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Katherine Graves was a high school senior in 1971, pregnant, and the daughter of religiously conservative parents who weren't prepared for their daughter to become a mother. Two weeks before her baby was born, under intense pressure from family and friends, Katherine chose to give up the baby for adoption. So when the tiny girl emerged with dark, curling hair, the nurse turned the baby's face away from Katherine's. She remembers getting a glimpse of the baby's feet. She gave her a name, Amy Elizabeth, and then the baby was gone.

For years, Katherine mourned the loss of her child, almost as if it had been a death, she says. "It was traumatic for me. Extremely traumatic." She never had another child and nearly 20 years later was attending an adoption support group.

"You spend a lot of years searching for yourself," she says. Not only that, she found herself subconsciously looking for her daughter in the faces of other girls who seemed the age Amy would be, and wondering, "Is that her?"

Katherine's story isn't unique, rather one of millions shared by women who do not voluntarily choose adoption. Their experiences are in focus in November, National Adoption Month. According to government data, relatively few birth mothers in the United States voluntarily choose adoption. Today, for many who do, some level of contact is usually possible. In the past, adoptions were often closed. Open adoptions have increased in recent years, and there are many variations on the levels of contact allowed or desired.

Most adoption groups favor a child's right to information about his or her birth parents. One of the most practical concerns is for a person to know his or her medical history. But another force is that most people want to know where they come from. They want to know who they look like, what their parents are like and why they were given up for adoption. A birth mother nearly always wants to know if her child is healthy and well cared for, and she often longs to know much more. She typically suffers grief, and some level of openness in the adoption has been shown to help. But in 1971, adoptions were generally closed. When Katherine said goodbye to her little girl, she expected it to be forever.

In Texas, May Nell and Glenn Machen lost their teenage son in an accident. To help fill the hole left in their lives, they decided to adopt a baby girl. Nine months after starting the state adoption process, they held their beautiful, 4-month-old child for the first time. They named her Tara.

Tara grew up in Pearsall, just south of San Antonio, and her mother was always honest and positive about her adoption. She was born in Louisiana to a young woman who surely loved her but selflessly gave her up for adoption so Tara would have a better life, May Nell told her. Tara's birth father was Cuban, but that was all anyone knew about him. May Nell also made a vow to Tara that not all adoptive mothers find themselves able to do: She promised her daughter that someday she'd help her track down her birth mother. "One day we're going to find her, honey, because I want to meet her just as badly as you," Tara remembers her mother telling her "I want to thank her."

Tara became a tall and beautiful young lady with long, dark hair and brown eyes different in both looks and personality from her petite, green-eyed adoptive mother. When Tara was 18, May Nell decided to pursue that quest.

A relative who was an attorney did adoption paperwork, and in his previously closed file, May Nell found the birth mother's parents' names and address. Soon after, she showed up on their doorstep in Baton Rouge. "It was an emotional meeting," she recalls. "I told her, 'I don't know if [Katherine] is your daughter or not, but she is the mother of my little girl.' And she said, 'Come on in.'"

Katherine's mother said her daughter had been searching for "Amy" for eight years. She gave May Nell a San Francisco phone number where Katherine could be reached. May Nell, however, guarded personal information about her family until she had a chance to check out Katherine. She even parked her car down the street so no one would see her Texas plates.

May Nell sat on the information until the San Francisco earthquake a year later, which gave her a sense of urgency in contacting Katherine. She made the fateful call to California and says she was actually relieved to reach a wrong number. The person who answered the phone gave her Katherine's new number. She tried again.

Katherine answered the phone rather brusquely, she remembers, but melted as soon as she heard the southern accent on the line. She'd been waiting for this call. May Nell recalls, "I said, 'I think you are the birth mother of my daughter.' And she said, 'Oh, my God, oh, my God, I have to sit down!'" They set up a meeting date in a neutral location: Hammond, La. When the day arrived, May Nell left Tara and her uncle in a hotel lobby across the street from the restaurant where she was meeting Katherine. "I wasn't taking any chances," May Nell says. She didn't know what to expect.

"When Katherine came in, I knew her immediately," May Nell says. "And I'd never seen a picture of her. She was tall, and she was looking around. And I stood up and said, 'Katherine?' And she said, 'Yes, yes, but let me sit down, my knees are buckling.'"

For some time, the two sat in the restaurant, May Nell listening to Katherine's story and soothing her tears. Finally, after she felt satisfied that this was indeed a good person, May Nell asked, 'Well, are you ready to meet Tara? Katherine exclaimed, "Is she here? Is she here?" They went across the street to the hotel. Tara was sitting with her back to the door, her long, brown hair across the back of a chair, one foot visible bouncing to the side. That's what Katherine saw first - the thing she'd seen last.

Tara's uncle told her, "She's here." Tara jumped out of the chair and the three women joined in an embrace. "I can't tell you how emotional it was," May Nell says, and tears fill her eyes. Katherine says she was determined to not cry; she wanted the reunion to be a happy time. Tara touched her face. She pulled her over to a mirror in the hotel lobby and looked at their images side by side: two tall, lanky women whose faces are unmistakably similar. Years of questions were answered in those looks.

"It was a nice, nice meeting," May Nell says. "When I say 'nice' I mean we were all so loving to each other and didn't even know one another. But we knew what we had in common."

"Because May Nell's firstborn son died accidentally when he was 16, she had experienced the loss of a child," Katherine says. "She knew that Tara's birth mother had experienced the loss of a child. That was why . . . she was the kind of adoptive mom who would reach out to the birth mother."

The first reunion was the beginning of a long-lasting relationship. "We're just a family," May Nell says. During the next 17 years, Katherine would visit the family for holidays, and Tara and May Nell saw her in San Francisco. Then the story took another unusual twist when Tara's dad, Glenn, died and May Nell moved to San Antonio. She married Dean Neugent, a retired corporate executive who'd been dawdling with a popcorn company he called "Papa Dean's." Neugent decided to sell the business so he and May Nell could travel, and Tara said she'd be interested in taking over.

She invited Katherine to join in the venture. "This is the blessing for me," Katherine says. "I never got to be around Tara when she was my grandchildren's age. I never saw her grow up. I feel that she and Steven [Tara's husband] have given me the most amazing opportunity. How could I say no to that?"

Today, Katherine and Tara work together every day and have quadrupled business. "It's uncanny how alike they are," says May Nell. In fact, they finish each other's sentences. They have a similar energy: talkative, lively, strong. May Nell says she and Tara have a great and loving relationship. "When you feel secure like that, then you're not threatened

by an outsider," she says. "I wanted her to be loved. And I felt Katherine would be able to show her that the reason she gave her up for adoption was because she loved her."