

You  
Carried  
Me

*a daughter's  
memoir*

Melissa Ohden

*with a new epilogue by the author's birth mother*

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*A Daughter's Memoir*

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*To the woman who carried me,  
and to Ron and Linda Cross, who carry me  
in their hearts*

# One

*The tale of someone's life begins before they are born.*

— Michael Wood, *Shakespeare*

A THICK MANILA ENVELOPE arrived at my home in Sioux City with the afternoon mail one sunny day in May 2007. I knew without even looking at the return address that it came from the University of Iowa Hospitals in Iowa City and contained the medical records that would answer some of the questions I had been agonizing over most of my life.

Who am I? Where did I come from? Whose blood runs through my veins? And why was I given away? These are questions that most people who, like me, were adopted as infants want answered. But what I needed to know was more fundamental, and less innocent: Why did you try to kill me? And how is it possible that I survived?

I felt a clutch of panic in the pit of my stomach. Now that I had the information I had sought for so many years, my body, and spirit, rebelled. But as the Irish poet James Stephens – another adoptee – once wrote, “Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will.” So with trembling fingers, I peeled back the sealed flap of the envelope and faced the facts of my improbable life.

As I read through my tears the blandly rendered details of my narrow escape from death – “On August 24, saline infusion for abortion was done but was unsuccessful” – I discovered something I hadn’t expected: the full names of my biological parents.



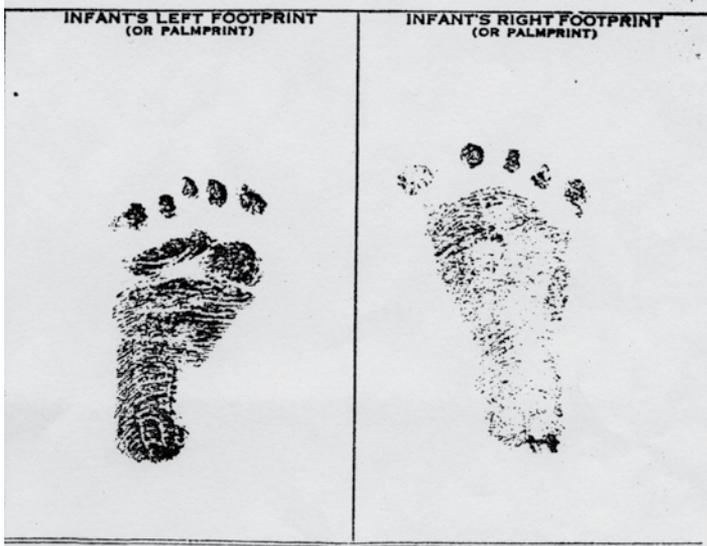
Their names were clearly written in the record of my birth, but I was left unnamed.

As I fought for my life in St. Luke’s neonatal intensive care unit, it became clear to the doctors and nurses on hand that my birth mother had been pregnant for far longer than the eighteen to twenty weeks reported at the time of the abortion. The pediatrician who examined me a couple of days after I was delivered estimated that my gestational age at birth was about thirty-one weeks – well into the third trimester. The discrepancy hinted at something still unknown: How could any abortionist, much less one affiliated with one of the most prestigious hospitals in the region, have made such a mistake? What

doctor or nurse would believe that a woman more than seven months pregnant was less than five months along?

Like other babies born prematurely, I had a host of serious medical problems including low birth weight (I weighed 2 pounds 14.5 ounces), jaundice, and respiratory distress. But my troubles were complicated by the aftereffects of the poisonous saline solution I had endured in my mother's womb. No one knew the long-term consequences of surviving an abortion. Developmental delays are routine for preterm babies, but I also had seizures; and the list of potential complications grew to include mental retardation, blindness, and chronic poor health.

Three weeks after my birth I was transferred three hundred miles east, to the university hospital in Iowa City.



*Among the records I received were these prints of my feet.*

#### 4 You Carried Me

The nurses who cared for me, a nameless baby, made me tiny clothes and colorful booties. One nurse, Mary, decided I needed a name and dubbed me Katie Rose. For years after I left the NICU, my adoptive parents and Mary kept in touch, exchanging Christmas cards and letters with pictures of me and updates on my progress. When I got older, I wrote the letters myself; Mary and I began a friendship that would endure for decades. It made me feel so special that this nurse who had cared for me when no one else did still cared about me.

