

First letter to my first mother

A Mah,

I was born on your twentieth birthday sixty years ago in New Orleans. Since learning that in 1991, I've imagined every July 3rd, OUR birthday, that you would remember me. I've wondered how we are similar, what traits we'd share because of that. You relinquished me on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1953 at the Baptist Home for Unwed Mothers. What was that day like? It was Hot and humid, perhaps like HOME. Surrounded by whites and blacks, but no yellows; NOT like home. I know how that feels.

What could we have shared in the time we had together? What was it like to have me in your belly? Did you rail against me, or did you talk to me as I grew inside you? After giving birth to me did you see me, touch me or hold me? Or, in keeping with the times, did you know I was only steps away, yet as forbidden as the Forbidden Palace, to walk in and embrace me. If you were like me, that compliant person who didn't know that I was given tacit permission to look into my file when visiting at the orphanage years later, we stayed still and shamed, unable to peer in.

Observations made by the nurse and social worker: I was described as an attractive little girl with dark brown eyes and black hair; serious a great deal and with a winning smile. I apparently loved being with people.

I moved both legs at birth

I held my head erect at 3 weeks

I held my hands open at 4 weeks

I scratched the bed sheets with my hands at 5 weeks

I was alert when spoken to at 6 weeks

I observed objects in the room, smiled at conversation, and enjoyed a propped up position at 7 weeks

I stopped crying when spoken to and looked around the room at 8 weeks

I followed people with my eyes at 9 weeks

I recognized familiar voices and turned from my back to my stomach at 10 weeks

I gurgled, recognized my bottle and inspected my fingers at 11 weeks

I cooed when spoken to, bubbled and played with my hand at 12 weeks

I had a winning smile! I apparently loved being with people! I gazed upon these lines, the non-identifying information provided by the agency that marked my existence, when I was 38 years old. The primordial HOWL that emanated from my soul could not be stilled. It was then that I first felt the depth of that loss. I reburied it as quickly as possible.

I have a prominent birthmark on my right calf. Might you have remembered this about me? When I heard that some Chinese birth families of the current diaspora marked their children before relinquishing them, so they might find them again, I considered that birthmark as the bookmark of where we left off.

You were born in 1933, the only girl of 9 children in a Chinese family from somewhere in Asia, yet you ventured to study in the US. I was an only child, raised by Chinese immigrants both born in 1900. My parents could have been your parents.

Like you, I was a risk-taker. In my adolescent and young adult years, I could only turn left when everyone else steered straight ahead. I was a pregnant teenager, too. When that happened to me in 1971, I squeezed through a crack in the door that didn't exist for you. And, if it did . . . I would not be writing you now.

We shared shame and secrecy, umbilically connected, then severed, maybe forever. I fear that you could not acknowledge me even today, sixty years later. Neither of us could speak of the other. How can we bear the sadness of the unspoken. Could you say, "daughter"? Is there a small space in your heart for me? We are bound by our shared sorrow and loss.

Would you be proud of me? I didn't become an engineer or marry a doctor, as my parents wished. I cannot, but go against the grain, cleaving to the outsider, the creative, the counter-culturalists. In college, after earning my useful undergrad degree in now extinct stone lithography, I lived in a school bus with a million dollar view from the outhouse, built a house using a book called Architectural Graphic Standards, which today would be like building a house using Wikipedia.

I've struggled perennially with self-esteem and feeling confident enough to inhabit the spaces that I have arrived at. I've read that first mothers struggles are not so different, after the trauma of separation. Yet, I hope that we share the trait of optimism. Could you overcome your shame and sadness to have a happy life? A Mah! I am good, and I wish the same for you.

with my love,  
Janney Lynn