

abandoned  
at  
birth

The cover of Janet's leather-bound scrapbook – it holds every clipping and document from her 10-year search.

Imagine being left on the hospital doorstep as a newborn baby. Imagine spending the rest of your life searching for clues to your background and your birth parents. Imagine what it's like to be Janet Keall. By Julia Nunes

PHOTOS BY ROBERT KARPA



"The biggest mystery to all of this is: if my biological mother didn't raise me, didn't hug me and kiss me every night, didn't see me grow up, then why am I still searching for her?"

**IN THE EARLIEST** hour of an October morning in the remote coastal town of Prince Rupert, B.C., a man opens a hospital door and steps into the darkness. He wants a cigarette, a quiet moment while his son is inside waiting for the doctor. Instead, on the steps he finds a moving bundle, a blanket that contains a newborn baby girl.

This is all Janet Keall knows about how her life began. Just a handful of details collected from a faded newspaper clipping and a conversation with the man who found her. For years, she has searched for answers—writing letters by the hundreds, posting notices on websites, offering her story to local news reporters. But the mystery endures. And it goes to the core of who she is.

“There are two people in this world who made me,” says Janet. “I’ve got ties to two people I don’t know.” She takes a deep breath, resisting tears. “I don’t even know their faces. It’s not right. It’s not natural.”

In and around her 10-year search, Janet has built for herself an enviable life. At 28, she is blessed with loving adoptive parents, a supportive spouse, two young sons, a full-time job and an elegant penthouse suite in downtown Vancouver. But underlying all of this is raw emotion, unresolved. “I know what I’ve got, and I don’t take it for granted,” she says firmly. “Yet I think that just kind of helps me along. It will never wipe out the emptiness. It will never wipe out the grief I feel.”

Few people understand the depths of that emotion; her story is so rare. Perhaps her common-law husband, Christopher Chong, comes closest. “She’s utterly alone when it comes to her search and her emotions,” he says. “The rest of us have choices either to hate our families and not talk to them, or to have a relationship at arm’s length. She doesn’t have that option. She was never given that choice.”

“That’s the hardest feeling of all,” Janet says, nodding. “I really am alone.”

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**AS A SMALL GIRL** being tucked into bed, Janet asks for the same story over and over again. It’s the story of how she came to be adopted. And to young Janet, it sounds like a fairy tale: “We saw this baby on the news and we wanted that baby, and so we did what we had to do,” Jerrilyn Keall, her adoptive mother, would whisper softly. “And we got a phone call, and we went and got you, and we were so happy.”

Janet smiles, remembering. “It really made me feel so special.”

“She grew up knowing,” says Gordon Keall, her adoptive father. “There was no resentment. It was just, ‘We are your family. We’re Mom and Dad.’”

But for young Janet, the story caused some confusion. After a final kiss goodnight, she would lie in her dark room, imagining who her birth mother might be. Around age 10, she developed a fantasy: her favourite singer, Whitney Houston, was going to come and claim her before morning.

Reality did not truly set in until Janet turned 18 and was legally entitled to her birth record. Sitting in that same suburban bedroom, she scanned the single-page document, which listed her birthdate, city of birth and the name her nurses had given her: Bonnie Vanessa Hope. Every other line was blank. At the top of the page, the word “unknown” had been written in by hand.

“And I just said to myself, ‘I’ve got to go to Prince Rupert. I don’t know why, I don’t know

what I’m looking for or what I’m really doing, but I’ve got to go there.’” With her parents’ support, Janet set out on the 19-hour drive north. As the city landscape gave way to trees and empty spaces, she was sure she’d find some answers. “I thought it would be easy,” she recalls.

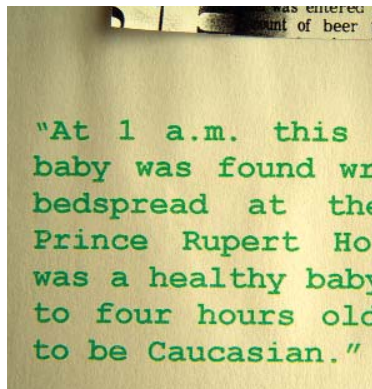
Prince Rupert itself turned out to be small and rather depressing, a former boom town scattered with empty homes and storefronts. “The town was very quiet and eerie”—an eeriness that matched her own situation.

She had travelled there with her boyfriend and had no particular plan other than to visit the hospital where she’d been found and be interviewed by the local newspaper. Along the way, she discovered that all of her hospital and police files had been lost. “No one could find anything to do with me. It’s like I was never even there,” Janet says sadly.

