

FLESH *and* BLOOD

a short story by COLIN CHISHOLM



Photo: Roy Arenella

Anna was supposed to die of cancer, but a heart attack has come first. She's smoked three packs a day for the last thirty-five years, since the day I was born — the same day she gave me up for adoption. She has an addiction, otherwise known as grief. If it weren't for grief, perhaps the cigarette companies would shrivel up and blow away.

I consider this as I stand, smoking, in the drizzle of Spokane, outside the hospital where my birth mother is dying. I do not know her, really. One Sunday morning two years ago, she called me at my home in Denver, where I've lived for eight years with my husband, Peter. Over the noise of the dishwasher I could hear the telltale croak of a lifelong smoker. I didn't smoke — not yet.

"Is this Rebecca Guterson?" she asked.

"It is," I said. "Who wants to know?" I'm a mortal threat to telemarketers.

"You might want to sit," she said. "It's very serious."

"What?" I said. I could feel the sinking of my heart, that familiar slowing that comes in the seconds before loss becomes reality. Surely someone I knew had died.

"Please," she said, "don't hate me. This is your mother."

"Who the hell is this?" I asked, relieved and pissed at once. It wasn't my mother's sweet Texas twang. Perhaps it was a friend from college ribbing me.

She stumbled over her words. "I mean, your real mother. The one who gave birth to you. My name is Anna Solanger."

I sat down. I could hear the toilet flushing, Peter stepping from the bathroom. If there were words to say, they flew by quickly and were lost to me.

"I'm sorry," Anna said. "I don't want to wreck your life. I just needed to see if you were alive."

"Alive?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Alive."

Peter came into the kitchen, opened the fridge, poured himself a glass of juice, moved on to the living room without looking at me.

"Are you there?" Anna asked.

"Yes," I said. "I'm alive. I'm thirty-three years old."

"I know," she said. "Your birthday is tomorrow."

I slammed down the phone. In that moment, I was capable of either tears or rage, and I'm more proficient at the latter. Thirty-three years, and she had finally called to say hello. On the other hand, she'd remembered my birthday all those years, and here I was married to a man who I knew with certainty had no idea that my birthday was tomorrow. Peter isn't a bad person, not at all; he just doesn't have a clue.

I waited three days before calling Anna back (having gleaned her number from caller ID), and she broke into tears at the sound of my voice. I calmed her down, and we summed up our lives in an hour, which is not only easier than you might

imagine, but pretty darn unsettling. Inside our minds we are such miracles, but the more we try to explain our individuality, the more ordinary we seem. I found myself talking about a fifth-grade tennis match, the plastic trophy I had won.

"Oh, I'd love to see it!" Anna bubbled, and I realized that her loneliness went far beyond my own.

We made plans to meet in March, a month away. She would come to visit me in Denver. In the meantime she promised to send photographs, as did I. I didn't tell my parents. I saw no point. They lived, still, in their cloister of west Texas, their dreams unchanged since the day they had collected me from California. I was their doll, their shining Texas star, and I didn't want to hurt them.

Anna's photos arrived in a letter filled with apologies. She lived in Spokane with her husband, Frank, who had been a butcher until he hurt his back. Anna had worked for the last sixteen years serving up sloppy Joes and jello in a middle-school cafeteria. She said she liked her job. She'd had no other children; after losing me, she'd felt she didn't deserve the joys of motherhood. Her parents had died in a car accident two years after she gave me up, and she'd blamed it on herself. Of my birth father, she claimed to remember almost nothing, and that was fine by me.

Most people wonder about their ancestry, scanning family history for glimpses of their destinies, seeking proof that they're not the accidents they often appear to be. But when you're adopted, you have no archives to dig through. Like Adam or Eve, you invent your destiny. Your adoptive parents guide you, but underneath, you know that you're alone, that your origins are as great or as hopeless as you imagine them to be. While my parents hovered over me and orchestrated my growth, I stumbled through the fields of my imagined ancestral bones, picking traits and idiosyncracies to call my own. Where there was artfulness and grace, I chose movie stars and queens; where there was bitterness and pain, I imagined murderers and whores.

In the photos I saw a woman too colorless for dreams. Across the backs, her loopy scrawl: "Me in front of my house, 182 Delaney Ave., last summer. That's Batman at my feet. He's a registered Chihuahua"; "Frank at the meat counter, Safeway, 1995"; "Frank and me with Mickey Mouse, Disneyland, 1989." The sky was always gray, even in California.

"When we were at Disneyland," Anna wrote, "we had to leave Batman in the Super 8. He'll never forgive us till the day he dies."

Roses bordered her concrete walkway; a pink mailbox hung by her door. Her clothing was neat and proper, dresses instead of pants. She appeared talented with an iron.

"Looks like you were lucky to be adopted," Peter said, looking over my shoulder. "Do I need to be here when she comes?"

