

Tree of Strangers

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All mothers are daughters.
For Pamela. For Bonnie, Rachel,
Ruth, Amelia and Lilian.

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1

Better
call
Maysie

R unanga, West Coast, 1983.

I live at the end of a gravel road at the top of a valley consumed by bush. Beyond our cottage, the old track has almost disappeared. Gone are the trucks that once serviced the coalmine. The bush has closed up behind them like a curtain at the end of a performance.

I am alone with the wind at night, released by darkness to rage against itself in our isolation. Every day the rain engorges the bush with a lushness that overwhelms our tiny clearing. My husband is here and my three girls. But the bush swallows them up like the road, hiding them from my view beneath a green canopy of enmity.

I wrote those words at the kitchen table in 1983, on a scrap of paper that survived the many later purges of my life. An embarrassing early version of an unsent letter to my mother. The whole world hung on those words. A letter to the mother I'd never met. The mother I'd dreamed of and longed for. The mother I had just found. But how do you convey your life in a few sentences when almost every memory is missing?

It wasn't as if I'd woken from a coma at twenty-three and found myself stuck in a loveless marriage with three small daughters. A sleepwalker committing a crime. I hovered between sleep and waking, unknowing but somehow not innocent.

Generalised dissociative identity disorder, my therapist calls it. Generalised because it is not total. I have fragmented memories: mountain tops poking through clouds. Dissociative because the physical and emotional world often feels unreal. Daydreaming on steroids. I forage

for identity or assume new ones, sometimes at the same time. In short, I am an unreliable narrator of my own life.

But diagnosis is good. In adoption circles, we call it 'the fog'.

Mavis and Max, my adopting parents, were instructed to tell me early and to act 'as if' I was born to them. A birth certificate names them as my biological parents. Paper proof of parentage. No one asked what it might mean to adopt a stranger or to be that child. Stripped of meaning or context, 'you're adopted' became a crack in my mind and that's how the fog got in.

Even now I still lose memories as easily as small change. But I remember the night of the phone call.

In Runanga, on the West Coast of the South Island, there was always a storm brewing out to sea. Bruce, my husband, sat in the depths of his chair, his reading lamp held together with tape. We were not television people. Our three girls were asleep in the next room.

The bath was my refuge. I wrapped the plug in a rag and wedged it into the hole. Rusty water struck the pitted cast iron. I sat on the edge of the tub, the chill of the house creeping up, while I waited for the surface to flatten before slipping beneath its perfect skin.

Bruce knocked on the bathroom door. Rain slamming against the window had drowned out the phone. His voice was slow with annoyance. I wrapped a towel around me and went to the kitchen.

'This is Jeannie.' The voice was deep and gravelled.

Almost four years earlier I'd looked into the scrunched face of my first child and seen an inkling of our likeness. It was the first time I'd seen someone I was related to. I wrote to Social Welfare, the first of many letters. A few were recently returned under court order. Held on file through every welfare department incarnation. Sad, pleading messages. Please tell me about my mother. Reading them now, I'm struck by their

rawness and intimacy. I imagine the bureaucrats who read them. Their replies were formal. We have no information on your mother. We are unable to help you.

The storm diminished. 'Hi?' I felt like I was shouting down the phone.

'Is that your husband?' Jeannie rushed on. 'Not very friendly, is he?'

'He's reading. He doesn't like the phone much.'

Jeannie's laugh was a short burst of sound, one sharp note on top of the other. I had no idea why I'd told a stranger about my husband.

From the haloed chair Bruce cleared his throat. The moon emerged, casting long shadows across the lawn.

'I'm replying to your letter,' Jeannie said. 'How did you find me?'

Another letter. A random chance that seemed like such a long shot I could hardly believe she was calling.

