

Knowledge: the key to truth

1986

Often as the boys slept in their cot, I would watch the perfect rise and fall of their shoulders, fascinated by their unique individual characteristics. Any link to my own genetic pool remained a mystery, a complete enigma. Persistent questions, for which I had no answers, started to niggle. My need to have some explanations was starting to intensify. The authenticity of my introduction to seek heritage has been questioned, but there has never been any reason to deviate from the truth of it.

Early September 1986, we weaved our path beneath pleasant autumn sunshine through the crowds in Edinburgh, enjoying the ambiance of city life. This seemingly insignificant excursion was about to turn into the beginning of an epic personal journey, taking twenty-five years to reach 2011. I was destined to navigate a passage through time until enabled to cruise into calmer waters with new comprehension and an invigorated sense of liberty.

Jack my husband, paused outside Register House, an imposing building at the east end of Princes Street. The implicit comprehension in his gesture hovered between us. I found a moment's escape from making a decision by watching a short-statured, grey-haired man call out "Evening News" from a nearby newspaper booth. I remember thinking he sounded as if a clothes peg pinched his nose. The Duke of Wellington looked down on us from astride his rearing horse, set high on a granite plinth. A visit to Register House, sometime in the future, had been discussed as a possible starting point. Being presented with the 'now' element in Jack's gesture annulled my previous positive conviction, that today should mark the start of my search for background information.

I blocked out the traffic noise, the chatter, the man with his newspapers, and took time to argue with myself as to why it should be today. There was no knowing when there would be a similar opportunity. My husband provided the final impetus, wrapped loosely in a few words of encouragement which I barely heard.

So it was, I found myself alone on the steps of Register House watching Jack walk away, carrying a young child on his back, with our other son holding his hand. I observed them until they were no longer visible having been swallowed by the crowds.

The dozen or so steps I climbed to reach the main entrance felt like many more. The door was heavy and awkward. Inside was a polished marble floor reminiscent of the firm pale golden sand of a Kerry beach. From her position behind the reception desk, a young fresh-faced blonde girl, neatly dressed,

exuded an air of efficiency. She listened attentively to my garbled explanation, as I fumbled awkwardly in my handbag to retrieve a copy of my adopted birth certificate. It had been stored in there for weeks, just in case. She appeared oblivious to the tremor in my hand. "If you would like to take a seat," she gestured to a row of wooden chairs. "I will see if anyone is available to help."

From this new vantage point I could see a circular iron staircase through a large glass-panelled door. Several tiers of platforms branched out from the black spiral, each lined with shelf after shelf of buff-coloured folders. So many lives recorded, some long forgotten, others hardly started. One of them was mine.

After a few minutes, she returned accompanied by a middle-aged gentleman, who suggested we move to another room. It was easily accessed through a door from leading from the reception area, and furnished with a large rectangular oak table skirted with twelve high-backed chairs. He left me alone, explaining it could take a few moments to locate my file.

Tiny illuminated motes of dust floated, danced and hovered making a slow descent before settling on polished oak. A stray thread on my T-shirt insisted on being tugged in a vain attempt to make it go away. High windows flanked one side of the room, beyond which the sound of brakes could be heard, interspersed with engines revving ready to move on again from the traffic lights outside.

During the delay, I barely resisted the temptation to flee. Eventually the man returned and, casually making himself comfortable in a chair opposite, presented me with a large brown envelope. Immediately apparent was a an unbroken red wax seal. My authorisation to break the seal was requested. Shakily I signed one of the marked boxes on the previously untarnished exterior. When my signature was complete, one swift flick of his pen set free a sheaf of papers which spewed out onto the table. Solemnly, he selected one and slid it across to me.

"This is your original birth certificate," he said in a tone of practiced empathy. Then I was indulged with time to absorb the shape and significance of each written word.

My connection to this other person, while undeniable, felt surreal. I stared at the details and the name, all so different. This was another me from a world a million miles apart from the parallel persona who sat in stark surroundings with a complete stranger.

A second sheet was pushed in my direction, my pre-adoption medical examination, a third my original baptismal certificate, before finally the court papers sealing an infant's destination. At no time was I hurried or forced to engage in conversation.

Sensing I no longer wished to sit in this room with a stranger, the gentleman offered to provide me with photocopies of my original birth certificate and baptismal certificate to take home. I thanked him with sincerity before returning

to the real world, clutching tight copies of my past life, thinking only of the mother who wept as her baby cried.

Jack was pleased. "You always thought you might be Irish, or hoped you were. Anyway, it all sounds very Irish. I am going to enjoy calling you 'my little Irish Colleen'."

Mother's name: Brigit Mary Finnigan

Child's name: Teresa Mary Finnigan

Mother's occupation: Housekeeper.

Father's name: Paternity not admitted

He had no idea just how often my birth certificate was removed from its envelope and stared at, as if by some kind of telepathy something more would become obvious. I became encased in a bubble of otherness. I cannot think of a better way to describe this new awareness of my parallel existence.....