

THE STRANGER YOU KNOW

Aaron Smale's quest to find his brother turned up a sister. It also turned up a trail of damage caused by an Adoption Act that's nearly 60 years old – and is still hurting children and their families.

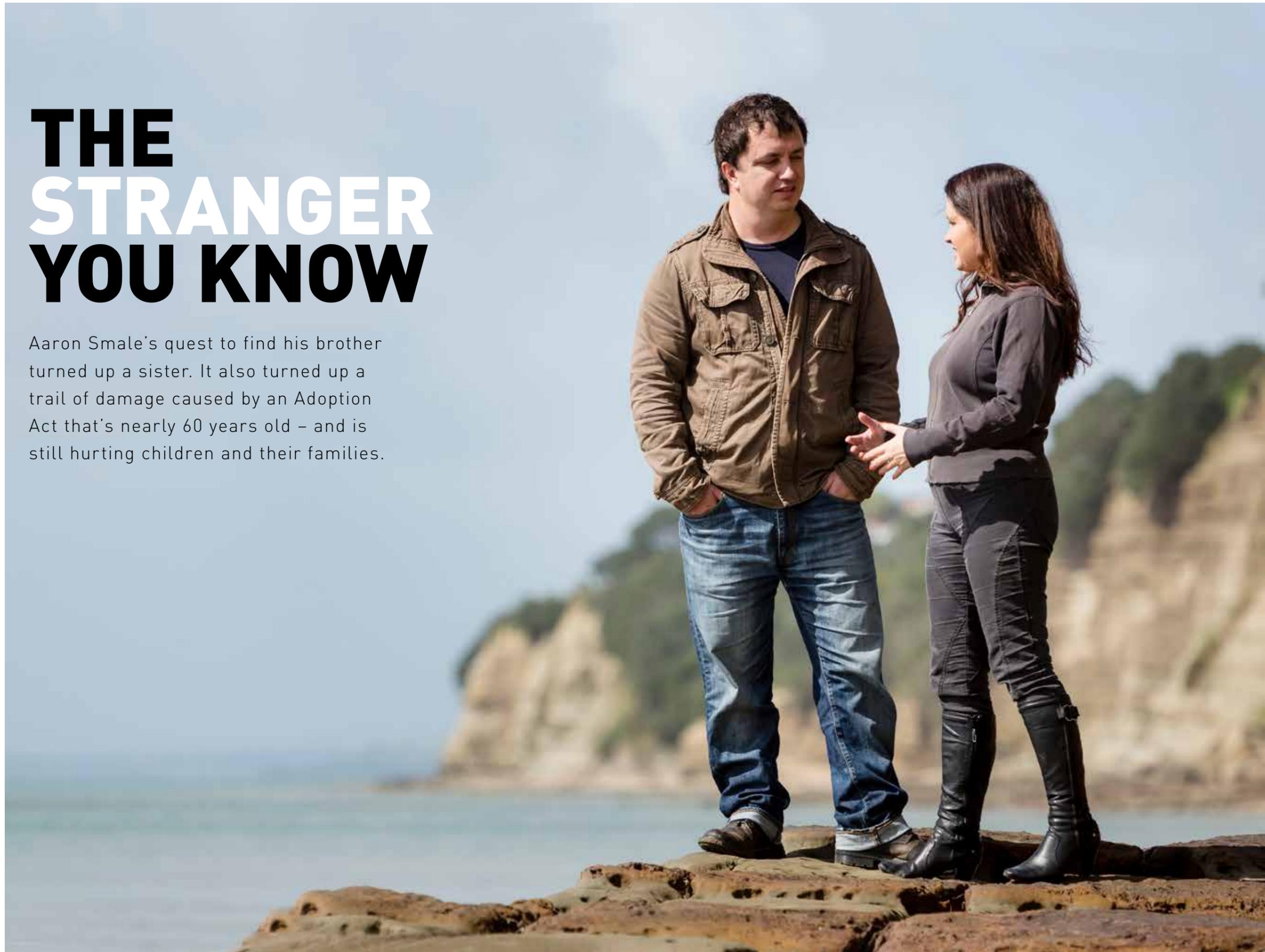
Christmas Day, 2009. The murmur of lateness, the rustle of last-minute present wrapping before we traipse 20 minutes down the road to the in-laws for the ritual gluttony. The phone rings.

