

BLACK MARKET BABY

An Adopted Woman's Journey

by
Renée Clarke

“The gravest responsibility in life is to bring a child into the world.”¹

“This poor child is motherless, and there's not one thing worse in this world than being motherless.”²

“The woman's natural instinct to keep and care for her young is not strong enough to stand against society's condemnation and punishment for bearing a child out of wedlock, a child called 'illegitimate.' The father of such a child assumes no responsibility and our society makes no demands upon him. It is the child who bears alone the total burden of his illegitimate birth. His best hope is adoption.”³

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This is a true story. However all the names and certain details have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

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DEDICATION

For my three daughters: This story of my life with glimpses into my heritage picked up in my aura, the irises of my eyes and akashic records is all that I know of my ancestry; my roots were torn leaving behind forever, a full lineage. My life becomes your genealogy, your family tree, and from me you must piece together who came before because I am them, the blood that ran in their veins runs in mine. Those grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents have given to me as I have given to you, the thread of life for you to carry on in your children and them in theirs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have come finally to appreciate my four parents, two who brought me into this world and two who raised me.

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To all those people who have studied and written about adoption, in an effort to make clear our dilemma and bring to light the injustices of the system, I am thankful.

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book in an attempt to deal with my adoption and the trauma of divorce, to get an overview of my life, to set the record straight from my point of view and to give my daughters an inheritance. For fifty years I have denied my adoption and started to talk about it only when I returned to Canada, the country where I was born. I was always under the illusion that I had grown up in a loving family and that my upbringing was normal.

I have labored to remember childhood events. Letters I had written to my parents and my children's letters to me have helped in the recollection. I have tried to rebuild my life and then to extract those events which contributed most to my identity. Historical data has helped to weave a tapestry of the times into which I was born and raised, meaningful in the development of my consciousness. I have read numerous books, talked to many people and realized that however we try to understand what it is to be adopted, it is not easily handled nor has it been satisfactorily dealt with for most of us adoptees.

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, initiated by racial minorities, had a broad effect on other minority groups as well, one of which was adoptees. We, as well as our children and all generations yet to come, have been deprived of the right to know our origins. Why? I have not found a substantial reason for this rule.

I wanted to face my adoption head-on and get a clearer picture of who I am, which would tell me who my birth parents were. Until we adoptees face who we are, we live in a dream.

*“Through the 1940s there were fewer children available for adoption and independent adoptions flourished, with many high-priced ‘black-market’ operations taking advantage of desperate childless couples. Obviously, no counseling or education were available to these adoptive families. This was also true in the large numbers of secret intra-family adoptions which continued into the 1940s. In these cases, in order to hide an illegitimate birth, a relative would take the child and raise him/her, with the origin being concealed. During this same era, when agencies arranged non-relative adoptions, they often advised the parents against disclosing the adoptive status to the child and to treat him/her as if he/she were their natural born.”*¹

*“What matters is what you do in this world, not how you come into it.”*²

PREFACE

September 1, 1939: Germany invaded Poland. Two days later both Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. On September 10, Canada entered the war. Prime Minister Mackenzie King reassured the country there would be no conscription. By the end of that month, sixty thousand men across Canada volunteered.

*“Many who had fought in the 1914-18 war watched their sons march off.”*³

I was conceived in February of 1940, five months after WW II had started. During my second month of growth in utero, the German armies invaded Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and France. The near capture of the entire British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk on the northern coast of France transformed the war. A few days later France fell and Charles DeGaulle escaped to London. On June 10, fascist Italy joined forces with Germany and Italian citizens living in Canada and Canadians of Italian origin suspected of being fascists were arrested.

As Germany intensified its air attacks on Britain, Canadian munition supplies became essential and factories stepped up their production. Air training and aircraft manufacture were expanded to aid Britain against the German Luftwaffe. A large number of women entered the work force. Sugar, meat, butter and milk rationing began in order to ensure adequate supplies for the troops.



I was growing in my mother’s womb during the summer when the Atlantic Ferry Service came into being and bombers built in the United States were flown to Montreal, Quebec, and from there made the hazardous crossing to Britain.

Although the United States remained neutral along with the Soviet Union, it helped Britain by providing fifty overage destroyers and started its first peacetime draft. Mackenzie King was re-elected as prime minister. The Ogdensburg Agreement, drafted on August 18, 1940, pledged the United States to defend Canada from invaders. This contract marked a shift from Canada’s traditional alliance with Britain to a recognition of an involvement with its neighbor, the United States.

These were the circumstances of the world into which I was born.

