

## A-d-o-p-t-i-o-n – Adrian Buckley

It's a pretty emotionally loaded word adoption – think Angelina Jolie! What does it feel for an adoptee to say, “I was adopted?” Do you even speak of it, or is being adopted something in the background of your identity? Perhaps the word adoption evokes sadness in you, or anger, or thoughts of being blessed. For me being adopted simply defined my life! I wish it hadn't, but it was always in focus so to speak. I couldn't really escape it on any level, from the way I looked, to the complex relationships I had with my adopted family, to my ultimate search and discovery of my birth family. It's been a huge voyage!

I was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1968 and given the name Adrian Stephen Buckley, I went home eighteen-days later as Christopher Kenneth Way. I was a very much wanted baby, a brother for my blonde haired, blue eyed adopted sister, and a welcome addition to a successful northern beaches family. It was an exciting time. My father was one of Australia's leading television directors, a busy, charismatic man. My mother was a young and dedicated wife, the daughter of the founders of the Spastic Centre. My mother's sister was born with severe disabilities and though she was surrounded by love, it was an extremely emotionally complex upbringing. This upbringing would have major consequences on the outcome of my adoption experience.

When my parents talked of having children my mother was adamant she wanted to adopt, as she didn't want to take the risk of natural childbirth if the result was a child with cerebral palsy. Her life in so many ways had been dominated by disability and she didn't want the rest of her life to follow the same path – this wasn't out of anger, or resentment, I think more from plain emotional exhaustion. They adopted my sister, and were a happy three person household for two-years before making the decision to add me to the mix. My profile was perfect, my father is Eurasian, and so am I. It was thought by their adoption agency that this would be a positive thing, for at least there was a chance I would look like one of my parents – my mother has flaming red hair! The reality of life was proving pretty hectic for my mother however, being twenty-six, with two young children, and a busy husband who was away a lot of the time on production. Even then she wondered if she had bitten off more than she could chew. Then things got **really** crazy as after three-months of my arrival my mother fell pregnant. It turned out to be a complicated pregnancy and in the back of my mother's mind all the fears of having a disabled child rose to the surface. The birth itself was disastrous. The umbilical cord wrapped around the baby's neck and the doctors were forced to intervene. My mother reacted to an anaesthetic and both of them almost died. They didn't and into the world came my brother. The feedback from the doctors was there was a possibility he could be disabled due to a lack of oxygen at birth. Thankfully everything turned out fine, but the bond between mother and natural son became incredibly powerful.

My whole adoption landscape changed from that very moment. In quick succession my mother had three children all under three, and was still just twenty-six! She had two needy baby boys wanting food, affection, warmth and one was hers, one was not. She didn't want to feel the way she did, but she couldn't help but wish this little adopted boy could be given back. It was all too much, too

stressful, I was one child too many. She tried to make it work but she just couldn't bond with me, and this lack of connection coloured my whole life as an adoptee.

While all this was happening my birth-parents were going on their own adoption journey. I was to learn on meeting my birth-parents that they were very much in love, wanted to keep me, thought they were going to, only to have the wisdom of parents and authorities decide that they were too young. They **were** too young, but they wanted to make it work, and my father in particular made huge sacrifices to be an adult and 'do the right thing'. He joined the army and in doing so volunteered to fight in Vietnam. My mother was placed in a horrible, drab nursing home in Ashfield with a section out the back for all the 'loose' girls who had managed to get themselves knocked up. Regardless of the difficulties both my birth Mum and Dad sort of drifted into a kind of married fantasy. My father, who was in training for the intelligence corps would send money each week enabling my Mum to have a room with a little balcony, and when given leave would visit, and even sneak in for the night. My mother stroked her tummy and talked with me each day assuring me everything would be alright. In the background my grandfather had organised my adoption and this was going to happen no matter what good intentions my parents had. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1968 my father drove from Adelaide (where he was training) to Sydney to be told by hospital staff he would be arrested if he came anywhere near the hospital. Bluntly he was told that his baby was being adopted out and there was nothing he could do about it – the best thing was to go back to Adelaide. For two weeks he couldn't get in contact with my mother to find out what had happened, why it had happened. When they finally did see each other they both broke down, and the reality of what had transpired set in. Regardless of being adopted out my father believed that they would be able to get me back and he would marry my Mum when he returned from Vietnam. Each day he wrote telling her how much he loved her, but after a while my mother stopped responding. In her mind there was no point anymore and being with my father was just a reminder of all the trauma of losing a child. She just wanted to get on with her life. She met someone else, fell in love, married and had two other children, only talking of me with my grandmother on birthdays. My father would get married three times and have four other children, never really healing from the experience of losing my mum, and his child in the way he did.

Meanwhile back in my adopted world I absorbed very early that my family life was going to be tough. Through words and actions I was made to feel I didn't belong, that I was different, but not in a special way. I remember as a young boy standing on some play equipment at school and being asked, "When are your parents coming to pick you up?" I remember thinking to reply, "Oh, they're not really my parents." Of course I didn't say it, or want to say it, but it felt so unnatural to me, even then, to think I belonged to my adopted parents. I knew even then that my life would be a solo journey on an emotional level. My home life basically became an endurance event and by the time I was sixteen (my parents divorced when I was about twelve) I had all but no relationship with my adopted mother, and by necessity only a food and roof over the head one with my father – who I had lived with since the age of fourteen. I was free to do as I please and being a troubled teen wrestling with his identity, and the reality of a completely dysfunctional family life, I went off the rails. I drank a lot, put myself in risky situations, became an awkward character to get close to, battled with depression, a complete lack of self-esteem, not to mention sabotaged every relationship I had. Besides that I was fine!

At the age of twenty-two I received my original birth certificate and saw my birth name for the first time. It was an amazing feeling. I did nothing with the identifying information until four years later, when hung-over at a BBQ a hippie friend took me aside and said, "Chris, it's time for you to find your family." I went to the State Library, found my grandparents, and sent them a letter with another letter inside for my mother. I wrote my grandparents that I was a friend of my Mum's from the 60's who had lost contact, and wanted to catch up again. I heard nothing for months. Completely shattered by the lack of response I applied for my mother's marriage certificate and sent a letter directly to her address. There was no more nice words about how many cats I had, or what music I liked, it was an 'at least tell me my history and heritage' letter. Within a week I heard my Mum's voice for the first time. We met up about three-weeks later, and saw in her, me.

It was the beginning of discoveries that continue to this day. We have had our ups and downs – it hasn't been a fairytale. What it has been, and I am writing a book about it, is a coming home, to myself more than my family. I made the choice to live the rest of my life with my birth name in April

2006, at the age of thirty-seven. A lot of people wondered if this was because I was angry at my adoption experience, my adopted parents, but it was not that at all. It was to put a line in the sand, to say I will not define myself or my life by my adoption anymore. It will always be a part of me; I will always be an adoptee and speak openly of it, it is my history, but the rawness of the experience has subsided. I now feel that though I wasn't blessed by the experience of adoption, I am blessed by the insight that it has given me. It took a long time to work that out, and I hope it will carry me forward into the next stages of my life in a positive, loving and compassionate way.