



“You go right back up there and get me a toddler. I need a baby...”

--Edwina McDunnough, Raising Arizona

MATCHED: A Memoir

By Denise Massar

[contact info]

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Overview

First, the elephant in the room: Sentimental, well-meaning adoption memoirs do not sell.

THIS IS NOT THAT.

For every adoptable newborn in the United States, there are eighty sets of hopeful adoptive parents competing for that baby. And in domestic adoption, hopeful adoptive parents are responsible for finding a woman willing to give them her baby. Supply is low, demand is high, the competition fierce.

We advertised ourselves across the country, fielding and vetting birth moms by phone. The first birth mom to contact us—there would be eight in all—had been raped by two different men. Ashamed and depressed, she'd spent her pregnancy doing coke and using vodka to knock herself out. Did we want to adopt her baby, she asked?

We tried posting our flyer at women's shelters. One director was enthusiastic; they specialized in housing victims of human trafficking. Would we have a problem adopting a baby born of prostitution? I didn't think I would, but what about my husband?

Obsessed with finding a baby, I posed as a professional adoption speaker to Trojan-horse myself into a homeless shelter for pregnant girls. The unsavoriness of trying to sniff out a birth mom among friends and strangers didn't faze me—like those marathon runners who have menstrual blood or shit running down their legs, I was running toward the finish line without embarrassment or self-consciousness.

Nine months into our search, we were “matched,” chosen by a woman calling us from the delivery room. The forty-eight hours we spent in the hospital with her were as full of

surprises (the not-good kind) and obstacles as our search had been. But we'd found our beautiful boy.

My birth mom search didn't end there.

I'd wanted to find my own birth mom on and off throughout my life, but my adoptive mom—whom I loved dearly—had made it clear that curiosity about my biological family was the ultimate betrayal, so I'd left it alone. I was also scared to look. I imagined a greasy, mummed woman wanting to pull me into her redneck family (and her trailer). But having an intimate view of my son's open adoption versus my closed 1970s adoption, the disparities between the two illuminated how absurdly antiquated closed adoption really was. While my son would always know his birth mom, and, at just nine-months-old, his birth certificate already belonged to him, adoptees from my generation weren't allowed to know the name of the women who'd given birth to us or to even *see* our birth certificates. And finally, the eight birth moms I'd met along the way? They weren't scary. They were *women*—tough and resourceful, frightened and vulnerable. I decided to find the woman who'd given birth to me, even if it broke my mom's heart.

MATCHED is white-hot relevant. Adoption laws are changing and *fast*. In the last ten years, half of the fifty states have passed laws to open long-sealed adoption records (New York being the most recent, in January 2020), and the other half are expected to open adoption records within the next few years. Birth certificates in hand, adoptees are finding their biological parents online—I found my birth mom with a quick Facebook search. Adoption law reform—coupled with DNA technologies like 23andMe—have have made family secrets about who we are and *who we come from* impossible to keep.

There are other adoptive mom memoirs out there, but they are sappy, and dreamy, and religious—they don't tell it like it is. Jennifer Gilmore's semiautobiographical novel, *The Mothers*, comes closest to offering the real story from an adoptive parent's perspective. A.M. Homes' memoir, *The Mistress's Daughter*, and Nicole Chung's memoir, *All You Can Ever Know*, are smart and non-sentimental but are told from the adoptee's viewpoint. My memoir is the first written from the perspective of a woman who occupies two corners of the adoption triad (adoptee/adopter/birth mom), as both adoptee and adoptive mom.

MATCHED is, first and foremost, a book for lovers of memoir. The second market for MATCHED is the adoption community, and it's a big one: One-hundred million Americans have experienced adoption in their immediate family, meaning either they or a family member was adopted, has adopted, or has placed a baby for adoption. That's one out of every three of us!

I'm the right person to tell this story because I'm a known voice and in the adoption community: I've appeared on the podcast, *Infant Adoption Guide* (3000 downloads per month); I am a curated contributor for adoption and parenthood content on Medium, and I have 1100 newsletter subscribers. In addition, I have the collective promotional power of well-established memoirist friends who have agreed to promote MATCHED via their platforms, including Jillian Lauren, Dawn Davies, Jennifer Gilmore, and Ben Barnz.

Click here for a brief author video: <https://vimeo.com/captivate365/denise.massar>

Advance Praise

New York Times bestselling memoirist Jillian Lauren, *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem* and *Everything You Ever Wanted*, has provided the following blurb (<http://www.jillianlauren.com/>):

“Slashing sentimental fantasies, Massar pulls back the curtain on the world of modern open adoption, exposing its grittiness and prejudices, as well as its beauty. Smart, funny, and real, Massar brings the reader in close with her intimate portrait of a complicated yet compassionate journey.”

Movie Producer, *Cake* starring Jennifer Aniston, and memoirist, *WE: An Adoption Memoir*, Ben Barnz:

“Candid and moving, witty and fierce, Denise Massar’s story of family, love, and identity is at once unimaginable and deeply relatable.”

I can also reach out to the following adoption authors and celebrity adoption community influencers for additional endorsements:

- A.M. Homes, author *The Mistress’s Daughter* (Viking)
- Actress and author Jamie Lee Curtis, *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* (HarperCollins), adoption advocate, social media influencer
- Author Nicole Chung, *All You Can Ever Know* (Catapult)
- Michele Norris, author of *The Grace of Silence* (Pantheon). Past host of NPR’s All Things Considered. (Norris’ Race Card Project is mentioned in MATCHED.)
- Nia Vardalos, *Instant Mom* (HarperOne)

Author Bio

I live in Southern California with my husband and three kids. A Washington State native, I hold an M.A. in English literature from Central Washington University.

I've worked in higher education publishing for the last decade: As a rookie sales rep, I was salesperson of the year and promoted to marketing, as marketing manager I won first edition launch of the year and was promoted to editor. When Mom became my most important title, I started a freelance academic publishing marketing business that allowed me to work from home.

