science homework to do. Did your tutor help you with that yesterday?” my mom gently asks.

I think for a moment, not remembering my teacher giving any science homework. “Science? I don’t think I had any science homework.”

My mom’s green eyes scan the screen. “Well it says here that you have a worksheet to do,” she confirms.

“Oh, we did that in class. I’m already done with it.”

My mom nods slowly. “Okay, what about history. You have a test on Friday, correct?”

“Yeah, but I don’t understand. The teacher goes too fast in class, and I can’t take notes because I don’t know what she is saying. So, I don’t know what to study,” I reply

shortly. I used to love history in Taiwan, but in America, I have such a hard time because I don't fully understand English, which means I cannot fully understand the subject.

My mom looks at me, the frustration of nightly homework is starting to wear on her too. She turns her eyes back to the screen to find more information. "Oh well, here it says what we need to study." She starts to read a list of terms that are completely foreign to me.

"Mom," I cry, "I don't know any of those words. I don't think that's what we talked about in class. I'm sorry. I just don't know."

"Well, I'll just email your teacher about it then, and we can study it tomorrow. Let's move on to English," she suggests calmly.

Frustrated with the entire situation, I move from my chair at the dining room table to the soft, olive green sofa in the living room. Casually, my mom follows me.

"Elise, I know it's late. Let's just finish English and then you can go to bed."

Half-heartedly, I agree, and we begin discussing the structure of writing an essay. My mom does her best to bring the content down to my level of understanding as we talk about types of attention-getters.

"Elise, if you were writing an essay about the violin or painting, what would you say to get someone's attention?"

"Hmmm, I dunno. Maybe I would talk about how the paint is made or how much fun it is to use," I respond, unsure if I am understanding the question.

"Good," my mom encourages me before continuing to help me understand the various types of attention-getters that can be used.

Finally, after two hours of homework, my mom is as tired of the work as I am and sends me off to bed. With my teeth brushed, I climb into my cozy bed, pull up the covers, and think about school. “*I wish I knew the language like I did in Taiwan. Then everything would be so much easier to understand.*” I stare at the dark ceiling above me, as thoughts of my old home, thousands of miles away, fill my mind. I drift off to sleep.

~~~

Leaving Taiwan was hard. I knew nothing about American culture, American food, American style, English, or how to be in a family. I had no idea what my life would look like when I boarded the plane to America with my new family on April 16, 2015. I just knew that everything would be different.

It’s been three years since I moved to America. I’ve gained friends and lost some. I learned to love music and to paint my feelings freely. I’ve discovered how wonderful it is to be in a family, to have goodnight hugs and morning kisses. I’ve developed a love for music, particularly Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. I’ve learned that American Chinese and Taiwanese food is nothing like real Chinese and Taiwanese food. I’ve realized that I want to be a veterinarian when I go to college. I’ve found who I am and who I want to be.

Overall, my life has been better than it would have ever been in Taiwan. Yes, I miss things about my home in Taiwan and my culture, but I try to keep those things alive in America. I practice writing in Chinese and speaking it. I think about when I am old enough to go back and visit. Maybe I’d like to talk with my parents and tell them how I’m sad about the choice they made to do drugs. Or maybe I don’t have anything I want to say to them. I haven’t decided yet. I do know that when I’m older, I want to adopt a Taiwanese orphan of my own.

Adoption hasn't always been easy for me. There have been fights about English. Disagreements about things I was allowed to do in Taiwan that I can't do in America. Anger about my parents sometimes not understanding me and what I want. Severely missing my favorite foods and friendships. But I love being adopted, despite all that I've lost and all that I've overcome. I love having a family. I wouldn't change what happened, even if I could.

## Emma's Story

“Dear Yan-Ting's (Emma's) mom and dad,

The purpose of this letter is I want to thank you instead of Yan-Ting,

thank you to adopted Yan-Ting and

giving her a chance to learn the warmth of a family. ...

[I] appreciate that you're willing to give her a new start, it really touch me.”

– Dong-Yann, Wu, Emma's Counselor, Letter, March 30, 2015

## American

I am American. I am not Taiwanese. In fact, I don't really want to talk about Taiwan because that part of my life is over. It doesn't really matter anymore. My family is in America. My home is in America. And my friends are in America. It's simple: I am American.

Of course, I never imagined being American – being adopted – when I lived in Taiwan. I just assumed I would grow up in the Children's Home until it was time to leave. Then, I would go out into the world and survive.

But, I was adopted, and now my life is so much different. Like I said, I am not Taiwanese. I am American, and nothing can convince me otherwise.

~~~

*I don't like thinking about it, but the first time I was taken away from my birthparents, I was too little to remember everything that was happening. I was a year and a half old, and nothing about my life wasn't normal. My birthparents neglected me, and I wound up in the arms of a stranger and away from my family, from Elise. I don't like putting a name on my feelings, but I felt alone and abandoned.*

*My first foster family wasn't terrible. I remember having enough to eat and a warm place to sleep. But other than that, I don't remember much about them. I don't like to remember.*

*I was three and a half years old when I went back to my family, to Elise. I remember very little about being home the second time, perhaps because I try my hardest to forget. Taiwan is not my home any longer, so there is no need to think about it. And although I*

*block the thoughts from my mind, sometimes I can't help but remember how I felt as social workers took Elise and me from my home for the last time – abandoned, alone, and orphaned. But that was all left behind in Taiwan. It's no longer my life, and no longer worth talking about.*

~~~

I moved to my new home in the small town of Tupelo, Mississippi, in April of 2015. I was 10 years old – a young age to be facing an entirely new life. But even so, I was completely ready to leave my old life behind. When I boarded the plane in Taipei to head to Japan and then to America, I knew that I would never again have to face the harsh realities of being an orphan. I was relieved to have a future beyond the life I had in Taiwan. I was ready to start a new life and a new identity with a new family.

When my family finally landed in Memphis, Tennessee, I knew that I was 100 percent ready to start over, to learn to be in a new family, to make new friends, and to have a new life. I could be anyone that I wanted to be, and I couldn't wait.

With six suitcases, four bags, two backpacks, and a guitar, I was packed with my new family into our blue minivan and headed down I-78 to home – a place that I couldn't wait to learn more about, a feeling I had never truly experienced.

~~~

I've always been considered smart, even in Taiwan, but I don't like thinking about how I was in Taiwan. Still, I was nervous about learning a new language and going to an American school.

Thankfully, when I arrived in the United States, it was only April, so I had the entire summer to prepare. In Taiwan, I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, but my mom wanted me to repeat 4<sup>th</sup>

grade in America. I didn't think it was necessary, but after we started English lessons, I saw that she was right. Throughout the summer, I would spend two or so hours a day working on reading, writing, and speaking. Typically, Elise and I started out working on reading with my mom. Then, we would sit down with Hannah and work on learning numbers, colors, and other things like the alphabet.

Hannah had workbooks for Elise and me, filled with kindergarten and first grade material. At first, I felt dumb working on such childish things, but whenever I would join Hannah at the cherry brown dining room table, I realized that these childish things were nothing like the things I knew in Taiwan.