The library book on finding biological family lost to adoption had advised digging deep to find a dropped clue, a lost memory. Even opening the book had infused me with a sense of disloyalty as indelible as a birthmark. The title is gone. But the stories of lives completed in reunion, the secrets of their stranger adoptions stripped away, brought me to tears. A memory rose up, precise and whole. Mavis's sister had been a nurse for the doctor who delivered me. She was consoling Mavis at the Formica table in our kitchen. I was fourteen and surly.

'What do you expect?' the aunt said, her voice hushed over teacups as I lurked in the hallway. 'Her mother was a model. You've heard the stories . . .' She sucked on her cigarette when she saw me.

It was no more than a crumb.

At the Greymouth library, I took down the Auckland phone book and looked under M for Model. Nothing. But there was a Modelling Society in Wellington.

An extravagant toll call in the calm of early afternoon when the girls were napping and playing.

‘Do you know anyone involved in modelling in the late 1950s?’ I asked the blithe young woman who answered.

‘You better call Maysie,’ she said. ‘Maysie Bestall-Cohen. You know.’

I didn’t know, but Maysie turned out to have been the doyenne of the emerging fashion industry. She sounded kind. The Modelling Society did not get going until the early 1960s, she said. ‘Write to Jeannie Gandar, she started everything at the Fashion Fiesta in Upper Hutt in 1961. She knew a lot of girls.’

I wrote to Jeannie at the Wellington Polytechnic, where she taught clothing design. I included a family studio portrait Bruce had won in a raffle. We were standing together in front of a mottled background, new baby Ruth in my arms. Rachel, the middle one, smiling whimsically, while Bonnie gazed down the lens. With nail scissors I trimmed away Bruce and the girls, until I was alone against the painted backdrop. Months passed, and I gave up any hope of a reply. After all it was an impossible task. I possessed just two facts about myself: my date of birth and ‘Her mother was a model’.

‘I’m replying to your letter,’ Jeannie said in her deep voice. ‘At first I thought, how ridiculous. It happened to so many girls I knew.’ She drew breath and I was sure she was smoking. ‘To be honest, I threw your letter away. But something woke me in the night and I thought: That’s Pamela’s girl. Has to be. The likeness is uncanny.’

My chest tightened. Pamela. Her name is Pamela.

'I got up and drove to my office and saved it from the bin as the cleaners came through.'

I had the impression Jeannie was tall, imposing. The kind of woman everyone noticed. She explained she'd taken months to call because she'd been researching. She'd lost touch with Pamela but found Fred, Pamela's father, living in Waikanae. He remembered the name of the doctor in Napier.

When Jeannie was sure, she'd called Pam in Madrid. Just the word conjured something in me. Madrid. Spain. The opposite of coal-town Runanga with its shuttered mine, roaming dogs and born-again Christians.

'It's remarkable, spooky even,' Jeannie laughed. 'You writing to me, and me knowing your mother.'

'You know my mother.' More wonder than question. My mouth was dry.

'I do. Or at least, I did. You look so like her.'

I'd never felt so tired. 'What should I do now?'

'No need for nerves. Write a letter and send a photo.'

'To Spain?' The idea of mailing a letter from Runanga to Madrid felt impossible. I took down Pamela's address.

'I'll give your letter time to get there, and call Pam back, see if we can arrange a meeting.'

I pressed my forehead to the cold window. Bruce's reading light reflected a bright spot against the native bush that enclosed us. I put down the phone and said nothing.

The bathwater was still hot. I caught my breath as though I was warm and the water cold. My hair floated over the surface and a picture of my mother formed. She would be tall with pale eyes and straight hair that hung thick and glossy, the opposite of my thin plait. I sat up in a rush. I never intended to stay under the water for so long. The stillness induced an amniotic slumber, until a frantic signal from my brain propelled me up, finally desperate for air.

The next morning, with the girls playing, I returned to a

version of the letter that began with the wind and the bush. Outside, in a patch of unexpected sun, I read about our lives. Desperation soaked into every word. I tore the paper into tiny pieces. The chickens consumed the flakes before they realised it was not an early meal.