As a marketing manager, I would ask my more dynamic authors to pitch their book to my sales team, and I can serve in a similar capacity for you. I will be thrilled to (continue to) talk to booksellers, reviewers, sales reps, librarians, readers, book clubs—anyone in a position to help sell MATCHED.

I have begun pitching MATCHED where I interact with readers: my website, my newsletter, podcast appearances, local city and county librarians, and of course, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. I've also built a foundation of support for MATCHED via relationships with fellow memoirists, Jennifer Gilmore, Dawn Davies, Jillian Lauren, and Ben Barnz.

After reading the first ten pages of MATCHED (via my website) readers regularly send me messages asking, "Where can I buy your book?!" I am chomping at the bit for the day I can reply with a pre-order link!

Comparable Titles

Successful novels such as *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng, *That Kind of Mother* by Rumaan Alam, and *Lucky Boy* by Shanthi Sekaran, all have adoption at the center of the narrative, as do lauded memoirs *All You Can Ever Know* by Nicole Chung, and *Everything You Ever Wanted* by Jillian Lauren. The following six titles are most comparable to MATCHED.

All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir by Nicole Chung, Catapult, 2018, 222 pages, \$26 hardback, ISBN: 978-1-936787-97-5. Chung's memoir stands out for its gentle yet direct call to the carpet for those of us who've uttered, "Race doesn't matter," or "I don't see color." Chung shows us glimpses of the racism, intentional and unintentional, she endured growing up Asian within her white adoptive family and her mostly white hometown in rural Oregon. Expecting her first child, Chung, done with being the "perfect" adopted daughter, acts on her long-repressed desire to find her birth family and to claim her Korean heritage.

Race is not a major factor in my adoption story (though race is discussed), and the heft of MATCHED is about my journey to becoming an adoptive mom. MATCHED is, at its heart, an examination of birth moms. Chung's story is patient, calm, beyond reproach. Mine is impatient, laced with profanity, and morally questionable.

Everything You Ever Wanted: A Memoir by Jillian Lauren, Penguin Random House, 2015, 245 pages, \$16 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-14-218163-8. Standout qualities of Jillian Lauren's memoir about adopting her son from Ethiopia include her uber-relatable voice, her proximity to fame (she's married to bass guitarist for Weezer, Scott Shriner), and her inclusion of the stark-

faced realities of adopting a child with attachment issues. Lauren's voice stands out in the field of adoption writers which is full of earnest, squeaky-clean, do-gooders. In a previous memoir, *Some Girls*, Lauren unapologetically claims her past as both heroin addict and member of a harem (all of which is referenced in EYEW).

In international adoption, you don't search for a birth mom to give you her baby. You fly to your child's home county and pick them up from an orphanage. Though both adoption memoirs, our experiences could not be more different.

The Mistress's Daughter by A.M. Homes, Penguin, 2007, 238 pages, \$14 paperback, ISBN 978-0-14-311331-7. The standout quality of A.M. Homes' story is included in the title; she is the product of an affair. Not only was she adopted in the era of closed, secretive adoptions, but her birth parents' relationship was a secret, her placement for adoption was a secret. Homes' memoir focuses on her reunion with her birth parents, both of whom are wildly disappointing to her, but especially her father; unsurprisingly, he was not a good man—Home's prose is a product of her life story: cerebral, somber, and dark, though beautifully so.

Homes' story does not deal with motherhood. The bulk of MATCHED is told from my point of view as a mom, a mother to two biological kids hoping to adopt another.

Inheritance: A Memoir of Genealogy, Paternity, and Love by Dani Shapiro, Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 249 pages, \$25 hardback, ISBN: 978-1-5247-3271-4. Using a DNA kit on a lark, Shapiro discovers that the deceased father she dearly loved was not her biological father. Learning she was conceived via sperm donor, Shapiro wrestles with her identity over the course of *Inheritance*: Not being biologically Jewish, is she still Jewish? Is religion cultural or genetic? Is

her grandmother still her grandmother? Will her biological father's resistance toward her soften—will she get to meet him?

Shapiro's memoir engages in the same conversation that I'm having in MATCHED: Secrecy surrounding adoption (due to rapidly changing adoption laws) and parentage (due to DNA and ancestry sites) will be impossible for society to maintain within our lifetimes, and what does that *look like* both culturally and for individual families like mine and Shapiro's?

Instant Mom by Nia Vardalos, Harper One, 2013, 251 pages, \$15.99 paperback, 978-0-06-223184-0. *Instant Mom* is the story of Vardalos' adoption and early parenting of a toddler girl from California's foster system. The stand out quality of Vardalos' book is her celebrity status. Inserting name-dropping stories with ease, Vardalos highlights her connections to Tom Hanks, Rita Wilson, Sean Hayes, even The Queen of England! Vardalos includes a lengthy appendix in which she answers "How to Adopt" questions for hopeful adoptive parents, making *Instant Mom* seventy-five percent memoir and twenty-five percent prescriptive.

Vardalos' is a story of adopting via foster care, so courting and navigating birth moms is not part of her story. *Instant Mom* is light, celebratory, and wholesome, where MATCHED gets down into the murkier parts of adoption.

We: An Adoption and a Memoir by Ben Barnz, Wyatt-MacKenzie, 2018, 225 pages, \$18 paperback, 9781948018227. Barnz tells the story of domestic private adoption, from the perspective of a married gay man. Barnz and his Hollywood-screenwriter husband adopt a newborn baby girl, but before they even have twenty-four hours with her, the birth father sues them for custody. *WE* stands out for two reasons: First, Barnz's vignettes of growing up in 1980s

New York City as a closeted gay youth with an instinct to nurture beautifully sets the stage for his longing to parent as an adult. Secondly, Barnz examines what motivates a birth father to fight or not to fight for his child. This is a subject I've not seen another adoption memoir delve into. Barnz's treatment of his daughter's birth father was both petulant and generous—a very human combination.

