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OF MOTHERS AND daughters

THINGS CAN GO TERRIBLY WRONG IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN GIVEN AWAY.

Stories of child abuse make you shiver when you realise how unprotected you were in the world, because of a choice your biological mother made to protect her own life. But sometimes the protection and love for children like me are astounding.

Right before she gave me away, my birth mother named me Elize. I always imagine it should have been Elizabeth, but she didn't quite think me worthy of bearing a queen's name. I was the result of an extra-marital affair, evidence of something my mother never wanted her husband to know of, I was her dark secret. Dark yes, because she and her husband had light-skinned children and she was certain I would be dark as her lover was quite the dark handsome type. As soon as she found out she was pregnant with me, my mother arranged that the nanny of her other children should disappear two months before my birth. She then insisted on going to be with her own mother at Tses to give birth to me. How convenient to then return without a baby – somehow having lost the child, never spelling out what “lost” meant as the sullen woman who returned was quiet and withdrawn for months.

When I was two months old the “nanny” and her child returned to her old employers. No questions were asked given unwed pregnant women sometimes do strange things. The baby explained her mysterious absence. The assumption my mother did not want to gamble on was correct, I was darker than her other children. Her fears of what to do with her pregnancy found its answer when she learned her nanny was barren and desperate to experience the joys of motherhood. The two women, like Sarah and Hannah agreed to an arrangement. And for years everyone believed the story – or rather – nobody thought it strange that at the time the one woman lost a baby, the other gave birth to one.

As fate would have it, the day came when someone asked after “Ousie Jemima's little girl”. Everyone told her in hushed tones to keep her voice low, and explained that Ousie Jemima's daughter had never made it. But this woman happened to have been a nurse at Tses at the time of my birth and so

she knew that Ousie Jemima had not only given birth to a healthy baby girl, but left with her too. And that's how the cat was let out of the bag. By the end of that day, all of Mariental knew that I wasn't in fact my nanny's miracle baby, but instead the illegitimate child of Ousie Jemima.

She claims she did not want to do it to her husband. Do what to him? Bring another man's child into his house? I can understand she did not want to lose what she had because of a “little mistake”. Besides, “I do not want to do this to my husband” should have been the motivation to not get involved in that other relationship in the first place. Oh well. And besides, how many men don't bring their other children from before or during their marriage into their marriages? But okay. The secret was out. And would you believe this, this husband who had always been kind to me became even kinder?

Once their not-so little secret was out, however, I imagine things got a little uncomfortable for both Ousie Jemima and Emma, the woman I consider my real mother. And so the nanny left the family she'd served for years, myself in tow.

She went on to work for an old unmarried Dutch man, Herman. Unmarried and without children, Pappa Herman took me in like I was the child he'd been waiting for all his life. He paid for my school and sent Mamma and me off on holidays. With Pappa Herman, I didn't even care that my name wasn't Elizabeth, I felt like royalty through and through. We lived with him from the time I was 3 until I was 13 years old when he moved back to the Netherlands. I was devastated to see him go, and didn't understand why he was leaving me behind. But while we loved each other like father and daughter, I of course wasn't legally his daughter. I had feared that once he went to his homeland, he would forget all about me, but he didn't, he kept in touch and often sent money to us.

We had to find yet another family to work for. The next

family we lived with was Mr and Mrs Coetzee, except I wasn't allowed to call them Mr and Mrs Coetzee. They insisted I call them "Ma" and "Pa", and they too treated me with only the greatest kindness and love. We'd been with the Coetzees for nearly 4 years when Mamma took ill and eventually died.

I was heartbroken and confused. I didn't know what was to become of me. But Ma Coetzee told me I was to remain with them of course; there was no other way about it. She assured me as long as she and her family lived, I would always be taken care of and I would always have family. And she stuck to that promise. The Coetzees took me through the last years of high school until I finished my grade 12.

Life had taught me that there aren't any guarantees: You could be born to a mother who gives you away, a surrogate father could move to another continent, and the only mother you know, could die. So I taught myself to always prepare for the worst, while striving to do my best. I worked hard at school and after matric I easily got a scholarship to study engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. I wasn't going to use the unfortunate events in my life as an excuse to remain dependent on people who truly owed me nothing. No, they were the very things that propelled me to become independent and follow in the footsteps of those who were kind to me.

I'm now a grown woman, with my own home and my own little girl, a little girl I legally adopted because I know what it's like to be a little girl just wanting to belong. I want to give her the legal protection of being my daughter even after I'm long gone. I also have two sons, because I've taken in Ousie Jemima's youngest daughter and her boys, since the family has rejected her over her illness and she has lost her job because of it as well.

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Ousie Jemima is still alive, and I see her, sometimes. She's tried to have a relationship with me now, but I feel it's too late. I do not hate her or hold anything against her, but I just feel like she's trying to come into my life at a time I've already made peace with the fact that the one woman I consider my real mother, died when I was 17. Besides, I also have parents in the Coetzees and in Pappa Herman, whom I'm still in contact with and who visits me at least once a year. ♀

