

Swimming Up the Sun: A Memoir of Adoption

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CHAPTER 3

The documents were not waiting when I arrived home to Washington, D.C. and when they showed up in brown envelopes, they proved both disappointing and intriguing. My birth certificate contained nothing I didn't already know, except an address that meant little to me, 25 Bridge Street, Beeston, Notts. Eve's marriage certificate, however, was rich in new information. Under "Rank or Profession," it showed that her husband Derek was with the "River Police" and that she was a "Comptometer Operator," which I imagined had something to do with adding machines and accounting. This was deflating and didn't jibe with her being an art student, which was what Canon Ingles and Moo had both thought, but I'd secretly wondered if that story had been told to make me feel more special. After all, "Comptometer Operator" didn't conjure up the most exciting profession in the world, but it did fit with my sense of who Eve really was, a Midlands girl longing for family who'd experienced a bad start. The marriage certificate showed their parents' names and two addresses up north, his in Newcastle and hers nearby in

Prudhoe on Tyne. The “River Police” must be the Tyne River Police, forty miles south of the Scottish border, I reasoned. I had been to Scotland only once, arriving in Edinburgh during Christmas break with a college friend. We both immediately caught the flu and spent most of our week beneath a comforter in a room so cold you could see your breath at midday.

I intended to return to England the next year to follow Eve and Derek’s trail but life worked several unexpected turns, in art—I formed a community theater company—and in health—I was attacked by a stranger and didn’t travel or work a regular job for a couple of challenging years. While recuperating, I visited the Library of Congress where they stored telephone directories from around the world. After describing my search to the research librarian, she gave me a stack pass and showed me where the directories were kept, a windowless storeroom between two floors crammed with rows of dusty bookshelves. Of course, the LC didn’t have *all* the world’s phone books, but I found several Newcastle listings in a 1977 Northumberland book: two D. Goodmans and one D. R. Goodman. In a brand-new 1983 directory I found what I was looking for: D. Goodman, River Vw, The Eals, Shaggyford. The phone number was Haltwhistle 20032. It was the only D. Goodman in the book, but when I went home that day I didn’t call Eve, nor did I the next day. I couldn’t broach the distance in geography and between her heart and mine by phone. I put the number away until my next trip, which I hoped would happen as soon as I could organize my finances.

I worked for five years in the community theater, loving every minute but eventually my enthusiasm ebbed. Not that it wasn’t still fun, but I was spending more and more time teaching and writing grants and less time producing and writing plays, my true

love. I also had non-community play ideas I wanted to explore that weren't suitable for presentation within the company. I was bone tired of scraping together a living from insufficient grants and freelance writing. The arts grants we obtained only paid twenty-five cents on each dollar we needed. I imagined the Defense Department having to run its operations that way and shook my head. Most of my steady wages came from a house-cleaning business a friend and I had started because the theater was never able to do better than break even.

One day as I lugged home a portable vacuum cleaner, a neighbor stopped me in the portico of my downtown apartment building. We sat on the stone bench in front of the building, enjoying the long rays of afternoon sun. "You need a real job," said Steve. I crinkled my nose. Steve worked for the U.S. Department of Energy as a bureaucrat, and I had no intention of being lured into those gray halls. "I've applied for a research job and another running a training program for women," I said, hoping to cut him off before he started in on me again. Steve was always trying to "help" me.

"Come in on Monday morning," he said, "and take the typing test. That way if these other jobs don't pan out you'll have something to fall back on. You can type, can't you?" He sounded so condescending. "Of course I can," I said. I knew he meant well, but becoming a temporary clerk-typist was not what I had in mind after five exhilarating years running a theater, but to placate him, I agreed to take the test. Steve was already planning where he'd take me for a celebration lunch. "You'll like the office, Energy Emergencies. It's a great group of people, you'll fit right in. And hey, you'll get to work with me!"