Barnz and his husband did not search for a birth mom; one was presented to them, while the heart of MATCHED is my story of *searching* for a baby and my unique view into the volatile, often illegal, and heartbreaking lives most birth moms are living.

The Mothers: A Novel by Jennifer Gilmore, Scribner, 2013, 275 pages, \$26 hardcover, 978-1-4516-9725-4. *The Mothers* is the only title I'm including that is not a memoir, but it's important because it is the most similar to MATCHED in scope and perspective. Gilmore is—in real life—an adoptive mom and as a fellow adoptive mom, it is clear her novel is autobiographical; she's *lived* it. Gilmore is a *writer* who wrote about her adoption journey, not an adoptive parent who, moved by the experience of adopting a child, decided to write about it. Gilmore stands out, too, for her willingness to be disappointed in and critical of birth moms. The current milieu within the world of domestic adoption is to speak of birth moms as if they are saints and to preach to adoptive parents about their moral responsibility to include them in their child's life post-placement. But what if the saint is scamming you, or snorting coke? Are adoptive parents required to remain obsequious and obliged? Gilmore is the only adoptive parent I've read who acknowledges the frustration of the situation, and asks, "When do *I* get to be the mom?"

Gilmore's story deals solely with the search for a birth mom. MATCHED is the story not only of my search for a birth mom who would give me *her* baby, but how the adoption of my son was the catalyst that lead me to search for the woman who had given *me* up.

Marketing Plan

I was a passionate and driven marketing manager when I was selling *other* authors' books; in promoting my own, I'll be unstoppable. I have a clear vision for getting MATCHED seen, heard, and chattered about. I'm highly motivated to see my marketing plan through and have the marketing savvy to perform all tasks, from the initial, savvy media pitch to the months-long process of spreading the word through my community and network.

Platform

- **Author Website** <http://denisemassar.org>
- **Author Blog** <http://www.denisemassar.org/blog/>
- **Author Newsletter** 1100 newsletter subscribers. Conversational dispatches from the world of writing, editing, and querying while parenting. Also, book recs and discussion.
- **Medium** <https://medium.com/@denisemassar> While anyone can publish on Medium, I am a Medium partner. That means Medium has identified my content as high-quality, they promote my articles on their website, and I am paid for content.
- **Twitter** <https://twitter.com/denisemassar>
- **Facebook Author Page** <https://www.facebook.com/denisemassar>
- **The following well-established memoirist friends have agreed to promote**

MATCHED via their platforms: Jennifer Gilmore, Jillian Lauren, Dawn Davies, Ben

Barnz

Events

- **Hometown book launch party (Mission Viejo, California).** Mission Viejo is where we have put down roots, and my friends are the core demographic for MATCHED. They are the Cheryl/Liz/Glennon army, and their word-of-mouth and social media promotion of MATCHED is main goal of event.
- **Childhood hometown book launch party (Olympia, Washington).** Though Olympia is the state capital, it still has a small-town feel; a lot of people never leave. I haven't been back since graduating (1990!), and people are curious. An event will help secure coverage in the local paper, The Daily Olympian, circulation 17k daily, 28k Sunday.
- **Pacific Northwest tour.** The book's final chapter in which I meet my birth mom takes place in Powell's City of Books in Portland. Powell's Books will be a natural tour stop, and I'll also organize events at Elliott Bay Bookstore (Seattle), Seattle Public Library, Auntie's Bookstore (Spokane), and Orca Books (Olympia).
- **Hometown Library Events.** Both my city library (Mission Viejo, CA) and county library (Orange County) have agreed to host an author reading and book signing event.
- **Festivals.** I will pitch local festivals, including: Los Angeles Times Book Festival, San Diego Writer's Festival, Pasadena Festival of Women Authors, and Literary Orange.

Regional Media Outreach

Because I grew up in Washington State and key sections of the book take place in the Pacific Northwest, I consider two regional market areas “hometowns,” Southern California and the Pacific Northwest.

- **On-air or TV interview with Washington State Senator Ann Rivers & State**

Representative Tina Orwall. The law that opened up my adoption records, allowing me to find my birth mom, was written by two women: State Representative Tina Orwall-D, and State Representative Ann Rivers-R. (I know Tina and Ann personally. They were an integral part of my research for MATCHED and we became friends. They’re pleased to be a part of my story and will agree to an on-air interview.) Not only were they on opposite sides politically, but they’d been on opposite sides of the issue –Tina was an adoptee who wanted to give adoptees access to their original birth certificate, and Ann had placed a child for adoption and wanted to ensure continued privacy for birth moms who wanted it. The story of their unlikely collaboration was reported via *The Seattle Times* and other regional news outlets when the law went into effect in 2013. We have a good chance of gaining human interest radio and TV coverage via this angle: “How has the opening of adoption records for hundreds of thousands of Washington State adoptees *really worked out?*” Since the 2014 law change 10,000 Washington State adoptees have requested their records. Washington State adoptees are hungry for reunion stories, and they number in the hundreds of thousands.

- **Media outlets to pitch in Pacific Northwest:** T.V.: Seattle’s KOMO, KIRO, KING 5.
Radio: KUOW (NPR Seattle), KNKX (NPR Tacoma).

