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Speaking through the things of their lives: writing a memoir with my parents' melancholy objects

Abstract:

In the process of writing my memoir about living with my adoptive parents, I have had to reconstruct their lives through the objects and things that they left behind. Our communication as a family – I was an only child – was fractured, difficult, sometimes non-existent. They kept secrets and spoke little about certain key aspects of their lives so that I knew little about them; this became clear after the death of my adoptive mother in 2001, when I discovered letters, documents, and a series of other objects that not only filled in gaps about their lives, but also told new stories. The photograph has been referred to as a 'melancholy object' by both Barthes and Sontag, and discussed as such by Gibson, and there is a photo of my parents in the 1950s, laughing together on their motor-boat, for which this description resonates. It is both my favourite image of them and an impossible contradiction, as I knew them only long after that time, when things had become more difficult, the boat had gone, and with it, seemingly, their happiness. This paper will discuss the use of such objects in the writing of memoir, with reference to my own experience and that of other adoptees in writing memoir.

Biographical note:

Sue Bond is a PhD candidate at Central Queensland University. She has degrees in medicine, literature, and creative writing, and publications in several print and online journals. Her essay 'A hole in the heart: on secrets, silence, and sorrow' was long-listed for the Calibre Essay Prize in 2014.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Personal essay – Grief memoir – Memoir – Objects – Things

Introduction

My parents were born during World War One in England, and died in the early years of the new century in Australia. These are my adoptive parents; my other (birth) parents were also both born in England, but much later, and both are still alive. One lives in Australia and the other in England; I have reunited with my birth mother but only corresponded with my birth father. I am a late discovery adoptee (LDA), which means that I was not told of my adoption until an adult, when I was twenty-three.[1]

As part of my doctoral thesis, I am writing a memoir called 'A shark in the garden' about living with my adoptive parents. Much of the writing as memoir has developed since they died; before that, I experimented with the novella and short story to try to capture our relationship in prose. Their deaths seemed to give me permission to speak more frankly about them, without the need for a fictional cloak. I rely, as life writers do, on memory, and on the things that my parents left behind – their personal belongings, most of them old and from other lives and other places. These things trigger memories of times spent with them, or reveal aspects of themselves previously unknown to me. Since their deaths, they have indeed become more 'known' through certain of their personal belongings than they were in life, which I elaborate upon in this essay. Memory is unreliable, and memories triggered are unreliable, but I do not have competing voices, as few people they knew are still alive. Our family of three (I had no siblings) had little contact with relatives, so I knew only one grandparent and, fleetingly, one uncle.

I looked to Thing Theory for a way to think with the things and objects of my parents. In wrestling with what 'things' are, Brown imagines them as 'the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject' and

> as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. (2001: 5)

So, my parents' objects – the embroidery, the photographs, the letters – are physical manifestations of something much bigger, particularly now their owners are gone. As Breitbach writes, photographs show this particularly keenly as objects and things (2011: 35).

In a further approach to things and objects, I note Turkle's exploration of her grandmother's kitchen closet as a child, and the significance of the family keepsakes she found there: 'every photograph of my mother on a date or at a dance became a clue to my possible identity' (2011: 3). Her biological father disappeared before she knew him, and was not mentioned by her family again; she is certain that a photograph of a man with the face cut out is of her father, and she treasures it as her only representation of him (4). In the same collection, Susan Pollak writes of the importance of her grandmother's rolling pin as an evocative object, something with which to remember and to meditate on loss (in the way of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*) as well as, via D. W. Winnicott, the noted child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, a healing and creative 'transitional object' (2011: 230).

The things that I will be examining in this paper include birth certificates (and their importance in adoptee memoirs), photographs, a rag doll, a fox fur stole and the accompanying photograph of my maternal adoptive grandmother wearing it, two letters, and my mother's wardrobe. I will also examine another late discovery adoptee's story of the importance of particular objects in her relationship with both of her mothers. I will begin with a discussion, not so much of melancholy objects, but of paper things that are of great significance to adopted people, and how they write about them in their memoirs.

