

*Secrets and
Silences*

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Silences*

Dorothy B. Williams

“The Victorian Adoption Act 1984 created opportunities for people affected by the adoption experience to access personal information and to make outreach to natural families.”

First published 2019

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A self published title designed and produced by Adala Publishing
www.adalapublishing.com.au



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978-0-6485272-6-8 (Print)

ISBN 978-0-6485272-7-5 (eBook)

www.dorothybwilliams.com.au

*Dedicated to Rosemary and Annette
and all the other encouraging Tuesday-nighters*

CHAPTER 1

Arrival

AS ISABEL JERKED open a sticking gate, three black cockatoos rose screaming from a huge tree behind the house.

The air was quite still. The last light was fading as she knocked and waited, knocked and waited. The sky was dull peach and violet, gnarled tree trunks twisting black against the weird glow. Her bunions ached. She was too young to have bunions.

Isabel frowned up at the first faint star. After a day of mishaps and misdirections, she was not giving up. Round at the back of the house she knocked again. No response. She turned towards a gateway in a wire fence and gazed down a grassy slope. An athletic young woman leading a white goat up the hill caught sight of her and called, 'Hello? Are you looking for somebody?'

'I'm lookin' for Aimée Lacey.'

'I'm Aimée Lacey.' The slender figure, thin olive-skinned face and mass of long dark hair brought no thrill of recognition, only dismay. This girl couldn't be the right one.

He had been fat, flushed and bald.

'Can I help you?' The girl tethered the goat, eyeing lank mousy hair and pale eyes examining her from a pudgy face. The woman's lips tightened.

'I wrote — Isabel Cameron. You were expectin' me. Weren't you?'

'I'm sorry, no. Should I know you?'

'You should, but you don't. I'm your mother.'

The girl smothered a nervous laugh. 'I beg your pardon? I live here with my parents. Who are you looking for?'

'I'm lookin' for my daughter Elizabeth. Born twenty years ago. Sixth of March 1965. Adopted by Geraldine Lacey. Renamed Aimée. I wrote. Twice.'

The girl stared at her for a long moment, unimpressed. 'You'd better come into the house. My mother will be home soon and you can talk to her.'

Isabel followed her in the back door and along a passage into a comfortably worn lounge room. The girl offered her coffee and disappeared, taking a long time over mugs and biscuits. Isabel glanced around the room, disparaging its creative country-cottage decor. It was not what she had expected.

She heard a car come down the drive, passing the house to turn into the yard. The cockatoos screeched away, the fly-wire door banged. A cheerful greeting received an abrupt reply. A moment of frozen silence. Then a woman stood in the doorway staring at her, frightened.

'How could you do this?'

'I wrote. Twice. I'm Isabel Cameron. She knew I was comin'.'

'She had no idea. You wrote to a girl who had no idea she was adopted. You had no right. I threw it away.'

'You open 'er mail?'

‘We have no secrets from each other! She was on holidays ... she asked me to open anything that came, and let her know — ’

‘You didn’t let her know? What do you mean, you have no secrets?’

‘How could I? They assured us she was ours in every way but accident of birth. You signed her away, so why should I tell her otherwise? How did you find us?’ Geraldine’s hands were clasped, twisting within each other as if trying to escape. ‘This new law’s not right! They’re not supposed to give out addresses without permission. You didn’t even wait for a reply.’

‘Was I going to get one?’

‘Later — some time — I don’t know. It would have been up to Aimée ...’

‘So it should have been up to me.’ Aimée’s face appeared ghostlike over her shoulder in the dark passage. She stepped around her confused mother and set a rattling tray on the coffee table. ‘It not true, is it? It can’t be.’

Geraldine looked from one to the other and nodded, colourless and scared.

‘Why wasn’t I told?’ Aimée’s mouth was tragic and her eyes defiant.

Isabel leaned forward and took her hand. ‘You should have been told. There’s never been a day in my life I haven’t thought about you, wondered about you — ’

Aimée’s hand hung limply in hers. She turned away. She looked straight at Geraldine.

‘Are you telling me I’m not really a Lacey at all?’ Dad, Gran, Gramps — aunts, uncles, cousins — really nothing to do with her? All knowing ... all lying to her? ‘I don’t belong?’

‘That’s not so!’ Geraldine protested, vehement. ‘Of course you belong to us. We all love you dearly. You’re a legal part of this family — ’

‘Legal?’ Her mind reeled.