I wondered then if she was ill. The photos hinted at decay:

the sunken eyes, the thinning hair, the grayness of her teeth. Though I saw my face in hers, it was a very distant version. I know I'm not beautiful, but I had expected more from her. I flipped through the photos again and again, as if they might change, and when they didn't I threw them to the floor. What I wanted was not her, but my dream of her. When she'd given me up for adoption, she had robbed me of my past, and when she returned to me, she stole the past I had created.

One week before my spring break, I left Anna a message asking her not to come. I gave no reason, except to say that something had come up. Peter was relieved. We went skiing in New Mexico instead. When we returned, there were eleven messages from Anna on our answering machine.

Number one: "What did I do? What was it that I said?"

Number two: "I know you hate me. I don't deserve your love."

Number three: *Silence. Sniffles. High-pitched barking echoing through a house.*

Number four: "Please call me when you get back. I'm very, very sorry."

Number five: "Frank says I should forget you. If only it were that easy. He doesn't understand."

Number six: "I really need to talk. Batman died this morning. He would have been fourteen in July."

Number seven: "Why don't you call me? Do you really hate me so much?"

Number eight: "Batman was cremated today. I poured his ashes beneath the roses. I know I should stop calling."

Number nine: "This is cruel." *Silence. A phlegmy cough.*

Number ten: "I'm not going to call again. I'm really not. It wasn't meant to be."

Number eleven: "I just thought you should know: I'm dying. It's not a joke. That's why I had to find you."

Peter was sorting through the mail. He was tall and tan and glowing from New Mexico. We had made love in a hot tub under the stars. I had dreamed that I was pregnant, a first for me.

"Jesus," Peter said, shaking his head. "She's really fucking whacked. Thank God you didn't grow up with her."

Not that Peter liked my parents. He tolerated them because he had to. And, anyway, we saw them only once a year, at Christmas.

"She's dying," I said. "Be a little more sensitive."

"Maybe she's dying, maybe not," he said. "And even if she is, you've never even met her."

Spokane from five thousand feet is about as good as it's going to get. From the plane, there is the purity of distance, a suspension of disbelief about your destination that is akin to the act of faith you make when stepping into an airplane. That a plane can fly defies every intuition, yet we fly, and cities sprawl, and from the air even a city like Spokane appears a thing of beauty.

Anna met me at the airport, flowers in her arms. I knew

at once that it was her, and that she had not been lying about being sick. Her teeth were the gray of clouds, her skin a frozen-waffle yellow. Frank stood behind her, enormous, his distrusting eyes like raisins in the bread dough of his face. His head was cleanly shaven, a white dome glistening under the fluorescent lights. They were an odd couple: Anna as light and fragile as blown glass; Frank a four-hundred-pound side of ham with legs. Anna had been crying, anyone could tell, and when she saw me, she proceeded to cry some more.

"Is it ok if I hold you?" she asked, barely audible, and when I nodded, she threw her arms around me.

I don't know what I expected, but it was nothing like what I felt. Our bony ribs collided, and our hipbones hit like bumper cars. I might have been holding myself, except she was even skinnier and smelled like cigarettes and roses. Though she was my height, she felt tiny in my arms, as if I might lift her and throw her skyward like a child.

Frank, on the other hand, was a mortal danger: if he tripped and fell on you, you would surely die. He insisted on carrying my bags, clearing a path through the crowd like a football lineman, breathing so hard as we walked that I worried for his health. Anna held my hand, squeezing too tightly and chattering about her plans for our visit. Her worried eyes never left me, as if she feared I'd vanish in a puff of smoke or be run over by an airport shuttle.

We made it to their car, a lime green Geo Metro that had obviously been cleaned, waxed, and buffed in the last twenty-four hours. I was surprised by the sight of it, not because I'm a snob (though perhaps I am) but because the laws of physics seemed to deny the possibility of Frank's getting into it. He loaded my luggage in the back while Anna reluctantly released my hand and climbed in the rear seat, insisting that I have the front. I sat down, waiting for Frank to perform his miracle. He did not disappoint. With the agility of a gymnast, he grasped the steering wheel, angled sideways, and lowered himself in. I held my breath as the Metro pitched violently to port, shrieking like a sinking ship.

"We get fifty on the highway," Frank said as we spiraled down the parking ramp. A plastic Chihuahua dangled from the rearview mirror.

"We used to have a Bronco," Anna added, "but the engine burned up. Anyhow, we don't drive much."

As in the photos, the sky was gray. The city itself was ashen, the buildings unremarkable and sorry. We exited the highway near a large mall on the west end of town. Anna pointed out landmarks: the Chevy dealership where they'd bought their Metro; the Blockbuster video store where they rented movies; the Subway restaurant where Frank liked to eat two tuna-fish sandwiches every Sunday after church; Loyola Middle School, where Anna worked. She got especially excited when we passed Costco.

(end of excerpt)