

Evangeline Davis

The Daughter aka The Adoptee

Waking up these days with my teeth on edge, I have begun to comb through books like a mad person in search of an identity, somehow forgotten, but recorded by another. Frustration is getting the better of me as I throw chunks of paragraphs, pieces of poems, mixed with bits of sentences into the air. I write words entwined and re-ordered in hopes some meaning will follow.

How do I feel about Regina, my birth-mother? About Ruby, my adoptive mother? I live with the belief that I feel nothing less than indifference. The details are all mixed up, blurry. The only clear truth is the gaping holes and absence of knowing anything for certain.

Two mothers stand distantly behind this daughter's life, far enough away that she can never reach them. Neither is ever very real because the daughter has never touched her mothers. All she feels is each mother taking turns at abandoning her; one physically and the other emotionally. Mother-to-daughter love is murky and uncertain X 2. The mothers are jealous, trying to cancel each other out. Each believes the other is worse. Neither understands the hollowness they have both created inside their daughter. All that's been offered is a legacy of hurting and emotional scarring X 3. Is a family tied together tighter with shared blood and DNA? Or are family bonds formed after years of shared day-to-day existence? Does love ever have anything to do with family?

My legacy. Their histories. Each making me afraid of the dark and the monsters under my bed; leaving me wondering if the monsters will crawl out and grab me by the throat and take control. Desperately I attempt to be a better mother than the two I had. Constantly I am paralyzed with dread their mistakes will reappear in me, that this is inevitable, that for a time I am a mother like Ruby and Regina combined. Drugs. Suicide attempts. Leaving my children for someone else to mother because I was petrified and unsure of myself. For a time

I let their insecurities win. I unwittingly gave myself over to their low self-esteem. During those years I was introduced to the psyches of Regina and Ruby, though I didn't recognize them at the time. I was offered a rare and valuable opportunity to understand them, as I needed to understand myself. For a while, and sometimes still, I lacked the ability to see our situations through compassion. Instead I judged Regina and Ruby with the same severity I used to criticize myself.

My birth-mother

Dear Regina;

I wish for understanding, for empathizing with whatever motivated you to keep having babies, eleven babies, my brothers and sisters, when you didn't seem to want them once they became physical realities struggling from your womb. Was the alcohol damaging your ability to realize? What I wouldn't give to live inside your memories for just one brief moment. Seconds of knowing, of feeling an answer, could melt all the pain and confusion, all the irrational feelings of worthlessness solidified around my gut. My head and my heart, my intellect and emotions, have been at war for as long as I can recall. I am supposed to understand the illness consuming you, the illness you consumed. I should not take your actions as a statement about me, but rather realize what you did was a statement about you. My rationality grasps these concepts, like a drowning woman grips a life preserver or an outstretched hand. I try planting seeds of sympathy, but the earth spits them back, indignant I would try to grow understanding.

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Regina. The sole reason I exist today. Without Regina I could not leave my mark on this earth, whatever it may be. Her body housed my growth. Nurtured me, no matter how unintentional, into existence. From May until February, Regina's body fed me, kept me warm and protected me from harm. And then the time came when Regina's body had enough, pushing me out to face my existence. Regina could have abandoned me right from the start, long before her belly began to swell with my kicking legs and fisting hands. I wish I could love her for allowing my life. I wish I could hate her for not following through with what she started. The indifference Regina and I feel for one another is what I hate. Acidic sadness for what will never be shared between Regina and me and my brothers and sisters; a common, everyday, family history. We all attempt to ignore our desires for Regina's care and nurturing; our craving to be valued by the woman who gave us life.

A child's dream. I could never admit before how much I yearned for Regina's embrace the first time we met. I secretly prayed for her to walk into my living room and wrap her arms around me, tight, like she would never let me go ever again. I wanted her to tell me about all the February 19th's she spent thinking about me, wondering, and worrying if I was okay. I hoped more than anything Regina would tell me what a mistake she'd made giving me away, that

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the rest of her life had lost some of its meaning without me at her side as her daughter. Longingly, I waited for Regina's promise that now we had found each other, things would be different, we, a mother and a daughter, could make up for lost time. A child's dream.

