Reflective piece shared with Adoption West by an Adopted Adult.

What having and not having contact has meant for me both growing up and and as an adult.

It was when I was in my early 40s, sitting on the loo, browsing though my teenage daughter's book 'Dustbin Baby' by Jacqueline Wilson when I had a revelation. The words 'I always hate my birthdays. I don't tell anyone that' and 'I've got so good at pretending I hardly know I'm doing it. I'm like an actress. I've had to play lots of lots of parts', made everything in me still, it was as if everything slowed down, with the sudden realisation that this was me.

I'd been adopted as a six week old baby in 1959. I found out by accident when I was 14 and was rummaging through the important 'red bag' in my mum's wardrobe – the bag that always had to be rescued if there was a fire but was not to, in any circumstances be looked through. The bag held lots of secrets and I kept thosesecrets until I was 30 when I finally told my mum that I knew I was adopted.

I remember a story that I was told by my mum and dad, when I was about five, about visiting a ward with lots of babies and them choosing me, because I was smiling. Of course the five year old thought that's where all babies came from – different from a gooseberry bush – but similar. Talking to my mum, when I was 30, going through the adoption process myself with a very wise social worker who told me kindly but firmly that we couldn't progress with the application until I'd talked to my mum and told her that I knew I was adopted, was something I truly dreaded. It was awful – she cried and I cried yet on reflection it was the first honest conversation between us. She had tried to 'protect me' and losing her husband, my dad who had died suddenly when I was seven, she had bought me up as a single parent. She had moved away from Manchester and her family to rural Wales and without family or husband to talk through things, the 'secret' continued. In her mind she had told the five year old little girl, so no harm done, no reason to talk about it anymore.

But was harm done? Yes, absolutely.

- Even as a small child, standing at my father's grave, digging my fingers in my hand so that I wouldn't cry in front of my mother, I have become adept at hiding my feelings. I believe the 'secrets', erosion of trust, hidden anger towards my mother that was always masked, set a pattern of behaviour that has taken 65 years to work out!
- Intimacy is hard, secrets so ingrained in my story, have made it difficult to sometimes attach, yet when I do it's for life and that's not always been healthy. With my mother, there was always the feeling that she wanted more from me than I could give. She craved an intimate relationship with me which was so hard to give because on a primal level, I struggled with feelings of betrayal and mistrust.
- For most of my adult life, I've created situations where there have been secrets – sometimes honesty, especially in relationships is difficult to do.
- In order to feel safe, I often seek to control my environment and my husband tell me, those in it!
- Lack of medical and genetic knowledge has been hard – finding my birth mother in my forties has given me some answers but difficult when I was younger and having my daughter.
- Frustration with the system – it took a lot of effort to locate my records and there seemed to be lots of hoops to jump through and it seemed to take a long time.

Woud it have been different if I'd had contact with my birth family and been able to form a more secure sense of self?

Undoubtedly, yes. When my mother died, I traced my birth mother and visited her in South Africa. She had given two children up for adoption – her family knew about my brother who was adopted by her sister but I was a secret adoption. Meeting her, answered some but not all my questions. It helped me understand where I came from and helped fill in some of the gaps in my personal story. What it wasn't able to do though was undo the damage of a system which didn't put the emotional well being of the child, at the centre of processes. I don't have a crystal ball, I don't know what would have been the benefits or pitfalls of a more open adoption. What I do know though is there would have been less secrets and lies for us all, me, my mum, birth mother and brother.

Postscript: Now I understand, I love my birthdays and make the most of every one!

Our thanks to K for sharing their story.