Hannah would sit in between Elise and me. Carefully, she would brush her long brown hair behind her ear before explaining to us about writing American numbers and letters. I watched with wide eyes as she traced the dots on the page, which turned into letters as she connected them. "A" then "B" then "C."

I stared at the paper before me. *"These letters look so weird compared to how I normally write. I have no idea what they mean."*

"Okay, Elise and Emma," Hannah's cheerful voice grabbed my attention. "This is the alphabet. Let's practice tracing the letters, and then I will help you understand how we put them together."

I picked up my brand new pink pencil – because pink is my favorite color – and started to trace the dots. Carefully, I tried my hardest not to stray from the shape. I looked down at my "A" and compared it to Hannah's. *"Not bad,"* I thought to myself before continuing. *"This is nothing like Taiwan, and I think I'm okay with that."*

Every day as I read new books and spent time writing, I grew to love the English language. It came naturally to me. Sure, I missed some key issues, like making items plural and using the proper tense for verbs, but for the most part, I learned to read and write much faster than anyone anticipated, which was good to me because I loved reading.

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*School in Taiwan is much different than school in America. It's harder and the teachers aren't as nice. I wasn't called by my name. Instead, all of the students were given numbers. I was number 21. But Taiwan school wasn't bad. I got more breaks between classes than I do in America. Here I only get recess. I loved breaks because I could hang out with my friends, even if it meant that school went from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

*I didn't really mind school in Taiwan. I don't like remembering my life there, but I don't mind thinking about school. I excelled in most of the classes I took, but I was particularly good at math. I still am. But in Taiwan, I never had good relationships with my teachers like I do in America. I never woke up excited to go to school like I do in America. In Taiwan, I tolerated school, even though I was smart. In America, I love school.*

~~~

As the first day at my new school approached in the fall of 2015, I became nervous. I didn't know what to expect or how to act. I didn't want to go. Everything was different in America. The teachers called me by my name instead of a number, and they seemed to like me. It was strange, and nothing was like it was in Taiwan, but I liked it. Everything was more laid back.

For the first few weeks, I pretended to be shy, a stark contrast to my typical outgoing personality. I just didn't want others to make fun of me because I didn't know how to speak

in English. So, I hardly talked at all, except to my teacher. But after a few weeks, I fell in love with school and even made a few friends.

The first year of school flew by. Eventually, kids stopped staring at me when I worked out my math problems on the board in Chinese. I started hanging out with a few of my new school friends on the weekends. I learned to enjoy reading as much as I used to enjoy it in Taiwan. I loved every moment of school, and by the time the summer came in May of 2016, I had almost caught up to the other kids in my class as far as reading and writing.

~~~

When I first came to America, I wanted to be just like my new big sister Hannah. We arrived shortly before her senior dance recital, and I remember staring in awe as she wore all kinds of glittery costumes as she performed on stage. I knew that maybe I wanted to be a dancer like she was, but I wasn't sure if I would be any good at it.

Because of that, I told my mom that I didn't want to do ballet. When summer officially started, Hannah asked if I wanted to join her at the dance studio.

"Emma," she asked. "Would you wanna come try dancing with me tomorrow? I'm helping my dance teacher with a summer work shop for girls your age."

I stared up at her nervously. "Uh, maybe. I'm not sure. I don't have any of the shoes or clothes to wear."

At that point, my mom joined the conversation. "Well Emma, if you want to try it, Hannah can take you find some ballet shoes and a leotard tonight."

I thought about it some more. *“What if the other girls make fun of me because I’ve never danced before. I won’t be any good. But, Hannah looks so excited, so maybe I should try it.”*

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want too, Emma,” Hannah admitted gently. “I just thought that maybe you would like to try. You can even stand right next to me.”

“Okay, I’ll try it,” I agreed, knowing that if I was close to Hannah that it wouldn’t be too bad.

The next day, Hannah and I left, dressed in leotards, tights and soft ballet slippers with our hair tied back into neat ballet buns.

When we arrived at the studio, Hannah introduced me to her dance teacher, and then found a spot at the barre that was big enough for us both. I stared around me at the girls chatting to one another, all dressed like I was. *“This isn’t so bad. I can do this,”* I encouraged myself. Hannah smiled at me.

Quickly, her teacher told her the combination and started the music. All the girls, including me, turned to Hannah and started to follow her movements. Ballet was not easy for me. My feet didn’t know how to do what Hannah’s did, and I couldn’t understand what language her teacher was speaking. But I continued to follow her, trying my hardest.

At the end of the day, I was exhausted, and I didn’t love ballet. I didn’t really want to go back the next day. Neither Hannah nor my mom made me.

But my mom and Hannah were both surprised when I asked to sign up for ballet lessons in the fall. The pretty costumes and soft movements grew on me. I was learning to like something new.

Throughout the fall of 2015, I spent an hour and half every week at dance. But when I started making friends at school, I wanted to try the activities that my friends did, too. As a result, midway through the school year, I joined a soccer team. While I enjoyed ballet and trying something new, I loved everything about soccer, from the running, to being on a team, and to playing games even though we didn't win once.

Each day, I was becoming more American, taking every opportunity that I wasn't given in Taiwan. As I danced and played, I pushed the thoughts and realities of my old life as far away from me as possible.

~~~

I loved school, but I also loved summer. Summer meant hours of reading, time with friends, and a trip to Buffalo, New York, to visit my extended family. I never quite understood why my family lives so far away from my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, but I always look forward to the trip to see them.

Around mid-July, my entire family packs the minivan with suitcases, pillows, and DVDs and begins the two-day journey to family. This year, I couldn't wait to go and see all my family and, of course, their pets.

This year, we spent our time at multiple hotels, visiting as many family members as possible. My dad has five sisters and one brother, and my mom has one brother and one sister living in Buffalo. By the end of two weeks, I'm pretty sure I saw most of them at least twice, and their pets just as frequently. It was exhausting, but so fun! I love having a family that extends beyond parents and siblings. I know that I've only known my relatives for a few years, but I've always felt like I belonged.

~~~

*I don't like talking about my family in Taiwan because my family in America is much better. In Taiwan, my birthparents went to prison for drugs. At a young age, I lost everything that was familiar to me. I lost my family. I was tossed between foster homes and never once was I given a new family. But I have a family in America now, and that's all that matters.*

*The first foster home I went to in Taiwan was okay. But I ended up back in the arms of my birthparents until they lost me and Elise permanently to drugs and neglect. So once again, I returned to that first foster family. Elise joined me for a while, but eventually, the social workers placed her somewhere else. I didn't see her regularly again for a few years. My only family was taken away from me. I stayed with that foster family for a few more months, before transferring to my second foster home. I was there until I was almost six, when I went to my last foster home.*

*I don't like to admit it, but this entire time, I wished for my birthparents to care. But they didn't. I wasn't family to them like they were family to me. As a child in the hands of the government, I went to counseling every month or so with Elise. We were supposed to be reunited with our birthparents during this time, since at some point during my time in foster care they had been released from prison. They never came. They didn't care enough to come.*