I didn't get any of the more promising positions I'd applied for; the Department of Energy job was the only one offered. As much as I didn't want to become a government clerk, I knew I was finished with cleaning other people's houses, and I couldn't seem to translate my theater experience into a paying position anywhere. All my good shoes were down at the heel and every decent article of clothing needed cleaning, so I took the job. To my surprise, I found the work interesting and even remunerative. Without dashing to the brace of part-time jobs I'd cobbled together to support myself, I had more quiet time to write, enjoy myself, and save money for a visit to England. In fact, as I descended into what I'd feared would become a personal hell, my life flourished. After a year my position was made permanent and I was promoted and given a raise. I was writing my own plays and had become involved with a young man who was also a "hyphenate" like me; by day, Jim performed magazine production but at night he was a rock 'n' roller.

I hadn't seen Moo since our unhappy visit in Italy years ago, although we'd continued writing letters. Her Italian husband had died in a car crash, and she'd returned to England alone. I wanted to visit her and finally thought I could do so without harboring unrealistic expectations. Equally important, I was ready to find my birth parents, not simply search for them. It hadn't been only the distance, the lack of money, and the turmoil of injury that kept me from searching. I just hadn't been prepared. I had dreamed of finding perfect parents who'd say all the right things and make me feel perfect too. The intervening years had blessed me with a few lessons in maturity and I was as ready as I'd ever be to face the real thing.

Something else happened that was important to my search. When Moo moved back to England, she visited old friends in Nottingham, her first visit in decades. Out of

the blue, she wrote to me, “By the way, your birth father's shop is still there. The name is Minson's. It's on Upper Parliament Street.”

Gaping like a fish, I sat on the sofa reading and re-reading her letter. Why had she chosen this moment to tell me his name, something she'd known her whole life? Why? Perhaps she'd forgotten the name until she saw the shop again years later. Probably she felt protective of our relationship. If she'd fed my curiosity with facts, I might have wanted to find my birth parents sooner, and where would that have left her? Was she also sending me an olive branch, a signal that couldn't be mistaken for another half-hearted apology in our rounds of bad judgment? I understood that giving me Philip's name was an invitation I couldn't refuse. It was a gift, a family heirloom she'd waited years, consciously or not, to reveal.

In the spring of 1984 when I was 27, I visited Moo in Norwich. I discovered a quaint, blustery city in the southeast of England that clung fiercely to its crumbling medieval wall and narrow, winding streets. Three hours from London and an hour's drive from the North Sea, it faced east like a Saxon soldier and year round received the bitter blows of the Arctic wind.

“There's nothing between us and Siberia,” Moo grumbled, pulling her camel coat tightly around her. It was May. Blossoms were on the apple and cherry trees and the spring flowers bloomed vividly despite the harsh weather. Moo had recently moved from another part of Norfolk into the City proper and we explored it together, seeing the sights and visiting the famous pubs and churches. “They say we've a pub for every day of the

week and a church for every week of the year,” she told me, and she wasn’t far wrong. Off the beaten track for tourists, the stone city shone.

We decided to take an overnight trip to Nottingham. We were excited for this would be our first visit together, a couple of Nottingham girls going home. She knew I’d come to visit her and continue my search, and like the old days of long nature rambles and market prowls, she was game for the adventure.

Nottingham was a good three-hour drive from Norwich. We planned to stay the night somewhere and return the following day. By American standards, this was an ordinary distance to travel but it was deemed unusually long by some of Moo’s friends. “Packed your trunk, have you?” asked Moo’s friend Lily, only half in jest when we bumped into her at the market.

I was watching TV in Moo’s sitting room when I casually mentioned the subject of finding Philip. “Do you think we could find the haberdashery?” I asked.

“I know Nottingham like the back of my hand,” Moo said, hand on her hip and head thrown back. “I can tell you *exactly* where it is—Minson’s, Upper Parliament Street, on the corner. I can see it in my mind like it was yesterday.”

“Would you come with me?” I asked.

“Of course I will,” she said.

“I mean, I don’t know what will come of it. I’m not even sure he’s the one...”

“I am,” she said. “We went there when you were just a baby.” This was part of the old story; I let her retell it. “After we got you, they told me he was the father.”

“Who told you?” I asked. “His name’s not on the adoption papers.”

“I don't know, but I knew it was true,” she said, brushing the details off like crumbs.

“Who told you? You must remember...”

“Well, I don't, and that's all there is to it.” She lit a cigarette and inhaled.