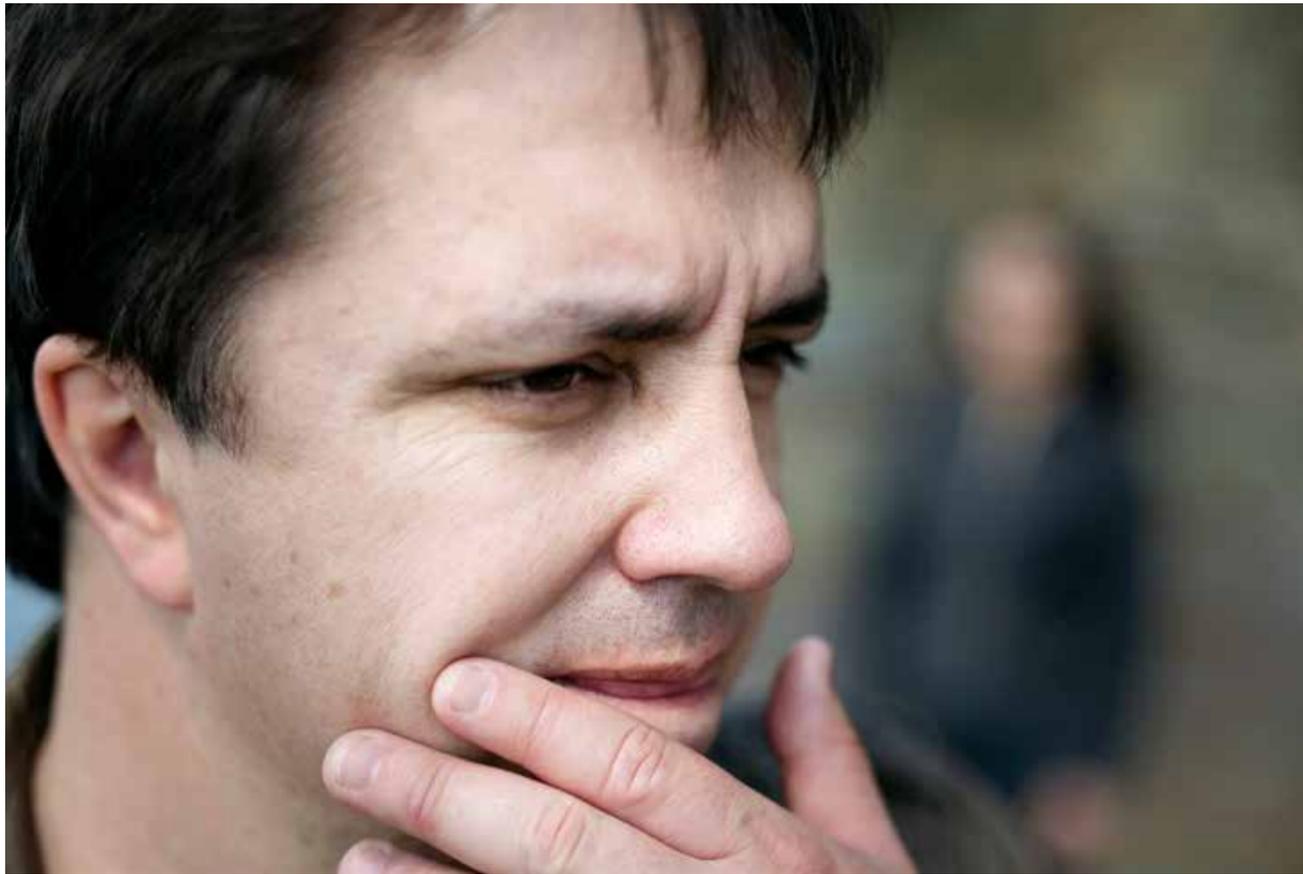
A woman's voice, unfamiliar. A stranger. "Hi, I'm Tanya and I think I'm your sister." I tell her she must have it wrong – because for the previous two months I've believed the person I'm trying to track down is a brother. Finally, after sorting out mothers and genders, the scales fall from my eyes. The mysterious, unknown brother is in fact a sister. Her name is Tanya. And I'm talking to her.

Then it starts. I call it the echo chamber now. We swap notes about ourselves and there's a constant feeling of "me too". When she describes herself, it's like listening to a twin. Besides sharing a father, we are both adopted. We not only have genetic similarities, but those traits

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PHOTOGRAPHY **ADRIAN MALLOCH**





Aaron Smale was adopted at the height of the practice in 1971.

have also been shaped by the same fundamental experience. And yet we've been kept apart by a social experiment that has left many like us wandering around slightly lost.