*Still, every time counseling approached, I looked forward to seeing my sister and my birthparents. I hoped they would come. But eventually, I realized my birthparents weren't coming. They didn't want me. I was more of a problem than they wanted to deal with. I wasn't family. And I don't like talking about my family in Taiwan, or my*

*birthparents, or my life there, because it's not worth talking about. I don't need to keep reminding myself that I wasn't worth taking care of.*

~~~

After a trip to New York and a summer full of reading, I was ready to go back to school in August of 2016. I would be in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and in the many of the same classes as my friends. I couldn't wait!

For the most part, I had caught up to everyone else in my class in the English and reading areas. I loved everything about them. So much so, that when I was assigned the reading fair project, I was ecstatic. I didn't think it was possible to be so excited about school, but then my teacher made me even happier. I was going to do the project with my friend! I couldn't wait to choose the perfect book and work on the assignment together over Christmas break.

We chose to use a *Magic Tree House* book, because we both loved the characters and adventures. Together, we spent hours creating the perfect project board, adding the ideal amount of glitter, creating a river out of cellophane, and writing character overviews and the story's summary. After weeks, the board was perfect, and we couldn't wait for our teacher to see it.

During the first week of school after Christmas break, I brought the project in to be judged. My friend and I took turns telling the judges about the story and our board, working our hardest to prove that we deserved a prize. At the end of the judging process, we got first prize for our age group and a trophy. It was one of the best moments of my life. I had so much fun!

For the rest of the year, as I worked on new English concepts and read harder books, I thought back on my academic victory and reminded myself that I was American. That I belonged here. That I fit in.

~~~

For me, summers always pass slowly, and I long to be in school. After a really great year in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I was nervous to go to Milam for 6<sup>th</sup> grade – a whole new building, new teachers, new classes, and likely, new friends. I knew it would all be okay, but I was still nervous.

Luckily for me, I tested out of my English as a Second Language classes and tested into all advanced classes. I loved being able to challenge myself and to take fun electives like computer and art.

The first half of the school year flew by. I stayed busy with ballet and hip-hop. I stopped playing soccer and joined the kids choir at my church instead. Almost every night of the week, I went to some activity before heading home to work on homework and eat dinner.

Suddenly, I realized that it was almost Christmas break, which meant a chance to catch up on reading and a chance to work on this year's reading fair project with another friend. I couldn't wait for both, and for Christmas, of course!

Christmas is my favorite holiday. There's nothing like it in Taiwan. I don't like talking about it, but we hardly even celebrated birthdays in Taiwan as a result of being poor and living in foster care and the orphanage. So, to wake up one morning and find presents piled under a tree is wonderful. I love everything from picking out the tree over

Thanksgiving, to helping Hannah wrap too many strands of lights around the tree, to picking the perfect spot for each ornament with Elise.

My family has a tradition of getting a new ornament every Christmas based on something that was done in the past year. Stephen, Zachary, and Hannah have so many ornaments, and I love seeing them all on the tree. Elise and I only have a few, so hanging them up goes really quickly, but my older siblings let us hang theirs up for them. Because I have so few ornaments, my mom, Hannah, and some of her friends, have been buying us extra ornaments so we can catch up with the rest of the siblings. I love opening them and hanging them on the tree – it’s like an official reminder that I am a part of the family too because I have my own ornaments.

While the decorating of the tree and house is so much fun, waking up Christmas morning is the best. I love running out to be greeted with warm hugs from my mom and dad and seeing the fire place running. There’s always soft Christmas music in the background, and sugary cereal on the table for a quick “before Christmas presents” snack. Elise and I always check the beautifully wrapped boxes to see who the biggest box belongs to.

When every family member is awake, we read Luke 2 from the Bible. Then it’s present time! We rotate opening gifts until each perfect bow has been torn apart and every bag is emptied. This year, my favorite gift was an Kendra Scott necklace. I couldn’t wait to wear it. After all the gifts are opened, we move on to stockings. It’s like Christmas all over again as we tear into tiny presents of nail polish, chocolate, and other goodies. But to me, Christmas is more than the presents and the lights. It’s a reminder of family. Together

we support each other and we love each other. We spend the day playing games together and simply being together. I love Christmas, but mostly, I love that I have a family.

~~~

*In Taiwan, I was known as a trouble maker, in school and at the Children's Home. I was smart, and I used that to my benefit, often encouraging those around me to act out for the good of the group. Sometimes this involved stealing money – for which I once spent the night cleaning the jail as a punishment – and other times it involved less severe disobedience. I don't like to admit my behavior now, because I know that I wasn't a good kid back then, but I feel like what I did in Taiwan was justified. I didn't have much. When I got in trouble, I simply wanted attention. I simply wanted someone to care. I don't like talking about that part of my life in Taiwan because no one ever cared. But now I have a family, and they do care about me, and I don't have to be the girl I was in Taiwan.*

~~~

Once Christmas passed, I was ready to work on my reading fair project with my friend. This year, I didn't just want to get first place at my school, I wanted to go further. My friend and I set out to do this. We both love ballet, so we picked a book about a dancer that used to be an orphan – kinda like me! Together, we decorated the board in pink and worked on the summary, theme, and characters for the book. When we finished, it looked perfect and was ready for judging.

On the day of judging in January, my friend and I dressed in leotards, tights, and ballet shoes, like the main character in the book did. We spent hours talking about why we chose our book and how we made the board. I also got the chance to tell the judges that like the main character, I also used to be an orphan. And then I talked about how I also did

ballet. The judges loved it! We won first prize for the school and then we were sent to district.