When her story appeared in the newspaper, her hopes surged that someone—perhaps even her birth parents—might step forward. “That was crushed pretty quickly. I learned instantly that I have to just take it as it comes. And I have to accept that maybe I will never know.”

A decade later, she is still facing the same truth. In the absence of facts, so many what-ifs linger.

“What if they’re drug addicts? What if they’re alcoholics?” says Christopher of Janet’s birth- >



**The few details of Janet’s first hours were gleaned from a faded newspaper clipping and the man who found her.**

parents. “What if they’re racists – and here she is in an interracial relationship? We have no idea what kind of people Janet’s biological parents may be. We need to be prepared for almost anything.”

“It’s kind of like accepting 20 different truths,” Janet explains. “And one of those is that I’ll find them. But the other 19 are that maybe I’ll never know. I think of that often but I try not to as well. Because if I focus on the negative too much, then it will just eat me alive.”

And so her search continues.

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**IN THE OFFICE** where she works in downtown Vancouver, Janet stands by the fax machine, waiting nervously. Three sheets of paper spit out, face down, and she holds them tenderly in her hands. Janet has been waiting weeks for these pages but finds she cannot bring herself to look at them.

Three months earlier, she had mailed a DNA sample taken from inside her cheek to a company in the U.S. The faxed pages will now reveal what science can offer about where she came from. Janet retreats to her office, closes the door, braces herself. Then she starts reading.

“Here I’ve lived my life for 28 years and I’m just now going to find out a for-sure fact of where I’m from,” she says. “It was overwhelming.”

The Certificate of Ancestry showed that Janet’s genetic makeup is 89 per cent European. It was the first solid piece of information to come along in years. “Of course, I’ve now got many more questions, but still it just validates my story for me.”

Janet’s loveliness – her fair skin, auburn-brown hair, blue eyes – have always inspired comments. “She must have been pretty,” people tell her, in reference to her birth mother. But Janet herself has no mental image of the woman she has searched for all these years. “That’s a skill you’re taught when you grow up with mystery,” she says. “You don’t ever assume until you know the facts.”

Over the years, her pursuit of those facts has taken a heavy toll. With every newspaper ad she places, with every television interview she grants, she waits for a breakthrough, but now she doesn’t expect one. “If she gets a lead, there’s hope. And then the hope is quickly smashed because the lead dries up or it’s not true,” says best friend Karyn Waters. “It’s been one huge roller coaster throughout her life, and it just gets more intense.”

After one newspaper story was published, a man contacted her to say her mother might be a woman named Joanne Clements, who had lived in Prince Rupert at the time. He was vague on details and soon dropped out of touch. Still, Janet mailed out letters of inquiry to every Clements she could find in Canada. She kept a spreadsheet of several hundred names. “Only four people didn’t write back. But no one knew anything.” Her voice drops. “No one knew a thing.”

Janet insists she is not necessarily seeking a relationship with her birth parents. What she wants now are answers. “I just want to know who my mother is, who my father is. Do I have brothers and sisters? And what happened that night? What happened during that pregnancy? I just want to know all the facts.”

That urge is common among adult adoptees, says Eugénie Doré, executive director of the Adoption Council of Canada. The council promotes openness in all aspects of adoption. She says adoptees should have

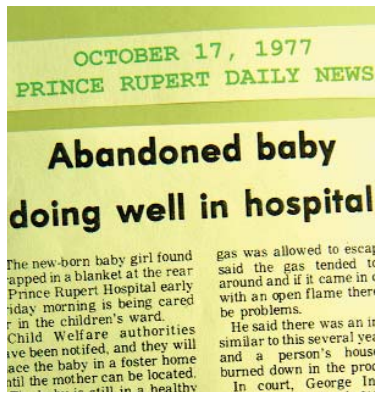
access to relevant information pertaining to their birth parents. “It’s the right of every child to know where he or she came from,” says Doré.

In British Columbia, legislation allows birth parents to decide to keep their identities hidden. But the number of these vetoes is quite small, says Lee Crawford, an adoption therapist with a private practice in Vancouver. After new legislation was passed in 1996, Crawford says many people wanted to search for their birth parents, and most people still choose to reunite and find each other.

Crawford, who has worked in the field for almost 18 years, believes reunion is often a healing experience for everyone involved. “Reunion lessens the guilt and the shame that birth mothers feel, and it gives them a sense of peace. It strengthens adoptive-family relationships because people are able to communicate more openly and honestly. I’ve watched it time and again in my practice.”

