

Editors: Esther Grau, Diana Marre & Beatriz San Román

Author: Kate St. Vincent Vogl

Layout editor: Sofía Gaggiotti

Dissemination: Maria Galizia

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(Re)Connecting in Reunion*

My birthmother found me through my mom's obituary. The call came out of the blue on a Saturday night. Too late for telemarketers, late enough for terrible news. My dad had been so distraught over my mother's recent death, I worried he might have been in a car accident. Maybe this was the call notifying next of kin—a stranger was, after all, asking if I was the daughter of James St. Vincent of Medina. I sat myself down and prepared myself for the worst.

Next of kin, indeed. "I gave birth to a baby girl," the woman said. "Would that be you?"

Yes, I was born in that hospital on that date thirty years before, but I'm a lawyer by training. Where there's reasonable doubt, I can find it. Who knew how many baby girls had been born there on that date?

She had the non-identifying information on the couple who adopted that baby girl. She could read it to me.

The nest
Carme Fitó



* **Kate St. Vincent Vogl**, autor of the contents in this Newsletter, will participate as a speaker in the 5th International Congress AFIN **"The Triad in Adoption and Foster Care: the place of the biological family"**, which will take place in **Barcelona on the 25th and 26th of November**.

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Imagine hearing a stranger telling you details about your parents, details known only by neighbors who'd stop by your house for a cup of coffee and a slice of pound cake. Characteristics only old friends have earned the right to tease them about, and this stranger starts rattling them off, from your father's good-natured disorganization to your mother's Swedish practicalities. This woman can recite all those stories told around the kitchen table. She knows how your parents lived, how they laughed, how they loved.

And in this intersection of the life you had and the life you could have had, it's clear: You are deep in the midst of an identity theft.

Not yours—because the life you lived was never yours to begin with. Because a lifetime ago, you belonged to this woman, before she signed her name to the stack of papers she's reading from, back when she had the sole right for you to call her *Mother*.

I had never looked for my birthmother, but knew I could be found. My birth records had been sealed along with so many others in the United States during the post-WWII era. I found out I was adopted when my sister got in a fight with a neighbor boy. He hit the end of his sparring ability and threw out all he had left: "Yeah, well, you're adopted," he'd said. My sister ran home to get the real truth from Mom. The truth was that for too long Mom thought we were too young to understand, and then we were too old to bring it up. My sister was old enough to know that everything would change. I was still young enough to think nothing would. I imagined that my birthmother was a genie, that I was made of magic.



The heart
Carme Fitó

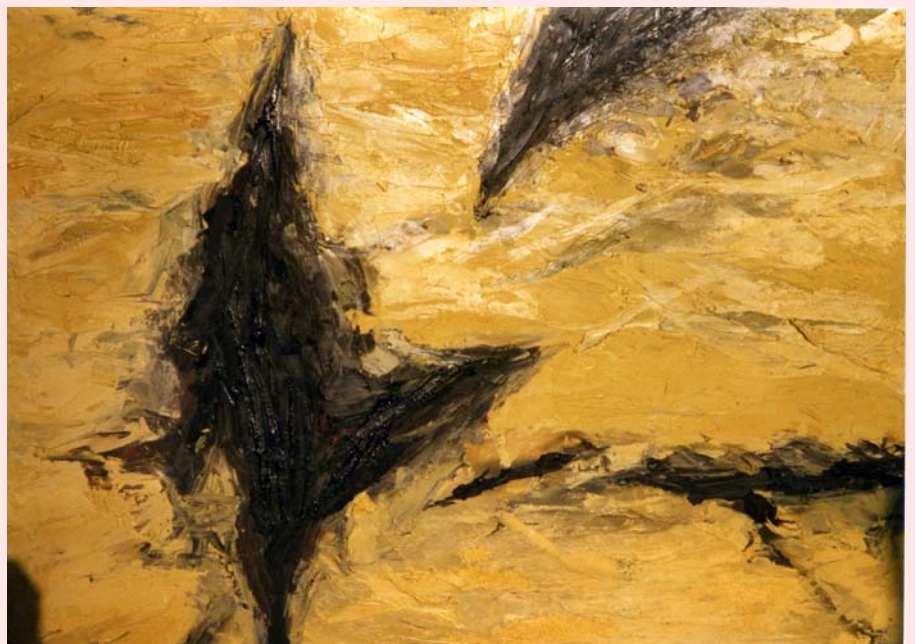


In reality, her name is Val. She was a college freshman who got in trouble. He was a graduate student in art. My birthfather offered to marry her, if she wanted to. She didn't want to get married like that. Instead, she went to a home for unwed mothers and surrendered me to adoption. Besides her parents, only one of her eight sisters knew about her pregnancy. Val waited thirty years to find me. She waited until her other children were old enough to understand. They were so excited for her to find me.