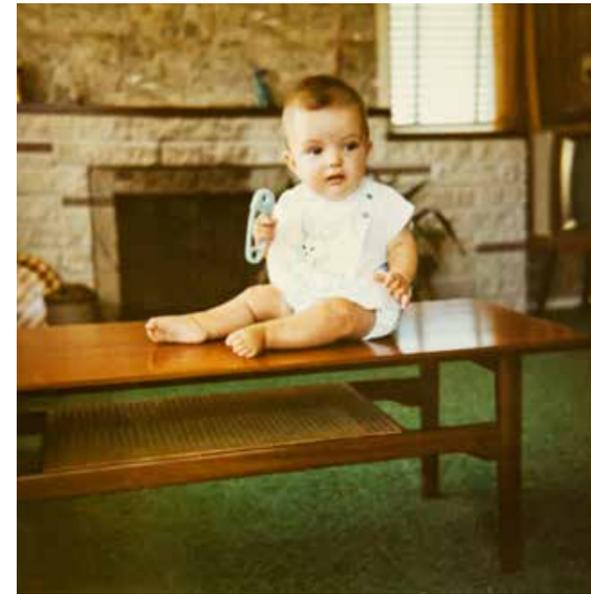
We gush on for about an hour. I send her a text later, telling her she's the best Christmas present I've ever had. I find a photo of her on a website and see my own eyes looking back at me. Weird. I sign off the text, "Love, Aaron" and hesitate before I hit send – am I allowed to say that word to a stranger? Where are the boundaries and expectations in this new game?

Later, we meet for the first time at a cafe in Tauranga and talk for about four hours, the echo chamber in full force. Eventually the waitress politely starts clearing our table as the cafe is closing. Tanya turns to her as we stand to leave, puts her arm around me and says, "This is my brother I've just met for the first time."

The waitress looks at us both, stunned and not sure what to say. It's a celebration, really. Here we are, stepping out of the shadows in front of the first person we can find.

Adoption is an experience that cuts to the very core of what it means to be human. It touches on questions that inflame intense debate – the desire for a child, the loss of a child, sex and who should and shouldn't have it, children and who should or shouldn't have them, welfare and the role of the state in children's wellbeing, racism, the ties of blood and the obligations of loyalty. Even the terminology is fraught – should it be birth mother, natural mother or something else? Adoption is such a complex subject it's impossible to generalise about the experience. But two issues that constantly arise in any adopted person's life are questions of rejection and identity.

This is a story I was reluctant to tell in public. Whenever you approach a story, you try to find the person who is the insider, the one who touches the issue on a number of levels, who can give an insight in a way no bureaucrat or observer can. In this case, the insider was, uncomfortably, me. After years of working as a journalist and asking



Aaron at about six months old.

TWO ISSUES THAT CONSTANTLY ARISE IN ANY ADOPTED PERSON'S LIFE ARE QUESTIONS OF REJECTION AND IDENTITY.

others to divulge information about themselves, I was now confronted with a story that required me to do the same.

I was adopted in 1971, when the practice was common. I grew up with one sister who was adopted – and one that wasn't. Both my adopted sister and I have Maori ancestry; our adoptive parents do not.

I met my natural parents in my teens. My natural father adopted two girls, open adoptions both. I have two nieces adopted from the Philippines. I have a number of Maori relatives who were whangai-adopted by members of the wider whanau, including my eldest aunty. And then, at the age of 38, I found out I have a blood sister on my father's side who was adopted out as well.

On one level adoption is unusual, but it is also universal and ancient. Moses was adopted. So was Steve Jobs. While its practice may have declined statistically and in many ways gone out of fashion, other "child finding" measures have sprung up to replace it: overseas adoption, IVF, sperm and egg donors, and surrogacy. The desire to have children by those who can't for whatever reason has been paralleled by a world where wars and economic collapse have left children without parents.

The rules, policy and legislation

around how this transaction occurs have always been fraught with moral judgments, ethical dilemmas and shifts in social attitudes. On an international level, this has been enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, Article 3, ratified by New Zealand in 1993, which says: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

It goes on to unpack this by referring to the obvious necessities of life. But further down the list, in Article 7, it says: "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents." It is clearly talking about the biological parents.

The adoption legislation in New Zealand does not include this bedrock assumption. In fact, registration under our adoption law leads to a child having a birth certificate that is a legal fiction, listing their adoptive parents as if they were the biological parents. In this respect it acts as a legal guillotine, sever-

ing completely any connection a child has to their biological parents. The fact the child is adopted or has another history is not even mentioned. The lie starts right there.

Wellington writer Anne Else, author of *A Question of Adoption* and an adoptee herself, has found many flaws in the adoption legislation and practice over decades of research. But one of the fundamental problems of the New Zealand act, as she sees it, is its primary focus. "The best interests of the child are not paramount in the Adoption Act. They don't even come into it. The best interests of the child never seems to include being with its mother. There are no circumstances in which we are justified in legally severing all the birth ties."

