

Brown Baby's All Upset

by Birgit Burton

I grew up as the only child of Lieutenant Colonel Charles and Angeline Smith. I was adopted, but they never made me feel like I was different. I could look at them though and see that I was. I could look at them, my cousins, my aunts, and my uncles and see that I did not resemble anyone. You know how people say "Wow, you have your grandmother's eyes" or "You look just like your Aunt Shirley, look at those dimples" or "Wow, your daddy could never deny you". No, that never happened for me.

In addition to being my parents' pretty little girl, I was also the oldest grandchild with two years between me and my next cousin, Lisa. Because of this I was in charge of everything. When we came together for family gatherings, I would hold court with my cousins. We always did things my way and they always followed my every command because I was the oldest.

My story begins with my parents, two first-generation college students, who met at Tuskegee University, who after ten years of marriage with no children, decided to adopt while my father was in the Air Force, stationed in Steinbach, Germany. My mother was thrilled to have a little girl. I had a closet filled with

dresses and every color hair ribbon possible, a room full of toys and the most magnificent canopy bed and matching French Provençal furniture that you've ever seen.

I also had curly hair and light brown skin which was different than the rest of my family. We never talked about it, but it was there. I was biracial. My birth mother was German that was a fact; my birth father was a man of color that was an assumption. At the time I was born in Germany, biracial children were referred to as "brown babies", a stigma assigned to children who were born of white mothers and black fathers, sort of an obvious sign of that time, the early '60s, that my mother had slept with the enemy.

In America, I was just light skinned, no one knew that I was part German. As a young child, I was privileged and didn't know. Because my father was in the Air Force, we lived in many different places around the country. We lived a very comfortable middle class life. I had noticed that my life, the material things and experiences, were different than those of my cousins. My cousins began to notice; however, and as we grew older, and I continued trying to wield my position as the leader among them, they began to revolt.

During one family gathering, in the midst of a disagreement, my cousin Lisa yelled out, "You think you're special because you're

adopted". Wait, what did she just say? This was quite shocking because up to this point, no one had ever, and I mean ever, mentioned my being adopted.

That was the beginning. Then there was that one hot and humid July afternoon, when the family gathered for our yearly reunion. I was about 13 and I remember standing in my grandparents' huge backyard under the massive willow trees, clearing my throat, and preparing to make my usual pronouncement of exactly what we were going to do. And out of nowhere, my cousins, Keith, David, and Lisa, flatly refused to do what I said. And then, they began chanting "Aw Birgit's all upset!" "Aw Birgit's all upset!"

I was utterly speechless. They continued rebelliously, chanting, laughing, giggling, and feeling pleased with themselves for their successful mutiny.

"Aw Birgit's all upset!" "Aw Birgit's all upset!"

They turned it into a song, with a little beat, and then marched off toward the house where all of the adults were gathered, drinking lemonade, and socializing.

I stood alone, looking around the yard; the air humid and sky a soft blue. I could hear the sounds of the crickets as the sun began to set. I was definitely hurt, but neither they nor I knew

exactly why. I was bleeding, but neither they nor I knew just how deeply I had been cut.

Somehow their chanting had unveiled the elephant in the room and triggered in me a deep sadness that I was, indeed, adopted. Even though no one talked about it, I was adopted. Even though I was blessed with a wonderful life, I was adopted, and that reality got really big for me that day.

It didn't help that I was also struggling with what it meant to be biracial and with understanding what the notion of race meant for a brown baby like me. I belonged to this wonderful family of black and brown people, but I was born of a white mother. I resonated more with my black identity because of my parents and the beautiful family I was adopted into. But the truth was, I was no more physiologically black than I was white. I couldn't talk about this, but I was plagued by this for a while. Was I denying my white mother? My birth mother? The woman who brought me into this world amidst circumstances that caused her to make the greatest sacrifice of her life?

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My cousins were young and had no idea what their little rebellion had stirred in me that day. In the backyard of my grandparents' home on that country road in southwest Michigan, I

was propelled into thinking about who I actually was that day and contemplating the frailty of my complex brown identity.

It's been a long and winding journey of discovery and I've learned some things that I'd always longed to know. Once I learned these things I had more knowledge but my family didn't change. I still had the same wonderful family of people that didn't look like me, rebellious cousins and all, and I realize now that even though I may not have looked like them, I am truly grateful that I think like them, smile like them, care like them, and love like them.