In late January, at the district judging event, we dressed again in our ballet clothes and talked to a new set of judges about our book. We tried our hardest, but this time, we didn't place high enough to make it to the next round. Although I was sad, I loved learning about other girls like me, ones who are adopted and have the chance to follow their dreams in America.

~~~

I don't like talking about Taiwan and my birthparents, and that's okay. My life isn't in Taiwan anymore. It's in America. And although I miss my food, my friends, and my culture sometimes, I love my new life, my new family, and my new friends.

I don't really have any desire to go back and visit Taiwan. I don't hate the life that I had there, but I see how much better my life is now and don't want to waste time looking back. I don't even know if I would have anything to say to my birthparents if I had the opportunity to meet them.

I love adoption, and maybe one day I'll consider adopting a kid into my family. But I'm not really sure though. Right now, the only things I'm certain of are that I'm a Tybor, I have a family, and that I'm American.

## Hannah's Story Part 2

“Sometimes I must remind myself that it is hard to grieve a life I didn't know,

but that I am still allowed to feel the loss.

My adoption doesn't always have to be positive,

even if positivity came from it.

And though it sometimes makes me sad,

I choose to love.”

– Hannah Tybor, Journal Entry, Fall 2017

## Searching for the Unknown

With the addition of sisters, the time-consuming college search, and the anticipated high school graduation, life became too busy to actively pursue answers about my past and my birthmother. Although thoughts of her surfaced increasingly, my focus was on receiving scholarships to my dream school, buying decorations for my dorm, and preparing for my senior dance recital. I moved from one event to another, endlessly checking off items from my ever-growing “to-do” list.

Elise and Emma arrived in April of 2015. I graduated that May. And after one short summer, I landed at my dream school, Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in August. I had high hopes of becoming a journalist, perhaps traveling abroad for my writing or working at a promising news organization. But like most well-thought out plans, mine changed.

For a reason that I can’t pinpoint, curiosity with my adoption increased as I began my college journey. Perhaps it was a result of being on my own for the first time or because of Elise and Emma’s adoption. Or maybe I subconsciously decided to discover who I truly was and needed more information to make this decision. Either way, adoption became more prevalent in my life, further kindling my search for answers.

After adopting Elise and Emma, researching adoption became a regular occurrence for me. Each time I read a new book or online study, I discovered a negative stigma around adoption and reunions. I knew that while adoption was messy and sometimes difficult, it was also beautiful and worth doing. I knew that journalism could help portray this, but I wanted to do something deeper. I wanted to craft messages and build positivity around

adoption. To be able to build this positive perception of adoption, I decided I would study public relations and a double minor in organizational communications and nonprofit management. This diverse background would provide me with the proper tools to pursue my passion of being a positive change in the world of nonprofits, particularly adoption-related ones. With this change in place, I finished my freshman year of college.

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In the fall of 2016, my sophomore year of school, I began to think about actively searching for my birthmother, but I had no idea where to begin. My busy life developed a routine, but in the still moments, thoughts of my birthmother came to mind. I knew that I wanted to help others better understand adoption, and to do so with excellence, I needed to understand it the best that I could. Searching gave me another insight, fulfilled my curiosity and continued to make me seem whole like I did the first time I learned her medical history.

It was a hot Tennessee September day, and I was sitting alone in my dorm room when I came across my first piece of helpful information. I had been researching about adoptions and reunions, but this was something different – a registry. It was then that I remembered my parents briefly mentioning the New York State Adoption Information Registry, but I had never researched the database any further. A few clicks later, I discovered that this was the only New York State-approved way for adoptees to connect with birthmothers or birth relatives because New York maintains a closed adoption process and system.

My eyes skimmed the bright screen until they stopped at the words, “Identifying Information.” My heart skipped a beat. This is exactly what I had been hoping for. Excitedly, I read the short paragraph that followed, and my heart sank with each word. I

could only receive identifying information if my birthmother also signed up to be in the registry. This news dashed my hopes. I knew that I needed to register, even if my birthmother had not.

I scanned the rest of the website and reviewed all the necessary forms, discovering another potential obstacle – I needed my parents’ signatures. I knew that they would willingly help me, but I acknowledged a potential sense of betrayal. I didn’t want to undermine their impact on my life, but I still wanted to know my past. I was both excited and nervous to begin the first real step of searching, but I wanted to talk with my parents first.

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Fall turned into winter, and I still had not approached the topic with them. The internal fear that my decision to search might make my parents feel inadequate created a sense of hesitancy within me, even though they had shown approval and support in the past. Still, I knew that this is what I wanted to do, and so I promised myself that I would approach the subject with them before returning to school for the spring semester.

On January 9, 2017, after fighting with my nerves for months, I called my mother into my bedroom. It was mid-afternoon on a rare quiet day in the Tybor household. Elise and Emma were busy preparing to return to school, and my mom was taking a break from helping them. We were enjoying a conversation about my friends and my life, and I gently slipped in the words, “Mom, I think I am going to search for my birthmother. I want to apply with the New York State Adoption Information Registry.”

Surprise spread across her soft face, and a look of compassion followed. “Is there any particular reason why?” she asked.

Knowing that this was likely to be her response, I had thought about my answer. “I just want to know more. I’m interested in meeting her, and I guess I want to know if she is interested in meeting me. I want the opportunity to thank her for the sacrifice that she made for me.”

My mom understood, responding, “Dad and I always said that we would support your decision to search if you wanted to. So, what happens now?”

Excitedly, I explained the process of registering with New York State, that I would need her permission and basic information relating to my birth. Immediately, she went to pull my adoption file from upstairs as I printed off the necessary forms. Together, we filled out document with as much information as we could provide, sometimes relying on the adoption file and others on my mom’s memory.

Later that night, I was sitting in my bed, wrapped in my favorite soft blanket, pondering the decision that I had made. Nervousness filled me, and I accepted the urge to write my birthmother a letter, even though it was unlikely that she would ever read it.

*Dear Birthmother,*

*January 9, 2017*

*The idea of meeting you has forever enticed me. It always seemed so strange to me that adoptees could harbor feelings of disdain or hatred toward their birthmothers. However, I know that I’m not conditioned to think like most are.*

*From a young age, I became intrigued with the woman who couldn’t afford to take care of me, yet gave up everything so that I could have a chance to thrive. That woman is you. My parents raised me with the mindset that you were courageous. They understood the importance of teaching me how much you gave up so that I could live. Bravery, self-sacrifice and love always come to mind when I think of you.*

*I know that you could have chosen the simpler and easier route of abortion, especially during a time when unplanned pregnancies were far more taboo. Yet, despite the social constructions, you chose the most difficult path: adoption. For this, I owe you endless praise and gratitude. It is because of your sacrifice that I cannot fathom why adoptees are angry with their birthmothers.*

*I find great beauty in following dreams. Everyone has desires and goals. I'm sure that you weren't an exception to dreaming. Perhaps you hoped to attend college after finishing high school and pursue your passions. Maybe you wanted to travel the world discovering new things. Or maybe you wanted to meet your prince charming and have a family. Whatever your goals were, I know that my occurrence displaced them.*

*However, you willingly gave up your desires for me. The records I have indicate that you never finished high school or attended college. I assume that since you were only 18, your choice to place me for adoption shattered any chance at completing your education. To me, you gave up part of your future to ensure that I could have one. Thank you.*