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Regina is on her third heart attack in two years. Six months earlier her left leg was eaten away by gangrene, fueled by diabetes, irritated by alcoholism. Regina's boyfriend waited for her in the lobby of their apartment building, staggering impatiently back and forth between the elevators and the front doors. When the taxi finally arrived, Regina's boyfriend couldn't find the fare Regina instructed him to bring when she called from her hospital room. He bummed the money from the guy in apartment 114. Trying to be gallant and strong, this boyfriend offers his arm to help balance Regina into the lobby. But his drunkenness pulls them both to the ground. Regina hits the pavement hard. The boyfriend can barely raise himself and must forfeit assisting Regina. Tears roll into Regina's ears, tickling, wet puddles form an itch she can't be bothered reaching for. Distorted and unfocused when seen through drops of salt water vision, clouds billowing into cotton candy shapes float over and into Regina's sight. Grinding her teeth at every passer-by, praying to god for the will to shut down her tears, Regina lays frozen by embarrassment and pain.

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Regina's first introduction to tragedy came when she was nine years old, the day she heard her father died. Some say his death was accidental, that he drank from the barrel containing poison believing it was water. Yet others say it was suicide, that he had had enough of life on this earth. But to a nine-year-old child who worshipped her father, those were minor details. All that mattered was that her father had been wiped from her life; his smile, his affection for her, gone forever.

Regina's mother remarried and her children became some man's stepchildren. Regina, more than her brothers and sisters resented her stepfather's intrusion, wishing he would go away and her own father would return.

When Regina was 23 she gave birth to the first of her children, David. Unmarried and alone, having a baby "out of wedlock" in the early 1950s was punishable by forced solitude and ridicule. Regina chose to leave her son in the care of her mother and stepfather in hopes of getting on her feet. Shortly after moving to Toronto, Regina met Frank Davis and they were married. Six children later, living in poverty, and dealing with abuse and alcoholism, Regina still had not returned to Saskatchewan to reclaim her first born from her mother. David grew up believing Regina was his sister.

Regina gave away the six children born to her and Frank Davis and left him and the chaos that was their life together. Regina took the alcoholism with her. She met three more indifferent men and had four more children which she also eventually gave away.

But we all came back, nine daughters and two sons. Some of us wanted Regina to pick up where she'd left off, to play mommy, and soothe away the boogiemans hiding under our lives. Some wanted Regina to be a friend, to have over for tea and some easy conversation. Others wanted the essentials, wanted Regina to fill in the missing gaps of family history. But, secretly, we all wanted Regina to love us, to love us before we loved her this time. We all wanted an apology, words of regret. We were little children beneath our adult surfaces, making demands and living with secret, unrealistic expectations. And like so many years earlier, we overwhelmed Regina. She could not meet each of our individual needs; she still didn't have the tools. But she never pushed us away when we made those first steps toward her. If we called just wanting to chat or find out some new details that had just crossed our minds, Regina always made herself available. Sometimes the chats were incoherent and slurred by Regina's drunken demeanor. Sometimes she'd cry and talk about regrets. But mostly Regina kept us a safe, arm's distance away because, I believe, bringing us any closer would open up all the old wounds and probably kill her. Regina heard and recognized the need in our voices and realizing she could not fulfill that need must have been like reliving the past over and over, like realizing the first time she could not answer the need in our baby cries. Inside I felt abandoned all over again. And again. And again. I would never have the mother-daughter relationship with Regina, with my first mother, that I so desperately needed.

And today those words, that realization, has been solidified without any hope of changing because I find out Regina is dead. Regina Bengert-Davis-Minchinton died on November 6, 1996. None of us, not one of Regina's eleven children knew that she had been in hospital for three months and then, holding the hand of her estranged, second husband, Butch, died at 3:30 a.m. I suppose everyone thought we didn't care that our mother, the woman who gave us life, died.

