

Two By Four

Judith Groudine Finkel



By the time I was four, I had lost two mothers. Actually, my first mother lost me.

I blame my first father. Here's how I picture it: As soon as the midwife said, "It's a girl," he grabbed me and took me to the orphanage, while my first mother, exhausted from childbirth, was unable to protest. If she was unconscious from the pain when he left with me, he might have returned from the orphanage and told her I had died. Perhaps he was clever enough to dig a shallow grave and tell her I was in there.

I imagine it that way because I believe if my first mother had held me for even a few seconds, she would not have let me go. I know this because when I see pictures of my second mother holding me, I understand she couldn't bear to leave me. Yet the likely truth is my first

parents had decided before my birth that if I were a girl, they would take me to the orphanage. They were living under China's one-child policy, and everyone wanted their one child to be a boy.

Six years ago, when I was 8, I began to wonder, "What if the second child of my first mother and father were a girl and they gave her to the orphanage, too?" She might have been adopted by an American couple in Houston, and we would be reunited. So I began to look for Chinese girls who were with American parents. My plan was to ask their parents from which orphanage their child had been adopted.

The woman I always called Aunt Beth, my second mother's best friend, tried to talk me out of this. She held my hands in hers as she explained how unlikely it was that I would find the person I was looking

for. She warned me I could embarrass myself and others with my questions.

Aunt Beth's arguments convinced me to drop my plan. But then I saw the girl I knew was my sister. When I looked at her outside the ladies' room of the International House of Pancakes, it was like looking at a picture of myself. She even had bangs almost down to her eyebrows and two ponytails like I did. And she was with an American father.

"Excuse me, sir, from what orphanage in China did you adopt your daughter?" The balding man hesitated. "She's my wife's daughter from her first marriage." Without excusing myself, I ran back to the booth where Aunt Beth waited. For some time after that, I ignored Chinese daughters with American parents.

This made me feel guilty because it defeated one of the legacies my second

mother had tried to leave me. She hadn't wanted me to feel isolated as a Jewish Chinese-American girl with American parents, so she'd attempted to convince Aunt Beth to adopt a daughter at the same time. Then as we grew up, we could take both Chinese and Hebrew classes together. But for Aunt Beth, it was impractical to raise a child as a single parent. Besides, she had never even babysat.

Two days before my fourth birthday, my second father, Darren Gold, wound up a single parent raising me. Aunt Beth said my second father never accepted the fact my second mother, just 42, was dying. After being out of town for three days on business, Aunt Beth called Darren to find out how Annie was doing. As soon as my second father told her he thought Annie was doing a good job of fighting her cancer but that she seemed to have the flu, Aunt Beth knew the end was near. She took off the rest of the week to be with her.

Most of the next three days Aunt Beth sat in a chair in Annie's and Darren's bedroom and watched Annie sleep. I liked to sit in Aunt Beth's lap and twist her shoulder length brown hair around my fingers. "You're soft," I said. She laughed. "How kind of you to appreciate my fat."

When Annie was awake, Aunt Beth got her water or wiped her face with a fuchsia colored washcloth and dried it with a matching towel. Since I was not quite four, I was at home with the two women while my second father spent most of each day at work. The first day of Aunt Beth's vigil, I moved a kitchen chair to the counter and climbed onto it. From there I fetched a cereal bowl

from the cabinet. I then moved the chair to the pantry and performed a similar feat to get to the box of Cheerios. Carrying my two newly obtained treasures, I went into my second mother's room. She was sitting up in bed with three pillows behind her. "I brought you breakfast in bed," I said, and proceeded to pour half a box of Cheerios into the bowl. Even as the Cheerios fell onto the beige shag carpeting, my second mother smiled. "Thank you, my sweet Jasmine." Aunt Beth rushed over to clean up the Cheerios. I climbed on the bed and put my head on my second mother's chest as she encircled me with her arms. Aunt Beth took our picture and had the roll of film developed at a one-hour photo store to make sure Annie saw it. Aunt Beth calls the picture the Jewish-Chinese version of Madonna and Child. Annie's face was quite thin, which made her slightly hooked nose look larger than before. My face was fuller, but we both had prominent cheekbones. Annie and I shared a similar hairstyle—bangs and straight dark hair covering our ears. Her face was pale compared to mine. The picture is at Aunt Beth's house now. It's next to one of her and Annie in college on which my second mother had written, "To Beth, who I can always count on."

Aunt Beth says I was too young to remember everything I think I did. She claims I've absorbed all I heard about the time of my second mother's death and what happened afterward and have turned that information into memory. Of all the things she's ever told me, this is the one thing I know she's wrong about.

I remember that last Saturday so well. My second father, who was over

six feet and seemed like a giant to me, was home all day with my second mother, Aunt Beth and me. At sundown as our Sabbath ended, we performed the havdalah service, all gathered around Annie, who was sitting up in bed. My second father held the havdalah candle, which was woven in blue and white strands and had two wicks. As we recited the blessing over the candle, we put our hands in its glow to symbolize our desire to bring the brightness of the Sabbath into the following week. I held the spice box as we recited the blessing over it, passing it around so we could enjoy its sweet smells. That's supposed to help keep the sweetness of the Sabbath with us all week.