In 1999, a Law Commission paper on the 1955 Adoption Act came to the same conclusion. It describes the act as "an anachronistic, adult-centred piece of legislation that fails to reflect the child-focused values otherwise embedded in the modern family law framework".

The report goes on to say, "The law, as well as acting paternally to protect the child's best interests, should also respect the right of the child to the preservation of identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference."

The report points out that the 1955 act "does not recognise that an adoption has lifelong implications. It does not acknowledge the needs of the birth parents to express grief for their loss, nor does it recognise the issues of identity and rejection that an adoptive child may experience. Adoption is not primarily about the rights of applicants for adoption, important though those are; it is about the best interests of the child."

The way adoption was practised when I was born – closed, secretive, shrouded in shame and condemnation – is now looked upon as an aberration of the past. And yet its basic assumptions are still active not just in the adoption legislation but in the myriad ways people are acquiring children not physically their own.

Overseas adoption, surrogacy, and the use of sperm and egg donors are based on the same assumption as the closed adoption of a former era – the "clean break" theory. This is the belief that you can simply take a child away from its mother and place it with strangers and it will grow up happy and adjusted



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because of the love and care they bestow on it. The theory was a swing away from eugenics ideology, which fell out of favour after its extreme expression in Nazi Germany. While eugenics proposed that some groups of people were genetically inferior – such as those born to single mothers – the clean break theory argued that genes had no effect whatsoever and a child was entirely a product of its environment.

In the Adoption Act's 1950s context, the application of the theory resulted in secrecy that hid the birth mother from the stigma of having a child out of wedlock. The adoptive couple were then recognised "as if" they were the biological parents of the child. It was supposed to make things tidy. But it didn't.

The clean break theory is the old chestnut of nature versus nurture, genes versus environment. It comes down firmly on the side of nurture and environment being the decisive factor in a child's life. It completely denies the influence of the child's genes or the reality of a child's

bond with its biological mother. It ignores two basic issues: that children are bonded to their mother and can do suffer a trauma when separated from her; second, the child will grow up disconnected from the people from whom they derive their identity – not just their physical appearance but their personality as well.

Family might be a social construct that varies over time, place and culture, and meeting a child's basic needs may look different in different locations. But what is not socially constructed is the fact that every child has a biological mother and father.

They were a young couple share-milking in the Bay of Plenty, working their way slowly towards buying their own farm. They received a phone call from Social Welfare to tell them a baby boy was available in Upper Hutt – could they come down the next day? After driving all day, they arrived

at the hospital. A nurse handed an infant to them and left them alone, returning five minutes later. "Well, do you want him or not?"

Stunned by her tone, they said yes. They left with him dressed in a nappy and wrapped in a blanket, and were given a bottle of carrot juice to feed him. Earlier, a teenage single mother had held him for the last time before giving him away. He'd looked up at her and grasped her thumbs.

That infant was me.

The implications of that day would play out over not just my life but that of my parents, my birth mother and also my birth father. This scenario was repeated with variations several thousand times over the course of the year I was born. It had been going on like this for some years before then.

What was not understood, and is still only vaguely grasped even now, is what happens to a child who is taken away from its mother in the first few months of infancy. In some theories of child

development, this is when a child is bonding with the mother and learning trust. Other theorists go further and argue a child is already intrinsically bonded and any disruption of that bond can play havoc with its ability to trust. Conscious memory is not the issue here. It's the wiring of the infant's brain in response to its environment. For nine months of pregnancy, that environment is its mother – and this doesn't suddenly come to a halt at birth.

The person who has advanced this theory most convincingly is US author and psychotherapist Nancy Newton Verrier in her book *The Primal Wound*, built upon in a subsequent book, *Coming Home to Self*. She argues that a person's first experience of being given up at birth isn't the eventual revelation of the adoption years later. "The adoptee was there. The child actually experienced being left alone by the biological mother and being handed over to strangers," she says. "That he may have been only a few days or a few minutes old makes no difference. He shared a 40-week experience with a person with whom he probably bonded in utero, a person to whom he is biologically, genetically, historically and, perhaps even more importantly, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually connected, and some people would like him to believe that it's the telling of the experience of the severing of that bond which makes him feel so bad."

She adds that many adoptees she and other clinicians have spoken to are not surprised when told they're adopted, even if it has been a secret up to that point. "So far as adoptees are concerned, not only are they not understood as having suffered a loss, but they are supposed to be grateful for having been adopted. We as a society still view adoption as beneficial without any acknowledgment of the trauma which precedes it or the pain and confusion that accompany it."