“Go on,” I said, letting the point drop.

“We went in, your father and I. We wanted to see if we could see him.”

“Who?”

“Anyone. Your father, his father, your grandmother. So I could tell you about them.”

“And?”

“He wasn't there, but your grandfather was. I saw him.”

“You didn't say anything?”

“No,” she said. “I bought a spool of thread.” She looked at me with eyes twinkling with conspiracy.

“What did he look like?” I asked.

“An older man, Jewish.”

“What else? What did the store look like? Was there anyone else there?”

“That's it. It was just a haberdashery but well known in Nottingham. My father used to be jealous of the Jewish merchants. He was a clothing salesman. Anyway, I'd seen him and that's what was important.”

“Why?”

“Don't be silly. I wanted to be able to tell you so you would know where you came from.” Upper Parliament Street, evidently.

“What about my mother?” I asked.

Moo inhaled deeply. “She was an art student, but I don't know anything about her. Now, clear the table for lunch. Would you like soup and a Marmite sandwich?” This was as far as she'd go, perhaps as far as she could go. It was a gift, even if some of the facts slipped down between the cushions. I was keenly aware she didn't have to tell me, and she didn't have to take me there. Though I felt she owed me this, many such debts are never settled.

We left early in the morning, waving goodbye to her friends at the county council flats. We stopped for a pub lunch in Long Sutton near the Wash, an inlet of the North Sea. The wind was fierce as we drew closer to the water. We struggled out of the car. The gale slammed the car doors and ripped the hats from our heads. We laughed but the wind tore the sound from our throats. In the quiet pub, we were the only customers.

“A might blowy, ay?” said the publican.

“There's nothing between us and Siberia,” said Moo.

“But at least the sun's up and about,” said the publican. He spoke with the broad dialect of the Midlands. What a tolerance the English have for poor weather, I thought, as we ate cheese sandwiches and pickled onions. Moo had a barley wine to “fortify” herself.

I drove west into the Midlands, and the weather became milder as if bestowing a benign blessing on our adventure. Nottingham again struck me with its sprawling size. The River Trent wound through the southern edge, spawning half a dozen solid bridges. Traffic hurtled through the industrial sectors and was tamed into one-way streams in and out of the city center. Make a wrong turn and you had to go all the way out of the city and start again.

As we found our way downtown, Moo pointed out places she remembered. “There's St. Peter's, where your father and I were married. Dear old St. Peter's. Canon Ingles married us. There's the bookstore where I worked. I must show you the bookstore. That's the road for Sherwood. We'll go up there this afternoon to see Rosemary for tea. There's Lower Parliament Street, you'd better park or we'll miss it.”

We parked and walked back into the center of town where St. Peter's Church stood in the small square, surrounded by busy streets of shops and offices. Remembering my last encounter with Canon Ingles, I hoped Moo wouldn't suggest we drop in on him and she didn't. “Come on, it's up here,” she said after we reached Lower Parliament Street. “I'm coming,” I said, slowing down as the moment of reckoning approached.

“Look,” she said, turning around to face me, arms folded in front of her, “we'll go in, you'll ask for Philip Minson and take it from there. If he's there, I'll run over to the pub and meet you later so you can have a private chat. You haven't lost your nerve, have you, darling?”

“No,” I said, “but I'm nervous.”

“*Coom on, duk,*” she said, slipping her arm through mine and talking in Nottingham dialect. “*Y've nuthing' to be afraid of. We've just coom t'buy soom thread.*” Upper Parliament Street was directly above Lower Parliament Street. We hiked up the steep hill. “There it is!” exclaimed Moo, “Just as it's always been.” The shop was large and stood on the corner of the busy street at the top of the hill. Blue and white signs proclaiming “Minsons” ran along the top of the windows. “Fabrics, Linens, Curtains,” read the sign in smaller letters. We crossed the street.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” said Moo.

“Fortune favors the brave,” I added and we went in.

“Home of the Minet” announced a sign, promoting the company's brand of lace curtains. A woman was cutting fabric for a customer. “May I help you?” she asked.

“I'm looking for Philip Minson,” I said.

“He's not here right now. He's up at the factory. May I help you with anything?”