*I know very little about you. Even so, the tiny bit of information that I do have allows me to make a single conclusion: you loved me. I have blankets and hats that you made for me. I have bibs and sippy cups that you decorated. I know that as you read applications of possible families, you searched for the one that I would be happiest in. I can only imagine the way you felt as you looked at the pictures of my parents and my brothers, knowing that your unborn baby girl would become a part of their family. I wonder if you know that by sacrificing your dreams, you fulfilled my mom's dream of having a daughter.*

*With all of this and more in mind, I have decided to pursue my dream of registering to meet you. The process goes through the state of New York, and*

*results are contingent upon your desire to meet me. I deeply hope that you do. I want you to know that it was with great excitement and anticipation that I mailed my application this morning! While I'm not sure what this next chapter of my life holds, I am ready for the adventure.*

*And even if nothing happens, and I don't get the opportunity to meet you, I hope that you know that I think about you daily, that I'm grateful for your sacrifice, and that I love you.*

*Hannah*

The next morning, with my application in hand, I drove my red Dodge Caliber to the Tupelo post office, where I dropped off the documents that contained the potential to change my life forever. As I let the envelope fall into the slot, my body relaxed and filled with hope.

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Weeks passed as I awaited a response. My spring semester of my sophomore year at college occupied my time, distracting me from the wait. As the cold winds of winter transitioned to the subtle hints of spring, I began preparing for my spring break – a hiking trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, with my best friends, Hannah and Tatum. Time dragged on, but finally midterms passed, and the spring break adventure began.

It was early March, and my friends and I hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail through rain, winds and snow. We cooked big breakfasts and explored the quainter parts of the town. At night, we settled into our hotel for movies and runs to the hot tub. On the second night of our adventure, March 10, I received a text from my mom.

“A letter from the New York State Department of Health came for you today,” the message said, along with a picture of the small envelope. Worry pinched at my heart.

Another message followed shortly after. “Do you want me to mail it to your dorm, or would you rather I FaceTimed you and read the letter to you?” Even though my friends were in the room with me and the information inside the envelope was private, I couldn’t wait to open it, so I FaceTimed her.

Moments later, her face filled the screen of my phone, a look of uncertainty sat upon it. “Are you sure you want to do this here and now?” she asked a final time. Quickly, I confirmed, and she opened the envelope and started to read.

“Dear Ms. Tybor, Enclosed is the available non-identifying information about your biological parents and your adoption. ... In some cases, the non-identifying information is rather limited. ... Our records indicate that you are registered for both non-identifying and identifying information. Therefore, the Adoption Registry will keep your case open in case another qualifying person steps forward and registers. ... Thank you participating in the New York State Department of Health Adoption Information Registry.”

Stillness overtook me, and for a few moments, I couldn’t breathe. My greatest fear had happened, and my hopes had been trampled. The New York State Department of Health couldn’t provide any identifying information. My birthmother had not registered. I had no new information.

“Hannah,” my mom whispered quietly, afraid of my saddening appearance. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I replied, still lost in thought. “I am just processing this. I am okay. I anticipated this happening.” Her eyes seemed to reflect an understanding that I wasn’t truly fine, but she knew better than to push the issue in front of my friends.

“It’s okay, Hannah,” she reminded me. “Maybe your birthmother will register soon.” The initial shock passed, and I knew she was right. There was always the potential for my birthmother to register later. The hope that had left was starting to grow again. After a few more comforting words, my mom ended the FaceTime call, so I could return to my friends. Hilarious romantic comedies, beautiful moments exploring, and great memories with friends distracted me for the remainder of the trip.

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Two weeks passed, and although I initially had admitted to being okay, I struggled with the information I received from the registry. I couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t want to meet me. What had I done wrong? Why wasn’t I good enough for her? It was as if I was facing another, more mild abandonment. I needed to write to my birthmother again.

*Dear Birthmother,*

*March 24, 2017*

*I know several months have passed since I began my journey to find you. I had planned on writing sooner, but the busyness of life kept me from doing so. I hope and pray that you are doing well, and that wherever you are in life, you are happy.*

*When I began this journey, I must admit that I was filled with expectant hope. I have always known that one day I would pursue my desire to meet you. Deep in my heart, I just figured that you would be curious about who I was and who I’ve become, and as a result, that you would want to meet me, too. A huge part of my heart believed this, and I decided to let my hope of meeting you outweigh my fears of being rejected again.*

*I knew the odds. I just chose to ignore them. Yet, they’ve become reality, and although I prepared for this, I must admit that it hurts more than I anticipated.*

*On March 10, 2017, I received an update from the New York State Department of Health. I was given two pages of non-identifying information, but sadly, no new information.*

*I was also given the much-awaited news: no one in the adoption registry matched my birth records. In other words, you have yet to decide if you want to meet me.*

*Dear birthmother, I know that there is so much fear in the unknown. And I know that this is a feeling you know all too well having gone through the journey of placing me for adoption. I just want you to know, that while I do not love your decision, I understand the pain that must surround this situation.*

*I am not angry with you for giving me away. I am so grateful that you chose to give me the best life possible. I am not upset with you for valuing your privacy. I know that my adoption may be a secret in your life that you are not ready to share. I love you. You gave me more than life. You gave me the chance of a good future. You gave me a family. Yes, you gave me away. But, you did so out of love. And, I will always be thankful for that, even if I never get the chance to share with you how I feel.*

*For now, my journey of waiting continues. I still hope that one day you will register to meet me. Until then, I will be praying for you.*

*Hannah*

Searching for my birthmother was taking its toll on my emotions. I saw abandonment in all of my relationships. If Hannah and Tatum were busy, I thought it was because I wasn't good enough to hang out with them or that they no longer wanted to be my friend. If my mom couldn't talk on the phone for a long time, I saw myself as a burden. I knew that my reoccurring feelings of abandonment weren't real, that my friends enjoyed

hanging out with me and that my mom loved hearing from me. Deep inside, I knew this journey, although much harder than I anticipated, was something that I needed to endure to grow.

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The Adoption Registry failed me, ending my search for my birthmother. My craving to know more about my past would simply have to be satisfied with the little information that I had. Besides, I had end-of-the-semester projects and finals to worry about.

One afternoon, I was particularly stressed and studying for an intense public relations case studies exam, when one of my academic advisors and close friend, Mama April, approached me. Our chatter turned from classes and exams to our personal lives, and she asked me if I had ever considered using AncestryDNA to try to find any birth relatives. The thought had never occurred to me, and the very idea of it sparked a renewed hope within me.

*“Perhaps there is still a chance to locate my birthmother,”* I thought excitedly, already preparing to reignite my search.

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I carried on with anticipation through finals and into the summer, burying myself in adoption reunion research. I thought about my birthmother often, bringing her up in conversations to my parents. They showed their support of my interest to meet her. My mom often reminded me of how important it is to ensure my birthmother’s privacy since she made the courageous choice to give me a better life.

On several occasions, I mentioned the process of AncestryDNA and the potential outcomes it could result in to my parents, but the conversation never went beyond the surface level. I could tell that my mom was worried about the potential disruptions of my birthmother's privacy if there were actual results from the analysis. She never told me not to use that method, but my mom gently reminded me that it wasn't my place to enter my birthmother's life if I wasn't wanted. In her opinion, my birthmother's failure to register through the state meant that she wanted her privacy. Without a firm disapproval of the method, I decided to utilize it in my search. I continued to research the DNA analysis process, as well as other adoptees' successes from the results.

