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## Mothers

by Mary Brannigan

People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you've seen pictures. As Julia came face to face with Ann there was something different about the countenance of the woman sitting opposite her in the restaurant. Some element that she'd not noticed in the photograph she'd received three months before. There was a hardness there not picked up by the camera. Julia could see the likeness to herself in the woman's face. There could be no doubting the fact that they were related. It had taken her five years to find Ann. She'd started her search a year after the death of her adoptive mother. Sheila had given her the kind of unconditional love that made her loss unbearable. Maybe it was the gap she'd left that caused Julia to think about tracing this woman, who had given her up for adoption when she was a month old.

She'd been told she was adopted when she turned five. It had been done with such sensitivity that it made Julia feel she was a precious gift her mother had longed for. That was probably why Julia never felt any desire to seek out her natural mother before. Sheila had treasured her with a love she felt no one else could give, and she'd been a happy and contented child. Her mother had seen her through all the angst of her teenage years and welcomed all the boyfriends she'd brought home, before she finally settled on James. When he proposed Sheila received the news with a knowing smile as though she'd felt he was the right one from the day they'd met. The engagement party was planned with her usual care and six months later the wedding took place.

Married life only strengthened the bond with this lovely woman who had given her so much. They met regularly for lunch in town and James enjoyed his mother-in-law's visits to their new home. Sheila had helped them choose the furnishings as Julia set about making it the kind of welcoming place in which she'd been raised. When their first child arrived he was accorded the same care and attention she'd shown her beloved daughter. Julia's life was full and she wished all her friends could have the happiness she felt.

The baby was a year old when her father came to see his daughter alone one day in June. He brought the news that shattered her idyllic life. Sheila had been diagnosed with cancer three months earlier, but had refused to tell Julia. Now it had spread and her father had insisted on telling their daughter. For the first time in her life she felt afraid. That evening she went to see this mother who had protected her from the storms of life. It had been her mission to give her daughter the kind of security she herself had always known.

Now they were plunged into the round of doctors and hospitals that were part of the awful search for a cure for Sheila. It was not to be and six months after being told of her mother's illness, she'd stood at the graveside wondering how she could live without Sheila. It didn't seem possible that they'd never again meet for lunch in their favourite restaurant. Julia clung to her father for comfort, knowing he too was lost without this woman who had been the bedrock of the family.

It was this terrible ongoing sense of the missing part of her that had led to the search for her birth mother. Now as she looked at Ann she sensed nothing of the warmth she'd known all her life. This was their first meeting since exchanging letters three months before. Ann asked about her life and listened attentively as she spoke of the kind people who had brought her up. " Well, I'm glad you've been happy" said Ann. " I've had the sort of life I would have forfeited if I'd kept you. I had no wish for children. Your father was a medical student in my year and we both knew you'd have to be adopted. We were focussed on our careers so I didn't hesitate to give you up. I'm a consultant now, so I guess we're both better off for my decision" continued this woman with the hard eyes.

As they parted at the end of lunch Julia knew they would never meet again. She also knew she'd had a lucky escape the day Ann had handed her over to John and Sheila Hobson. That night she tore up the photo that had told her nothing about this woman who had given birth to her.