Her conclusions have been built on years of observation of adopted individuals in her work as a psychologist and the recurring patterns of behaviour they exhibit. But there is also growing evidence for a neurological basis to these observations. Verrier points to mounting evidence that trauma in infancy, including the trauma of a child being separated from its mother, wires the child's brain in such a way it comes to expect rejection. Even if



Tanya, about six.

"NOT ONLY ARE [ADOPTEES] NOT UNDERSTOOD AS HAVING SUFFERED A LOSS, BUT THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO BE GRATEFUL."

**US AUTHOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST
NANCY NEWTON VERRIER**

the child is placed in the most loving and secure environment, this hard-wiring of the brain can lead to the adoptee responding to social interactions out of a sense of fear, mostly fear of rejection.

Because there's no conscious memory of the event, adoptees can have difficulty negotiating their feelings and responses. Their inbuilt fear of rejection is a default setting and they aren't aware there is an alternative way to operate in relationships. Many adoptees will even unconsciously sabotage relationships so they can have their fears confirmed.

Verrier traces this reaction to how the brain develops, particularly a small, almond-shaped part of the brain buried right in the middle – the amygdala. It's the part of the brain that's responsible for the fight or flight response. "While the amygdala is nearly mature at birth, the hippocampus, the memory bank for factual data, doesn't develop until we are two years old. Although the first three years of life are probably the most influential in the development of our attitudes and beliefs, we have very little

memory of that time."

Quoting Dr Brent Atkinson, another psychologist who has worked in this area, Verrier says, "This means during that early childhood, when relationships with caregivers have such profoundly life-shaping impact, the amygdala is busy making emotion-charged associations about events the embryonic hippocampus never even records. For this reason, many adoptees who have gone to clinicians in an attempt to gain some control over overwhelming feelings have had very little success."

Dr Nim Tottenham, assistant professor in the department of psychology at UCLA in Los Angeles, has researched the development of the amygdala. Her work has included studies of Romanian children adopted from orphanages and the effects this has had on their brain development.

While the brain is a scramble of potential, waiting to be wired up by the experience of the outside world, the amygdala is one of the earliest parts to be fully functional and locks in any experience the infant has. "The basic neuro-anatomical architecture of the human amygdala is present by birth. The most rapid rate of amygdala development occurs within the first two post-natal weeks, and this rate stabilises early – around eight months old."

Because the amygdala is vulnerable in this early stage of a child's life, negative impacts on its development can be life-long and difficult to undo. "Much behavioural work has demonstrated that early caregiver deprivation results in significant emotional difficulty later in life."

Tottenham's observations about the connections between the development of the amygdala and future mental health problems align closely with observations by the likes of Verrier and others. "This circuitry has been implicated in a wide range of mental illnesses, like anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, sociopathy and personality disorder," she says.

Many adopted people (myself included) have formed good relationships with adoptive parents. However, in a large number of cases (mine included), those relationships have been compromised by problems associated with rejection and trust.

I received a phone call a few years ago from Mum. She asked me if I'd read



Verrier's book, which I had. She and Dad were astonished at how accurately it described both my adoptive sister and me. Many of the explanations of adopted children struck a deep chord with them and they could finally make sense of behaviour that had baffled them for years. While meeting our birth parents had explained many of our personality traits, there were patterns of behaviour that were linked to the adoption process itself and had nothing to do with genes. For the first time they'd found an explanation, if not a solution.

Not only were they raising children that bore no resemblance to them or other members of the family in either looks or personality, but also their relationship with them was complicated by the fact these children were reacting to them out of deep-seated fear and mistrust that was difficult to overcome because no one understood what was happening.

Adoptees are often immersed in a profound ignorance, perpetually groping after the most basic knowledge of self. This blindness is experienced in a different way by parents raising an adopted child.

It was my 16th birthday when I first heard her voice again. She'd phoned not long after we'd tracked her down. Before she introduced herself properly I knew who it was. It sounds odd, but I knew her voice. It was the woman who had left me at the hospital all those years ago.

I met my birth mother for the first time on a school rugby trip to Sydney shortly after that call and later that year I met my birth father in Auckland.

There's a kind of strange euphoria in meeting the two people who have given you life. The huge vacuum of knowledge that's existed suddenly sucks in every little moment and detail. Little mannerisms, the sound of their voices, their hands, their eyes looking back at you. You discover what everyone else who knows their genetic parents takes for granted – the implicit knowledge of who you are and the people whose flesh and blood you share.