My junior year of college brought me back to Middle Tennessee State University, but with a new adventure to enjoy – renting a house. I moved into my tiny, three-bedroom house near campus on August 5, 2017. Moving in, getting acclimated and preparing for classes to begin created a flurry of activity that momentarily served as a distraction from continuing my search.

However, by mid-September, I settled into a steady routine and regularly set aside time to focus on my search. After much prayer and advice from those around me, I made up my mind and knew that AncestryDNA was the next step in my search. A sense of longing compelled me to write my birthmother again.

*Dear Birthmother,*

*September 12, 2017*

*Hey. It's been a while since we last talked. Life gets busy, and it never seems to slow down. But tonight, I felt compelled to sit down and share with you. There's something on my mind that I must say.*

*I want to express my gratitude to you. I want you to know that I am truly blessed because of the decision you made. I've been reading a lot of adoption*

*books lately, many of which like to place the multitude of problems that adoptees face on their birthmother's decision to abandon them. As I read, I can't help but entertain the idea of your rejection, my abandonment. I see story after story of attachment disorders and behavioral issues. I read of victimization and hatred. And I can't judge because I know every adoptee carries his or her burden differently. But, I've also realized that I must be an anomaly because I do not share my fellow adoptees' emotions. And for that, I thank you.*

*While I am not sure if this is entirely true, I have a sense that your feelings toward me were never rejection. Yes, I am sure fear and confusion were present. And yes, maybe even mourning. But, I know that you cared deeply for me because of your actions.*

*It must have been crazy hard to sit down with a pile of potential families and choose where you would place me. I am sure that as you flipped through photos and assessed job descriptions and read personal stories, you felt the pain of having to let me go. I imagine that in every family photo you saw, you pictured your tiny baby girl there among strangers. How lonesome a feeling and experience it must have been.*

*And yet, I say thank you because the family that you chose was the best place I could have ended up. You knew that I would need more than you could give, so you gave me the very best. My mom and dad taught me to love you and to appreciate the choice you made. They provided for me abundantly. They loved me unconditionally. And more importantly, they taught me to have reverence and love for you. I am thankful that your decision not only gave me life, but also gave me love.*

*I want to say thank you for another reason as well, one which may seem more odd. Doctors and professionals say that a mother's perception of her baby*

*while it is in the womb plays a huge role in the development and emotional wellbeing of the baby. I can tell that you showered me with love. I can picture the things you must have said to me as you knitted keepsakes for me. I hope you told me stories of my new family as you stitched “Daddy’s girl” into a pink bib. I bet you whispered, “I love you” as you crocheted baby booties for another woman to give to me. It is for your choice to accept me until you had to give me up for a better future that I say thank you.*

*You are still in my thoughts, and I am still looking for you. I hope that you are filled with peace about my adoption, as I am about being adopted. I will always be grateful for the decision you made. Thank you for giving me love and for giving me a family.*

*Hannah*

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On October 9, I applied for my DNA kit. Three days later, the tiny, white package arrived in my mailbox. I tore open the box and stared at the contents as a mild fear washed over me. Thousands of thoughts flew through my mind.

*“Could this tiny tube potentially hold the information that will lead me to my birthmother?”*

*“What if I am making the wrong decision? Should I just abandon my search since my birthmother did not apply for the registry?”*

*“Is my past really worth knowing?”*

As these thoughts overwhelmed me, I paused and simply prayed, “God, if it is Your will for me to find answers through this search, then open the doors that You want to open. If it is not Your will, then close the doors that I should not go through. Only You know the

outcome of my search; protect me from anything that I will not be able to endure.” Immediately, a soft peace settled in my heart, and I knew that if my DNA yielded no results, that I would end my search because the door was not meant to be opened.

That evening, I joined Hannah and Tatum in the library to study. For some reason, I didn’t want to be alone as I prepared the kit to be sent for analysis. Together, we read the instructions that simply consisted of filling a clear tube with a large amount of spit, sealing it shut and placing it in another clear container, and then mailing the tube and its contents back in a package that was provided. We laughed as I struggled to fill the tube with enough spit, while talking about my opinion of this method of searching and the potential outcomes.

Hesitantly, I explained my feelings. Since my decision to search again using AncestryDNA, I aimed to lower my expectations to minimize any disappointing results. Nervousness filled me, but so did peace and hope. I knew this was where I perceived God leading my search, and because of that, I trusted in the outcome.

The next morning was crisp and bright. I left my house early, so I could stop at the post office before going into work. Shortly before 9 a.m., I traded the tiny, white box for a six- to eight-week wait. By the end of the semester, I would have my DNA results in my hands.

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*Bing.* An email notification popped up on my laptop. Without looking, I clicked the small “x” in the upper right corner to remove it and continue with my work. As the notification left my screen, the sender of the email caught my eye – AncestryDNA. My heart skipped a beat before I figured it was just another email telling me to register for the

full Ancestry subscription. Besides, it's only October 29. I only sent my sample in to be analyzed three weeks ago. There was no way that it would be ready yet. I assumed that it wasn't my results, yet excitement nagged me to check my email.

I opened the envelope icon on my screen and clicked on my inbox. My eyes couldn't believe what they saw in the subject line of the new email. "Your AncestryDNA results are in. Click here to view them."

I sat in disbelief. "*How could my results already be in?*" I thought. I needed more time. I hadn't thought about what I wanted from my birthmother if I did get to connect with her.

*"Am I just searching for answers? For her name? Or am I wanting to know my story and why I was given up for adoption? Do I want another family? What happens if a reunion doesn't happen? What if she hates me?"* The thoughts came in a never-ending stream for an hour or so, before I gathered the courage to click the link in the email.

AncestryDNA opened in my web browser, bright green and grey lighting my screen. "Your DNA results are in," the screen read. Below, three sections appeared. I clicked on "DNA story" first, and my ethnicity estimate popped up – 38% Europe East, 30% Europe South, 17% Great Britain, and the remaining 15% spread throughout smaller areas. As I began to discover my history, my life appeared more whole. It was as if something had been missing, but I did not know it. Next, I clicked on "DNA circles," which provided insight into the lives of my earliest potential ancestors.

Finally, I clicked on "DNA matches." Before me appeared the accounts of 91 people who were either fourth cousins or closer relatives, but no birthmother. Defeat didn't occur to me, rather, I was determined. I had 91 potential connections to my birthmother or

my birthfather. There was a way to find out more. I skimmed the connections, looking to see if I had a close match of an aunt, uncle, or grandparent, but there was none. So, I took the seven closest DNA matches, whom I estimated to be third cousins, and messaged them explaining the situation.

*“Hello, I just received my DNA analysis and it shows that we are related as 3rd-6th cousins. I am adopted, and I am in search of my birth family. I want to know more about my past and to finally be able to connect all of the dots of my history. This may seem like an odd question, but I am curious to figure out our relatives and the connection. Do you happen to know anyone in your family that gave up a child for adoption in 1997? I was born in Buffalo, NY. My parents would be about 38-40. I know very little information other than that. I hope you can help and that I am not being invasive. Hannah”*

Knowing that I had completed all that I could with the information I had, I took a deep, steady breath and returned to homework.

*Bing.* A Facebook message request appeared on my screen from someone that I didn't know, but the name looked familiar. Ten minutes had passed since I sent the message to my closest DNA matches, but I hadn't contacted any of them through Facebook. “Maybe it's one of the matches!” I thought. It was.