He existed and he was close by. “No,” I said. “I really need to speak with Mr. Minson.”

“Perhaps you have a telephone number where we could reach him?” said Moo.

“I'd be happy to ring him myself for you if you'd like,” said the woman, helpfully.

“No, I'd rather have the number if that's all right,” I said.

“Certainly,” she said. She wrote the number down on a piece of paper and handed it to me. I picked up a promotional flyer on the way out. It was blue and white with a design of a curtain on it. It read

MINSONS of NOTTINGHAM
for Quality Fabrics and Custom-made Curtains
Browse through the
LARGEST RANGE OF
FABRICS IN THE MIDLANDS

and I thought, that's my people.

“Aren't you going to ring him?” asked Moo. We were standing on the sidewalk outside a real estate office, trying to work out our next move. I looked at the pictures of houses for sale.

“I think I'd like to walk around for a bit first,” I said. The truth was I didn't know what to do next. The social workers had told me I should use a third-party intermediary to investigate the situation and find out if he wanted to meet me. Being close to contact, I

felt both impelled and resistant. Reality would soon overtake my fantasies and I wasn't sure I wanted that. Yet, I wanted it more than anything. It reminded me of the choice on a TV game show from my childhood: The Money or The Box...The Money or The Box.

We went to the bookstore and up to Rosemary's for tea. Rosemary was my godmother, another old friend of Moo's from childhood days. She had lived a middle-class English life in a pretty suburban house in Sherwood, with a winding stone pathway from the sidewalk to the front door and a vivid flower garden in the back. She was a widow and her children were married with families of their own.

Happily, Auntie Gerrie joined us. I hadn't seen her since my first visit to Nottingham. Moo chattered amidst her old friends and drank one too many sherries, but we had a pleasant reunion. "Your mother says you're searching for your birth father," Rosemary said after Moo left the room. "I hope you won't turn your back on Roger," she added. "He's been a good father to you." Everyone had feelings on the subject. Why shouldn't they?

"I don't intend to," I told her. "That's not why I'm looking. I ... it's hard to explain. I've always wanted to know. I've always wanted to see people who look like me."

"Then what?" she asked.

"Rosemary!" interrupted Gerrie. "She's just curious, and with all the pussyfooting around by that Canon and the rest, I don't blame her." Gerrie had always been impatient with British reserve.

"I suppose we'll correspond and visit from time to time. I'm too old to have parents. I mean, I have parents. I'm grown, so I guess I'd most like to be friends."

We drove back to Norwich that night, without my having made the phone call. I got Philip's home number from directory assistance but I wasn't ready to call. We stopped in Grantham for dinner and had a sumptuous meal in the old castle. Our table was by the window in what was once the bedroom of a Fourteenth Century prince. Moo felt more comfortable knowing she'd be returning to her flat that night, and I'd done enough adventuring for one day. We relaxed over dinner and shared a bottle of wine.

It had been eight years since our last visit together. Much had happened. I'd been in and out of college, started the theater, been attacked, and was recovering. Her second husband had died, she'd moved back to England, and been homeless a while before finding her Norwich flat. We'd fought our separate battles and had scars to prove it, but that night, we put the differences aside and delighted in having a special dinner together. We'd had a good day, filled with old friends and new adventures. For once in our lives, we were an English mother and daughter on vacation, chatting about our outing and pretending to fight over the check.

After we returned to Norwich, I kicked stones around for days, scuffing my shoes and feeling cranky. I couldn't call and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I tried finding an intermediary but Social Services said I had to put my request in writing. I didn't think to ask Rosemary or Gerrie, and I didn't really know anyone else. Moo confronted me.

“Look,” she said, “you've got to call. You want to call.”

“I know but ...”

“Don't `I know but' me. This afternoon, we'll go round to Lily's and you can use her phone. I won't listen. You can make your call.” I knew she was right.

Lily received us with her apron on. “I made some tea,” she said as we walked into her garden flat. She was my mother's best friend in Norwich. They treated each other at the pub and watched TV together. Lily let Moo use her phone, and Moo did errands for Lily, who was frailer than she. After a cup of tea, Lily showed me into her sitting room and closed the door. I could barely hear the two friends chatting in the kitchen.