But for me that euphoria gave way to a deep grief over all that had been lost. The immediate affinity I felt for my birth parents was complicated by the fact they

were virtual strangers. The bonds of loyalty I felt for the parents who had brought me up generated a potent but irrational guilt. I realised I didn't have the kind of connection with them that I had with these strangers who'd just walked back into my life.

In one sense it didn't change who my adoptive parents were to me and what they'd done. If anything, it deepened my appreciation and love for them. But meeting those I was connected to by blood threw into sharp relief the distance that had always existed with the parents I'd grown up with.

It engendered regret in both directions – regret the process of adoption had sabotaged a key aspect of the relationship with my parents from the start. And regret for the everyday moments I could never recover with the people I was most like in the world. I could never get back that lost time.

As a child I had a great fear my birth parents would die before I could meet them. And yet meeting them was akin to going through a death in reverse – they hadn't died, they'd been given back alive.



School photos of Aaron, 10, and his half-sister, Tanya, 11.

THERE WAS NOTHING IN THE 1955 ACT THAT REQUIRED ADOPTIONS BE CLOSED AND SECRETIVE. THE SECRECY WASN'T LAW, IT WAS POLICY. OR PREJUDICE.

But instead of reflecting on memories, I repeatedly discovered the life moments that had been missed.

For others, meeting their birth family can be a discovery that isn't pleasant and I know people who are glad they didn't grow up with them. This can bring about its own mixed emotions, even guilt. In such cases those feelings can amount to self-loathing and a rejection of your own identity. For some it can be a combination of all these emotions.

Each revelation from my birth family brought with it more questions. There were secrets and misunderstandings that members of the family had kept from one another. The identity and race of my father. The possibility other members of the family could have brought me up. The fact some members of the family didn't even know of my existence. There was the growing awareness of how powerless my mother had been and how much giving me up had damaged her.

I also discovered inconsistencies between the law and the way it was applied that had affected the way my adoption had been handled.

There was nothing in the 1955 act that required adoptions be closed and secretive. Birth mothers were supposed to have been given the option of knowing

the names of the adoptive parents, but they almost never were. The secrecy wasn't law, it was policy. Or prejudice. The duress single mothers were put under was such that the legality of the whole process was often shonky.

When I explained this to my birth mother, she just looked at me in stunned silence. I watched all the years of not knowing well up in her eyes. It had been completely unnecessary. My sister Tanya's birth mother reacted the same way when I explained it to her.

Another revelation I found hard to deal with was how my father being Maori had influenced things.

In her comprehensive book, Anne Else tackles the issue of race in adoption. "Race comes up throughout the history of adoption. Finding enough parents willing to take Maori or part-Maori children, or indeed any non-European child, was universally regarded as one of the major problems..."

Prospective parents usually had a wish-list and, generally speaking, at the bottom of that list were Maori boys. "By the late 1960s, some child welfare offices used a simple 'colour-coding' system to speed up preliminary matching. The card files for adoptive applicants were flagged according to what sort of child they would

consider: blue for a boy, pink for a girl, red for handicapped, green for Jewish, yellow for Chinese, black for mixed race."

I'd like to believe this was simply because people adopting wanted a child who looked like them to some extent. But unfortunately this doesn't completely explain it. It was well known that those working in welfare often lied about part-Maori children, saying the child was "Italian" or "Spanish", in an effort to get them off the books. This seemed to be more acceptable to those adopting than acknowledging the child was Maori.

In an interview, Else said there was a further irony in this lack of demand for Maori children. Often if the father was Maori, his parents or other family members would want to adopt the child but were unable to. I discovered there were members of our father's whanau who wanted to adopt Tanya but were excluded from doing so (members of the whanau would have happily taken me too, had they known about me).

"The Maori family often wanted the child, but the Pakeha family said no – this kid's being adopted, it's not going anywhere near the Maori family," says Else. "The Maori family wanted the child but they couldn't mount legal challenges and things like that. And so they wouldn't get the child."

Maori children would then often languish in welfare care because many of the white, middle-class families applying to adopt didn't want them. Fortunately, my parents weren't among them. Tanya and I were adopted at the height of this practice in New Zealand – she was born in 1968 and me in 1971.

As the numbers of children available for adoption in New Zealand began to decline from a peak of 3976 in 1971 to fewer than 100 annually today, those seeking to adopt have had to find other options. Overseas adoptions had occurred intermittently in previous decades but it was the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the resulting economic chaos that saw the practice surge. Television images from Romanian orphanages ignited interest from New Zealand couples who were quick to jump on a plane to go looking for a child to rescue.