‘Truly! Your *real* mother is the one who did the mothering. Anybody can give birth.’ *Only not me, not me.* ‘What difference does it make. You belong to me.’ She took Aimée’s hand and clasped it with the other as the girl flinched back. ‘I always meant to tell you, but ... it didn’t seem important.’

‘I thought human beings didn’t belong to anybody.’ Isabel’s small mouth tightened with contempt. ‘I carried her, she carries my genes, she’s part of me. She’s not a piece of property.’ She sipped her coffee.

‘You gave her up for good. It was a legal contract. You knew it. She stopped being part of your family and became mine. They had no right to change the laws and you had no right to come here!’

‘But they did. An’ I do. Because adopted children have rights too. An’ their mothers.’

‘We’ve given her everything! She is part of me, part of us.’ *Twined around my heart. Her very name means “beloved”.* ‘We gave her a family, not you. You — you gave her up.’

‘You had a baby and gave her away.’ Aimée stared at Isabel. ‘How could you?’

‘Because I loved you. Enough to give you up, to give you a chance in life. I had nothing. Nobody.’

‘You gave your baby — you gave *me* away. Is that love?’

Isabel put down her cup. ‘I never stopped lovin’ my baby girl. I been longing for my baby girl for twenty years. And now here I am, and here you are.’

‘But your baby doesn’t exist any more.’ Geraldine’s voice was full of conviction. *What good did your love do that baby? Did it make any difference to her? Love is about caring, and working, and understanding. Getting up at night, putting on band-aids, knowing what she needs and giving it, consoling, encouraging, all the thousands of little things that make a child grow as part of her own family.* ‘You can’t turn back the clock.’

‘But it’s time she knew about her real family, isn’t it? She ought to know who she really is.’

‘Her *real* family is here — she’s Aimée Lacey, she’s my daughter!’

Isabel stared at her and crunched a biscuit.

Aimée whispered, ‘I do have a right to know who I am, to know about this other family.’ She turned to Isabel. ‘I suppose I must have a father somewhere. Who is he? Am I like him? I’m not like you, am I?’

‘Not a bit. You’re not much like him, either. Of course I don’t know what he might have been like when he was younger, maybe skinny and dark-haired like you. He was bald and heavy and he locked the door on us one night when everybody in the office had gone. He was my boss.’

Geraldine gave a chirp of protest.

Aimée sat rigid. ‘I wasn’t exactly what you might call a love child then.’

Isabel gave a short laugh. ‘He wasn’t too bad, but no, I couldn’t pretend I loved him. But he didn’t actually rape me, if that’s what you’re thinking. It was persuasion – well sort of. I just didn’t know how else to keep my job.’

Silence fell. The three women avoided each other’s eyes. Geraldine picked up her cup, and put it down again, cold. Isabel took another biscuit.

‘Did you marry?’ Aimée asked.

Isabel smiled. ‘Oh yes. You’ve got five half-brothers.’ Aimée’s eyes widened, and Geraldine gasped. ‘But I could never forget my baby girl.’

‘You’ve got five other children,’ Geraldine said, stiff-lipped, ‘and you’ve come to claim my only one?’

‘But she’s my own flesh and blood. You must remember that. I never thought I’d see her again. It was terrible. But everything’s different with the new law, isn’t it? She has a right now to know her mother.’ She turned to Aimée. ‘We can meet in the city one day. When can you come?’

‘I don’t know.’ Bewilderment silenced her. Five brothers! She had never liked being an only child. ‘Give me your phone number. I’ll ring you.’

‘Are you catching the late bus?’ asked Geraldine faintly. ‘It’s almost due.’

Aimée stared at her. Was there no car out front? A visitor at such a time, such an unprecedented one, without her own transport ... But for anyone to be sent on her way hungry was unheard of.

Isabel frowned. ‘I hope I can find the way in the dark. I didn’t mean to be so late. Surely there’s a later bus?’

‘I’ll run you in,’ said Aimée, glancing at the clock and jumping up, ‘we’ll just have time.’

Isabel stood up, brushed crumbs from her skirt, and walked to Geraldine who also rose. Geraldine tensed as Isabel grasped her rigid

arms and held them, saying softly, ‘Thank you for taking care of my little girl.’ Both compelling and ingratiating, her voice repelled Geraldine.

Geraldine was dumb. She shook herself loose. *Once I might’ve thanked you for giving me my daughter. But ... not now.*

‘Hurry up, then,’ said Aimée. She wanted her out of the house. ‘Back soon,’ she threw over her shoulder to Geraldine as Isabel followed her out. This was all impossible.