- **Crimson & Black (Central Washington University’s Alumni Magazine):** The alumni association has promised a feature article prior to MATCHED’s publication. Circulation 36K, bi-annual publication.
- **Media outlets to pitch in Southern California:** T.V.: KCAL, KTLA, KCBC, KNBC. Radio: KPBS (NPR San Diego), KCRW (NPR Santa Monica), KPCC (NPR Pasadena)

Print and Online Magazines and Websites

- **Medium.** I am a Medium Partner and get paid for my content. The curators at Medium chose my article, “Black Babies Cost Less to Adopt,” as recommended reading for their subscribers interested in parenting, race, and equality. The article has a seventy-five percent read rate (read vs. view). The average read ratio on Medium is thirty percent. You can read “Black Babies Cost Less to Adopt,” here: <https://medium.com/p/black-babies-cost-less-to-adopt-b8836e71607e?source=email-a5b316619677--writer.postDistributed&sk=871caf998933d2ba99673ca2aa0a06b1>
- **Parents, Today’s Parents, and Well Family.** I will be pitching an article titled, “I Breastfed My Adopted Baby: I Wouldn’t Do It Again.”
- **Huffington Post, Catapult, Rumpus, and Bitch:** MATCHED naturally falls into three sections. In the ramp-up to publication, I will pitch a series of three articles, each containing an excerpt and written from the POV held in that section of the book.

Article One: A naïve and hopeful adoptive mom, I’m *obsessed* with finding a baby. “I Snuck into a Homeless Shelter for Pregnant Teens, Trying to Sniff Out a Baby to Adopt.”

Article Two: A new adoptive mom, I've learned birth moms aren't the girls from MTV's 16 and Pregnant. They're homeless, and victims of human trafficking, and victims of rape, and drug addicts, and women being pummeled by their partners and *good god* why isn't anyone talking about this? "Birth Moms Aren't Who You Think They Are: 16 and Pregnant? Think Again."

Article Three: Newly awakened to the fact that my 1970s closed adoption is absurdly outdated when viewed side-by-side with my son's open adoption, I break my mom's heart by seeking out my birth mom, my identity, and a new tradition of openness for my family. "I'm Not Your Perfect Adopted Daughter."

Podcasts

- **InfantAdoptionGuide.com blog and podcast:** Invited January 2020 to be appear on podcast as an expert on birth mom conversations. Podcast gets 3,000 unique downloads per month. Site gets 6,000 hits per month from targeted hopeful adoptive families in the U.S. You can listen to my episode here: <https://InfantAdoptionGuide.com/67>
- **Dani Shapiro's Family Secrets**, 78k subscribers. I will submit my search for and reunion with my birth mom as interview topic. The topic of closed adoption rapidly becoming impossible in a world of ancestry/DNA websites dovetails perfectly with Shapiro's own experience of discovering she was conceived via sperm donation. Recent guests include Adrienne Brodeur (Wild Game) and Kiese Laymon (Heavy).
- **Four Most Downloaded Adoption Podcasts:** I will request to be a guest on: Foster the Family 54K, Creating a Family 7K, Adoption Now 4K, Adoptees On 3K

Targeted Marketing to the Adoption Community

- **Adoptive Families (AF) Websites and Newsletter.** AF is a trio of adoption-centered websites, with a newsletter boasting 65,000 subscribers: Adoptivefamilies.com, Buildingyourfamily.com, Adoptivefamiliescircle.com. I have submitted an article proposal for Adoptivefamilies.com, “What I Wish I Knew Before I Started Talking to Birth Moms.”
- **Adoption Bloggers.** As a member of Feedspot, I have access to 150 adoption blogger’s contact information with a total subscriber base of more than five million people. I have the last twelve months of blog posts, Facebook page links and list of followers, and Twitter page links and list of followers. In the run-up to MATCHED’s launch, I will contact each blogger and request to be a guest, supplying my topics of expertise and a link to my podcast with Tim Elder of InfantAdoptionGuide.com.
- **The Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (AAAA).** AAAA is an organization of 470 attorneys dedicated to the practice of adoption and assisted reproduction law. I am registered as a non-professional member of AAAA, which has given me access to their directory of 470 attorneys. With publisher’s assistance, I will mail either an ARC of MATCHED or a photo postcard of MATCHED’s cover with the top five reasons it is a must-read for their hopeful adoptive parent clients. This is an important market to tap—all adoption attorneys supply their clients with a recommended reading list, hoping to prepare their clients about how gritty domestic adoption can be. MATCHED will help them reach that goal. (Also, our attorney was one of the heroes in our adoption story—attorneys will eat that up.)

- **Adoption Agencies.** All adoption agencies offer/require classes for their clients. There are 3000+ adoption agencies in the U.S. I will contact a minimum of ten agencies in my area offering myself as a guest subject matter expert, proposing a 30-minute talk with Q&A, titled, “What I Wish I’d Known Before We Got the Call” (Agencies include: Lifelong Adoptions, Newport Beach; Bethany Christian, La Mirada; International Christian Adoptions, Temecula; Unique Adoptions, Murrieta; Hope 4 Kids, Dana Point; A Rainbow’s End, Huntington Beach; A is for Adoption, Costa Mesa; Adoptions Unlimited, Chino.) Adoption agencies actively seek parents who have successfully adopted to speak and answer the questions of those still waiting to be matched.
- **Labor and Delivery Nurses.** Labor and delivery nurses are unsung heroes within the world of newborn domestic adoption. MATCHED sings their praises and is a must-read for every L&D nurse. I plan on advertising in the program for the Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses’ (AWHONN’s) national conference, attended by 3200 nurses. Next conference: June 2020 in Phoenix.
- **Homes for Pregnant Girls or "Second Chance Homes."** The girls and directors who live in these homes are lovingly and honestly portrayed in MATCHED. There are 118+ of these homes in the US. I will email each director a sneak peek that links directly to the chapter that praises their work, including a link to purchase MATCHED on Amazon.
- **Tie-ins with National Adoption Month in November (National Adoption Day is the Saturday before Thanksgiving):** 1) Via my newsletter, I will advertise a daily drawing for a MATCHED giveaway chosen from those who comment on my blog with their own adoption/reunion stories. 2) I will hold three livestream events via my Facebook author page. Possible topics: Here’s What Birthmoms Are Really Like | Reunion in Adoption:

Show Me Yours and I'll Show You Mine | Ancestry Sites: Is Closed Adoption Even Possible Anymore?