The next version was more natural.

My name is Barbara. I may be your daughter. I have three girls. I married young and had a family to keep from killing myself.

I started again.

We live on the West Coast of New Zealand, in a small cottage. I'm not sure how we ended up here, but it seems to suit us. Bruce, my husband, drives the local bus and makes things from wood, for the tourists who find their way here. He is kind to us.

Eking out our lives in the middle of nowhere and he is kind to us.

We would love to meet you.

I rewrote the letter in my best handwriting, folded it over another photo and went out to mow the lawn.

What if it was a practical joke? What if Jeannie did not call back? The girls watched from the big window as I forced the push mower through the long wet grass.

Rachel pressed her hand to the glass and it began to drizzle. If only Bruce would take over the mowing. But he was a man of extremes. Bowling greens or wilderness, with nothing in between. So I cut sweeping curves in the overgrown lawn, the blades of the mower clogged with wet grass.

'You're wet,' Bruce said when I came in. The girls were making cushion forts, hungry and niggling each other. Ruth needed breastfeeding. Sharon Crosbie was on the radio, reading a poem cobbled together from weather reports. 'Gusty south-easterlies easing afternoon.' The cadence and beauty struck me. In Runanga, the fine spells were not increasing.

Bruce disappeared to the garage beneath our house to turn wood, the whir of his lathe a distant train coming towards us.

After lunch, I strapped Ruth to my chest and walked the girls to the general store. The postmistress leaned across the counter. Her large breasts flattened on the glass as she held out lollipops.

'Airmail to Madrid. That's in Spain.'

I remember my embarrassment. I wanted to remain separate from these people, and it showed. No matter how I pretended, they considered me a snob. Apart from a slut, it's the worst thing you can be in a small town.

Something outside the valley grabbed my tongue and I could not stop. 'My mother lives in Madrid.' Wind, followed by rain, rattled the front window. 'I'm off to Spain shortly.'

The postmistress glanced from the sleeping baby to the girls holding their lollipops. I'd outgrown the hidden cottage, the tangle of bush and the weather that swept over us like convulsions. Through the fog, I saw a sun-drenched city. There were tree-lined streets and women with pencilled eyebrows in busy cafés. We walked home in the driving rain and I knew it was not my mother I must conjure up. It was me.

2

Cold
enough
to
cut
your
hair

Was there another phone call? Or did I dream my mother's voice? Did I make it up to soothe the loss? I have lived in two worlds for so long I'm not sure of my own truth.

If you catch me off guard with a question such as: Did you ever speak to your mother? I'll sometimes say . . . Just once. Now, thirty-seven years later, I'm not so sure. Did she call? All the way from Madrid, our lives antipodal, her accent hard to place.

I would have been in the kitchen in our house in Runanga. The scrubbed wooden bench, a coal range and a single gas burner. The peep of sea view sold us on the place. As if that patch of distant blue was enough to banish the isolation. There were chickens, of course, and a goat called Bounce that needed milking at 5 a.m. His idea, my responsibility. Submerged in tiredness. Twenty-three years old and three babies under three.

If she had called, I could have been heating milk to make yoghurt. Or soaking lentils for a nut loaf. Or doing the laundry. The wringer part of the machine had broken. I would twist the nappies around a broom handle and heft the basket outside. On a good drying day the wind would whip the sodden wings into my face while the children watched from the porch. Did I miss her call? My desire was so encompassing I would have believed anything, even my own fantasies.

I'd heard her voice for nine months, her heartbeat, the rush of her blood and the click of her bones. A mother possesses you within herself. And you are secure there. You make a snug cavern of her body, a nest, or a burrow, and it is all yours. She shares everything with you. Her nutrition and discomfort, her anguish and joy, even her temperature. A scientist has described the connection between mother and utero child as like the roots of a tree. Soft villi whiskers