Crawford counsels people who have been abandoned, and she understands the loneliness they feel. “Nobody really understands the internal way in which people live with this. It’s extremely traumatic. Even adoptees who aren’t literally abandoned may still feel as if they have been. There are feelings of detachment and disconnection.”

Because baby abandonment is rare (no one knows just how rare because national statistics >



**Because abandonment is so rare, there is little research into why it happens, or how it affects those who are left.**

are not kept), there is little research into how or why it happens. Janet has looked hard for others who have been where she has been—with little success. With this in mind, and with her usual high dose of energy, she has worked hard to create a new website for people who were abandoned ([www.keallfoundation.com](http://www.keallfoundation.com)). In her spare time—between her full-time job and mothering a seven-year-old and a three-year-old—Janet lined up a project manager, programmer, coder and web-hosting company willing to donate their services. With live chat programs and message boards, she hopes the website will help people connect and heal by reaching out to others who have been abandoned.

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**ON A SATURDAY** afternoon in late May, Janet stands facing a hospital doorway. She is back in Prince Rupert for the first time since that brief visit as a naive 18-year-old. Now she is finally standing at the spot where she was left when she was just a few hours old. At her side is the man who found her, and his wife—two caring people who want only to help.

In the doorway, a stream of people file past, oblivious. “It’s the main doorway to emergency,” Janet says slowly. “That’s the doorway that’s open at night. It’s very hospital-like, very cold, with fluorescent lights.”

On her previous visit, Janet had walked past all the hospital doors, uncertain at which she had been found. But now she knows. And much can be gleaned from this one new piece of information. The bustling location shows that someone had wanted her to be found. “I was left with that thought in mind,” Janet says.

On this momentous day, the commotion proved too intense. “I was just shell-shocked. I was a mess, completely paralyzed.” After a few tears and hugs, the small troupe left quietly together.

The next day was busy, too; Prince Rupert was having a homecoming and thousands of former residents had flocked to town for a series of events. After a meeting with the mayor, Janet told her husband she needed to go back to the hospital. Looking for clues, answers, something.

This time, the doorway was quiet. Although she does not know for sure, in her mind, she pictured her mother as the one who left her there. “I was just thinking”—Janet pauses, allowing the tears to

flow—“that was the moment she said goodbye. I envisioned this little baby who was me.

“So I just sat there and cried. I don’t even know why I wanted to do it. I guess I had to relive it. I had to be there in the same spot where she was. And then finally it just got too painful. There’s a time when you just have to turn it off. I could have sat there all day. But I bolted.”

That night, Christopher had to leave town. Once again, Janet was alone, which felt right to her.

In her hotel room, she did something she’d never felt the need to do in all her years of searching. She wrote a private letter to her mother. The words flowed fast. “I was just crying and writing and reliving the pain of what had happened that day—the day I was abandoned and the day I just had at the hospital.”

It was painful but, as Janet says, pain isn’t always a bad thing. “I’m not the type of person to hide and be in denial and not know. At least I can say that I was there. I really know where it happened.”

It was a piece of the truth. And it helped.

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**IN A LARGE** scrapbook bound in green leather, Janet keeps every newspaper clipping and document gathered in her 10-year search. Her birth registration record is here, along with her Certificate of Ancestry and a photo of her 12 “Prince Rupert aunts”—women who’ve spent their lives in this isolated town and offered Janet their support. On another page, a printout of a webpage on which the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Veterans’ Association requests information on her behalf. She has met many kind people over the years, and she is grateful to every one of them.

Janet says there are times she feels overwhelmed and deadlocked and thinks about ending her search. But she’s not ready yet, and she doesn’t think she will be in the near future. Not until she has convinced herself that every possible avenue has been explored. This magazine article, she believes, is one such avenue. “Of course, I’m doing it in hopes of finding my biological parents, but half of me says I probably never will. Then the other half says, if you never try.... That’s the type of person I am in life. I just don’t sit back and not do anything. I can’t.”

And there are 10 empty pages of her scrapbook still waiting to be filled. ●

OF  
A (Canada)  
HEALTH  
Statistics  
of child (print or type)

REGISTRATION OF  
**LIVE BIRTH**

names in full (print or type)

E. VANESSA

names, day, year of birth

October 13, 1977

4. KIND OF BIRTH—State  
single  
twin  
triplet

or other place (by name)

Prince Rupert, B. C.

street address. If rural give exact location, not Post Office or Rural

or other place (by name)

25-025

**Janet’s birth record – with its mostly blank lines – has a handwritten word at the top of the page: “unknown.”**