- **Goodreads:** In the thirty days prior to publication, I will run a giveaway on Goodreads, advertising within the several non-fiction, biography, and memoir groups I'm a part of.

<https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/105024633-denise-massar>

Synopsis

The book falls naturally into four parts: Losing, Searching, Finding, and Found.

Losing

We were never supposed to get pregnant. We were a couple of forty-somethings with two kids, a white lab, and an Orange County-sized mortgage, using condoms hyper-vigilantly. But then I got pregnant and we were unexpectedly thrilled and then the fetus died and had to be vacuumed out. And then I wanted a baby more than anything I'd ever wanted before. So, we decided to adopt. After all, *I was adopted*. I was an expert.

Searching

Turned out, I knew nothing. The days of waiting for a call telling us that a baby had been found—like my parents had done in the 70s—were gone. Our attorney told us we'd find our own birth mom. How would *that* work? What would the women be like? Would they want more money than we had? Be on drugs? I imagined them as being similar to the girls who'd hung out in the chain-link smoking section of my high school—lots of black denim and eyeliner.

What does it look like when an upper-middle-class, highly-educated woman—thrumming with desperation—hatches morally dubious plans to attract a pregnant woman willing to give her her baby? My hunt for a birth mom took me to motel rooms and creepy internet chat rooms. Eileen from Las Cruces had been raped by two men. Shame-filled, she'd spent her pregnancy drinking herself to sleep. Leticia, a benefits exec with an MBA and two grown kids, didn't want to raise another with the husband she was divorcing. Jennifer from El Paso had lost her job as a Chili's bartender after missing too many shifts. The restraining order she had against her ex

wasn't working: "I didn't wanna go in with bruises on my face, ya know?" Tara from Vegas called to ask, "How do you know you'll love your adopted baby as much as you love your biological kids?" I just knew, I told her. But honest *honest?* I wasn't sure. Obsessed with finding a baby, I even posed as a professional adoption speaker to Trojan-Horse myself into a homeless shelter for pregnant girls. The unsavoriness of trying to sniff out a birth mom among friends and strangers didn't faze me—like those marathon runners who have menstrual blood or shit running down their legs, I was running toward the finish line without embarrassment or self-consciousness.

Finding

We got The Call on New Year's Day 2014. A birth mom we'd never met had picked us out of a stack of Dear Birth Mom Letters from her hospital bed. Five hours later, we stood at the threshold to our birth mom's room. I was sure she was going to change her mind—how could she not? What would it be like to meet the woman who was *giving us her baby?* How would it feel to hold our son for the first time? What if he was ugly? Would I love him instantly or feel...nothing?

Hours later, as we lazily chatted with our birth mom, D, and twenty-four-hour-old Henry lie asleep on my shoulder, his birth father would explode into the room red-faced, jaw twitching. He hadn't known D was pregnant. We soon found out she had also hidden her pregnancy from her mom—whom they lived with—blaming her weight gain on thyroid issues. Later that night, as we were settling into our hospital room, our Italian Mama of a nurse, Gina, would pull us aside and ask: "Do you know she tested positive for meth?" We did not. I was okay with it; I could tell Henry was fine, bright-eyed and pink-skinned, and not that I was going to share this with Gina, but I'd done a shit-ton of meth in my twenties, too. *But what would Pete say?* He'd

made his limits clear. (My fear was unwarranted. Pete had held his son; the relationship had been settled.)

Because of Henry's drug exposure, we were visited by a duo from child protective services who should've been comical with their central casting personas: Joe, the affable and balding middle-aged veteran, and Heather, the female rookie with something to prove, but there was nothing funny about their declaration. If we didn't provide the paperwork they needed, Henry—or "the baby" as they called him—would be taken into their custody. I'd imagined that, on sight—in my beige cardigan, with Henry asleep in my arms—CPS would deem me as Henry's deeply qualified and rightful mother. That, with all of the soul-crushing things they'd seen in their line of work, they'd be overjoyed to find two people so desperate to parent. But protocol was protocol. And Heather wasn't fucking around.

When we were finally released from the hospital, we checked into a Holiday Inn next to the airport. After inhaling take-out egg rolls, and after Pete had fallen asleep, I gave Henry a bath in the tiny sink. I ran the soapy cloth over his spindly legs and his bottom so small I cupped it in my hands. I rinsed the lather from his hair, washing away the smell of the hospital. And any lingering scent of D.

Found

As a kid, I'd wondered about my own birth mom. What did she look like? Had she and my biological dad done it in the back of a car? But I'd never looked for her because my mom had made it clear that curiosity about my birth mom was the ultimate betrayal. But adopting Henry

had made me strong. His birth mom deserved to be named in his story, and I deserved to know my own. Even if it broke my mom's heart.

Adoptees, by law, are not allowed to see their original birth certificate. The document that names the woman who gave birth to you is off-limits, SEALED. But that is rapidly changing state-by-state, and Washington State law serendipitously changed the year I worked up the courage to request my birth certificate. The law changed from NEVER EVER NO MATTER WHAT to, "Sure, just send us fifteen bucks." Once I had my original birth certificate in hand, finding my birth mom was ridiculously easy—a quick Facebook search. Her name was Gwen and she was fifty-nine years old. She'd written me poems over the years. She'd never had any other children.

On a sunny May afternoon in 2017, Gwen and I met face-to-face in the café of Powell's Books. She dropped an F-bomb in the first five minutes, and I was smitten. *She takes stairs two at a time, like I do! She reads Rebecca Solnit! And her big laugh—it's my laugh, or I guess my laugh is hers?*

I was giddy with a new wholeness.

I'd almost missed this.