Some of us have cried hard, bitter tears. Some of us seem indifferent. And some of us still don't know. But Regina's ending is not our ending. Our finishing touches were grabbed from us by a system leaking with poverty, by alcoholism, by uncaring men who knew and cared so little for Regina, when asked at the end if she had any children, they said, "No," and then sold off what ever worldly goods Regina had left behind so they could buy a few more drafts.

Regina is buried in a mass grave on common ground in St. James Cemetery. Her friends had a candle light service in the tavern Regina thought of as her second home. And once again Regina's children were absent, transformed into a memory that Regina took to her grave.

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Pain and disappointment accumulate slowly, drop-by-drop, seeming harmless and bearable when measured incident-by-incident. But one day life is suddenly overflowing with pain, the overflowing pain is unmanageable, the spirit drowning and crying for a hand to reach out and pull it free from sinking

and dying. Desperate acts follow when no one answers the call for help. Self-preservation becomes the focus without regard for the rippling effects a life filled with pain inevitably has, passing the pain onto those nearest at hand, the pain transforming into dark, murky disappointment when received by those who are touched by the dying, frightened spirit.

My adoptive mother

Hesitating at the foot of Ruby's bed, our eyes are locked and afraid to let go. Ruby's eyes are sucked deep, the cancer has left little supporting flesh around the sockets. She can barely speak because internal bleeding gurgles around her vocal cords. Not permitting the tubes to be inserted into her throat and nose, crusts of dried blood cover the inner edges of her lips instead. Hand with tubes placed into collapsed veins is taped to a board and hard to hold. The room starts spinning, with white and tubes and glints of silver taped to skin, entwined in one. Ruby's eyes fill with fear. I want to cry. Hold her close and take the journey with her, so she will get there safe and without any pain. But I don't know how, and the room won't stop and my stomach is turning to nausea. Ruby asks,

"Are you sorry? Are you *sorry*?"

"Yes, ma ... I'm sorry. Really. Sorry."

Three hours after I left the hospital, Ruby died. Died alone. My imagined vision of Ruby's heavy eye lids, closing one last time, no one there to see she feels alone and afraid, still nips and pinches at the heels of my conscience.

I stayed in my apartment, as far away from everyone as I could. I imagined Ruby looming around me, watching me every second of the day, like she would have, if it hadn't been impossible, when she was alive. For months after I couldn't have sex because I'd feel like Ruby was looking down at me from the ceiling. I didn't get over feeling her presence until I allowed her voice to move into my head.

The entrance from the parking lot into the funeral home resounded with aged neglect. Claustrophobically low, the ceiling was lined with fat, sweating pipes, their once-upon-a-time, white paint peeling age-old yellow from cigarette smoke and rust.

Finding a seat in the front pew I became transfixed on the dead Ruby in her casket, directly in front of me. Clusters of chattering people were scattered intermittently around the room like fallen confetti. I could sense their whispers crawling up my back, feel their pointing fingers in my neck muscles.

"Why hasn't she cried yet? It's not natural for a daughter to react this way."

Choking back tears, fighting to feel peace and hate without guilt, because loving her hurt too much. "It wasn't her fault," *they* tell me, "she had no control." *They* tell me I do. But nobody seems to care Ruby won't have a headstone, or some flowers now and then, to mark her life filled with pain that was passed along to those she loved. Harlen takes Ruby's ashes home and puts them in her

hope chest, stored in his garage amidst planks, hubcaps, and rebuilt motors.

Eventually I ask around, wonder if Ruby ever told anyone in the family what having a daughter represented. Nobody seems to know. A cynical voice in my head tells me Ruby wanted a daughter, much the same way a little girl wants her first doll. She sees other girls playing with dolls. Looks on with envy, wanting a doll of her own to dress up in those pretty, frilly outfits she sees at Woolworth's. She wants the doll with curly hair, so she can spend hours combing and adorning it with ribbons and poodle shaped barrettes.

