Chapter Twenty-Three: The Irony of Being Special

Why was I chosen?—The tale of the hospital nursery

Since my first memories I was told about my adoption. The "origin story" was repeated with the same details. My mother, Evangeline, was the primary storyteller although Roger was often present and contributed to the tellings.

The focus of the story was that I was special because I was chosen. Other children came to their families through natural processes while I came to the Lamoureuxs as though by a magical, mystical, spiritual revelation. They worked to adopt for a number of years before a suitable match was found. I was never told how many times they had been to the hospital nursery to look at potential adoptees, only that being invited to come see me had special resonance because they'd been at the process for some time.

I was told that when they entered the nursery and approached me I was awake but laying down. When they got close enough to get a good look at me we all smiled at each other. Then the apocryphal event occurred: Roger used his index finger to point at me; I reached out and grabbed the finger with what he took to be a solid grip. That sealed the deal! I was the one.

As many times as I was told the story, I am embarrassed to say that I didn't spend a lot of time thinking it through. I just sort of took their word for it: I was special because they had chosen me and through my actions I had essentially chosen them as well. What a miracle! Indeed, I must be special.

Long after I had taken this book through a number of drafts, I began researching the adoption process in the state of Connecticut in the mid-to-late 50s. I had done some casual reading about the situation but I tore into it more deeply and came to new understandings of the

process and of my place within it. What I learned changed my perspective about how and why I was special.

Prior to the end of World War II, the Catholic Church supported a large number of facilities very much like the one that Claudette was placed in during and after her pregnancy. Not all such facilities accepted young girls with out-of-wedlock pregnancies; the House of the Good Shepherd in Hartford did. The Houses were generally designed to help troubled young women learn life and job skills that would help them thrive once they exited the Houses. In the case of a pregnant girl like Claudette, at a House that accepted pregnant young girls, these skills and training could help her when she took her newborn home from the hospital.

The end of World War II changed the Church's focus for, and administration of, these homes. Large numbers of the veterans who came home from World War II wanted to adopt children. It's estimated that well over 100,000 children were adopted through Catholic Family Services after World War II. A House like the one in Hartford, that was willing to train young girls so they could keep their infants, turned their focus to providing adoptees for eager World War II veteran couples (like my folks). This meant that the mothers of the children were no longer encouraged to keep the children but rather were pressured to give them up. My birth mother, Claudette, was no exception.

However, Claudette refused to sign the paperwork. She was not going to give me up and would not facilitate my adoption by giving her written permission. She wanted to take me home; her parents refused. As a result, Marie Claudette was left in *The House of Good Shepherd* for roughly 9 months after giving birth to Francis Wayne and was allowed to see me once a week for approximately a year.

Eventually, her mother signed the adoption papers then got Claudette to sign some papers that appeared to be unrelated to my adoption; the agency and hospital brought the two documents together and put me out for adoption. I was placed in a foster home for a period of time and then became available to Roger and Evangeline. Claudette did not know that I was going to be put up for adoption; she only learned of it when preparing to leave for her weekly visit with me: her mother told her that she should not bother because I was gone. She was then lied to and told that I had been adopted by a doctor and his wife who had moved out of state, when in fact, I've been adopted by a Navy family living within 50 miles.

Now here comes the part about being special.

Preferences for adoption in that period found white male infants to be the most sought after humans. Both literally and figuratively, healthy, white male infants flew out of adoption centers much like donuts in the social hall after Catholic mass on Sunday. And yet there I was in the nursery at almost one year of age. This is how I became special.

The short time that white male infants spent in nurseries and adoption centers stretched to a much longer terms for infants not fitting that description. Even white female infants were adopted quickly enough, but the pace slowed considerably for non-white infants, especially African-Americans, mixed-race children and infants with special needs.

When Roger and Evangeline entered the Saint Francis Hospital nursery on that apocryphal day, they came into contact with a child who was certainly the oldest white, male, healthy little person in the room. There might’ve been other children my age, but if so, they would either not have had white skin or they would’ve had a disability of some sort that marked them as less than ideal as adoptees. Further, when Roger extended his index finger and I grabbed

it, I use the strength of a one-year-old rather than a typical infant about to be adopted. Apparently, Roger did not make the connection between the grip of a one-year-old compared to that of a newborn.

In short, I was special because I was white, "normal"—that is healthy—and older than all of the other children in the room. It does not take a Ph.D., although I now have one, to realize that this was probably not the kind of "special" that one could hang his hat on the rest of his life.

I do not hold telling me that I was special (and specially chosen) against my parents. I know that they were trying to help ease me through the adjustments that come with adoption, let me know how much they loved me, and build positive feelings for my being "lovingly accepted" rather than (perhaps) being "unwanted or given away." My parents never once told me that I'd been "given up for adoption." They told me how much they loved me and they showed me that they loved me in very many ways. Nevertheless, they apparently needed this narrative as a way to convince themselves, as well as me, that I was special. I was special to them; to them it was true and being special bolstered my self-concept.

Unfortunately, it also contributed to my being unwilling to work hard to fully develop the potential that I had: I was already special. Like so many other myths that become apocryphal stories, there was a lot of unpleasant cultural ideology at the bottom of my story. I was special because I was provided by the Catholic Church, to my new parents, like a gift from God. But to my birth mother the Church acted as a broker that damaged the lives of young women who trusted it. I was special because I was white, older, and without disability. And of course, other than white preference, that's not really so special after all.

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