I had been willing to forgo ever knowing: why I was placed for adoption, my ancestry, even *who'd given birth to me*, to spare my mom's feelings, until I became an adoptive mom. Henry's open adoption threw into relief just how outdated, how *antiquated* my own closed adoption was. The eight birth moms I'd met during our search were real women—flesh and blood—unlike my own birth mom who'd existed only as a shadowy figure in my mind. Had I not met these women and fought my way through the gritty search for Henry, I would've never found the strength to look for my own birth mom.

After we said goodbye to Gwen, Pete, the kids, and I walked across Burnside, headed back to our car. My mom hadn't given birth to me, but she was my mom. She'd be okay with my wanting to know Gwen, someday, I was sure of it—her unconditional love had been a constant fact of my life. I hadn't given birth to the three-and-a-half-year-old boy holding my hand as we crossed the street, but he was my son. D had given birth to him, and he would always know who she was and where to find her. I stood under Portland's purpling sky, taking in deep breaths of cool air, feeling brave and light and free.

Sample Chapters

1

“The fetus is small for nine weeks,” Dr. Chu said.

“Can she take vitamins?” Pete asked.

Jesus Christ. *Vitamins?* I wanted to scream in my husband’s face, *our baby is DEAD, you fucking idiot!*

“The baby should be bigger, and we should hear a heartbeat,” Dr. Chu said. She’d been moving the wand over my belly but had stopped. “We’ll do a blood test to confirm, and we’ll know for sure tomorrow morning. I’ll call you by nine with the results.” She squeezed my arm and left the room.

Pete and I had driven to the appointment separately. I’d dressed knowing we’d meet up in the courtyard and he’d be checking me out from afar. I wore a black jersey skirt that swung around my thighs in a flirty way and a skinny tank that accentuated my newly-fuller breasts. Pete liked the curves pregnancy added to my normally angular frame. I’d pressed my breasts into him when we hugged, feeling the Southern California sunshine on my bare shoulders and a surge of warmth between my legs.

“Who’d have thought we’d be *here* again?” we’d said—the same hospital we’d pulled away from four years before, as Pete played Muddy Waters’ *Hoochie Coochie Man* from his iPod, introducing his new son to Chicago blues.

Dr. Chu called just before nine saying my hormone levels were high, and for a moment I let myself believe we’d escaped.

“Your levels are high because your body doesn’t know the fetus has died. You’re still creating pregnancy hormones and most likely will until you have the surgery to remove it. You need to schedule the D&C within the next week,” she said.

How could I’ve been so stupid? So smug? You couldn’t let the universe know when you were flying high, everyone knew that. She’d swing her lighthouse beacon of a head around, shine her light on you, and you’d get the call that someone had lost a job, entered hospice, or a fetus had stopped growing. It was best to fly below the radar. *Play it cool*. I hadn’t played it cool. We hadn’t told family and friends yet, but I’d found every opportunity to tell strangers. Running a mud run at eight weeks, I’d avoided the obstacles, patting my belly as I ran by and yelling to the course staff, “Running for two!”

I thought back to the day before. How I’d purred up against my husband. The skirt, the tank-top, the Rocket Dogs. I was replicating the way I’d dressed when I was pregnant with Jack, imagining that if I could dress the same, look the same, then we could still *be* the same people we were four years ago: young, carefree—even pregnant! It would be like we’d never left California. (We’d done a two-year stint in the Midwest to advance our careers in textbook publishing. Iowa had been particularly hard on us—the long, cold winters had given our new marriage a nasty case of frostbite we were still trying to thaw out.) But I was a fraud. We weren’t

young; I was forty, Pete forty-six. We weren't carefree; we had two kids under five. And we weren't pregnant.

I'd been careless. Was it the blue cheese dressing on Jack's salad? I'd been so nauseated, and it was the first thing that had looked good in two days and I just inhaled it. Was it when the pedicurist at Happy Nails started to massage my ankle? She'd barely touched it when I yelled out, "No!" but there was a pressure point, that if massaged, could cause a spontaneous miscarriage, right? I'd heard that. Or had it been the mud run? The field had been so deep I'd lost my shoe in the muck. I knew you could work out while pregnant, but why did I always feel the need to *prove that* to everyone?

Mom came to help with the kids, Jack and Kate, who were four and two, before the D&C. I handed her the reins and hid in our bedroom upstairs. Channel surfing, I landed on *Contact* with Jodi Foster and Matthew McConaughey.

Has there ever been an on-screen couple with less chemistry? And what's with Jodi's Mary Todd Lincoln ringlets? Stupid. I'd do better hair.

I sent my friend Marcia a text: "Time to talk?"

Marcia's first two pregnancies had ended in miscarriage, and she'd learned the way I had, at the nine-week appointment. When I found out I was pregnant, I stopped calling or texting her and crossed my fingers she wouldn't notice. I didn't want any of her miscarriage juju rubbing off on me.

Marcia and I met at Central Washington University. I first saw her in the dining hall where everyone studied at night. She was standing next to a table full of guys from Bainbridge Island. The Bainbridge guys wore fleeces and drove muddy Toyota 4-Runners. They went camping in The Cascades or floated The Yakima with a twenty-four pack and a bong, on a

moment's notice. They intimidated me. I wasn't a camping-on-a-moment's-notice kind of girl. Marcia was. And she was beautiful. Half Japanese, half white, she had creamy skin and full lips the color of Rainier cherries. Her black hair fell in waves to the middle of her back. Her laughter was generous and unladylike. The Bainbridge boys were laughing at whatever she was saying and calling her Marsh, wanting to be familiar with her like that. She was one of the guys, but they all wanted to fuck her, too. I hated her on sight. And vowed to make her my best friend.

She called from her office in San Francisco.

"I was pregnant," I said. "But now I'm not."

"Oh, babe," she said.