Meanwhile, the social services agency that had taken custody of me searched for a family willing to adopt a fragile newborn. This was no easy task because of my grim medical prognosis.

The search led to a small town, Curlew, Iowa, just one hundred miles from where I had been born. There a young couple who had adopted one child waited for another.

They were told that the baby would have needs that went far beyond food and shelter. Love they had in abundance; money for specialized medical care and services they did not. They drove five hours east to meet the tiny baby who needed a home. Unintimidated by the IV lines and the monitors attached to the skull of the baby whose head had been shaved from temple to temple, they made their choice. That's the day I first experienced a mother's love, in the arms of the woman who looked into my eyes and said, "You are mine."

Her name was Linda Cross, and although she wanted to bring me home right away, she had to wait another month to hold me in her arms again. In late October 1977, a social worker delivered all five pounds of me to the farmhouse Linda shared with her husband Ron and their four-year-old daughter Tammy. They named me Melissa Ann, after a friend who had become a quadriplegic after an accident. They admired her strength and her tenacious fight for life. They hoped for the same qualities in me.

Ron and Linda had grown up on the prairies of western Iowa. Palo Alto County had a population of about sixteen thousand people when they were born as part of the baby boom that followed the world war their fathers had fought in. They came from close families with deep roots. Ron was born in 1948 in Mallard, where four generations of his family had farmed the land for a hundred years. They grew corn and soybeans, and raised cattle and pigs. Linda was born a year later in Estherville, the seventh of nine children. Farming was part of her birthright as well: her father farmed and worked as an auto mechanic; her mom was a seamstress.

They met after they graduated from high school, at a drag race on the wide-open roads nearby. When I heard the story years later, it sounded like something straight out of the movie *Grease*. Fast cars, however, were the extent of their teenage rebellion. While their peers elsewhere in the country were engaging in the “summer of love,” they carried on a traditional courtship in their Iowa

hometowns. In April 1969, as their generation protested the Vietnam War and prepared to gather at the Woodstock Festival to celebrate sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, they married in front of their families and friends at the Lutheran Church in Estherville, and began a life together.

At twenty years old, Ron was a tall, brawny young man, with a shock of light-brown hair and a smile that could light up a room. He had a perennial “farmer’s tan” from driving around in his pickup truck or working the farm on his tractor. Linda was pretty and petite, with long blond hair and skin so fair she refused to wear shorts even on the hottest summer days because she was embarrassed by her too-white legs. Ron’s gregarious personality was balanced by Linda’s friendly but quiet demeanor. They were a perfect match.

The life they envisioned included children—lots of them. Their extended families included dozens of nieces and nephews, and they couldn’t wait until their own children were part of the happy crowd of cousins. When a baby didn’t come right away, they were patient; they enjoyed the time they had as newlyweds to get to know each other. But as the months turned to years they sought medical help and found that Linda suffered from a hormonal imbalance that made it very difficult for her to get pregnant. Surely they had their moments of regret as the years slipped by without the wished-for baby, but in Mom’s words, “If you want a family, it doesn’t matter how it’s made.” Three years after they married they took

in their first foster children – two brothers who lived with them for nearly a year. They loved them deeply and were heartbroken when their mother reclaimed them. But that didn't stop them from opening their home and hearts to another little boy soon after, and when he was gone they took in a four-month-old baby girl with blond hair and blue eyes named Tammy, who became their beloved daughter.

It was into this happy home that I was welcomed after being released from the hospital. I was barely two months old.

I needed almost as much care at home as I had received in the NICU, but time, love, and attention cured most ills, and as I grew, I thrived. A year after I left the hospital, my adoption was finalized. As a small child I knew a few things for sure: My name was Missy Cross; I lived on a farm in Curlew, Iowa; I belonged to a family that included a mom, a dad, a big sister, and dozens of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins.

And at some point before I can even remember I learned that I was doubly loved – by the parents who had chosen me as their own, and by a mother who had given birth to me and entrusted me to their care. That I was adopted was something I don't remember being told; it just *was* – a fact of life as ordinary as the sunshine in the morning, the starlight in the evenings, and the cozy walls around me.