After reciting the blessing over the wine, we each sipped from the half-filled aquamarine-colored wine cup so we could remember even more sweetness in the week ahead. My second father handed the candle to Annie, who dipped it in the wine where its wicks were snuffed out. My second mother's custom, just before kissing me, was to say, "God bless you. I love you. Have a good week." That night she said, "God bless you. I love you. Have a good life." Trying to parrot her, I responded, "God bless you. I love you. Had a good life." "That I did," my second mother replied softly.

Aunt Beth came close to Annie, who said, "Thank you for being with me as the Sabbath ends." As Aunt Beth led me out of the bedroom, my second mother said, "My dearest Darren, I have loved you so."

By the time we reached the kitchen, I heard my second father wail. Aunt Beth started crying and pulled me close to her with my head pressed against her stomach. I heard it gurgle. I broke away and climbed into my booster chair; I expected a meal. Aunt Beth placed her handkerchief in her pocket, took out a plate of chicken from the refrigerator and put it in the microwave. Before the microwave buzzer went off, Aunt Beth talked on the telephone. My second

Moment Magazine-
Karma Foundation
Short Fiction Contest

Judith Groudine Finkel's story won second place in the 2008 *Moment Magazine*-Karma Foundation Short Fiction Contest. Founded in 2000, the contest was created to provide recognition to writers of Jewish short fiction, a legacy that includes writers as varied as Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Cynthia Ozick. The stories were judged by Anita Diamant, author of the best-selling *The Red Tent* and the new novel *Day After Night*. Please visit our website for official rules and guidelines for the 2010 contest.

father came into the kitchen, sat down and put his head on the table.

I heard Aunt Beth whisper to him. "I told the funeral home Annie would want the same casket she picked for her parents. Their hearse will be here soon." "I won't let them take her." "Of course you will." Then she whispered again. "And don't worry about burial. Annie had me buy two plots under the big oak tree in the part of the cemetery farthest from the road." My second father raised his head. "You mean Annie knew she was dying?" Aunt Beth looked at him the way my second mother looked at me when I said something silly. That made him cry. I offered him some of my chicken, but he didn't take it.

When Aunt Beth opened the door for the men from the funeral home, my second father was sitting on the couch in the den. I was next to him watching a Sesame Street video.

The video ended just after the men left. I went to my second mother's bedroom to tell her I had seen the Cookie Monster, but she wasn't there. At first I was frightened not knowing when she would return. But then I saw the fuchsia towel on her bed. I knew she'd be back soon because she needed the towel to wipe the sweat from her face. I returned to the den and took my seat on the couch next to my second father. I held one end of the fuchsia towel against my cheek as I sucked my thumb. He lifted up the other end and used it to dry his tears.

That night and for so many nights after, any time I went into my second parents' bedroom, my second mother was gone and my second father was sitting in the closet holding the end of one of her dresses. At first I would sit next to him so he would know he wasn't alone, but I guess his tears blinded him because he never saw me.

That next year my second father worked all the time. He left before I got up in the morning and came home after I was asleep, though when his crying was

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really loud, it woke me. Weekdays the bent-over Chinese woman my second mother had hired to help take care of me when she was sick walked me to nursery school. On the way she would tell me stories like how she was born in the year of the dog so she was a good listener who could keep secrets. But I didn't have any to tell her.

On the Chinese New Year she gave me a red envelope with a dollar bill in it. She said it was to wish me luck and wealth. She taught me to say, "*Sun nin fy lok*," which means "Happy New Year" in Chinese.

On the Jewish New Year Aunt Beth gave me slices of apple to dip in honey. She said it was to wish me a sweet year. She taught me to say, "*Shana tova*," which means "Happy New Year" in Hebrew.

The nursery school I went to was at the synagogue where nobody looked like me. My teacher pretended not to notice. Or maybe she thought I looked better because she gave me the first prize when the girls dressed up like Queen Esther for Purim. All the other children had one mother, except for Courtney, who had two. One Friday afternoon both mothers came to pick her up. Courtney's new mother yelled, "Bitch, you know it's our weekend to have her." Courtney's old mother said, "Please, please, I need her with me." The new mother put Courtney in her car and drove away. I ran after the old one to tell her she could be my mother. I tugged at her jacket. "Let me go," she screamed. My teacher picked me up and carried me away.

Saturdays and Sundays Aunt Beth took me to the movies or out for pizza or to the zoo. She called these our adventures. I always wanted to hear the same story my second mother had told her. "Tell me about when she came to my orphanage." "Annie said she walked among the steel cribs." "And when she came to mine, what happened?" "You stood up and held out your arms to her." "That's because I knew she was my second mother." "That's what she always said." Once I asked Aunt Beth what my second father did at the orphanage. "Followed Annie around, wishing he'd always have her to himself."

One Saturday night when she thought I was asleep, I heard Aunt Beth yell at my second father. "If I didn't have a job that forced me to travel so much, I'd have you give her to me." If my second father replied, I didn't hear him.

Just after my fifth birthday, Aunt Beth told me she got a new job so she would be in Houston every day. "Hooray!" I said. "Your daddy got a new job, too. It's in a different country far away. But you can stay in Houston with me in my house." "When will I see my daddy?" "Whenever he comes back to Houston."

He never has.

I don't call Aunt Beth "mother" because it's too easy to lose mothers. And fathers.

Sometimes I dream I'm in an orphanage in China. Our sleeping mats are so close together there's no room to walk in between. Sometimes I dream I'm in an orphanage in Houston. Our beds are so close together there's no room to walk in between. ☺