

Swimming Up the Sun

A Memoir of Adoption

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To swim up the sun, v. —*intr.* [*colloq.* British English]

To swim toward the rising sun along a glimmering carpet of stars; to go forth adventurously, usually alone; to swim away from shore toward the unknown...

CHAPTER 1

In 1978, I flew eastward into the velvet darkness to England. In my handbag was an appointment letter to meet the man who would grant me a birth certificate. My adoption search had been an on-again off-again affair, reflecting my ambivalence as well as the obstacle of distance, but a month after I'd read about the change in British adoption law, the letter in the official brown envelope had arrived at my home in Washington, D.C., confirming my request for a counseling appointment.

I possessed a copy of my adoption order but I'd never seen my birth certificate. Now at the age of 21, I would be allowed to. The flight attendant passed by with a tray of miniature cordials, and as we sped through the night in a slim metal tube, I toasted my reflection in the window.

I had always wanted to know my birth parents. I'd felt them calling through the years of childhood. Not because I'd been particularly unhappy. My childhood wasn't perfect but there had been love, a brother and sister, good schools, travel, books, and the

pantomime at Christmas. Wanting to find my birth parents had less to do with my childhood and more to do with yearning to learn the shapes of their faces, the gestures of their hands, and the geography of their hearts.

Illuminated in a pool of light amid the dark cabin, I reread the letter with shaking hands, but I never entertained any possibility but the search. I had no real doubts. From the time I could remember my own name, before I could possibly reason out the implications, the knowledge that I would one day search for and find my parents had been a constant companion.

In the artificial dawn of the immigration hall, a man in a navy blue uniform stamped my American passport and murmured a minimal welcome. I waited with the other sleep-deprived travelers for the luggage conveyer to disgorge our bags. I knew more about myself than many adoptees did, that my mother had been a young British artist and my father the son of a Jewish haberdasher in the midlands city of Nottingham. I'd been told they couldn't marry because of religion, that his parents would never have accepted a non-Jewish girl. I knew her name was Eve.* It appeared on the adoption order.

A young Indian woman in a golden sari nuzzled her strapping Nordic husband as we waited for our luggage. How times had changed. Growing up in England knowing I was half-Jewish, I had sensed that being Jewish carried a scent of foreignness; that I was from a different race as well as religion. It was a scent some people begrudgingly admired but others resented. I heard a lot about the war as a child, about Hitler, and the Nazis. I recall when *Life Magazine* ran a commemorative photo essay on the

*At my mother's request, her name and those of her family are changed.

concentration camps. When I asked Moo, my adoptive mother, about the Jews, she bought me a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and left me to work it out for myself. Since I'd never met any other Jews, I wondered if I could possibly be the last one left. Yet I knew in my bones that my real father was out there somewhere. Knowing nothing about Jewish religion or culture, I gleaned that being Jewish was both dangerous and special.

I had brought only a small, soft-sided bag, which carried all I needed with room to spare. It was a treat to buy a few new clothes when I came to England; they were like touchstones: a wooly from Marks and Sparks, something cheap and cheerful from Dottie Perkins, perhaps a silk scarf splurge in the West End. We'd immigrated to the States at the end of the 1960s and I hadn't returned often. When I did travel here, I was nostalgic for the tastes and sights of the old days. This visit was to be more about the present and, who knew, perhaps the future. As my bus jogged through the snarl of London morning traffic, a chasm of expectation opened. Who would I find? What would they be like? Would they like me? It wasn't too late to cancel the appointment. It wasn't too late to halt this vehicle propelling me forward and backward. It wasn't too late to stop, go sightseeing instead, or prowl the markets.

The summer rain spat sideways against the bus window, distorting the view. I would *not* cancel my appointment; I couldn't stand not knowing anymore. When the stop came, I grabbed my bag from the luggage shelf and disembarked. My search had begun.