

Empty Chairs

A Short Story

By Cathryn Vogeley

It came on standard office stationery bearing the letterhead *Families United*, typed in Times New Roman, twelve font, single-spaced:

Your birth mother has asked us to contact you on her behalf. She would like to connect, but you are under no obligation whatsoever. Your information is protected and nothing will be divulged without your permission. An email and phone number along with business hours are below.

I take a moment and read the note again before laying it on the granite counter next to a half-finished bottle of Aquafina from yesterday's party. The cold stone supports me as I drop onto the bar stool. A sensation of nausea begins and I reach for the water bottle. In two gulps I finish it with water sliding down my chin and fat drops blurring words on the paper.

Before the mail that afternoon, it had been an ordinary day. I'd tucked cereal bowls into the dishwasher next to plates smeared with cake crumbs and sticky frosting from last night's twentieth-anniversary celebration.

My oldest, fifteen-year-old Marci, and her sister Celia, are making a racket over whose turn it is for the iPad. I love the household noise. If it were up to me, we'd have at least four children.

Marci yells, "Mom, can you start the car? I'll be right down."

I'm supposed to take her to choir practice.

"Sure, sure, I'm coming right now, honey," I say and fold the letter onto itself.

“Mawwwwwmm, come on.”

My boots thunk on the stone tile while my heart races. I grab my shoulder bag and stuff the paper in the side pocket.

My whole body is quivering, especially my hands on the steering wheel. Traffic is at a crawl.

Light rain covers the windshield. I turn the knob, starting the wipers.

My vision pulses with my heartbeat. What's wrong with me?

Forty-five years, my God. Forty-five.

A homeless girl hides under the overpass. She has a lighter in one hand, the other cupped around a cigarette. She looks up just as we roll by. She's young. Maybe just out of high school. I glance at Marci. They could be sisters.

Ahead of us, one of those souped-up low riders stops, signals right, and allows a long space in front of him. I lean on the horn. Marci cracks her gum.

“Patience, Mom,” she says, turning up the radio, “Ooh, my favorite song.”

She must have a dozen favorites and isn't shy about belting out the words. Normally I'd chide her for the gum cracking.

My children do not know that I am adopted.

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The messages that I am different came like dandelion puffs, barely noticed, putting down roots over the years.

I was in first grade, at recess with my best friend, Leslie next to me. We played on the old rusty swings, going up and down together.

Leslie said, "I saw your mother with the cookies in home room. I knew it was her. She looks just like you."

I slowed down dragging my feet on the ground and stared at the rust on my hands.

"Nuh-uh. She can't. She's not my real mother."

Leslie stopped next to me. "What do you mean?"

"I'm adopted. My real mother lives someplace else."

"Doesn't matter. The one you have now looks like she's real."

I smiled.

"You got brothers and sisters?" Leslie asks.

I rubbed my hand on my dark pants but the rusty color was still there.

"No. It's just me."

"Well, that's good. I hate my brother."

"If I had a brother, I wouldn't hate him. Sister neither."

We pushed off and pumped hard till we were up high again.

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At home, we usually ate dinner at the dining room table with six chairs. Just Mother and Daddy and me and all those empty chairs.

They were always saying how pretty I was. That day, I had on my yellow dress with the puffy sleeves.

"You are the loveliest little girl I know," Mother said, pouring Kool-Aid into my glass.

“Thank you,” I smiled. “Guess what Leslie said. She saw you at school. She said she knew you were my mother because I look just like you. I told her that’s funny because you’re not my real mother. I’m adopted.”

The cherry Kool-Aid was almost gone. Ice cubes hit my lip and the red drink got on my dress. Mother said, “Here now, use your napkin. It’s no problem sweetie, you have lots of dresses.”

Daddy put down his fork and sat back in his chair, like he was mad at me.

“Elizabeth. That is private. It’s nobody’s business. We don’t talk about being adopted. Next time, just say thank you and change the subject.”

“Why? How come we don’t talk about it?”

“We just don’t, that’s all.”

“Is it a secret?”

His mouth stayed real tight. “No. It’s not a secret. But it’s nobody’s business.”

My shame at being adopted began with those few passing words. Like dandelion seeds invisible as they settle in and grow deep roots, nearly impossible to pull out.

I didn’t know why Daddy said not to talk about it, but there it was.

Mother would answer my questions when Daddy wasn’t around. She said my birth parents were college kids and couldn’t take care of me. I dreamed that they were happy and married with more kids. That someday I might meet my real family. I liked to think about being with them, like a normal kid with brothers and sisters.