In the 1970s and early 1980s there was a program on television that dramatized the *Little House on the Prairie*

stories by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Tammy and I loved to watch that show, but truth be told, there wasn't much difference between the life lived by the Ingalls family in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, in the 1870s and the life we lived on the farm in Curlew a hundred years later. Sure, we had a lot more technology – like TV! But like the Ingalls family, we lived by the rhythm of the seasons.

In the summer we tended a large garden. Tammy and I had our own little plot that we sowed with seeds for flowers along with carrots, green beans, tomatoes, potatoes, and radishes. In the fall, we helped gather the vegetables that Mom would preserve for the winter. We had a collie named Laddie, whom we imagined to be the brother of the Lassie we saw on TV. He patiently submitted to being the playmate for two little girls, even letting us ride on his back. I'm not sure the cat I dressed up in doll clothes and pushed around in a stroller was quite as forgiving. But at least that was better than the treatment the cat got from our pet pig, whom we named Tailbiter because he liked to chew the cat's tail. When Dad would come in for lunch, he would always read a story to Tammy and me before he headed back out to the barn. Our life was defined by Dad's work on the farm, Mom's in the home, the help Tammy and I gave with the animals and the chores, and our membership in the close-knit community formed by our church and the dozens of relatives living nearby.

Mom loved to quilt and sew, and one of my earliest memories is running around with a gaggle of children while she

worked with her friends on a quilting project. Kids were always a part of my parents' get-togethers; there was no separate "grown-up" time. My parents often gathered with their friends to play cards, and Tammy and I always were a part of the fun, running around with our playmates while our parents talked and played. Both Mom and Dad were good cooks, but I vividly remember the care Mom took to make snacks to share with their friends at these get-togethers. I watched her in awe, sure I could never make something so delicious out of the simple ingredients Mom gathered from the pantry.

The Methodist church where we worshipped was a second home. It was not just the place we went for prayer and spiritual nourishment; the church was also the center of our social life, the source of our friendships and fun. Tammy and I went to Sunday school, and Mom taught Vacation Bible School every year. The church organized outings that introduced us to the wider world. One of my earliest memories is going on a church trip to a place where we could swim in an indoor pool. Swimming inside – that seemed weird! We had a lot to learn.

The hard lessons began in 1982. Our farm, 160 acres, was rented from a large landowner. Mom and Dad were trying to save to buy their own land, but other priorities – like their daughters – always came first. When trouble hit, my parents had few resources to fall back on. They weren't the only ones. The combination of many factors – falling demand for agricultural exports, high levels of farm debt,

rising interest rates, and reduced farm subsidies – created a nationwide farm crisis. We were among the victims.

As a five-year-old I was oblivious to the forces at play in the economy and the world. But I could sense the pain my mom and dad were feeling as our world was turned upside down. I vividly remember the day all our farm equipment and sows were auctioned. It was the first time I saw my parents cry. Tammy and I shared the grief we did not understand. We all knew that nothing would ever be the same.

To keep our family afloat, Dad moved to Storm Lake, a town about an hour's drive away, to take a job at a large hog slaughterhouse and meatpacking plant operated by Iowa Beef Processors (later Tyson Foods). Weekends meant driving back and forth to see him. It was a tense and lonely time for all of us.

A year or so after Dad started working in Storm Lake, Mom, Tammy, and I moved there to join him. We rented a small house on a quiet street that was home to many children and within walking distance of the school that Tammy and I started attending that September. I remember the relief I felt when we were all together again and the excitement of living in the “city” (population 8,800) and starting school as a first grader. That helped temper the sadness I felt over the biggest loss of all – our new landlord didn't allow pets, so Laddie had to stay in Curlew on the farm.

Our move to Storm Lake seemed to precipitate one momentous change after another. Money was in scarce

supply, so Dad worked long hours at the packing plant, often taking on additional shifts at night and on weekends to earn overtime pay. Mom started to work a job away from home for the first time, as a bookkeeper at ALCO, a local department store. Her hours were often at night and on weekends too. One of our favorite times was when Dad would take Tammy and me to visit Mom at her office on Saturdays. We would meet her in the break room for lunch or a snack. Afterward, we would wander through the store, window-shopping. I remember looking longingly at the Cabbage Patch dolls in the toy department. I knew better than to ask; there wasn't any money for extras like that, and I didn't want Mom and Dad to feel bad about having to tell me no. I didn't have to say anything, though, for them to see how much I wanted a doll of my own – every little girl in America wanted one that year! When Christmas came, Santa left a Cabbage Patch doll under the tree. I named her Rachel, and still have her today. I knew how lucky I was to have that doll and was thankful.