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HELPLESS

In the fall of 1940 when the leaves covered the sidewalks and gutters of the tree-lined streets, a dark sedan pulled up and parked in front of 201 St. Joseph Boulevard West in Montreal. Staircases lined the outside of the three-story buildings and gold leaf writing reflected on windows against black. There was a chill in the air and the setting sun streaked the red and gold of autumn.

A man and a woman sat in the front seat. A hat covered her short wavy brown hair. He was agitated and she kept looking back where her pregnant daughter, hair messy, clothes soiled, was writhing in pain. People on the stairs, relatives, friends of the car's occupants, approached the vehicle, then turned back. They seemed scattered. The door of the building opened and closed. The girl in the back seat was scared, her mother distraught. Nobody seemed to know what to do.

The doctor in blue appeared at the entrance at the top of the stairs and for a moment the girl and her mother were stuck in the doorway. "This is not the way I'd have it done," said the mother, disgustedly. "If she were married ... but she's not. It seems like he might be a reputable businessman but my daughter won't talk."

The girl passed a radiator in the narrow hallway and was hesitant about going into the room. There was some commotion around the doorway, nurses going in and out, so many doors opening and closing and people rushing around. She simply wanted to get it over with. She was seventeen.

Nervous and confused, she finally found herself in a small white room with tiled green floor and indentations in the walls that housed high windows. There were people around her. Nobody was holding her hand. She heard mumbling. She could feel her hands but the rest

was floating. Suddenly the baby was out ... messy ... she could see feet ... just feet ... and a big round clock, 6:10 a.m.

I looked down at my mother. Her legs were in the stirrups. Her face was like mine. She had brown hair and a big belly.

People with masks on ... a lot of whispering ... the baby was gone. No sounds. Something was uncomfortable ... hands ... wrists ... something was going on in the other room. There were two rooms separated by a doorway.

Picking up and changing hands. Handed around. From side to side, legs are kicking. Muffled sounds. They're wheeling me away. Hollow sounds. There was too much space around me. I'm stuck in space. There's a huge vastness around me. My mother is in the other room. They're working on her and I'm left here. Two people around her are calming her down. There's some kind of disruption. It doesn't feel good. She knows how she's feeling. She doesn't seem to have anything to say except the figures around her are calming her down. I don't think she knew they were going to take me away from her. This wasn't her decision. It was his.

There's some kind of ... not an argument but something's going on in that room around her. I'm just alone ... still ... something happened in my heart.

There was much movement in the hallway, angry words, somebody shoved against the wall, a small cry, a door slammed and then quiet. A car door closed. The motor started and its roar faded as it disappeared down the tree-lined street. The leaves were falling quietly and the setting sun streaked the red and gold of autumn.

Hypnosis session, August 12, 1992, Boulder, Colorado



A friend of the adoptive family brought the newborn to their home at the corner of Rachel around the block from Fletcher's Field, the "traditional park and playground of the city's less affluent, the downtown Jews of St. Urbain Street, Esplanade and St. Dominique."¹ At this time anti-Semitism in Quebec was at its height.

The birth certificate read: "The undersigned certifies that Renée Rosenberg, daughter of Myer Rosenberg, merchant, and Esther Rubin, his wife, of the Congregation Chevra Shaas, Province of Quebec, was born on the 27th day of October, one thousand nine hundred and forty, and baptized on the second of November 1940. Signed – S. Gerhuni." There was a handwritten file number, #9216, at the top left hand corner above the seal of the Superior Court of the Province of Quebec.

There were no other papers. With an exchange of monies, people became parents, illegalities turned legal and an adoption was consummated. A torn bond, an irrevocable trauma and nobody cared. A doctor, nurse, lawyer, judge and rabbi became a little richer, the birth mother got rid of her child, the birth father got rid of his responsibilities, the adoptive parents got what they couldn't manage to get on their own and the baby was lost somewhere in between.

And so began the life of this soul. No history, no ties, no strings attached. And now fifty-plus years later, the adoptive parents dead, the birth mother still wondering what ever happened to her baby, the birth father, who knows, might be wondering too or has completely forgotten or has never known, and the infant, now a full-grown woman with three children of her own, was trying in vain to search for her real mother, to find out who she was, her roots, her history ... still trying to imagine what it would have been like to have a real mother's arms to cry in, still trying to see her mother's image in the face in the mirror, wishing that someday the telephone would ring and that call would come.

Your adoptive father was the one who initiated it, brought you home and adopted you. Whether you were a child from another relationship that he had, or a friend came to him and he wanted to help her, in either case another woman was involved and it didn't sit well with your adoptive mother. You symbolized something she couldn't deal with. That explains a lot of the disgruntlement and difficulty that she has given you. That has to do with her own sense of rejection and her own fears.