*

A week had passed since I hid the letter under a lavender sachet in my lingerie drawer. It’s late afternoon with the soft drawn-out laments of mourning doves beyond the bedroom window. The

humidity had come up with the unusual hot spell. My husband, Tim, and I are in our bedroom; he's changing after work. I always thought of him as handsome. He is many inches taller than I am. He wears black-framed glasses. He keeps a Brad Pitt goatee.

He's known from the beginning about my adoption.

We don't talk about it.

While he changes clothes, I'm folding laundry, the light colors, mostly underwear. My lingerie drawer smells of flowers and as I place my things inside, the letter makes a crinkle sound. I pull it out and hold it to my nose. The lavender scent of a summer garden.

Tim slips out of jeans and work shirt, and tosses them in the hamper.

I wipe my damp forehead with the back of my hand.

"We're going to have to turn on the air."

Tim throws his work boot against the closet wall.

"Hey," I yell, "what do you think you're doing? I mean, if you have some problem with turning on the air conditioning..."

"It's not that. I'm just pissed. It's been a shitty day. On top of everything else, Mom called me at work. She wants to visit over Memorial Day weekend. I swear, every time I get a game set up, there's a glitch. Last time I had three days off in a row, it was *your* parents."

"Oh, so it's a parent problem? There are three hundred sixty-five days in a year. Can't you spare a day for your Mom?" The bed catches me as I sink down at the edge.

He's fixing the waistband snaps on his shorts and looks up, startled.

"Elizabeth? Are you crying? Hey, hey, if you want my mother to come, that's up to you. Honest to god, it's nothing to cry about."

The lavender scent has faded. The letter is just a page with printed text that I fold and lay back on the dresser.

“What’s that?” Tim asks.

Words catch in my throat.

He picks up the paper. “Smells like perfume,” he says and hinges his glasses on top of his head.

I turn my back to him and face outside. Doves have paired on a branch close by, their plump bodies and tiny gray heads are darting about. In a crook of the branch near the trunk, is a half-built nest.

“Look, Tim, a nest.” My voice comes out thick. “We’ll get to see hatchlings.”

Still looking at the letter, “I wonder why she wants to meet you. Why now,” Tim says, “After all this time.”

I watch the birds.

His voice is soft, “What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I’m going to do nothing. Throw it away.”

“You’re sure? Maybe keep it for a while. You might change your mind.”

I snatch it from his hands, tear it to pieces, and dump them in the bathroom wastebasket.

In the long vanity mirror is Tim’s reflection, arms folded across his chest.

“Nobody expects you to bounce around popping champagne bottles. I don’t blame you for being upset. It’s like a bomb dropped on you or something. I don’t know.” He runs cold water in the sink and cups his hands underneath, splashing his face.

“Maybe some people would be curious.” Drops fall from his elbows as he grabs a clean towel. “Maybe she’s really nice. You two might hit it off.” He swipes at his face and forearms then tosses the towel into the hamper. “It doesn’t help to get all P-O’d over it. It seems like you’re kind of... mad about it.”

My eyes sting. I whip around, facing him, “Mad? How would *you* feel? I’ve lived my whole life without her. I *have* a mother, thank you very much.”

Tim steps near and with his closeness is the faint smell of the morning’s deodorant mixed with perspiration.

His hands are gentle on my shoulders, “Sweetheart—,you—”

I twist away, “Don’t touch me.”

My hostility surprises me. I hate him. I hate that I love him and that he could go away, stop loving me. That he could destroy me.

Tim backs up, throws up his hands, “I’m sorry. Really. I’m sorry.” He turns and walks out.

Finally, I sit quietly for a long time looking at nothing, thinking of nothing. I pick up the pieces of the letter from the trash and tape it back together.

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It’s been three weeks. My mind is full of this woman who made me. When I’m alone, I cry. At night I cry. In the car, I cry. I’ve apologized for my outburst to Tim, again and again until he tells me to stop, that it’s no big deal, he understands. But, does he really?

We’re in bed, in the dark. The air conditioner whispers fresh dry air. We haven’t made love since the letter arrived.

“Tim?”

“Uh huh?”

“Please don’t leave me.”

“Ah, Lizzy. We’ve been married a long time. Why would you say that?” He pulls me close.

“Just tell me you won’t.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

“Won’t what?”

“I won’t leave wet towels on the floor ever again.” He chuckles.

I push him away and turn on my back. “Come on, Tim.”