My cousin's message started off by introducing herself as one of my DNA matches before going on to ask where I was from and if I had any more information about my adoption. She seemed uncertain that any of her relatives had given a baby up for adoption, but she promised to check around with her family and see if she could find any information. I read the message a hundred times before pouring out as much information as I could in

my reply. I promised that I didn't mind waiting and that I would look forward to hearing from her soon. She promised to get back with me as soon as she had information.

I couldn't process what was happening. Thousands of emotions flooded through me, but excitement dominated my thoughts. Never had I imagined that a DNA match would respond so quickly and be so open to helping me. Only three hours passed since the original email came containing my results, but it passed like both an eternity and a single second.

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6:30 a.m. came too quickly, but I needed to be up to pack a bag to take home before I left for class. I rolled over to turn my phone alarm off. November 2, 2017 flashed on the screen. Homesickness hit me hard, causing more excitement about my travels to Mississippi later that evening. I could hardly wait to see my family, since I hadn't been home in a few weeks. I bounced out of bed, quickly getting dressed, packing a bag and making breakfast. An hour later, I sat in the MTSU Honors College, drinking coffee and working on homework.

*Bing.* A Facebook Messenger notification appeared on my phone screen. I held my breath, waiting to see who it was from. My cousin's name accompanied the message, asking if anyone else had reached out to me. I explained that she was the only DNA match to reach out to me.

*My cousin: Well, I can definitely tell you that you and I are third cousins for sure. So, you have the right person. We are closer than you think. I'm your third cousin on your mom's side. My mom and your grandma are first cousins. I did make contact so I'm waiting. But I just want to reassure you that you do have the right person but please be patient.*

The blood in my body rushed from my head to my toes. I couldn't believe that my cousin knew my birthmother, that I was so close to finding out my history. Realizing the sensitivity of the situation, I messaged her back immediately.

*Me: Oh my gosh, are you serious?? I might cry. Thank you so much for all that you have done. I promise to be patient. I know this issue is sensitive and I want to be compassionate toward that and I do not want to intrude in any way. If you do make contact, tell her that I just want to thank her for all that she did for me.*

*My cousin: I did contact my cousin which is your aunt. She is very emotional. I forwarded your information. She has to wait and decide on how to deliver all this to your mom and grandma. We all don't know how she's going to react. But I do know that your aunt thinks about you all the time, as she mentioned when I talked to her. So, I'm keeping my fingers crossed.*

Every response I received, I read over and over again. I had an aunt! She thought of me often. In my head, when I had previously pictured this moment, I never imagined it going so smoothly. Still, my heart retracted from the multitude of intense emotions, and I knew that I needed to protect myself in case of another rejection. I carefully thought out my next response.

*Me: This is so emotional. I really appreciate all that you have done for me. You are brave to open those closed doors. I know the secrecy around this situation is tough, and I do not want to make the burden that they bear any worse. But I just want to know my family and my past. I am glad to know that my aunt thinks of me. I hope that everything goes well as she passes the*

*information along, but I completely understand if it doesn't. I can imagine the situation surrounding my conception and birth was probably not a great one. I want to be sensitive to the repercussions that I may cause by reaching out.*

My cousin agreed and gently reminded me that even though I was placed for adoption, that my life was not a mistake, that I am here for some reason. My heart filled with joy, and I stopped to thank God for my cousin, her acceptance of me and her willingness to reach out for me. I was overwhelmed by the love I was shown by a stranger, by a member of my family.

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My boyfriend and I left MTSU for Tupelo, Mississippi, at 4 p.m. that day, and on our ride to my home, I told him of my contact with my cousin. The excitement of his reaction nearly matched mine. Throughout the rest of the drive, he listened as I shared my fears and my hopes, doing his best to calm my tired nerves.

We arrived in Tupelo just after 8 p.m. I couldn't wait to hug my sisters and to watch the Buffalo Bills during Thursday Night Football. When we walked in the house, the game had already started, so we joined my family in cheering on our team. Two hours later, I sat surrounded by the people I loved, content despite the Bills' terrible loss. My mind wandered to my birthmother, and I realized that I wasn't looking for another family because I already had the best one. I had a family that supported me through the good times and bad times, praised my accomplishments and carried me through my failures. They loved me regardless of my blood because it was adoption that held us together as a family. I

realized that nothing could replace or outdo my family. I simply was looking for my history, and by knowing my birthmother and my past, I could fill in the gaps.

I kissed my sisters goodnight, and my parents went to bed about half an hour later. My boyfriend and I turned on the TV but after thirty minutes, exhaustion from a long day paired with a terrible headache forced me to go to sleep. I slowly climbed the stairs to the spare room and crawled onto the air mattress. As I pulled up the covers, I heard a familiar sound.

*Bing.* My phone screen illuminated the darkness. A name that I didn't recognize appeared on my Facebook Messenger notifications. "*Who is messaging me so late at night?*" I wondered as my head pounded. After turning down my phone brightness, I opened the app and immediately gasped. I didn't recognize the name, but her face was so familiar. In fact, the more I looked, the more I thought that her face looked almost identical to mine. "*This can't be happening so quickly,*" I thought, my entire body shaking in disbelief. I read the first few lines of the message. "Hannah, I couldn't go to sleep without writing to you. I just found out that you may be my daughter...." Taking a deep breath, I continued, knowing that my life would never be the same.

## Epilogue

Dear Reader,

Thank you. Thank you for your time and willingness to hear our stories about adoption and how adoption has created my family. Thank you for being open with your opinions and beliefs and for taking the opportunity to learn about mine.

In my endeavor to seek honesty and portray openness, I have learned so much from the people I share a last name with. And despite believing that I knew everything about my own perspective on adoption, I have grown immensely. These final pages, just a few more moments of your time, are here to share a few of my observations with you.

In the prologue of this book, I focused heavily on the pain not often associated with adoption, and as you have finished this book, I hope you can acknowledge this pain as well. But, I realize that I failed to spend enough time focusing on the beauty of adoption – something that this writing journey has made me appreciate all the more. I truly believe that adoption is beautiful, even with the pain. As I wrote about the experiences of my family, I saw beauty on every moment, from my parents holding Stephen in their arms, to seeing Elise and Emma for the first time across the courtyard of their orphanage. When I think about my family, I think of Emma greeting me in the driveway every time I come home from college for the weekend. I remember every moment that I spent playing dress up and wrestling with Stephen and Zachary. I think of daddy-daughter dates and phone calls with my mom. And with all of these moments in my mind, I must acknowledge that adoption is so unmistakably beautiful because it provided me with a family – the best family that a child could have, in my opinion.

Another wonderful takeaway from the interviews with my family members was learning about the reasons for each of their perspectives. I've always known how my brothers felt about their birthparents, but in this quest for truth, I learned why. I discovered that adoptees really do have different views on adoption, and that no one view is right or wrong. We are all the way that we are because we choose to be that way. As Stephen and Zachary taught me, adoption plays a role in their lives, but despite any issues that may occur from being adopted, they are still responsible for who they are as people. From Elise and Emma, I learned that there is not a right or wrong way to assimilate to a new life. Adoption has shown itself differently to each of my brothers and sisters, and I think that says something important about how adoptees and their perspectives on adoption should be considered.