Phillip Lopate writes that the personal essay is intimate and assumes there is a 'certain unity to human experience' (1995: xxiii); it is experimental in some degree, a testing of thoughts, a 'striking out toward the unknown' without a map (xlii). I have chosen the personal essay for this paper as my material is from my own lived experience, and that of my family, but includes the memoir writing of other late discovery adoptees. It is a form that also enables me to engage with a wide audience, both those within and outside the adoption community. And I am experimenting with the idea of objects and things as a way to find my adoptive parents. The map of my life's possible trajectory was torn up with the late revelation of my adoption. The ethical considerations of writing in this way particularly concern the inclusion of other persons who may not wish to be identified, so I have anonymised material and omitted certain photographs (of living persons) in an effort to address this issue.

Birth certificates

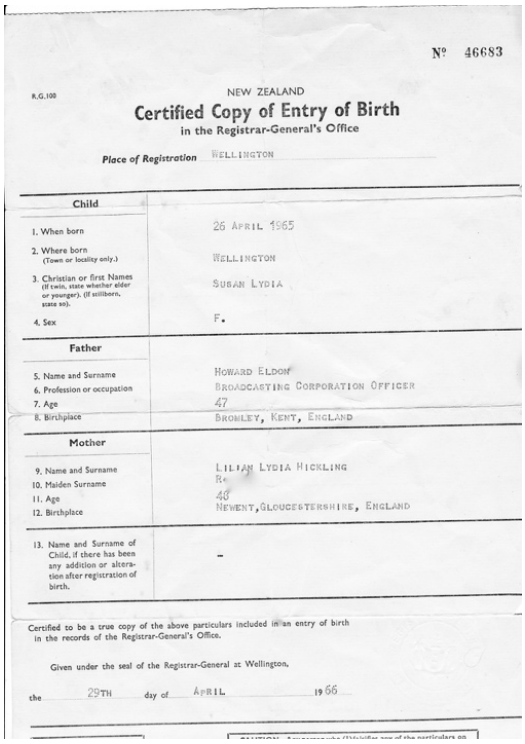
The terms memoir and autobiography are sometimes conflated, but I prefer to use the distinction that autobiography is the narrative of a whole life, whereas memoir is a subgenre or category of autobiography, involving the narrative of part of a life. Thomas Couser reminds us that the word memoir comes from the French word for memory, and that the form is usually 'based primarily on memory, a notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty' (2012: 19). He continues that therefore the 'narrative may be impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact based', but I would add that research is important for memoir as well. The act of writing itself can be from memory but can also generate memories, and some of these, at least, can be researched more deeply via a number of methods: oral history, interviewing, genealogical records, letters, diaries, and a variety of 'things'.

The adoptee memoirs that I have studied share the feature of containing the story of a search for, and reunion with, the family of origin, in particular the birth mother. There are variations, of course, with a variable amount of details about adoptive family life, career or vocation, formation of the author's own family, philosophical or spiritual development, and so forth. For example, Jill Joliffe's recent memoir, *Run for Your Life: A Memoir* (2014), begins with her life with her troubled and violent adoptive family, but substantially involves the story of her working life as an investigative journalist and political activist in places such as East Timor. Suzanne Chick, in *Searching for Charmian* (1995), includes her development as an artist and writer, as well as her own formation of family. What is particularly striking in this memoir is her inclusion of

many photographs comparing her appearance (and that of her daughters) to her birth mother, Charmian Clift.

Wayson Choy devotes much of his memoir, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* (2000), to his childhood with his parents. After beginning with a short chapter about the mysterious phone call he receives at the age of fifty-eight, inferring that he has another mother, he ends with a search for his birth origins. His descriptions of his childhood are rich with sensual and emotional experience. LDA memoirs such as Choy's contain the extra feature of the revelation of their adoptive status when an adult, as well as the search and reunion. This revelation may come from their adoptive parents, from another family member or unrelated person, or from an accidental discovery of adoption documents. Margaret Watson was told at the age of forty of her adopted status by her estranged husband; Beryl Martin records discovering a court order in a 'silver-lidded glass jar' (1997: 142) on her mother's dressing table when she was in her late teens; Richard Hill's doctor inadvertently revealed his adoptive status when his patient was going to college.

Adopted people necessarily have an attachment to objects in the shape of a piece of paper called the original birth certificate. This provides the key to knowledge about the beginnings of the self. For late discovery adoptees, it (or the Order of Adoption document) may provide the very knowledge of the previously unknown adoption itself, and thus the existence of other parents and extended family members.