She let me cry, and then she told me what I could expect during and after the D&C.

When she'd had hers—both of them—I hadn't dug too deep. I knew that afterward, her husband, CK, had driven her home. He hadn't really known what to say and ended up going to a late breakfast with his dad. And she'd been sad. I felt bad about not having asked more.

The D&C was on a Friday in April.

When I woke up, I could hear the movements of nurses behind the curtains on either side of me. I could smell latex and the clean, warm-laundry smell of my blanket. Our fingers laced, Pete traced rough, compulsive circles on the top of my hand with his thumb. It was irritating. I wanted him to comfort me the way Mom would, with a slow and steady caress. But through his uneasy touch, I felt his fear in being unable to protect me and his sense of helplessness in losing the child we'd begun to dream about but would never meet.

"I'm fine," I said, squeezing his hand.

On the way home, we stopped at our favorite Thai place in our old neighborhood, wanting to be somewhere familiar, enclosed, dim. We took a booth, and the waitress placed steaming cups of jasmine tea in front of us.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I’ll be okay,” he said. “I’m worried about you.”

Growing up, “dramatic emotion” wasn’t encouraged. One of Mom’s admonishments that caused me deep embarrassment was, “*Stop being so dramatic.*” Pete was cut from similar cloth. The youngest of five, he learned to make his case intelligently and forcefully, but there was little time for drama. I’m a Major People Pleaser. I like to show people how low-maintenance I can be. When I was in the hospital delivering Kate, the nurse asked me to tell her where I was, pain-wise, using the chart on the wall. Zero was “Not hurting,” and showed a happy, smiling face. Ten was, “Hurts the worst you can imagine,” and showed a crying face contorted with pain. My daughter’s head was crowning and the doctor had just slipped his scalpel into my vaginal opening and dragged the blade two inches toward my anus to give my daughter the room she needed to make her exit. There’d been no time for an epidural.

“Where ‘ya at with the pain, hon?” the nurse had asked. And I chose eight, “Hurts a whole lot,” because choosing ten just seemed dramatic.

“I’m fine,” I said to Pete, ripping the tops off three sugars.

But I didn’t want to be easy or accommodating. I didn’t want any pieces left unsaid, waiting to be spoken until *the next right moment*. I took a sip of my tea.

“Having a third baby was...you said you were done, but you were *so excited*. We saw Jack and Kate as big brother and big sister to this baby, and we fell in love with that—that picture of them. *This baby was never supposed to happen.* And I’ve been holding up little

hoodies and now...now what?" I asked, raising empty hands, wanting my husband to give me a different answer than the one I already had. "He's just...gone?"

I dropped my hands and watched as tears fell and spread like ugly gray dye on the white paper napkin.

"I still want him," I said. "I just still really want him."

2

My older brother, Bob, was adopted in 1966, and I followed in 1972. In-between, my parents adopted a baby girl they named Debbie. Debbie died just before her second birthday. The understanding among extended family and friends was that she died of SIDS, and SIDS is listed as the cause of death on her death certificate.

When Debbie was a baby, Dad was head park ranger for Fort Canby State Park. Fort Canby ran along the coastline of the southwestern tip of Washington State, where the Columbia River roared, churning and spitting, into the Pacific. Dad, Mom, Bob, and Debbie lived in what had once been the North Head lighthouse keeper's house. Two stories tall and built to withstand unpredictable weather, the white house with brick walls a foot-and-a-half thick sat on a rocky jut one-hundred-and-fifty-feet above the ocean. Some lighthouses signal dangerous coastline, hazardous reefs, or hidden rocks, while others mark a safe harbor. The lighthouse at North Head signaled danger.

“Didn’t it terrify you—living on a cliff?” I asked Mom after I had kids and realized that, *Holy shit*, my mom had lived on a cliff one-hundred-and-fifty-feet above the ocean with two toddlers.

“Not really. There was a big fence—six, seven feet tall and military-grade. The thing was the gate; we were forever reminding people to close it when they left. I was more worried about the windows with you kids (‘You kids’ could be any combination of Bob, Debbie, and me throughout her life. Though I’m not yet born in this story, I’m still in the mix.). The bedrooms were upstairs and the windowsills were just a few inches off the floor. If one of you would’ve fallen....so, I put two-by-fours over the bottom half of your windows and painted them white.”

North Head was almost always enshrouded in a cold, damp beach fog that settled on your skin. It didn’t burn off, exposing the sun’s warming rays, it rose, like a curtain, revealing a grey and indifferent sky.

“They said there were a lot of suicides up there. Especially women,” Mom said. “I used to drive down to Naselle and sit on a picnic bench just to feel the sun on my face.”

The first lighthouse keeper, Alexander Pesonen, moved into the house in 1888 and shortly after married a twenty-year-old Irishwoman named Mary Watson. Mary and Alexander lived at North Head for more than twenty-five years. They were isolated. The rain came in sideways. Howling winds were recorded at one-hundred-and-sixty miles per hour. Due to unpredictable weather conditions, shifting sandbars, and rocky reefs, ships aiming for the mouth of the Columbia capsized so often that the stretch of ocean outside Mary’s kitchen window was dubbed ‘The Graveyard of the Pacific.’ The bodies washed up in the cove below her house. The sky refused to comfort. In the spring of 1923, Alexander took Mary to Portland, one-hundred miles inland, to see a doctor. Diagnosed with “melancholia,” she stayed in Portland to receive

treatment but returned to North Head the first part of June. Her first morning home, Mary woke at five a.m., put on her coat, walked out the door, and flung herself off the cliff.