“Anyone can say anything, Lizzy and still they do what they want. Why would I leave?”

I take a deep breath, trying to stop the tears before they start. “Please. Just fucking say it.”

“I won’t leave you. There. Feel better?”

He touches my hair, playing with it, twirling it in his fingers, gently pulling it, and moving it across the pillow.

“Maybe it would give you some breathing space if you talked to her. Maybe give that agent a holler. Find out what happens if you connect. That letter says you’re in control.”

“You don’t get it. I’m *not* in control. I have *never* been in control. I had no say in what happened to me. I had no choice at all. She left me; you know? She left me.

And my parents. My whole life, they kept me up on some altar. Mother always saying how she adored me. And that I’m like an angel from heaven. I’m grateful to them for everything they gave me. I owe them. They don’t deserve to be hurt.”

*

It's a month since I've slept. Tim and I have talked and talked. He's right. I can go as slow as I want.

The doves had been sitting on two eggs, taking turns and now there are baby birds getting ready to fly. I sit by the window all day, watching the parents and the fledglings. Finally, I contact the agent.

My mother's name is Wendy. The intermediary has forwarded an email from her in case I declined to communicate.

To my long-lost child,

I want to tell you that I've always regretted having to give you up. You were conceived during a time when there was no acceptance of an unmarried mother. It was shameful to become pregnant before marriage back in the sixties.

I've hoped and prayed that you were well-loved and appreciated by your adoptive parents and siblings. Please know that I did the best that I could do for you at the time.

For many years, I was unable to allow myself to think about you and all that happened at the time. After a lot of work on myself, I have come to terms as best I can with your birth. I've decided to try to locate you and let you know me if you want. If not, I understand. I hope that you can forgive me.

I do love you,

Wendy

It's the last part that kills me. I can almost touch the ache in my chest. I don't want to feel this way. But there's this pull.

Wendy and I email and text every day, sometimes more than once. She asks to meet. No, I say.

I send a picture of me. A head shot only. I can't allow her to see me fully.

But I want to hear her.

She sends a voice message.

We sound alike.

I have sisters!

Wendy sends pictures of a family get-together, twenty people standing in front of an old shade tree. My people. I look like them. I should have been there too, with Tim and my girls.

I can't get enough of her, even after she shows me, tells me, reassures me. The story of my making, her time at the home, her labor alone, the secrecy, going to court alone to sign adoption papers. An old high school photo of my father. They never got back together, so that dream wasn't true.

There are pictures of her siblings and her children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews. I'm crying every day.

Who am I?

*

A year has passed and still, I can't let her closer. This affair we're having goes on, just the two of us.

In the beginning, my parents bristled when her name came up. Mother used to ask, "What do you talk about?" as if we might talk about her. Daddy said, "What's she want after all these years?"

I've told my girls about her. They had trouble believing Grandma and Grandpa aren't my 'real' parents. But things have quieted.

No one mentions my birth mother anymore.

Wendy sends a message suggesting that she fly to Philadelphia where I live, meet me at the airport and fly back to California the same day without anyone knowing. I can't. I text back, "What do you hope to gain?" She answers, "I could look into your eyes, tell you I love you, put my arms around you and if you'd let me, hold you close." But I can't.

My parents had given me their days and nights, their oversight, safekeeping, and every other thing a parent does for a child. If Wendy and I meet, will my feelings change toward my Mother and Father?

Wendy's two daughters aren't reaching out for me. They worry that I'll take her away, that they're just placeholders for me. No one in her family reaches out. Just as it was forty-six years ago. I'm not welcome.

No one except Wendy is interested in getting closer and this only hurts me more.

We've covered the past. I know all I need to know. Now, our texts are superficial and less often. After weeks go by, she'll send a note, how's things? How are the girls? And how are your parents?

I don't want to talk about my parents. It's as if I am choosing to be annoyed. I give one sentence answers.

She sounds like a generous loving mother. I'm grateful to her for giving me life, for enduring shame and the heartbreak of giving up her first born. But I can't hold her burden and mine too.

A text blinks on my phone screen. *Hi Elizabeth, I haven't heard from you for a while.*

Marci and Celia are upstairs singing Karaoke to Fifth Harmony's *Don't Say You Love Me*. In ten minutes, I'll drive them to choir practice.

With a deep breath, I press and hold the message. Delete all.

"Let's go girls," I call out, "get your things, it's time to go."

Author's note: This is a version of my shortlisted story for the Reedsy contest.

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