I'd composed an introduction that with minor alteration would work as well for Philip as for Eve. I tried to strike the right note of interest and mature detachment, but there was no way around the drama of the situation:

“Hello? My name is Nicki B---. I live in the United States, and I'm only in England another few weeks visiting family. I was born in 1956 and adopted. My mother's maiden name is Eve Langston Wright and I have reason to believe that you may be my birth father.”

This speech was the result of much mental sifting and editing, and it seemed to me I'd winnowed out the chaff. I didn't want to seem overly needy or pushy or weird, just friendly yet businesslike. I dialed, and a woman answered.

“Minsons, may I help you?”

“Philip Minson, please.”

“May I tell him who's calling?”

“Nicki Burton. He doesn't know me, though.”

“Just a moment.” I hung on the line rigid, not breathing.

“Hello,” said a pleasant male voice after a length of time. “This is Philip Minson.”

I took a deep breath and made my speech from the piece of paper in front of me. There was silence on the line. Finally he said, “What did you say her name was? And how old

are you?" My heart sank into my knees. It had never occurred to me he wouldn't know who I was, that he wouldn't even know I existed. I repeated the information. "Eve Langston Wright ... and I was born July 25th, 1956."

I could hear his mind flipping through the Rolodex of time, flipping back fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years to his youth. I couldn't stand the tension. "Look," I said, "I'm coming through Nottingham on my way to London next week. Perhaps I could stop in to see you." I didn't care that I'd suggested a geographical absurdity. I *had* to get off the phone.

"You've obviously gone to a lot of trouble in your search," he said, pleasant but noncommittal. "I'd be happy to meet with you if that's what you want." I took down the address, and we set a time the following week and rang off. I was ecstatic. I'd talked to him. He didn't know who I was, true. But I knew he was the one, even if he didn't know it yet.

Buoyed by my success with Philip, I decided to go ahead and call Eve. I had narrowed her whereabouts down to a town called Lemington outside Newcastle-upon-Tyne, way up north. I'd drive up and see her, assuming she was agreeable. I could see her after meeting Philip or perhaps before. My itinerary could follow the changing winds of the search. I rang the number and a woman answered. "Hello?"

"Is this Mrs. Goodman?" I asked, using her married name.

"Yes, it is. Who's this?" She spoke with a north country accent.

"And was your maiden name Eve Wright?"

"Yes, it was. What can I do for you?" she asked.

Still nervous but no longer an amateur, I proceeded. “My name is Nicki B---. I live in the United States and will only be in England another two weeks visiting relatives. I was born on July 25th, 1956, and was adopted, and I have reason to believe that you may be my birth mother.”

Without missing a beat, she responded, “Oh, that couldn't possibly be the case!”

Astonished, I stumbled and repeated, “I'm looking for Eve Langston Wright of Nottingham...?”

“Oh,” she said, breezily. “I'm Eve Wright of Prudhoe on Tyne. Sorry.” And hung up.

I sat on Lily's sofa stunned. The blue brocade slipcovers swirled about me. In my heart, a stone dropped to the bottom of a rough, murky sea. All that thinking about Eve's family, her husband Derek with the Tyne River Police, their kids. I had their marriage certificate, for heaven's sake. I knew the names and birthdays of their children, my brothers and sisters.

I sighed. The icy water at the bottom of the sea cleared. I saw what I'd done. I had thought, what would a woman do who'd had a baby and put her up for adoption? She'd get married and have another baby. I'd looked in the registers for the marriage of Eve Wright following my birth, and when I found it listed in 1957, I stopped looking. I never dreamed that there would be two Eve Wrights; it was a fairly unusual name. Then I remembered the missing middle initial. I should have kept looking through the registers. Instead I'd ordered marriage and birth certificates and gone straight to the telephone books for a current address.

For six years, I'd been searching for the wrong Eve Wright.

Though the water was terribly deep, the light at the surface reached the stone at the bottom. I knew what I had to do. My mind returned to the Register Room at St. Catherine's House. I had to go back to the beginning. I knew I could do it, but the weight of the water pressed down on me, clear from the top to the bottom.