My birthmother joined the Adoption Network Cleveland and thought their detectives would uncover my name within the week. But before receiving any contact information, all members must go through a year's worth of counseling and meetings, to understand what could happen when making that initial phone call. They gave her insights on the best things to say to ensure the best outcome.

For many, all that means is that the other side doesn't hang up the phone.

I didn't hang up the phone. We talked for four hours that first night. I thought it was my one chance to ever connect with her, so I wanted to know everything. She wanted to meet, and so did I. But first I would have to tell my dad.



Dream in yellow
Carme Fitó



He'd just lost his wife of 37 years. With this news, would he worry he was losing me, too? I remembered Mom crying whenever my sister would threaten to find her "real mom." I wasn't sure what Dad would do. I told him about Val when my family visited for his birthday. He was the one who gave me a gift. If I wanted to meet with Val, that was up to me, not him. He said, "There's always enough love to go around."

But, he said, he wouldn't share any holidays. Hard enough to share those with the in-laws!

Val came to visit a few months later. I felt we could talk frankly to one another. My questions focused on what was happening in her life when I was born. She wanted to know what my life was like now. It dawned on me that she was interested in forging a relationship. I wasn't sure I could.

I was still grieving the loss of my mother. So, that first year, I asked her not to send me a birthday card. Isn't that horrible? It's horrible. But I knew my dad wouldn't be sending me one—he's that disorganized. And I thought it would hurt to get one from her and not any from him. She asked if it was okay to send cards and presents to my girls. Someone wanted to dote on my daughters? No problem, I said.

I'm not sure why I needed to draw the line in the sand for me, but not for my kids. I'd been warned to beware the stranger who came looking for me, but my children had never been a part of that equation. Val was so very patient with me. She was willing to take whatever it was I could give.



Couple
Carme Fitó



As for my birthfather, he had been killed in a motorcycle accident before she could find me. She put me in touch with his family. Because of her efforts, I was able to meet his parents and his siblings. One of his sisters is a poet who lives near me.

In those early years of my reunion with Val, months passed without any phone calls between us. Once, almost a whole year passed. My dad moved to Florida and asked me to help pack boxes at the house he was selling. Val came to help, too. She cared for my girls while I sorted through closets. I couldn't have done it without her.

At my older daughter's first communion, my sister-in-law asked where my mom was. My mom was dead, I thought, then realized she meant Val. How much she would have enjoyed that time with all of us. I started calling her once a month. I'd call in between, too, careful always to give Dad any news first. Loyalty issues are often difficult to overcome for adoptees.

Val joined us for my younger daughter's first communion. And she came to celebrate Grandparent's Day, too.

Val read the first book I wrote, even all the awful first drafts.



