



HELEN HILL'S DRAWING OF HER 5 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER RAINE, 1984

## A TREATISE ON ADOPTION

What freeway am I on now?...no signs. The maps are gone too. Well, the road is straight and there are no turns. And I know I am headed west because the sun is straight before me.

I remember family vacations driving west. We planned to see the caves and the National Forests. Monuments. Geysers and Redwoods. Everything was planned and mapped out long after I was asleep at night. My clothes were packed for me, selected and folded into a large white suitcase by my mother. There was a swimming suit for motel pools. A light windbreaker for summer storms.

Where are we going? Where is the next stop? How long before we stop for lunch, for dinner? How long until we get a room? A *Best Western* room with 4 Stars. Rooms without a speck of dust and two double beds made up as smooth as boards and the bathroom blinding white — a fresh paper ring sealing the toilet as if it had never been used before.

Most of the motels on the outskirts of town were newly constructed so there was still red-brown dirt turned over and raised in mounds past the parking lot curbs. They were good for climbing, the loose dirt went falling and rolling down the mounds.

I remember the hollow sound of pounding the second story concrete walkways with my feet on my way back to the motel room in the twilight hour between the restaurant dinner and bedtime. The sheets and pillowcases were impossibly clean like no one had ever rested there, and they would be made that way again when I was gone. Before we left the next morning I would see a motel maid with her cart, waiting for us to leave so she could eradicate all traces of us. Her cart was piled with more glasses wrapped in wax paper and more boxes of soap, each wrapped carefully so that the next occupants could be sure that they were the first to touch everything in the room.

Gradually we reenter the stream of freeway traffic. Cheyenne, Ogden, Helena. Where are we now? When will we stop? Will there be a pool tonight?

Summertime. We are a family encased together, wrapped inside a station wagon traveling across the country. We are an island unto ourselves and in the early morning before the wind gets hot, before the windows have to go up, I have the window down all the way to let the air in, the air that blows through other people's lives and is commonplace to them. The air that blows across their front porches comes in through the window and touches my face, changes the hair across my forehead. I am excited to be blown by a wind so many miles from home — But it is as if they sense my love of a strange wind and the windows are ordered up and the air conditioner is switched on.

Perhaps I caught a scent of my own people, a way of life that had expelled me but calls to me all the same.

Somewhere there is an eye that rests in a hollow beside the nose just the way mine does, but I have never seen it. There are hands shaped like mine and a way of walking that resembles mine but I've never seen it. I am to know only that I am a second child, youngest; I am daughter and I am to ride in this seat on family vacations and be glad the sheets are impossibly clean and there is no trace of anyone before me. I am to roll up the window when the wind bears a thrill and a promise of a place I might have come from.

I stare deep into the black vinyl of the seat in front of me and press my knees into it. Unknown miles of asphalt pass underneath me and I embrace the feeling of moving, of drifting even as I sit still in my place. I am in no one place even as this car surrounds me.

Sometimes we would cover five hundred miles a day to get to a 4 Star motel. The four stars insured its absolute cleanliness. The wide open seemed to me nothing more than days of being encased in a car and a succession of motel keys dangling from a plastic oval. We were traveling over and above the country, never touching it. We flew through it and slept on beds that were prized for their anonymity. I was part of these vacations and they passed before my eyes like television shows.

She is always with me, my mother. She is me, but standing somewhere at rest, connected. To find her would place me. To know the slightest detail would let me rest. I would like to see a dress that she wore, a comb she used. Instead of building on top of an empty hole I could build over a form.

But for now I would rather be moving. I would rather be in a boat or a car or on the edge of the ocean.

My mother years ago made a sad mistake. Her life was not her own. There was an event beyond her control. She was young, her life was ahead of her. This one child could have twisted her life and her plans and robbed her of all hope of a logical future. So she cut this child loose from her. She cut it cleanly away. Those who cared about her arranged it, and it was gone. Whatever regrets she had were silenced by the logic and the necessity and the regard for the promise of her future. The event was severed cleanly and permanently like an unidentifiable suitcase thrown from a moving car. (The event rushes away from her. Laws protect her from ever being haunted by her mistake.)

Years ago my parents who raised me were faced with an empty place. They took home someone else's child and called it their own. To protect themselves they had to eradicate all true history of the child. She was to serve as daughter, to fill a hole they found gaping, regardless and heedless of any history but the clean and unused one they made for her.

My physical being was a subject that was unspeakable for it was the one clue that they could not seal in an envelope away from my eyes. They used the most powerful weapon — shame — to discourage a natural desire to know the past.

If they could change everything about me they would have. They would rather have melted their own flesh and blood together to form me like others do but they could not, so they pretended. I was in need of a home so they filled an empty place with me. My hands, my face, the way I seem to think and walk is foreign to them and must therefore be kept foreign to me.

Vacation trips seemed a good family thing. To see the world as they felt it should be for me, clean and removed and free from history as all things should be. The sheetrock walls, the slick headboards of each room in each *Ramada*, *Holiday* and *Best Western* where maids wrap soap and seal toilets. My parents who raised me thought that I could grow so much beyond them within the boundary of a locked and speeding car.

Summertime and we are a family encased together, wrapped inside a station wagon traveling across the country. We are an island unto ourselves in the early morning before the wind gets hot, before the windows must go up. I have the window down all the way to let the air in, the air that blows through other people's lives. It touches me and excites me to be blown by a wind so many miles away from home — but again they sense my love of a strange wind and the chance it might bring me a knowledge of a line of people I belong to whose eyes and ways of talking are like mine. I roll up the window as I am told.

But the shame they imposed did not last much longer than the years I lived at home.

Where do I turn now? How far can I look into myself without uncovering a void?

Both of you have been fully protected for the duration of my youth. You, my mother, have an uncomplicated past. You are free to walk alone and the law protects your right. You, my parents who raised me, have had your daughter, your empty place filled. I have served you both well and in silence, but age weighs heavily on me. The face that is mine in the mirror is more and more groundless and strange.

Am I to die without the barest detail of my own? Am I a secret illegal to myself?

All roads for me lead to a sealed envelope kept in a courthouse unknown to me, which for the protection of others I have no right to open.

And for now I would rather be moving.

~HELEN HILL (1984)



HELEN HILL

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