Else believes that an unofficial racial ranking emerged in overseas adoption

in a similar way to what happened around children in New Zealand with Maori ancestry, with people preferring children that look at least similar to them racially. She points out there are few people lining up to adopt African children with Aids. Even overseas orphans whose adoptive parents help them grow up happy and healthy will, at some time in their lives, have to deal with their different ethnicity and parallel history.

Mary Iwanek was the head of adoptions at CYF during the 1990s when international adoptions took off. Of Dutch descent, she lost both her parents as a child and spent time in an orphanage. "Being an orphan and taken away when I was grieving for my parents – you never quite get over that when you lose your parents as a child. Children should not be separated from parents if it's not necessary. When parents are dead, you have to accept that. But separating children from parents purely because someone says you're too young or not married or he's Maori – from the child's perspective that shouldn't be the reason."

On immigrating to New Zealand, Iwanek worked as a nurse and was mystified at the way adoption was practised here, particularly the secrecy surrounding the process and the cruel way young mothers were treated.

She also worked on the East Coast and saw traditional Maori adoption practices, which, ironically, were more like Dutch practice in that the child was kept within the wider family. She specialised in mental health and saw many young mothers who had given up their children suffering with mental health problems because of the trauma. She also saw adopted people needing help.

In the early days of the surge of overseas adoption, she was often vilified for what was portrayed as bureaucratic delays in the process. She saw it differently. For her the best interests of a child were always paramount and that meant processes had to be implemented to ensure this. "I wasn't opposed to adoption but there were no systems in place. People were just going over and getting a taxi driver to take them to a hospital to pick up a kid. Romania closed it within 18 months because of the huge numbers of illegal adoptions."

She says many going into Romania to adopt weren't operating under any kind

AN EXTREME EXAMPLE OF AN ADOPTION GOING WRONG IS THE SEVEN-YEAR-OLD RUSSIAN BOY WHOSE AMERICAN ADOPTIVE PARENTS WEREN'T COPING WITH HIS BEHAVIOUR, SO THEY PUT HIM ON A PLANE BACK TO RUSSIA WITH A NOTE ATTACHED.

of international law, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Hague Convention. "We did get a system in place and I think that was appropriate. It needs to be clear and honest and not put pressure on birth mothers in poor countries to give up their kids for 200 bucks."

Iwanek still works occasionally as a consultant for International Social Services, an organisation set up after WWI to try and bring families back together that have been disconnected in the chaos of war.

She says in such situations of war or disaster there's now a general policy of not adopting children out for a minimum of two years, to allow time for families to be reunited. Haiti was an example of this not happening, which led to illegal adoptions and the backlash that went with it.

In such chaotic situations, she says, the best interests of a child can get tangled up in perceptions around poverty and race. What one person sees as rescuing a child can just as easily be perceived as the worst kind of exploitation.

There are countries, however, where good processes have been put in place. "The kids who come from the Philippines, you can guarantee they're not illegal adoptions. You can look the child in the eye and say everything was tried in their own country to either find a

place there or support the mother. We shouldn't be dealing with countries that are not acting in the children's interests. I've been in the Philippines and negotiated agreements with them because they were very much involved in developing the inter-country convention in the Hague."

Despite the best legal processes and good intentions of adoptive parents, adoptive children can still be vulnerable. While many children adopted from overseas have grown up happily in New Zealand families, there are others who have struggled and their parents have gone through much heartache as well. An extreme example of an adoption going wrong is the seven-year-old Russian boy whose American adoptive parents weren't coping with his behaviour, so they put him on a plane back to Russia with a note attached. This happened in 2010 and caused diplomatic ructions between the two superpowers; soon after, inter-country adoptions were stopped.

The law still seems ad hoc around decisions that impinge on a child's genetic and social history. Advances in technology have been marred by a lag in ethical guidelines to address the potential issues that arise. And in many such cases it is the 1955 Adoption Act that is being used as the only legal mechanism available to address such dilemmas. While adoption might seem unconnected to practices like IVF and surrogacy in the mechanical details, the issues around separation from your genetic family have some close parallels to adoption.

When IVF first started in New Zealand in the 1980s, there was no requirement for a record to be kept of sperm or egg donors. In 2005, a register was set up to record both donors and their offspring, but those conceived by sperm or egg donation before this was put in place have no official information to trace their genetic parents.

When I hear debate about changes to adoption law, it often seems to be driven by potential parents and what a loving home they could provide. No mention is made about what a child may irrevocably lose in the transaction.

Green Party MP Kevin Hague's Care of Children (Adoption and Surrogacy Law Reform) Amendment Bill puts the best interests of a child as the main factor in choosing adoptive parents. But this

completely fails to address the question of whether adoption – which assumes that a child has been separated from its birth parents – is in the best interests of the child in the first place.