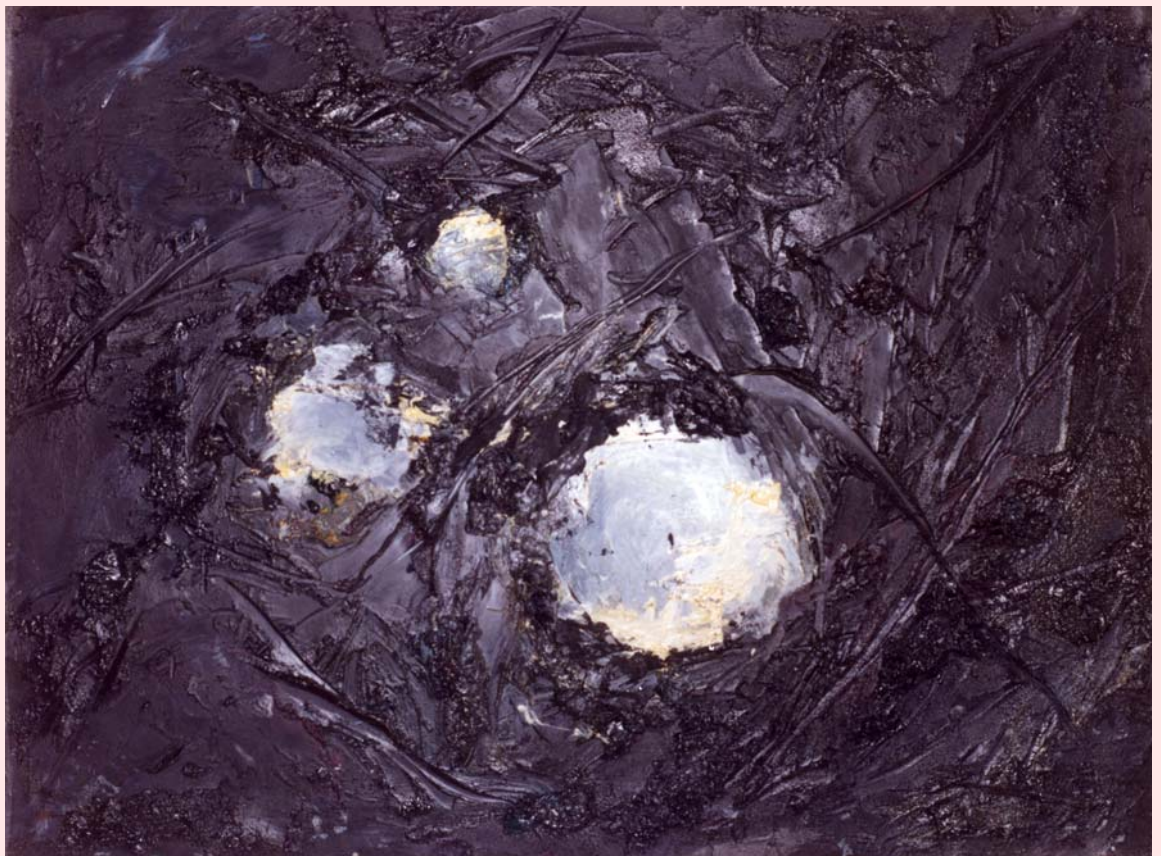
Relieve
Carme Fitó

She loved it all. I loved sharing the story. I became a better writer. I wrote another draft. She asked if she could send that one to her sisters. They all read it, and then wanted me to come talk about the book. And so I did, I came for a holiday to share with Val.

My dad was there, too.

At that point, I was ready to ask Val if it was okay to write about our story. We'd known each other for thirteen years by then. As open as we'd been all those years together, it wasn't until that talk that I discovered we still had secrets left to share.

That part is in my memoir (she did give her okay), but I will tell you this: Now, if we go a week without talking, it's too long. I miss her. Over the years, we've built a relationship. One challenge in reaching out to another side of the triad is that the emotional ties are not always shared, despite the clear biological connection. For me, those emotional ties were not secured until we shared our stories and our time.



Lichen I
Carme Fitó



The [Evan B. Donaldson Institute](#) has found that adoptees become increasingly interested in their biological roots as they age, as adoptees begin families of their own, and as medical conditions appear. That has certainly been the case for me. Though I've grown close to Val, I do not love my father any less. Coming to know Val and her family and my birthfather's family, I find I understand myself more. There is, indeed, enough love to go around. And a little more knowledge is always a good thing.

That said, there are still moments when I call Dad or Val that I worry about who's getting the good news first. Not a bad problem to have.

More than anything, Val's patience and understanding about what to expect in the beginning of our reunion made all the difference for us. On that first call, even, she showed amazing restraint in offering to read the information about "the couple that adopted that baby." There was only one baby girl born in that hospital on that date. Me. If she would have blurted that out instead of reading off the non-identifying information, it would have been too much, too soon for me. In so many of our early conversations, she let me take small steps—baby steps—to find my way to her. How like a mother. Because she is one.

Maternity
Carme Fitó





REFLECTIONS

I wanted to write my memoir as a "thank all" instead of a "tell all." Before I started writing, I asked my birthmother Val if it would be okay to share her story, for in telling mine I share so much of hers. "Absolutely," she said. She wanted other birthmothers to know they weren't alone, as she had felt for so many years. It was important to me to make sure that writing this memoir was okay with my birthfather's family as well. I had never met him, for he had died in a motorcycle accident a few years before Val had found me. I had the pleasure of meeting his parents, though, who have since passed away. I knew two of his sisters, one of whom is a poet and playwright who lives near me. Another sister is a professor of international law, and I had been practiced law before I became a writer. They read my manuscript and were glad how my story brought their brother back to life.

For a time, a couple of my birthfather's siblings struggled with the story being published. I had not met them before the memoir went to print. They weren't in the memoir, the poet who lived near me had given me the clearance for the family, so I thought it was okay to proceed without getting their express approval.



Picture of me as a kid with my parents and my sister Aimee



Picture of me with Val (my birthmother) and my daughters

But one of the siblings had always been the one writing the family's Christmas letters, and here was someone else writing the family story. If that were me, I would have been just as uncomfortable with the change. There were other concerns, too, common in memoir - like how many family details were exposed to strangers. Such concerns have heightened significance when coming from a birthfather's family. I tried to allay their fears but still worried that I'd jeopardized our relationship. Fortunately, though, through my book tour, I was able to travel to where they lived and finally meet them. In doing so, I was able to learn their kindnesses and understand more of myself as well. In turn, they've come to know me and understand my intentions in writing the story, and that alleviated their concerns.

Too often we fear what - and who - we do not know. I've been lucky to have so many good people in my life. Surely children (and even adult adoptees) do not suffer for having more people care for them. As my dad once said, there is always enough love to go around.



