



You
Carried
Me

*a daughter's
memoir*

Melissa Ohden

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A Daughter's Memoir

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*To the woman who carried me,
and to Ron and Linda Cross, who carry me
in their hearts*

One

The tale of someone's life begins before they are born.

— Michael Wood, *Shakespeare*

A THICK MANILA ENVELOPE arrived at my home in Sioux City with the afternoon mail one sunny day in May 2007. I knew without even looking at the return address that it came from the University of Iowa Hospitals in Iowa City and contained the medical records that would answer some of the questions I had been agonizing over most of my life.

Who am I? Where did I come from? Whose blood runs through my veins? And why was I given away? These are questions that most people who, like me, were adopted as infants want answered. But what I needed to know was more fundamental, and less innocent: Why did you try to kill me? And how is it possible that I survived?

I felt a clutch of panic in the pit of my stomach. Now that I had the information I had sought for so many years, my body, and spirit, rebelled. But as the Irish poet James Stephens – another adoptee – once wrote, “Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will.” So with trembling fingers, I peeled back the sealed flap of the envelope and faced the facts of my improbable life.

As I read through my tears the blandly rendered details of my narrow escape from death – “On August 24, saline infusion for abortion was done but was unsuccessful” – I discovered something I hadn’t expected: the full names of my biological parents.



Their names were clearly written in the record of my birth, but I was left unnamed.

As I fought for my life in St. Luke’s neonatal intensive care unit, it became clear to the doctors and nurses on hand that my birth mother had been pregnant for far longer than the eighteen to twenty weeks reported at the time of the abortion. The pediatrician who examined me a couple of days after I was delivered estimated that my gestational age at birth was about thirty-one weeks – well into the third trimester. The discrepancy hinted at something still unknown: How could any abortionist, much less one affiliated with one of the most prestigious hospitals in the

region, have made such a mistake? What doctor or nurse would believe that a woman more than seven months pregnant was less than five months along?

Like other babies born prematurely, I had a host of serious medical problems including low birth weight (I weighed 2 pounds 14.5 ounces), jaundice, and respiratory distress. But my troubles were complicated by the aftereffects of the poisonous saline solution I had endured in my mother's womb. No one knew the long-term consequences of surviving an abortion. Developmental delays are routine for preterm babies, but I also had seizures; and the list of potential complications grew to include mental retardation, blindness, and chronic poor health.



Among the records I received were these prints of my feet.

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Three weeks after my birth I was transferred three hundred miles east, to the university hospital in Iowa City. The nurses who cared for me, a nameless baby, made me tiny clothes and colorful booties. One nurse, Mary, decided I needed a name and dubbed me Katie Rose. For years after I left the NICU, my adoptive parents and Mary kept in touch, exchanging Christmas cards and letters with pictures of me and updates on my progress. When I got older, I wrote the letters myself; Mary and I began a friendship that would endure for decades. It made me feel so special that this nurse who had cared for me when no one else did still cared about me.

Meanwhile, the social services agency that had taken custody of me searched for a family willing to adopt a fragile newborn. This was no easy task because of my grim medical prognosis.

The search led to a small town, Curlew, Iowa, just one hundred miles from where I had been born. There a young couple who had adopted one child waited for another.

They were told that the baby would have needs that went far beyond food and shelter. Love they had in abundance; money for specialized medical care and services they did not. They drove five hours east to meet the tiny baby who needed a home. Unintimidated by the IV lines and the monitors attached to the skull of the baby whose head had been shaved from temple to temple, they made their choice. That's the day I first

experienced a mother's love, in the arms of the woman who looked into my eyes and said, "You are mine."

Her name was Linda Cross, and although she wanted to bring me home right away, she had to wait another month to hold me in her arms again. In late October 1977, a social worker delivered all five pounds of me to the farmhouse Linda shared with her husband Ron and their four-year-old daughter Tammy. They named me Melissa Ann, after a friend who had become a quadriplegic after an accident. They admired her strength and her tenacious fight for life. They hoped for the same qualities in me.

Ron and Linda had grown up on the prairies of western Iowa. Palo Alto County had a population of about sixteen thousand people when they were born as part of the baby boom that followed the world war their fathers had fought in. They came from close families with deep roots. Ron was born in 1948 in Mallard, where four generations of his family had farmed the land for a hundred years. They grew corn and soybeans, and raised cattle and pigs. Linda was born a year later in Estherville, the seventh of nine children. Farming was part of her birthright as well: her father farmed and worked as an auto mechanic; her mom was a seamstress.

They met after they graduated from high school, at a drag race on the wide-open roads nearby. When I heard the story years later, it sounded like something straight out of the movie *Grease*. Fast cars, however,

were the extent of their teenage rebellion. While their peers elsewhere in the country were engaging in the “summer of love,” they carried on a traditional courtship in their Iowa hometowns. In April 1969, as their generation protested the Vietnam War and prepared to gather at the Woodstock Festival to celebrate sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, they married in front of their families and friends at the Lutheran Church in Estherville, and began a life together.

At twenty years old, Ron was a tall, brawny young man, with a shock of light-brown hair and a smile that could light up a room. He had a perennial “farmer’s tan” from driving around in his pickup truck or working the farm on his tractor. Linda was pretty and petite, with long blond hair and skin so fair she refused to wear shorts even on the hottest summer days because she was embarrassed by her too-white legs. Ron’s gregarious personality was balanced by Linda’s friendly but quiet demeanor. They were a perfect match.

The life they envisioned included children—lots of them. Their extended families included dozens of nieces and nephews, and they couldn’t wait until their own children were part of the happy crowd of cousins. When a baby didn’t come right away, they were patient; they enjoyed the time they had as newlyweds to get to know each other. But as the months turned to years they sought medical help and found that Linda suffered from a hormonal imbalance that

made it very difficult for her to get pregnant. Surely they had their moments of regret as the years slipped by without the wished-for baby, but in Mom's words, "If you want a family, it doesn't matter how it's made." Three years after they married they took in their first foster children – two brothers who lived with them for nearly a year. They loved them deeply and were heartbroken when their mother reclaimed them. But that didn't stop them from opening their home and hearts to another little boy soon after, and when he was gone they took in a four-month-old baby girl with blond hair and blue eyes named Tammy, who became their beloved daughter.

It was into this happy home that I was welcomed after being released from the hospital. I was barely two months old.

I needed almost as much care at home as I had received in the NICU, but time, love, and attention cured most ills, and as I grew, I thrived. A year after I left the hospital, my adoption was finalized. As a small child I knew a few things for sure: My name was Missy Cross; I lived on a farm in Curlew, Iowa; I belonged to a family that included a mom, a dad, a big sister, and dozens of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins.

And at some point before I can even remember I learned that I was doubly loved – by the parents who had chosen me as their own, and by a mother who had given birth to me and entrusted me to their care.



I'm twenty-five days old.



As I looked when Mom and Dad saw me first, at one and a half months.



Mom and me in the garden. I'm two.



Tammy and me—best friends at this point.

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



Ryan and I are engaged, 2005.