‘You won’t be able to meet my family, you know,’ said Isabel, fastening her seat belt. ‘They don’t know about you.’

‘What! What was all that carry-on about family, then?’

‘You got a right to know, even if your foster mother does think different. I reckon what happened to me before I was married has nothin’ to do with my husband and my boys. But I can tell you about your grandparents — my parents, that is. I wouldn’t know anything about the others.’

‘But — I’ve got five brothers! Do you mean to tell me I can’t meet them?’

‘Well, they’re all younger, you know. Just kids. It would be real embarrassing for me to have to explain. And my George — well, men get funny ideas about women, don’t they? He’d never understand. He thinks I’m visiting an old friend. I wouldn’t want him to find out, after all these years.’

She sat uncomfortably, sensing the girl’s outrage as she negotiated the bumpy road at top speed, not caring how Isabel was being thrown about. They arrived at the bus stop in time to see the tail lights of the last bus disappearing far down the road.

Isabel was leaning forward, sweaty hands gripping her safety belt. ‘What am I going to do? I can’t ring George — if I tell him I’m spending the night away he’ll only think the worst.’

‘Just tell him you’re stranded and can’t get back.’

‘Then I could see you again in the morning,’ she said, a wistful tone accompanying her worried frown, ‘but he doesn’t know where I am.’ The frown deepened. ‘

‘We’ll chase it,’ said Aimée grimly. ‘There’s no motel or anything here.’ Aimée, already accelerating past the silent general store and shabby hall,

swerved violently on the next bend, and swore. 'Did you feel that? I've got a flat.' She got out to inspect the tyres.

'Well, it's been like this for me all day. There was a surprise train strike, I had no money for a taxi, and I had to wait hours for a bus. Now I've missed this bus, and you've got a flat tyre. You get days like that sometimes, don't you?' She watched the lights of the bus rounding a long curve and descending the winding road towards the lights of the town in the valley.

'One bus for the workers, another for school kids and shoppers. Down in the morning and back in the early evening. That's all.' Aimée's voice was muffled as she burrowed for the jack. Isabel got out, shivering in the chill night air, offered help, but hovered uselessly as Aimée changed the wheel. 'I suppose you'll just have to come back and spend the night at our place.' They headed back to the dirt road.

'It's not much, your place, is it? I hoped they would have done better for you than that. My George is doing very well. We got a lovely home.'

'But I won't be seeing it, will I?'

'We'll be friends though, won't we? You do understand my position, don't you? Don't be hard on me. I did what was best for you.'

'Perhaps it would have been best for me after all if you'd kept your end of the bargain and stayed away.' A fog was clouding her brain. 'You've upset my mother dreadfully, and we'd both have been happier left as we were.' She braked, and pulled over to the side of the road. 'Look, I don't think I'd better take you back to my place. Mum's too upset. Where do you live? I'll ring Mum then drive you back to town.'

Isabel nodded passively. 'I thought you'd be glad to see me. You don't know what it was like for me.' Isabel riffled through her bag searching for a handkerchief. 'Twenty years I've wondered about you. Anyway, she should have been straight with you.'

'As honest as you've been with your family?'

'That's different, isn't it?' Isabel blew her nose. 'You don't know what it's like.'

'No, I don't. I just can't imagine how anybody could give away her own baby.'

‘You don’ know. It was different then. What else could I have done?’

‘What other girls do, I suppose.’

‘But that’s what they all did, unless they could get married. What sort of life do you think illegitimate kids had then?’ Aimée cringed. ‘Even if there was any way to keep you fed and clothed — ’ Isabel gave a snort. ‘I suppose you think it was all welfare and child care centres then. If anything like that had started by 1965 nobody told me about it. I’d have only had to put you in a home so I could go out to work to feed and clothe you. And my mother wouldn’t stand for the disgrace.’

‘But there must have been a way.’ The word disgrace floated meaninglessly past Aimée. ‘I mean, to give away your baby ... How old were you?’

‘Fifteen. I mean, how could I have managed on my own?’

Aimée glanced astonished at Isabel’s tired eyes, creased forehead, cheeks already sagging in sympathy with her lumpy figure. She was still a young woman, however unattractive. Only thirty-five. And had borne six children! Her own mother was in her late forties, energetic, trim and fashionable in her own relaxed way, her eyes bright with only faint laughter lines.