And then in 1984, Mom gave birth to a son, Dustin. After fifteen years of marriage without any pregnancies, my mom hadn't even realized she was pregnant until she was twenty weeks along; before we knew it, Dustin was born, six weeks early. Mom and Dad told us about the baby a few days after my birthday. They found out she was pregnant on the day of my birthday party with neighborhood friends, and Mom told me later how hard it was for her to keep the news in until the party was over. When she and Dad finally

burst out with it, I felt like the new baby was my birthday present! Just a few weeks later, Mom was ready to give birth. I remember staying with my grandparents while she was in the hospital; we played endless games of UNO to wile away the time. At last the call came – the baby was a boy!

To be a seven-year-old girl with her very own baby brother to care for was bliss. I couldn't quite understand why Mom and Dad would go to all the trouble of having a baby that way when they could just adopt one as they had Tammy and me, but I wasn't troubled by it. It never occurred to me that Dustin was somehow more theirs than I was. I don't think it ever occurred to them either.

As I got older, I took on more responsibilities in our home as Mom and Dad worked to provide for our family's simple needs. Tammy and I walked the few blocks to and from school with our neighborhood friends. We were latchkey kids who came home after school to fend for ourselves. Sometimes our neighbors Myron and Dorothy, who lived in a pretty white house on the corner, would keep an eye on us for Mom and Dad. One of their daughters, Lynn, was in high school. Tammy and I idolized her and wanted to be just like her when we got older – she was so cool. I remember how Tammy and I would argue over doing the dishes – neither one of us wanted to be the one who had to dry! But despite that daily tug-of-war, I loved helping out at home and learning to cook – now I could prepare some of the dishes I had seen Mom make when we lived on the farm. I especially loved watching over Dustin.

We nicknamed him “Dennis the Menace” because of his blond hair and bright blue eyes, but he wasn’t a menace at all – just a happy little boy. When I got older I began to feel burdened by all the extra responsibility, but at that time, it just made me happy to know that my parents trusted and relied on me. Even so, I dreaded the days when there was no school and my parents had to work. I missed them, especially my Mom, something awful.

The learning difficulties the doctors had prepared my parents for never developed; I excelled at school and my parents and teachers fed my intellectual and artistic curiosity with books and music. I wore out my library card at the Storm Lake Public Library, and beginning in fourth grade my teachers challenged me by placing me in classes for gifted students. Shel Silverstein’s *A Light in the Attic* launched my lifelong love of poetry, and Beverly Cleary’s books were my favorite fiction. I remember feeling a little bit like Ramona, with Tammy as big sister Beezus. Reading *Ramona and Her Father* helped me understand a little more about our family’s financial struggles. Money was always scarce, but good report cards were rewarded with a little gift or a special dinner out. Mom and Dad were determined that Tammy, Dustin, and I would be the first in our family to earn bachelor’s degrees.

Dustin’s birth sparked my natural curiosity about my own life story. I knew, of course, that most babies were not given up for adoption but raised by their biological mothers and fathers. Who were mine? My parents let me look at

the file about my adoption, which included information about the background of my birth family. I learned that my birth parents had been college students; that they were both athletic and that my birth mother and her family were musically inclined. I enjoyed sports and music, too, and it made me happy to think that in a way I was like them. I was *sure* I looked like my birth mother, just as Dustin looked like Mom. I wasn't motivated by any sense of discontent; quite the opposite. Just as the birth of a little brother had added to the love in our home, not divided it, I felt knowing about my birth family would enrich my life with more people to love.

Our move to Storm Lake brought changes, many of them good. But the biggest loss, apart from the time my parents had to spend away from home, was that church was no longer a home away from home. We were members of the United Methodist Church, and Mom and Dad tried to make sure Tammy, Dustin, and I went even when they could not, but church was no longer the focal point of our lives. Still, my faith remained strong. Soon it would be tested by fire.