Picture of my birthfather's sister and his parents, with me and my daughters

...FURTHER VIEWING

- ["I'm Legit"](#). Zara Phillips featuring DMC.
- [Oprah](#). Oprah meets her half-sister.
- ["Switched at Birth"](#). The Stag Hunt Episode: a depiction of the pressing need adoptees feel to search for biological roots.

...FURTHER READING

- Encountering New Worlds of Adoption. [Adoption and Culture: The Interdisciplinary Journal of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture](#). no. 1 (vol. 2)
- McGinnis, H., Livingston Smith, S., Scott Ryan, S. and Howard, J. [Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting healthy identity formation in adoption](#). Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. New York: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009
- Novy, Marianne. [Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama](#). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Pertman, Adam. [Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming our Families - And America](#). 2d Edition. Boston: Harvard Common Press, 2011.

In the news:

- Donaldson James, Susan. [Adoptees Face Sting of Discrimination](#) ABC News
- Ode, Kim. [Opening the Books on Adoption](#) *Star Tribune* (March 2, 2011)



LINKS

- [Adoptees Have Answers](#)
- [Center for Family Connections](#)
- [Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute](#)

RECENT EVENTS

[In Our Own Words: Mothers Remembered](#) - Mother's Day Adoptee Author Reading and Open Mic
May 3, 2011. The Lyric at Carleton Place, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Adoptees Have Answers (AHA) offers adoptees a forum to share individual and collective voices in a circle of peers. This past Mothers' Day, AHA hosted an evening of readings by adoptees to honor the mothers in their lives. Kate St. Vincent Vogl emceed the event and discussed her book, *Lost & Found: A Memoir of Mothers*. Vogl spoke about the development of her relationship with her birthmother and how that was made possible by the generosity of her adoptive father. In the sixteen years since, sometimes Vogl finds it a challenge to balance what time she shares with one instead of the other: "It's part of being an adoptee," she says.

Also featured at the event were St. Olaf creative writing professor Jennifer Kwon Dobbs and public speaker Deborah Jiang Stein. Dobbs, whose poetry has appeared in international journals, spoke of her experiences as a Korean adoptee. She read from her poetry and an excerpt from an essay about her extensive travels searching for her birthmother, so far in vain. Stein read from a fictionalized account of her birthmother. As a teenager, she had discovered she was adopted and had been born in a prison to a heroin addict.

At the end of the evening, audience members were encouraged to speak and share their own writings. Each who came to the mic shared heartwarming and heartrending stories of their own. Despite the diverse backgrounds, the writings of all adoptees revealed that each yearned to know and understand their biological roots and yet struggled with how to resolve that in the face of the love and loyalty felt for their adoptive parents.



FUTURE EVENTS

- [La Encrucijada de los Acogimientos y las Adopciones en España: Las Adopciones en el Punto de Mira. ¿Una nueva etapa?](#), Asturias, 1st October 2011
- XX Congreso Nacional de Pediatría Social: [Problemas emergentes en Pediatría Social](#), Granada, 6, 7 and 8 October 2011
- [SCCR/SASci/AAACIG Meeting](#), February 22-25, 2012, Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas, NV.
- [The 4th International Conference on Adoption and Culture](#). Mapping Adoption: Histories, Geographies, Literatures, Politics. 22 - 25 de marzo, 2012. The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California
- [Global Summit on Childhood](#), March 28-31, 2012, Washington, DC
- [International Conference on Children and Youth in a Changing World](#). KIIT University, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India, November 26-30, 2012

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Carme Fitó,

She trained as a painter and sculptor at the Massana School of Barcelona, where she got the title of graduate in painting. During her youth she devoted herself to painting and sculpture.

She studied art history and, during her recovery from a serious car accident, she studied social anthropology, an area in which she obtained her doctorate from the University of Barcelona.



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ADOPTIONS, FAMILIES, CHILDHOODS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate St. Vincent Vogl's birthmother found her through her adoptive mom's obituary.

Lost & Found: A Memoir of Mothers was featured on national ABC News, and the *Akron Beacon Journal* named it among the best books of 2009.

The anthology *Why We Ride* includes a foreword by Jane Smiley and Vogl's essay about growing up with 26 Clydesdales.

Vogl has presented her story at national and international conferences and on TV and radio across the country. Her short stories have been honored in international competitions.

She teaches at the Loft, the largest creative writing center in the United States.

She was graduated from Cornell University *cum laude* and from the University of Michigan Law School.

AFIN'S NEXT INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS

5th International Congress AFIN

The Triad in Adoption and Foster Care: the place of the biological family

25th and 26th November, 2011

Barcelona, Auditorio Residencia de Investigadores
(C/Hospital, 64)

info.afin@afin.org.es