‘But your mother — ’

‘Woul’d put me out on the street. She sent me out of the way, to an old lady she’d known in the country when she was young, some sort of nurse, and told everybody my nerves were bad and I’d been sent for a long holiday. There was a bush nursing hospital where the woman left me when my time came. Just as well if you ask me because I was dead scared of *her* trying her hand on me.’

‘She left you there? Alone?’

‘Of course, what would you expect? But one of the nurses there was real nice, held my hand and talked to me, just as if I hadn’t done anything wrong.’

‘Didn’t your mother come?’ Aimée tried to make sense of a story she felt belonged in some benighted third world country, or some other planet. This woman had no place in her world, certainly not in the ‘swinging sixties’ her parents reminisced about with such gaiety.

‘Not on your nelly! She wouldn’t have nothing to do with it. She never saw the baby — you, I mean. I come back on the train and went straight to the adoption place and handed it over. Mum wouldn’t let me talk about it when I got home. I didn’t really want to anyway. She said, “Look, love, it’s just as if you dropped a stitch, and now you’ve picked it up again, and you can just go on knitting, and nobody will know different.”’

Aimée felt her life had just come completely unraveled. She drew in her breath at being compared to a dropped stitch. ‘How could you bear it?’

‘Oh, I just got another job like the last one,’ Isabel went on, ‘filing and running messages and making tea, and tried to pretend it hadn’t happened, like Mum said, only I got sick.’ She fell silent.

To cover a lengthening pause Aimée asked, ‘Were you in hospital?’

‘Well,’ said Isabel dismissively, ‘That’s best forgotten.’

Another long pause. Aimée asked, ‘So what did you do?’

‘There was a sort of halfway house where they sent me. I had my own room, and after a while I found another job. Wasn’t easy though. Then I shared a flat with a girl from work and I used to go to a dance with her on Saturday nights. And I met George. He’s a panel beater. I was real lucky he married me. But of course I never told him about the baby, or the hospital. His family wouldn’t stand for anything like that any more than mine would. Anyway, I want to know about you. What’s your job?’

With some relief Aimée began to describe family life on their small organic farm, with her extended family on the adjoining big farm and in and around the small township. ‘We all share the farm work at times, but do other things as well. I go out teaching piano but I’d like to study composition. I work at home too, making jewellery for Auntie Sue’s store. Dad’s a personnel consultant. Mum teaches art part time at the high school and makes pottery for the tourist shops. And we play tennis and golf together.’

There was an extended silence. Isabel had noticed the tennis court.

‘So you haven’t got a real job?’

Aimée threw her a sideways glance. ‘Depends on how you look at it, I suppose.’

Once down away from the hills the traffic took all her concentration. Isabel passed desultory comments about places she knew and gave occasional directions as they penetrated the city streets.

The suburb was an old one, fashionable now. 'We was real lucky to get our place when we did,' Isabel commented, 'before them yuppies came in and drove up the prices. George did it up real nice.' They turned into a narrow street lined with parked cars and she pointed out the house. It stood out from those around it. Instead of a picket fence with shrubs crowded into a narrow front garden, it had a van parked on concrete. 'He got rid of the verandah and all that old-fashioned iron lace stuff,' she said with satisfaction, 'and put in lovely picture windows.'

Light streamed from the opening front door, silhouetting a bulky male figure. Isabel gave a startled jerk and threw open the door. 'I'll ring you,' she whispered. She jogged clumsily up the path. An arm reached out and pulled her inside.

'Who's that out there? Where the hell've you been?' Aimée heard as the door closed.

She turned and headed for home. Was it still home? She drove automatically, her mind still dazed. A light mist developed as the road ascended, thickening at last to a dense blanket of fog that slowed her and compelled her attention. She could see nothing beyond the ghostly shadows of eucalypts on the road verges.

The potholes of the long drive were dark pools of shadow. The house lights were diffused by fog to a faint glow. The entire property was wrapped in silence. The harsh cries of the black cockatoos were stilled. Leaves hung dull and motionless. The cheerful twittering of small frogs in the waterhole had ceased.

Geraldine, muffled in woollens on a verandah chair, rose like a wraith to wrap Aimée in a cold, damp embrace. Aimée submitted to the welcome, avoiding encounter, seeing not the painful love and longing but only dark pools of deceit that shadowed Geraldine's eyes.

The bleat of the small white goat called to her through the darkness.