Nº 46683

R.G.100

NEW ZEALAND

Certified Copy of Entry of Birth

in the Registrar-General's Office

Place of Registration WELLINGTON

Child	
1. When born	26 APRIL 1965
2. Where born (Town or locality only.)	WELLINGTON
3. Christian or first Names (If twin, state whether elder or younger). (If stillborn, state so).	SUSAN LYDIA
4. Sex	F.
Father	
5. Name and Surname	HOWARD ELDON
6. Profession or occupation	BROADCASTING CORPORATION OFFICER
7. Age	47
8. Birthplace	BROMLEY, KENT, ENGLAND
Mother	
9. Name and Surname	LILIAN LYDIA HICKLING
10. Maiden Surname	R[illegible]
11. Age	40
12. Birthplace	NEWENT, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND
13. Name and Surname of Child, if there has been any addition or alteration after registration of birth.	-

Certified to be a true copy of the above particulars included in an entry of birth in the records of the Registrar-General's Office.

Given under the seal of the Registrar-General at Wellington,

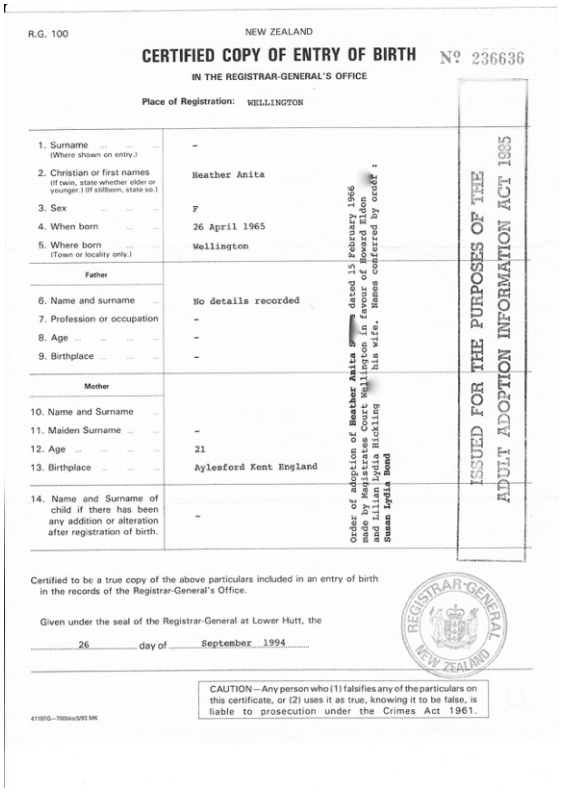
the 29TH day of APRIL 1966

Figure 1. Post-adoption birth certificate (surnames removed), personal collection.

In the adoptee memoirs that I have studied, the birth certificate or similar document has featured prominently as it gives details about the person's birth mother, particularly her name. The amended birth certificate that I had seen before I knew of my adoption

showed the ages of my parents. As my mother was listed as forty-eight at the time of my birth, I was surprised; it was unusual to have a baby at that age, particularly for the first time. I did not, however, ask questions, because asking questions in the past produced either puzzlement or hostility. They were not encouraged.

I was told of my adoption in 1988, and did not see my original certificate until five years later when I requested it from the registry office in New Zealand. A paper thing made significant by the inclusion not only of my (birth) mother's name and age and birthplace, but also by the fact she gave me a name. This made a difference because it signalled that my birth mother may not have wanted to give me up, but would rather have kept and raised me, to have mothered me.



R.G. 100

NEW ZEALAND

CERTIFIED COPY OF ENTRY OF BIRTH Nº 236636

IN THE REGISTRAR-GENERAL'S OFFICE

Place of Registration: WELLINGTON

1. Surname (Where shown on entry.)	-
2. Christian or first names (If twin, state whether elder or younger.) (If stillborn, state so.)	Heather Anita
3. Sex	F
4. When born	26 April 1965
5. Where born (Town or locality only.)	Wellington
Father	
6. Name and surname	No details recorded
7. Profession or occupation	-
8. Age	-
9. Birthplace	-
Mother	
10. Name and Surname	
11. Maiden Surname	-
12. Age	21
13. Birthplace	Aylesford Kent England
14. Name and Surname of child if there has been any addition or alteration after registration of birth.	-

Order of adoption of **Heather Anita** [redacted] dated 15 February 1966 made by Magistrates Court Wellington in favour of Howard Eldon and Lilian Lydia Hickling his wife. Names conferred by order: **Susan Lydia Bond**

ISSUED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE ADULT ADOPTION INFORMATION ACT 1985

Certified to be a true copy of the above particulars included in an entry of birth in the records of the Registrar-General's Office.

