



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Borders of Belonging

by Sofia Arroyo

My heart always skips a beat when I see a sign for San Bernardino, CA. Everything that I may have been thinking about: the weather, what exit I need to take, LA traffic, somehow runs out of my mind and I am left with thoughts about her, Ana Arroyo—my birthmother. I was born at the San Bernardino County Hospital and when I was only one-day-old, 11 hours to be exact, I was adopted by my white parents and left my first mother behind. I am eighteen years old now and I have only visited my birthmother twice. I have pictures of me – only a few weeks old, in an outfit especially picked out by her, and one of she and I during my visit when I was not even two. Every time I show that picture to my friends, they all comment on how much I look like her. Now that I am officially an adult, I am questioning my identity in a new way. Who am I? And what does it mean to be me? Living in Los Angeles at Occidental College, so close to the place of my birth, has opened up new questions as I seem to understand even more about myself. Is she out there? Where? Does she miss me? Or even think of me? At night I look across the hills scattered with lights and wonder. Although she is so close, I feel as if there is an invisible wall preventing me from getting to her. I know so little about her. She may not want to see me. I do not even know her address. Without answers to my questions about who she is, it is as if I am stuck in a bottomless pit, unsure of when I am finally going to not only have answers about her, but also fill in the missing pieces of myself. The barrier of distance and knowledge between my first mother and myself is a boundary that keeps me from feeling as if I can truly know who I am until I am able to reunite with her. Living here, so near to her, means I am at the brink of a connection that defines me – it is exciting and terrifying all at the same time. Once I am able to cross over this border between things that I have known my whole life and the vast unknown that resides within the history and body of Ana, I will have a much better knowledge of who I am and my own cultural identity.

Ever since I was a little girl, I always felt as if I though people who were not adopted knew more about themselves than I did. I envied the questions they were able to ask their parents and get easy answers to. The first time I filled out medical forms on my own, I sat in the doctor's office going down the list of medical facts realizing that I had no idea whether or not high blood pressure ran in my family. It was déjà vu all over again filling out Oxy's medical history forms; but this time was different. As I sat in my dorm room, avoiding my homework, I started thinking about her. I was in Los Angeles, if I wanted I could try to find her, maybe I could finally actually know my medical history instead of always guessing. She was here, 18 years ago, so close to where I am now, and maybe she still is. It's not like my questions are the

most important questions in the world, but I can't help feeling they would help me enter a new frontier of knowing myself. I sit on my bed imagining the stories, stories that would go along with the answers to my questions. Stories of a great uncle pushing through and living an extra three years even though doctors told him he only had six months before the cancer spread throughout his body. Stories of my Dad, coming to Los Angeles from Guatemala, getting sick from too much fast food. Stories of special, secret family concoctions guaranteed to get rid of an ear infection. Those family stories that most people my age ignore, but without them I can't help feeling they shape who we are. In her body, small and compact like mine, does Ana even realize that she holds so many of the pieces to the puzzle called me that I have been missing? Does she even know that she holds the key to creating a whole new identity—a whole new me?

People tell me that college is the time when you find yourself. It is a time when adolescents take their first steps into life on their own. But for me, as an adopted Latina first-generation college student, my questions seem to stretch out to forever – or at least across the freeway to the place of my birth. I know that sometime soon I will have to take a risky step into the contact zone, into the place where I need to let go of my fear of rejection in order to open the door to the possibility of a reunion. Although I did not realize it, I have been constantly negotiating with my identity. I know that I have another mother that cares about me more than anything, but do I actually belong to her? To anyone? To myself?

There is a border called belonging. At this border is a space, a place where negotiations happen and decisions are made. For me, defining my belonging to my birth mother feels like a border between two worlds. It is a border because it is where conflict within myself about who I am occurs. It is where negotiations of my first family history and past and that of my adoptive family all take place. Will I be able to call myself Ana Arroyo's daughter and feel that I actually belong? Do I risk my other family membership if I explore this relationship with Ana? Can I negotiate not only with each of them but with myself to find a way to be whole, without barriers between these two mothers, two families, both of whom have up until now been on opposite sides of my true self – splitting me in half in a way that makes me feel less than strong? I need to ask all my questions. I need to get my answers. I need to finally belong in both worlds. I need to belong to both families. I need to know and love both my mothers. Because then I can become my own self, create my own personal and cultural identity. A place to be me, really, truly me. A place without borders.

Sofia is a college student in Los Angeles, CA, she wrote this during her first year in college.