Debbie was sick a lot. Her lungs were always congested, so Mom and Dad stacked books under the head of her crib to prop her up and help her breathe. They thought it might be cystic fibrosis for a while, but that was eventually crossed off the list. But in December of 1970, she got pneumonia. When she began seizing, they rushed her to the shoebox of a hospital in Ilwaco. The doctor they knew there, Dr. Nease, said *not to worry, probably roseola, she'll be fine*. But the other doctor offered no reassurances. They worked on Debbie throughout the night in a room so small—a converted broom closet—that Mom and Dad couldn't be in Debbie's room when the doctors and nurses were with her. When they couldn't be at her bedside, Mom and Dad sat in a waiting area directly across from her room.

During the night, as her condition worsened, Dr. Nease told them, "If we can get her through sunrise, the odds are in our favor."

Mom knew before she knew. At first light, a searing electrical current started in her scalp, coursed through her body exiting out her feet, and was accompanied by a crushing sense of fear. She'd been slumped in the uncomfortable waiting room chair but sat up. "*Go see...*" she said to Dad.

Debbie died at sunrise.

Mom's parents drove down from Olympia. Dad's parents came up from Longview. His mom ironed Debbie's dress.

"Did you pick her clothes?" I asked Mom. "Or did you want someone else to do it?"

“Oh, no, I wanted to do it. She was mine to take care of. I took out her blue dress and her patent-leather shoes. The pendant Doc and Rita had given her with her initials on it. I’ve always felt bad about the patent-leather. I wish I’d put her in little slippers.”

She doesn’t remember any of the funeral. She doesn’t remember much about the months after other than she’d drop my brother at preschool and wander around town. She remembers asking *Why?* of shopkeepers and coffee shop girls. She remembers watching trials in the courthouse to have somewhere to be.

I didn’t really understand who Debbie had been to Mom and Dad, what they’d lost, until Jack turned two. They hadn’t lost a silent infant swaddled in a blanket, as I’d always imagined; they’d lost their little girl who giggled. Their girl who’d been so proud because her hair had just grown long enough for ‘big-girl’ ponytails. (The doctors shaved one of her ponytails off that night as they frantically searched for a vein.)

If you’re wondering if I grew up feeling like a replacement baby, I didn’t. Mom had a way of making me feel like I was her favorite person in the world. I always felt loved. *Special*. I knew she carried grief for Debbie alongside her love for me, but I didn’t feel like those two things were all mixed up in each other.

I didn’t feel like a substitute for Debbie, but I did feel like there was a ghost of sorts in our family. There was little in our home to give me clues about this little girl my entire family had loved but I’d never met. “Debbie’s your sister,” Mom told me. But it didn’t feel true. I wanted her to be, but how could she be my sister if I’d never met her? My parents kept the black tin box on the top of their closet. It’s where Mom kept everything Debbie: her birth certificate, photos, cards people had sent, her death certificate. I’d sneak the box down and hide on the far

side of my parents' bed to look at pictures of her. My favorite was an 8 x 10. It was black and white, which made her seem like a baby from long-ago, though she would've been just four years older than me. In it, she sat up with her legs splayed; the skirt of her cotton dress resting lightly on her bare knees. I'd study her face and body for signs of sickness. She had dark, kind of spiky hair; I thought maybe that was a sign. She looked happily, sweetly not into the camera but just right of it. I knew she was looking at Mom.

The first of December, Mom would bring the Christmas card tree down from the attic. It was an old tree branch she'd spray-painted white and stuck in an MJB coffee can. The base of the branch was supported by rocks my brother had collected from the tree farm across the street, and the coffee can was covered in aluminum foil and garnished with a big red bow. The idea was, you'd tape cards on the tree as you received them, and by Christmas, you'd have a big, full tree. The tree sat in the same spot every year, on top of the Magnavox—our stereo the size of a canoe—that lined a wall in the dining room. Bob and I would take turns getting the mail and taping on the cards. When it was my turn, I'd run out to the mailbox at the end of our gravel driveway the second the mailman drove away. Then I'd open the cards, spreading them out on our living room carpet and organize them favorite to least. I favored cuddly woodland animals. Mom had a soft spot for Currier & Ives. If a card had glitter, it immediately went into the first place position. Ranking complete, I'd get the Scotch Tape out of the china closet and tape the day's card onto the branches. When Bob and I were both little, we'd fight over whose turn it was, but as he got older he didn't really care. The lack of competition watered-down my joy a little, but mostly I was happy to put every card exactly where I saw fit.

Every year, Seattle Children's Hospital sent us a Christmas card, acknowledging that Mom's dad had made a donation to their SIDS research center. The card thrilled and scared me. It pleased me that I was in the loop enough to know it was about Debbie and that I should approach the card with reverence. It scared me because the logo for Seattle Children's Hospital (or maybe just Seattle Children's SIDS research?) bore an infant with its arms sticking straight out from its shoulders and its torso and legs swaddled in a white muslin-like cloth. The baby's head, the outstretched arms, and the swaddled torso and legs made a perfect cross. I didn't know—was the baby supposed to be dead? It looked like the kind of cloth that might be used for burial. But why would they send such a sad Christmas card to thank people for sending them money? Was it supposed to make you have feelings of Jesus? It was hard to tell, and I wasn't going to ask. Every year the card came with the dead baby, that in my mind was Debbie, and I taped it to our tree.

Debbie didn't die of SIDS. SIDS was a catch-all for baby deaths of unknown cause in the 1970s. By today's medical standards, any baby over the age of one wouldn't be ruled a SIDS death. When I was older, Mom told me that Debbie's pediatrician had said that Debbie died because she had a grossly underdeveloped vascular system—the system of a seven-month-old fetus—and it just couldn't keep up with her nearly two-year-old body any longer. He told her the most likely reason for an underdeveloped vascular system was maternal drug use during pregnancy, and in Debbie's case, he thought her birth mom had used cocaine.

Seven-foot-high chain-link fence, brick walls a foot-and-a-half thick, boards over windows, *Close the gate close the gate close the gate*. Nothing Mom and Dad did could save her. Debbie was always going to die. The worm was in the bud.