For 50 Years, I Was Denied the Story of My Birth

All adoptees deserve better.

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Credit...Anna Parini

By Steve Inskeep

In 1968, a woman appeared for an interview at the Children's Bureau, an adoption agency in Indianapolis. She was in her 20s and alone. A caseworker noted her name, which I am withholding for reasons that will become apparent, and her appearance: She was "a very attractive, sweet looking girl," who seemed "to come from a good background" and was "intelligent." She had "blue eyes and rather blonde hair," though the woman said her hair was getting darker over time, like that of her parents.

Her reason for coming was obvious. She was around 40 weeks pregnant. She told a story that the caseworker wrote down and filed in a cabinet, where it would rest for decades unseen. The expectant mother said she had grown up in Eastern Kentucky's mountains, then migrated north as a teenager to find work after her father died. She was an office worker in Ohio when she became pregnant by a man who wasn't going to marry her. The most remarkable part of her story was this: When she knew she was about to give birth, she drove westward out of Ohio, stopping at Indianapolis only because it was the first big city she encountered. She checked into a motel and found an obstetrician, who took one look and sent her to the Children's Bureau. She arranged to place the baby for adoption and gave birth the next day.

The baby was me. If she'd driven farther, I'd be a native of Chicago or St. Louis, but Indianapolis it was. Life is a journey, and I was born on a road trip. I spent 10 days in foster care before being adopted by my parents, Roland and Judith Inskeep, who deserve credit if I do any small good in the world.

My parents told me early that I was adopted, but that was all they knew. Indiana, like most states, practiced closed adoption, meaning birth families and adoptive families were allowed no identifying information about each other. Secrecy was considered best for all concerned. In recent decades, open adoption has been replacing this practice, but rules governing past adoptions change slowly, and I was barred from seeing my birth records. Everything I just told you about my biological parents was unknown to me growing up; they were such a blank that I could not even imagine what they might be like.

I accepted this until I became an adoptive parent in 2012 and a social worker suggested that my adopted daughter might want to know my story someday. She's from China, and like many international adoptees, she also had no story of her biological family. So I requested my records from the State of Indiana and was denied. Next I called the Children's Bureau, where a kind woman on the phone had my records in her hands, but was not allowed to share them.

It still didn't bother me excessively until after 2018, when Indiana law changed. Many adoptees or biological families may now obtain records unless another party to the adoption previously objected. In 2019 the state and the Children's Bureau sent me documents that gave my biological mother's name, left my biological father's name blank and labeled me "illegitimate." On a hospital form someone had taken my right footprint, with my biological mother's right thumbprint below it on the page.

Typed notes from the Children's Bureau recorded a visit with my biological mother in the hospital. Asked how she felt, she cried. And when she went to the Children's Bureau for follow-up meetings, she was clearly trying to hold herself together. A caseworker encouraged her to process her emotions, but she was "adept" at conversing with "seeming openness" while "maintaining a wall around her feelings." For her final meeting, after shopping downtown, she wore "a pink sheer shirtwaist and heels," with "a tiny waist," as if she had never been pregnant. The one emotion she expressed was feeling "trapped" in Indianapolis. She was so desperate to sign the paperwork and leave town that she was half an hour early for her appointment. She planned to visit her family in Kentucky, but not to tell them of her experience: She'd been calling home without saying where she was.

It's been nearly two years since I first read those documents, and I'm still not over it. Knowing that story has altered how I think about myself, and the seemingly simple question of where I'm from. It's brought on a feeling of revelation, and also of anger. I'm not upset with my biological mother; it was moving to learn how she managed her predicament alone. Her decisions left me with the family that I needed — that I love. Nor am I unhappy with the Children's Bureau, which did its duty by preserving my records. I am angry that for 50 years, my state denied me the story of how I came to live on this earth. Strangers hid part of me from myself.

While I now have the privilege of knowing my information, many people's stories are still hidden. About 2 percent of U.S. residents — roughly six million people — are adoptees, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. A majority were adopted domestically, with records frequently sealed, especially for older adoptees.

Gregory Luce, a lawyer who tracks adoption laws, reports that only nine states allow adoptees unrestricted access to birth records. Indiana is among those that have begun to allow it under certain conditions, while 19 states and the District of Columbia still permit nothing without a court order. California and Florida remain closed; Texas surrenders a birth certificate only if you prove you already know what it says. If my biological mother had stopped in a different state back in 1968, I might know nothing today.

This spring, more than a dozen states are considering legislation for greater openness. Bills in Florida, Texas and Maryland would ensure every adoptee's access to pre-adoption birth records. Proposals in other states, like Arizona, would affirm the rights of some adoptees but not others. The legislation is driven by activists who have lobbied state by state for decades. Many insist on equality: All adoptees have a right to the same records as everyone else.

Equality would end an information blackout that robs people of identity. Throughout life, I have met people who spent years searching for birth parents, complicating their struggles to come to terms with their past. While that was not my experience, I was never able to tell a doctor my family medical history when asked. It's one of those little things that never bother you until it does. I attended college in Eastern Kentucky, living there for years without the slightest idea that my biological mother grew up there.

The people who blocked me from learning my past must have thought their motives were pure. Closed adoption began as "confidential" adoption in the early 20th century, enabling parents and children to avoid the stigma of illegitimacy. Records were sealed to all but people directly involved. In a further step, by midcentury, even parties to the adoption were cut out. Agencies offered adoptive parents a chance to raise children without fear of intrusion by biological parents, and biological parents a chance to start over.

But nobody asked if I wanted my identity hidden from me. Jessica Colin-Greene, writing in The Connecticut Law Review in 2017, observed that "access to information about one's genetic background, heritage, and ancestry is a birthright denied only to adoptees." An adoptee "is expected to honor a contract made over his or her body and without his or her consent." Someone might argue that the state had to decide for me as a newborn — but the state's original plan was to deny my identity for life, and even deny it to my children.

Should adoptees and biological families contact each other, after the law forbade it for so long? Not without mutual consent: It's an intensely personal decision. But information alone is powerful. When Indiana finally made its records more accessible in 2018, so many people requested documents that state employees were overwhelmed. A 20-week backlog of requests built up and has persisted — a testament to how many human lives were affected. As records are opened, people's privacy should be respected; that's why I'm withholding my biological mother's name and any details that might identify her. But my story is mine, and other adoptees have a right to recover theirs.

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