Given under the seal of the Registrar-General at Lower Hutt, the 26 day of September 1994

REGISTRAR-GENERAL NEW ZEALAND

CAUTION—Any person who (1) falsifies any of the particulars on this certificate, or (2) uses it as true, knowing it to be false, is liable to prosecution under the Crimes Act 1961.

Figure 2. Original birth certificate (some details removed), personal collection.

Margaret Watson received a letter with non-identifying information after she went to the Family Information Support service in New South Wales. This letter contained her birth mother's first name and age at Watson's birth. It also revealed that her mother had named her Cheryl, a fact which 'gave me hope, that having been named by her she may have had a strong attachment to me, albeit only for a short time' (2010: 49). It also helped her assimilate the information about her adoption, and made it real: 'The receipt of this letter actually helped move me from disbelief and overwhelm [*sic*] of my situation into accepting that the news I had been given was indeed true' (50). Watson was unable to obtain her original birth certificate until legislation regarding adoption certificates and information being available to adoptees over eighteen and birth and adoptive parents passed into law in April 1991, but she only had a few months to wait. Once she had her original certificate, her search began in earnest.

The importance for Watson of this search is more than hinted at in this statement later in the book when she has found her birth mother:

> I asked Margaret [Humphries, of Child Migrant Trust] for a physical description of my mother and the more she spoke, I realised that at long last, I would soon look into a face which resembled my own. Although my eldest son has some resemblance to me, there was no one else I knew in the world with whom I shared my resemblance. (87)

Beryl Martin, in New Zealand, received her original birth certificate in September 1986; she learned that her birth mother died in March of that same year, aged eighty. But she did meet her two brothers and rediscovered family. She concludes with the following words that point to the significance of her search:

> I was born Beryl Martin but, as decreed by the Adoption Act, that name was taken from me and, with it, my identity, substituting one that was alien, neither congenial nor harmonious. In writing this story, I am reclaiming my identity. I now know who I am and am content. (199)

Richard Hill requests his original birth certificate from the Michigan Department of Public Health and receives a certificate listing his adoptive parents as his biological ones. He is outraged at the 'cover up' of his adoption and persists, applying again with a different surname, discovered with some research that revealed interesting connections. He is successful. Eventually, he obtains a photograph of his birth mother, and records a similar feeling to Margaret Watson:

> As an adoptee who had never seen any biological ancestors, I pored over every photo and proudly showed them to my family and friends. The picture that meant the most to me, of course, was the eight-by-ten black-and-white photo of Jackie, my birth mother. She was beautiful. And that wasn't just my biased opinion. Every person I showed the photo to had the same reaction. More than that, she looked happy. And I saw myself in her eyes. (2012: 78)

He goes on to describe his grief at the knowledge that he would never get to meet her, as she had died in a car accident when still quite young.

For me, the search and reunion process began after the death of my adoptive mother. This was not a conscious choice, but in the months after she died, I felt that the time had come for me to find, or make the attempt to find, my birth mother and any other family. When I did find her, we exchanged photographs at first, and, like the other adoptees described above, I saw for the first time, people who looked like me. My birth mother and I share less obvious characteristics, such as a similar gait, but the resemblance between myself and my birth father when he was in his early twenties gave me pause. It is difficult to explain the feelings that arise when seeing this resemblance, but that connection with the people who actually created you is made flesh when such striking similarities are present. (I have not included photographs of living relatives for privacy reasons.)

The laughing couple

Writing about my adoptive family has been a search and discovery process as well. My adoptive father's personality has always puzzled and troubled me. He was an emotionally controlling and manipulative man, who never acknowledged his harmful behaviour; it was as if he could not see, or perhaps admit to seeing, the damage he wrought. He clung to my adoptive mother as if to let her go would be his demise, and seemed to be adrift in the world outside his home. At least, that it is how it seemed to me when I lived with them, and even more so now, knowing more about him from letters, documents, and other adoptive relatives.

Figure 3. My adoptive parents, Lilian and Howard, personal collection.

This photograph keeps coming back into my mind. It is the one photograph of my adoptive parents that makes me joyful and sorrowful at the same time. They are on their boat, *Cressida*, sometime in the 1950s. It is in the period before they adopted me, part way through the twenty-five years of marriage they lived before I came along. My memories of them do not include the boat, or the laughter that seemed so carefree, and so shared between them. Barthes describes the *punctum* of a photograph as 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (2000: 27) which suggests that it leaves a wound of sorts. The wound of this image, for me, is this laughter.