Psychic reading, November 3, 1983 by Mitra

“Women, if they love children at all, can love almost any child. Thus when a baby is placed in her arms for her own she may or may not feel a rush of innate instincts. She may feel a vague fear, even panic, which is not dispelled when her daily life is disturbed by a demanding baby. She who slept the whole night through now finds herself waked by an importunate cry, to which she must respond. She may wonder why she ever gave up her placid existence in order to have a child another woman bore. If so, let her take heart. These are natural feelings, and ephemeral. As the child becomes real to her – a personality delightful though sometimes troublesome – he becomes her own. She forgets that she did not bear him. She believes that she recognizes in him similarities to her own family or to her husband's, and she rejoices when someone says the child looks like one or both parents. She compares her child to other children and finds him superior in all important ways. She becomes, in short, a full-fledged mother.”²

A French-Catholic nurse was hired to care for me while my new mother watched and wondered whether she was happy about the whole affair. They had been trying for ten years. Had had all the tests. Nothing happened. He blamed her. She blamed him. Then this opportunity came along.

It was wartime. “*As shortages grew, rationing spread to items ranging from meat and butter to oil and gas.*”³ We lived on a busy street where the milkman delivered milk from Borden’s Dairy in a horse-drawn wagon. My mother paid with her books of ration tickets.

Our flat was on the ground floor of an older three-story building. The upper floors had balconies with ornate, wrought-iron railings. Three pale-green painted wooden doors with filigree-framed windows led to each apartment. Ours opened to a small closed vestibule, then to a long narrow hallway with a deep red carpet covering its length.

The first room on the left, with a large window that looked onto the street and bus stop, was mine. As I lay in bed trying to sleep I could overhear the conversations from people waiting for the bus. Heavy maple twin beds and a dresser filled most of the space in the front part of the room, separated at one time from the back by beautiful French doors. My bookcases, a small table and chairs, a cedar chest and my extensive doll collection now took up the space where my mother’s baby grand piano once stood. A cupboard full of clothes occupied the far corner. When I was added to the family my parents opened a children’s shop next to their well-established lingerie store. Venetian blinds cast crawling lines of light on the ceiling and walls when cars passed at night.

Down the hallway to the right was a small room where my maternal grandmother slept when she was ill. The hallway opened to a living room where we spent our evenings listening to my mother play the piano. A doorway led to my parents’ room and another, to a small bathroom, a walk-in pantry, and the kitchen which opened to a back porch and paved oval courtyard that sloped ever so slightly to a drain in the middle. Our porch was connected to the other two floors by a closed, musty circular staircase which was rarely used. A tall wooden fence separated our yard from the lane behind. Across the yard a replica of our building housed, on the top floor, a family with whom we were friends, a grandmother and her two spinster daughters. The youngest, Fanny, babysat for me.

❧ 1941 ❧

Penicillin was discovered. Greta Garbo made her last feature film. In Canada more than 250,000 men and about 2000 women had entered the army.

In Poland thousands of Jews were being deported from the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos to death camps, the Chelmo and Auschwitz gas chambers. "Between 1933 and 1945 Canada had the worst record of all the western democracies in providing sanctuary to Jewish refugees fleeing the scourge of the Nazis. However, the majority of Canadians preferred almost any type of immigrant – including Germans – to Jews. It was in Quebec that the Jew seemed most threatened. Both the Roman Catholic Church and its lay allies in the French-Canadian nationalist movement were aggressively anti-Jewish."⁴

On the 7th of December, just after I turned one, the Japanese air force bombed Pearl Harbor and America was finally drawn into the war. Four days after the attack, Hitler, too, declared war on the United States. After Pearl Harbor, Canada joined Britain and the United States in declaring war on Japan.

✎ 1942 ✎

I remember my father boasting they had the best of care for me when I was a baby – a nurse, rather than my mother, took care of my needs. Was my mother incapable of nurturing me?

We were still on milk rations. My parents listened eagerly to the radio every evening for news of the war. Most days my mother worked alongside my father in their store leaving me with my grandmother. She was a little woman, soft, warm and gentle, who wore her snow-white hair pulled back in a bun held in place by large, delicate, wire hairpins. She was blind and taught me how to draw. Holding a crayon in her right hand and following the edge of the paper with her left, she drew borders of different colors trying not to cross the lines and got upset when she did.

One day while she was talking with the neighbors across the street and I was playing on the sidewalk, a truck suddenly jumped the curb and raced towards me. She rushed out and grabbed me, pulling me to safety. How did she do that? She wasn't born blind and no one knew how she became blind.

✎ 1943 ✎

It was during this year that the tide of the battle turned. The Russians won the War of Stalingrad and the German nation reverted to a defensive position.

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