

The Face in the Blue and White Bowl

In a blue and white bowl on the coffee table was a photograph of a woman in her 50s.

It was only a passport size portrait which lay face-up in front of me, but those eyes! Those eyes, which were the same shade of Wedgewood blue as the bowl. They held me mesmerised, and drew me to the edge of the sofa.

I reached out and picked up the picture for the umpteenth time, and it was like looking into a mirror. Those eyes gazed back at me, bewildered with an expression that spoke of a long-kept secret. This woman was a complete stranger, so why did I feel I had known her all my life?

I guess it was those eyes. Those eyes were my eyes, and the truth was I HAD looked into those misty, blue eyes long before the first seeds of memory had been sown. If it's right what they say about eyes being the mirror of the soul, I had seen into that woman's soul, but the vision had come and gone in a flicker of time.

For this was a photograph of my mother. The woman who had given birth to me in a convent nursing home 35 years ago. Apparently we had been allowed three whole days together, and then.... Then, she gave me away. Did those eyes fill with tears? I wondered. Did they scream for redemption as I was carried off? Did they love me?

It was 35 years, two weeks and three days from that moment to this, when I gazed into that face again. The actual track and search process had taken just eleven weeks, with a lot of support from my adoptive family, and agency records. Contact had initially been through a third party, then more recently by email.

I had posted a picture of myself to her, without surrendering a return address. I live in North Wales, she in South Wales. We were about 170 miles, and half a lifetime, apart. With her permission I had been given her house number and the street where she lived, and, of course, I Googled it. I knew the colour of her front door, and that she had vertical blinds at her windows, but so far she had no idea where I was. I wasn't quite ready for that yet.

So imagine how shocked I had been when the photograph, now in the blue and white bowl, had dropped through my letterbox in a cream coloured envelope. Had she somehow managed to find me? Had she sent it by post, or had she actually been on my doorstep? My doorstep! My head was flooded with unanswered questions, so much so, I was actually trembling as I took a closer look at the envelope. It had been franked with an official local authority stamp which could only mean it had been forwarded through the proper channels.

What a relief. I steadied myself with my hand against the wall taking a series of a long slow breaths before, much calmer, but still buzzing with adrenalin, I tackled its contents.

The photograph had been slipped inside a card which had a teddy bear on the front (I was 35 for heaven's sake... a teddy bear?) The twee little creature held an oversized daisy in its paws, with a one-word message tied to the stem--- 'Sorry' it read.

Inside my birth mother had written: "So very, very sorry. I'd love to meet you. If that's OK with you." Love Maraid. x

Maraid, not mother, not Mum, but Maraid. "Love Maraid" and a kiss. Love? Maraid? A kiss?

I was confused. I was curious. I was excited, and I was terrified in equal measure. Nothing could ever break the bond with my adoptive family, but here was a chance to reach back to my roots.

But not quite yet. I had to gather my thoughts. For the time being my birth mother would have to remain consigned to the blue and white bowl on the coffee table, while I wrestled with both our destinies. Whatever decision I made now would change my life, and change her life forever.

Should I leave her there, a face staring back from the past, or should I take her from the bowl and accept her into my world. She was a grandmother now, although I hadn't told her yet. I had a half brother and a half sister who I had never met. Perhaps they had children too.

This was potentially cataclysmic.

All of my life there had been two featureless shadows in my past, with by far the more intriguing that of the woman who had carried me in her womb, and had given me life. This was what I had always longed for, wasn't it? To shine a light on that shadow. A tiny flame had been lit, and now it was up to me to keep it flickering, or to blow it out.

Would I be brave enough? As brave as she had been, all those years ago, not to get rid of the shame and the scandal. As brave as she had been not to get rid of the pregnancy. As brave as she had been not to get rid of me. This woman carried me for nine months. She had cared enough to let me live. So why did I feel so confused? So overwhelmed with enormity of the decision. I just didn't know what to do next. My future and hers would have to stay in that blue and white bowl, until I did.

Meanwhile, at the other end of Wales, a woman in her 50s wandered into the cool, familiar quiet of the local catholic church. It smelt of incense and candle wax, and was as hushed as a whispered Hail Mary, as she knelt and prayed.

Some greater power must have heard that heartfelt prayer, because two months later that bereft mother, the woman who had given birth to me and given me a future with loving parents, told me of her visit to the church and of how fervently she had beseeched the God with whom she had fallen so far out of favour to allow her to be reunited with the son she had lost.

Today we met for the first time since she had held me in her arms to kiss me goodbye 35 years ago. We searched deep into our Wedgewood blues eyes that were brimming with tears before flinging our arms around each other to recapture and hold onto a past that was ours and ours alone.

I had found the mother I had lost and she had found the son she thought she'd never see again. There were questions to be asked, and questions to be answered, but now was not the time.

This amazing woman was no longer just a face in the blue and white bowl she was back in my world where she belonged, and I would make sure that she would stay there forever.