How do I write memoir with this photograph? It leads me to think about whom my parents were before I knew them. My parents survived World War Two. My adoptive father was a navigator in the Royal Air Force and sustained physical and psychological injuries during his service. I remember him telling me that my mother was called in to stay with him for a while on the base because he was suffering so badly. This assault to his mental health never healed completely; it might have been labelled Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but I never heard that term used in relation to my father.

He was depressed, anxious, paranoid, controlling, had sleep problems, took tablets. He had stays in hospitals where he wrote letters to my adoptive mother; he had difficulty

holding down jobs, which often ended in conflict. He went bankrupt in the early 1970s because of a disastrous time with a business machine company that employed him as a sales consultant for the Australian market. We flew to New York so my father could meet with the head of the company, and we stayed at his house. I remember the snow on the pavement, the huge toy room with a miniature carousel, the ginger cat that jumped on my bed, and getting my finger caught in a wardrobe door. On the flight home, I gave out sweeties to the other passengers (I was five). The air hostess let me wear her hat.

I was not aware of the bankruptcy, of course, at the time. But I found the evidence in letters and papers much later. I do remember my adoptive mother going into hospital around 1972, for a serious operation, and I was sent to live with another family. This other family tried to teach me Australian history, because I did not even know about Captain Cook. The atmosphere within our home must have been disrupted and disruptive, full of shame and dismay at what had happened, but I remember none of it.

The laughing couple photograph reminds me that there was another time for my adoptive parents, but it lies out of my reach.

The rag doll

Figure 4. Pollyanna, personal collection.

When my partner and I were cleaning my parents' house after the death of my adoptive mother in January 2001, we discovered many things. There were photographs, new and old; letters that revealed surprising information; large quantities of linens; boxes of toilet paper and dishwashing liquid, as if my parents, who had lived through years of rationing, were still suspicious it might happen again; postcards; jewellery; toys; fine old tools; certificates of achievement. From one large wooden chest, that my father had made himself many years before, my partner pulled out a very old rag doll. I let out a cry of long lostness when I saw her, as my adoptive mother made her for me when I was a child, but I do not remember exactly what age I was when she gave her to me.

As you can see, Pollyanna – an ironic name for a doll belonging to a generally pessimistic person, even as a child – is worn and has wool for hair. She is dressed in clothing I used to wear myself. She was a sibling replacement, as were my other toys. I would line them up and pretend I had ten brothers and sisters. My mother replaced her face a couple of times, as I used to make her 'frown' and 'smile' by pressing between her eyebrows or on her mouth with my thumb. Her squashiness was comforting, and I would sometimes lie my head on her body and fall asleep.

Other toys are still with me, particularly the ones that my parents made themselves. There is an ancient panda whose eye is falling out, and a sheepskin teddy bear in remarkably good condition for his age. I have also kept a fox pyjama storage toy that I used to call Basil Brush; my mother took me in to visit him in the department store before he finally became mine at Christmas one year. The fox was brushed regularly and fluffed up, but the other toys did not need such attention.

These memories remind me that there was a time when my parents were parents, when I knew them as my only parents and I loved them dearly, as small children do. It was when I grew older and started to have opinions of my own and plans for life that did not include my parents that our relationship became increasingly more difficult. My father fought for control, and threatened and manipulated in order to maintain it.

Fox fur stole

Figure 5. My maternal adoptive grandmother and her second husband, personal collection.

This object is deteriorating, shedding its fur from the stomach. But running my hand over its silkiness is both sensual and disturbing, for it was once a living animal. When first brought out of the cedarwood box, it was a mixture of mothballs and cedarwood that assaulted my nostrils. Apparently, fur should be stored in the cold, which this has never been. The photograph, taken around 1950, shows my maternal adoptive grandmother, the one grandparent I met and remember, with her second husband. He died not long after this photo was taken, so she was a widow for nearly forty years. Her first husband was my mother's father, Samuel, and he left England for Australia at some point, possibly in the 1920s, finally settling in or near Perth. At some point in time, the

marriage ended, either before or after this move. The details are uncertain, and my mother never spoke of this divorce or of how it affected her.