In the photos taken of me when I was very young, young enough I couldn't protest, I am always wearing dresses trimmed with lace and ribbon, the skirt lifted high and stiff by the underlying crinoline. My hair manipulated into ringlets with sections tied back from my face, with satin bows. But dolls eventually get worn out from being played with so much. And little girls grow up, sometimes wanting to play in the dirt or explore the bushes to collect ladybugs in an emptied peanut butter jar. Ribbons, satin and lace are exchanged for tee-shirts and overalls.

Ruby bought large dolls with fake, curly hair and staring, glass eyes. She removed the clothes they were purchased in and re-dressed their plastic, unmoving bodies in my out grown frills and lace, the dresses I could no longer wear. These dolls were placed, every morning, on my freshly made bed and served as reminders of what I once was. A part of me felt sure if I'd stayed small, small enough to be fussed over without protest, small enough to fit into those frilly dresses instead of growing up, Ruby would have loved me better.

* * * *

Dear Ruby;

One day's worth of volunteer work at Women's Own Detox was all it took. Standing stunned and silent amidst the bed filled darkness of In-Take I feel certain I can smell your housecoat hanging at the foot of one of those beds. All of those beds. I'm not afraid, like I thought I would be during the streetcar ride down Dundas street. Why should I be afraid? This is familiar. I remember addiction's nuances. Dusting off my memories of your heavy eye lids, your rubbery body, the bones dissolved by valium and sleeping pills. I remembered your sleep filled with moans and incoherent words, you never really resting but unable to stay awake. I stand surrounded by bed after bed of you, Ruby, like you have exploded and scattered yourself all over Women's Own Detox.

What isn't familiar is the absence of my anger. I prepared myself for the necessity of counter-balancing, of compensating for the rock of anger living in the pit of my stomach since I was little. As I listen to the in-take worker's voice explaining the plight of addiction, the strength these women, women like you Ruby, are made of, surviving the details of their lives, I sense compassion and caring. I feel her realization that the women trying to find rest around us, have been thrown to the ground and stepped on. And rather than lay there dying, these women get back up and attempt survival one more time. Perhaps the

survival was drug induced or fueled by alcohol, but we all use whatever creative means are within our reach.

For the first time in my life I don't feel compelled to counter someone else's compassion with, "Yes, but what about...?" Instead I can see your baby being taken from your arms when you are only fifteen years old. I see you standing at the foot of his bed, some twenty-six years later, hoping he can hear your admission to motherhood, before death grabs him. I see your tears as you tired from raising your other four sons without enough food or milk. Cucumber sandwiches, I remember you telling me, were what you and your children survived on during the depression. And then another son died. And another. But you were strong, Ruby. I can see that now. Though you had steak in the fridge you courageously didn't stay married, to the husband who beat you and drank himself to death. Your self-respect did show itself from time-to-time, maybe more often than I am capable of admitting just yet.

Dear Ruby, I hope your spirit hears this and that you will be allowed to rest once and for all, because you deserve some peace now that your struggle here is over. Thank you for teaching me how to survive a life filled with confusion; for showing me bravery in a time when it was considered un-feminine. The addiction wasn't entirely your fault. A strong-willed woman, Ruby, you must have scared those doctors to death. You didn't fit their text book definitions of womanhood. So, they decided to carve you into submission. They ordered you to stay at home, give up your job, when your nerves became frayed then they sedated your work ethic. They created your dependency with a few careless strokes of a pen on welfare applications and Ontario Housing recommendations. When those efforts failed, they hospitalized you and utilized their strongest weapon of all. Torturing your brain, your inner being with electroshock, the doctors told you it would make everything all better. No one thought to ask in those days, better for who? The truest testament to their near success was me, at 15 years of age, being handed my first prescription for sleeping pills. Followed by my struggle with valium at twenty-one.

But Ruby, we fooled them. I eventually discovered other resources to help me put the pieces back together. I'm only sad Ruby, that you won't be here to witness it. But I will bear witness through your eyes. When people ask me where I've found the strength to go on, instead of shrugging my shoulders I say you are my example.