As for my own personal growth, I learned that I am allowed to mourn. As odd as it sounds, even infants who are adopted face loss. Growing up, I was always given a beautiful perspective on my birthmother. I never felt anger or bitterness toward her. Instead, my parents taught me love and respect. I believe that this positive outlook is why I am the way that I am today, and I am so grateful that is how I was raised. However, since I always had this positive outlook, I never stopped to think about what could have been. As I embarked on my journey to find my birthmother, I realized that I needed to acknowledge why I wanted to search. I wanted to know my history, to uncover my identity, to fill the hole in my life. It sounds dramatic, but I don't mean for it to be. I knew a part of me was missing, and I needed to acknowledge that, and in doing so, I needed to allow myself permission to mourn. I lost my history, and in a sense, my identity, when I was placed for adoption. Of course, as I grew up in a wonderful family, I didn't realize that I had lost anything. But I

did, and on my journey of finding my birthmother, I finally gave myself the ability to admit my loss, and in doing so, I provided myself with the opportunity to grow. I am in no way sad about being adopted. I love it. But I am thankful for my adoption journey, and I am honored to be able to share my experiences and growth with others who may need to allow themselves to mourn as well.

So, Reader, thank you for sharing in my family's journeys. I hope you've realized, like I have, that adoption isn't the same for everyone, and we shouldn't expect it to be. We should remember and acknowledge the pain, but we should also embrace the beauty. Because in my opinion, it's not just flesh or blood that makes a family. Love makes a family.

## Conclusion

As the individual stories have shown, adoption is far more complex than many people, including professionals and specialists in the field, realize. The effects of adoption vary drastically from one adoptee to another, making generalized information hard, if not impossible, to develop. However, many adoptees share similar issues with behavioral and attachment problems, as well as struggling with having two identities. The end result of the struggle of multiple identities, in a sense the desire to search, is different for each adoptee based off their environment and perspective on adoption.

In my family, which has representatives of infant and child adoption as well as foreign and domestic adoption, the effects of adoption varied, which resulted in different opinions on adoption, birthmothers, and searching. For my parents, adoption first fulfilled the desire to have children with Stephen, Zachary, and me. It second provided a family for orphans in need, for Elise and Emma. For Stephen, adoption played a role in his development and behavior, but he chooses to take responsibility for his actions and experiences. He has no desire to search. For Zachary, adoption was not important. He never felt like an outsider. He never felt any connection to his birthmother beyond average teenage rebellion and still has no desire to search. For Elise, adoption saved her from uncertainty and gave her a family, but it also took her from her culture and part of her identity. As a result, Elise has a desire to return to Taiwan, but she is unsure if she wants to reconnect with her birthparents. For Emma, adoption gave her something she desperately craved – a family. Since then, she has abandon her past to fully embrace her future. She has no desire to adopt or to meet with her birthparents.

For me, adoption has had a profound impact on my life. I never felt like I had two identities as a child. I never felt like I did not belong in the family I had. But as I grew, the desire inside of me to know more also grew. Searching provided an outlet for me to find answers, and as I searched, I realized that I was not as whole as I thought I was and that I needed the search despite the results. Since I have reunited with my birthmother, I have agreed with the quote found in Strauss's book saying, "The compulsion to search usually says little about the adoptee's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the adoptive family. Classically, the searcher is looking for a reflection, not a relationship; he already has a mother and a father" (117). In my search, I was less looking for a deep connection with my birthmother. I was looking for information about my past, a name for my family tree, an identity to quantify so that I could feel whole.

Through this journey of discovery, research, and writing, I have realized the truly wonderful aspects of adoption, such as beauty, family, love, and growth. I have also been given the opportunity to acknowledge that there is often pain in the beauty and hardship in the growth. Adoption brings a multitude of experiences to adoptive parents and adoptees, but no matter the difficulty or the pain or the immense joy, in my opinion, adoption is still worth it. Overall, I know that adoption and its effects are far more complex than many people realize, and it is important to bring this understanding out into the open. I am thankful that my family's stories help to do so.



## Appendix A

IRB Letter



10/2/2017

Investigator(s): Hannah Tybor; Tricia Farwell

Department: Journalism

Investigator(s) Email Address: hmt2z@mtmail.mtsu.edu; tricia.farwell@mtsu.edu

Protocol Title: **Love Makes A Family**

Investigators,

Thank you for your inquiry regarding Institutional Review Board approval for your proposed project "**Love Makes A Family**." Based on the information you supplied, the current plan is to create a collections of hisotorical collective memories and there is no research component involved with the current project. As your project is a collection of historical information and will not contribute to generalizable knowledge, according to 45 CFR 46.102(d), your study does not constitute human subjects research. Thus, it does not require IRB approval.

Please let us know if we can be of further serve. We wish you great success with your project.

Sincerely,

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Middle Tennessee State University

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## Appendix B

## Interview Questions for Siblings

1. At what age were you adopted? If you were adopted at birth, what age do you remember being told you were adopted?
2. Growing up, did you feel any particular feelings toward adoption?
3. Growing up, how did you perceive your birthmother/birth relatives?
4. Did you ever have any desire as a child to meet your birthmother or birth family?
5. What is your least favorite thing about being adopted? Favorite?
6. What kind of assumptions do you receive when you tell people that you are adopted? Are they mainly negative or positive? Are any of them true?
7. How do you feel about being adopted?
8. Do you ever wish that you had not been adopted?
9. As you have grown older, has your opinion on your birthmother/birth relatives changed?
10. As you have grown older, have you changed your opinion about meeting your birthmother? If so, why? If not, why?
11. Do you ever feel like something is missing?
12. How has adoption most impacted your life?
13. If adoption hasn't played a huge role in your life, why?
14. If you could tell your birthmother anything, what would it be?
15. If you could tell the general population anything about adoption, what would it be?

## Appendix C

### Additional Questions for Elise and Emma

1. When you found out that you were going to be adopted, how did you feel?
2. When you found out that your adoption would take you to America, how did you feel about leaving your birthparents behind?
3. What emotions do you feel toward your birthparents? Why?
4. Do you have any desire to ever go back to Taiwan and connect with your birthparents?
5. Do you like being adopted?
6. What is the hardest part about moving to America? How has it affected you?
7. Do you ever wish that your birthparents had kept you? How does it make you feel?
8. Do you have a hard time being in a family after spending years in foster care and in children's homes?
9. What do you wish your family knew about how you feel about adoption?
10. What do you wish you could tell your birthparents?

## Appendix D

## Interview Questions for Parents

1. Why did you choose adoption as the means of expanding your family? Did you consider any other options?
2. How did you feel when you found out you were going to be parents for the first time? Did these feelings differ from what you anticipated because you were adopting?
3. Did you face any positive or negative assumptions about adoption, either while you were adopting or after?
4. Explain the adoption process for each domestically adopted child and how they differed.
5. How did you decide to tell your children that they were adopted? How did you choose to portray their birthmothers/birth relatives?
6. Did any of your children in particular suffer with the fact that they were adopted?
7. Explain your decision to adopt internationally and how that process differed from domestic adoption?
8. How has adopting older children varied from adopting babies?
9. What are the biggest challenges you have faced with the emotional well-being of older adopted children? What about with children adopted as babies?
10. What has your biggest disappointment been with adopting? Your greatest joy?
11. What stereotype bothers you the most about adoption?
12. How do you deal with attachment struggles?

13. How do you feel about your children searching for answers and seeking their birthmothers and birth relatives? Why?
14. What would you tell the world if you could say anything about adopting?

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