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One Story

by Penny Humphrey

Most of us have only one story to tell. This is mine.

Thirty years ago, I gave birth to a beautiful baby. I called her Phoebe. She was found to be suffering from neonatal jaundice and was treated for this condition under a special lamp. The nurses said the treatment would be likely to change her hair and skin colour, so when months later I noticed her skin was a little darker than I would have expected and her hair not red as were my husband's and mine, I didn't worry particularly.

Phoebe grew into an enchanting and beautiful child, bright and intelligent.

But as she grew, my husband became very concerned that Phoebe was so noticeably different from us. He became suspicious and accused me of having had the baby by a different father.

No amount of reassurance would cause him to believe otherwise, so I took Phoebe for a test and discovered to my shock that indeed my husband was not the father. I knew the truth of course, that I had been with no other man and so we arranged for another test to be done which proved that I was not the parent of this child either. My love for Phoebe was so great that I was able to transcend the shock.

Investigation proved that somehow in that maternity unit, two babies had got mixed up, put in the wrong cots at birth and so out there somewhere was my real baby with a different mother. That piece of information was very hard to bear as it must have been with the other mother.

The only thing to do was to meet up and exchange the girls who were now seven years old.

The day arrived, no names had been exchanged, the authorities thought it better this way.

We sat in a clinical waiting room, helped a little by the fact that a familiar face happened to be there as well with her little copper haired daughter Susie, a friend who I had come to know in the maternity hospital. The light dawned on us simultaneously as we realised that we were each looking at our own birth children.

A social worker called us into a room and confirmed to my friend and I what we already knew. I looked at my true daughter for the first time with different eyes and was surprised to find that with this knowledge I felt no pang of regret, no attachment to Susie other than that she was my friend's daughter.

My friend must have felt the same way because when our eyes met, there was no need for words.

The social worker began her prepared speech about how to deal with the future after the exchange but we told her to stop. There were hugs and tears while our oblivious children played.

The girls know their stories now, they are grown and flown the nest but Phoebe is still happily mine and Susie, the daughter of my friend.