I abhor the cruelty that turned the living animal into a fashion accessory, but do not dispose of it because it is a reminder of my grandmother, and because my adoptive mother kept it for so long. They were close, and there are dozens of letters between them that survived the years and the silverfish. They are affectionate and chatty. As my grandmother aged and became frail there is a sadness and a longing to them, as mother and daughter were so far apart.

Even more poignantly, my maternal adoptive grandfather, who I never met, wrote a letter to his daughter that I found after her death, carefully preserved. He asks her if she could send a photograph of herself and my father as they had not seen each other for forty years. This length of separation shocked me. The year of the letter is 1964, so since my mother was a child, not even ten years old, she had been separated from her father.

When old enough, my mother's brother travelled out to Western Australia to join his dad, and from then on his mother never spoke to him. She cut him out of her will, and refused to meet his wife and children when they came along. It casts a different light upon my maternal adoptive grandmother. I will never know what happened between her and my mother's father, but it was bitter and long lasting.

The letter from Cecilia

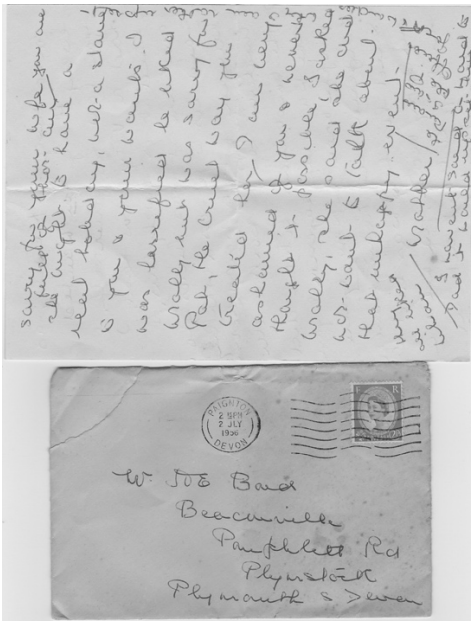


Figure 6. Letter from my paternal adoptive grandmother to my father, personal collection.

I may have met my paternal adoptive grandmother, but I do not remember her. My father said little about her, except once, when looking at photographs and finding one of her in old age, and saying that she was a 'tartar' at times. Other relatives have described her as wonderful with her grandchildren, exasperating to her daughters-in-

law, and divisive with her three sons. My father was the youngest and lived with her the longest, as his brothers apparently left home as soon as they could, in their mid-teens. What follows is an extract from my autobiographical essay 'A hole in the heart: on secrets, silence, and sorrow', which describes a letter from my paternal grandmother that became an important object in the understanding of my father and his family background:

> Almost as if she meant me to find it (or so I like to think), she hid the first letter in full sight in an embroidered cotton bag she had placed on a pillow in a back bedroom. She had made the bag for her mother as a child. Inside was a letter written on pale blue paper, the cursive script difficult to read. My paternal grandmother told a story of motherly despair at the behaviour of her son, who apparently had bullied and bossed around the guests on his motor boat during a trip, and acted the 'slavedriver' (her word) with his unwell wife and the crewman. I later learned from relatives that he had also forbidden his niece to go to a ball when her mother had already given her permission. For someone who had been bullied and bossed around for most of her life by this man, reading that it had happened to other people, and was not in fact all my fault, was liberating. I still wonder how this pale blue missive, a message from the past, survived. (2014: 8)

Letters abound in my parents' belongings. Most are not revealing like this one and Samuel's, but there are some letters from a previous boyfriend of my adoptive mother's, written in the 1930s. His name was Leslie, and he was a teacher; there is a photograph of him, and a newspaper clipping. He wrote mainly about organising to be in Weston-super-Mare, getting the train, visiting her. Another time and place that I have no access to except through objects like this letter and its accompaniments.

The purse and the painting

Susan Bennett is a late discovery adoptee who has written a memoir called *Late Discoveries: An Adoptee's Search for Truth* (2011). She was forty-three when she confirmed with a DNA test that she and her mother were not biologically related; that is, that she had been adopted. There are two major objects in her memoir that are important both to her and to each of her mothers: a purse that belonged to her adoptive mother; and a painting of a Christmas tree by her birth mother, completed when she was staying in a maternity home as an unwed pregnant young woman.