The way the bill is drafted, the separation of the child from its biological parents is simply a fait accompli. The child's relationship with its birth parents doesn't even come into the debate.

Anne Else questions the assumption that people have a right to be parents, whatever the method of gaining a child. "I don't believe getting bits from here and there and putting together a child like a cake is in the best interests of any child. Nature is random enough. I don't see that people have an absolute right to children they can't produce themselves. You can't say, 'It's my right to have a child and I will get one by any means if I can't have it myself.' I just don't think children are commodities."

My own view is the current adoption legislation should be abolished altogether and whatever replaces it should sit within the wider legal framework dealing with the welfare of children, with the primacy of the child's relationship with its biological parents enshrined in the law. It should not be left to the whim of policy made up by staff within a government department, as it has for the decades the current act has been in force.

The subject of adoption inevitably intersects with the issue of child welfare and the ongoing problem of child abuse.

Mary Iwanek's work in social welfare spanned the period when adoption was at its peak to a time when more single mothers kept their children. Although the availability of the DPB was one factor, others included access to the pill by unmarried women and the shortening of the time it took to get a divorce. "People say the DPB came in and that's why we don't have adoptions. It's actually not true. The DPB for unmarried mothers didn't come in until 1973. By that time there had already been a 20 per cent reduction in placements for adoption. By the time abortions came in [Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977], adoptions had already dropped by 60 per cent. The whole of society was changing."

She says the rise in child abuse is often attributed to welfare dependency but this has happened in the context of rising unemployment and inequality in society.

I WILL NEVER FORGET BREAKING THE NEWS TO MY BIRTH FATHER THAT HE HAD A DAUGHTER HE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT.

The year following that first phone call from my sister Tanya was an emotional marathon. The numerous moments of joy in discovering this person were often shadowed by pangs of regret at what had been missed. I will never forget breaking the news to my birth father that he had a daughter he didn't know about. I tried to imagine what it would be like to miss out on my own children's childhood or even a large chunk of their adulthood. Throughout the process I was also acutely aware of the implications not only for him but also his family, who had been a part of my life for over 20 years.

Once I was looking at a photo album with Tanya and there were pictures of my niece Monique as a toddler. I made a casual remark to Tarn that I wish I'd been there. Monique is a young woman now and I adore her. But I've missed forever the experience of being involved in her growing up. Fortunately, Tarn can be part of my kids' childhood. And we both get a kick out of finding little quirks our kids have in common with each other and with us. We've shared holidays together and you can't help but wonder what it would have been like to do so as children.

Possibly the most difficult discoveries I've made are those about myself. When I first met my birth parents in my teens I went through a period of turmoil for months and years afterwards. I got to a point where I decided I couldn't afford the luxury of self-pity and made a pact with myself to get on with my life. That was okay up to a point. But it didn't give me the tools to actually deal with the way the experience had shaped my view of the world and, more to the point, my

perception of myself.

This resurfaced when I found Tanya. Something I noticed very quickly when I was around her was that I felt a deep sense of calm. In an odd way it became a new reference point as to what was normal. I vividly recall catching up with friends at a cafe a few months after meeting Tanya. I felt a rising panic as I frantically tried to read every little gesture and word of those around me. And then I stopped. Or tried to. I began to ask myself what I was doing. I was among friends and yet all I could see was hostility. Even though I began to see my behaviour didn't make any sense at all, I couldn't help it. It was like a physical reaction, almost an allergic response. I had to get out.

This anxiety had been the norm and also the source of an ongoing battle with depression since my teens. I also discovered there was a family history of mental illness that explained a few things as well. All these revelations meant I could finally get some help – but only because I'd had a taste of what it was like outside the chaos that had ruled in my head.

The year I met Tanya was the same year I was studying for an MA in creative writing at Victoria University. While I was writing and rewriting the draft of a novel, I was also rewriting large chunks of my own narrative. I learned that our story is not just a minor part of our lives but gives psychological coherence to who we are as people. To change one detail of a character's story is to overhaul their whole life. To change several details is to almost unravel your whole life and start again.

That first time we met, Tanya and I spent a couple of very special days together. I knew from meeting my birth parents that such reunions are often cautious, but can spill over into some emotionally charged moments. I anticipated that happening and wondered how I'd respond if it did. Despite making a living out of words, I didn't know what I'd say.

As she was about to leave, my kids said goodbye and gave her a hug. When my little boy kissed her, I could see she was starting to lose it. So was I.

I hugged her too.

"I'm honoured to have you as my sister."

I couldn't have said anything better. +