Her adoptive mother kept the secret of Bennett's true origins from her, but they grew close in her later years, and mother and daughter were together when she died at eighty-eight. Her mother's purse has emotional significance for her, as an object that triggers memories, and a container for other items that are also full of memories. Bennett devotes a chapter to 'the white purse' and notes all of the places her mother took it, including to the 'the imaging center where she had her final tests done' (151). She summarises its meaning for her: 'I am unable to see it for what it is – a simple white handbag. All I can see in the white purse is my mother, and all I can feel is the pain of loss in my heart' (151). As well as earrings, toothpicks, and coupons, there is a wallet in the purse, a container within the container, in which there were 'secret compartments overflowing with photographs' (154). Over time she has found it 'a challenge…to figure out what to do with this personal item' (156), and she moved it around the house,

eventually storing it in her closet. She says of it now that 'we have reached an understanding, the purse and I. It stands as a symbol of the commitment and love I received from my mother' and that she cannot do anything else with it, even when the 'purse reminders' as she calls them, cause her grief.

The Christmas tree painting of her birth mother she found completely unexpectedly when she went back to Marcus House, the maternity home where her mother stayed. It had been renamed and repurposed to a nursing home, but the office manager showed her around. The painting is found hanging on the side of a cupboard; Bennett discovers it has her mother's pseudonym painted in the corner, and is overcome with emotion when the manager says she can keep it: 'The very painting, my mother's painting that gave her solace during one of her darkest times; I now had it in my hands' (140). The Christmas tree painting she keeps by the side of her bed so she sees it first thing and last thing every day. As her mother died at the age of fifty-three, Bennett did not get a chance to reunite with her; she also learned that her mother's life was difficult, and that her siblings grew up in a seriously dysfunctional family.

Grief in my mother's wardrobe

Before my adoptive father died, we cleaned out and rented the house at his instruction. I kept all of the belongings that meant something to them and to me. But I remember beginning to clear out my mother's clothes after she died, ostensibly to help my father, even though he did not want this to be done at that time. Gibson notes that while 'getting rid of objects quickly is a response to grief, even an act of grief, it is also a way of blocking emotion and a contemplative process' (2008: 17). It may be a way for the grieving to 'gain some control over a subject through their objects': I may have been trying to do this, but not to gain control over my lost mother, but my re-found father. The grief I felt was not only at the death of my adoptive mother, but also that she had died first, leaving me with my adoptive father and the bitterly ambivalent feelings I had for him, and he for me. Even at his age and infirmity and with his state of grief, he attempted to wield his control over me, denigrating my partner and belittling my competencies. Cleaning out my mother's wardrobe removed me from him and connected me with my mother through her clothes and other things that she owned. Many of the objects described above revealed aspects of my parents' lives unknown to me, and gave me solace and understanding. But some of these belongings also gave solace to my grieving father: even in my ambivalence towards him, I recognised his need for this.

Concluding with a beginning and a past

The letters and photographs and things that belonged to my parents, that I discovered in – and preserved from – their house after their deaths, enable me to write about my

adoptive parents in a fuller sense, and to remember them as more complete people. I can think through these objects to make more complex portraits.

My own melancholy object is a photograph, not related to my adoptive parents, but to my birth family. I am not including it here because it belongs to the family, not only to me, and generates strong emotion for all of us. It is an image of my maternal grandfather as a six-week-old baby. This photograph was unknown to the family until November 2011, when it was sent to me by Barnardo's, the children's charity in the United Kingdom. The story behind the photo was, of course, also unknown. My birth mother and I had applied for information about her father, who she knew had been a Barnardo's baby before being fostered. Nothing else was known, and her father had believed that his mother had abandoned him and his father had died in service in World War One. According to the admission history of the charity, my great grandmother had a relationship with a soldier while she was in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, and gave birth to her son in December 1918. She died eleven days later, at the age of thirty-six, leaving my grandfather effectively an orphan.

My grandfather died before I even knew I was adopted, but I would have loved to have met him, and for him to have known that his mother did not abandon him as such. But that's another story.

Endnote

1. In terms of adoption terminology: the adoption triad is composed of adoptive parents, birth or original parents, and adoptees. Some parents object to being labelled 'adoptive' or 'birth' and some adoptees prefer not to be referred to as adopted children: they prefer to be called simply 'parents', 'mothers', 'fathers', 'adoptees' or 'adopted persons'. I use the terms adoptive and birth with reference to my two sets of parents in order to distinguish between the two and make it clear for the reader.

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