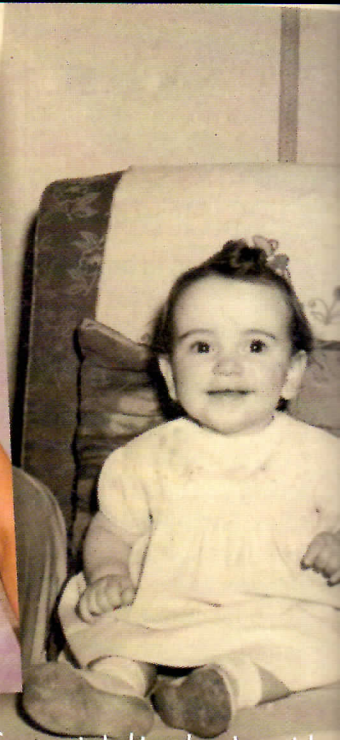


# My birth was my family's biggest secret

How does it feel to discover your family has lied to you; that your mum and dad aren't your birth parents; and you may have relatives you never knew existed? This is what happened to Val Lawson, 54, from Leeds

Val, today, and as the baby secretly adopted by Tom and Mary Lawson.



*I couldn't shake the constant niggles that I might have siblings*

**A**t the age of five, I remember telling one of my friends I was adopted. There was no basis for it; I think all children like to imagine their own alternative life... it's just that I turned out to be right.

I found out one afternoon at work when I made a phone call to replace my lost birth certificate. The woman on the end of the line asked if I'd like the full version. I'd only ever had a short copy with my date and place of birth, so I said yes. 'You know it will only have the name of your adoptive parents on it,' she said, 'not your birth parents.' I told her she must be mistaken, I wasn't adopted. But she said, 'You are actually.'

I didn't know what to say. She was so matter-of-fact that I didn't contradict her again. I was polite and put the phone down and then burst into tears. I felt helpless.

My parents had died a few years before, so quizzing them was out of the question, but what about my older brother, Joe? I called him and, when he picked up the phone, I asked him straightaway: 'Am I adopted?' There was a long pause and then he said, 'Who told you?' I felt sick as I told him about the phone call, and then he burst into tears. I'd never heard him cry before. He kept apologising and he told me Mum and Dad had made him promise never to tell me.

Joe told me to contact Nanna – my mum's cousin who I had always called Nanna – as she knew everything and could explain it properly. It turned out that, back in

the 50s, Nanna had been friends with a young woman who was single and pregnant, my birth mother – Phyllis Bennett. Phyllis couldn't keep me because of the scandal it would have caused, so she asked Nanna to find someone to adopt me. Nanna turned to her cousin Mary and her husband Tom – my adoptive parents.

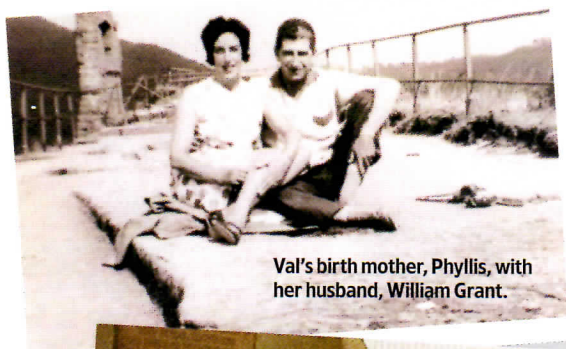
Nanna also told me that, once Mum had died in 1982, she and my father had discussed telling me. But my father got cold feet and decided it was better to 'leave well alone' – one of his favourite expressions.

A few days after seeing Nanna, I received the birth certificate. Then, a friend who was involved with the adoptions service managed to obtain my original certificate – which has the name Linda Bennett on it... me.

## I wanted to know more

The magnitude of the secret my parents had kept took a while to sink in, but gradually I became aware of how difficult it must have been for them. I made the decision early on to not let it tarnish my memories of them. Whatever their reasons, everything they did was for me, because they loved me.

The one feeling I couldn't shake was the constant niggles that I might have siblings I didn't know about. I did a tentative search



Val's birth mother, Phyllis, with her husband, William Grant.



Val's adoptive parents, Mary and Tom, with Nanna – Val's only link to the past.



on the Internet, but I didn't pursue it. It felt disloyal to Joe and I didn't want him to feel like the family I already had wasn't good enough. But when Joe died in 2004, I officially had no family left, and I knew that was the right time to investigate.

Nanna had told me that Phyllis had married two years after I was born, so I went to Leeds Library and spent days searching through microfilm before finding Phyllis's date of birth, her marriage certificate, and the name of her husband – William Grant.

### I was someone's long-lost sister

It took another week before I discovered they'd had a son, Richard\* my half-brother. I knew I wanted to find him, but had no idea how to go about it. I became very despondent. Looking for my brother had given me a purpose and a goal and then suddenly, it was over. Then, last August, an old school friend contacted me through Friends Reunited. That gave me the idea to type in Richard's name. There were four results and, from the dates, I was able to whittle it down.

Composing the email to introduce myself as someone's long-lost sister was the most nerve-racking thing I've ever done. Eventually, I entitled it 'Family' and simply asked if he knew Phyllis Bennett, and the man she had married in 1953.

He replied two days later, saying Phyllis was his mother and asking how could he help me. It was incredible. I'd found a blood relation. It

took me two days, many drafts and lots of advice from friends before I was satisfied with the email I sent back to him. I was hoping that he'd be overjoyed to find out about me but, sadly that wasn't the case. His response was quite cool and he made it clear that he didn't want to form a relationship with me. I would have been devastated, except he wrote that, a few years before, a man called Colin had contacted him claiming to be his brother. He included Colin's email address.

That I had found another half-brother was wonderful and this time I emailed straightaway, explaining who I was and how I'd come to know of him. It only took half a day for Colin to reply, and opening his email was a very different experience. It was everything I'd hoped for – he asked me lots of questions, wanting to know all about me, and I immediately knew this was the start of something big. He seemed completely accepting and enthusiastic about this revelation – he's since described me and my introductory email as 'the best present.'

### My quest took me to Australia

I learned that Colin had a wife, Gemma, and a daughter, Deirdre. He works as a geologist and has always known that he was adopted. Phyllis and William had given him up two years after me, and he'd moved with his adoptive parents to Adelaide, when he was six.

Months of emails, phone calls and photo-swapping later, I went to visit him in Australia. To say I was nervous was an understatement. In the end, after all the outcomes I'd imagined (a dramatic embrace, tears, joy) when we came face to face at the airport it felt a bit formal and we shook hands – I was a little disappointed. But, it soon became clear that he was very happy about me being in his life.

My three-week trip was an education from start to finish. Colin and I have different dads – Colin knew his was William Grant, but

I have no idea who my real dad was. Phyllis and William decided to put Colin up for adoption because they just couldn't afford to keep him.

After a few hours of being

Val refuses to let this revelation tarnish her happy memories.



*'My birth mother couldn't keep me because of the scandal it would have caused'*

in his home, it hit me that this was the first time in my entire life that I was spending time with someone who was related to me by birth and blood. It was a very odd situation, knowing that if things had been different, we'd have shared a childhood. We spent a lot of time talking about the pros and cons of knowing if you're adopted and, although we never reached a conclusion, we both agreed that finding each other made up for the lack of answers.

Colin and I are in each other's lives now and that won't change. I have dozens of dear friends, yet I've always felt separate, alone and slightly 'disjointed'. Finding stability with my new family has changed that, and I'm revelling in this feeling of belonging.

I'm now at a place where I can honestly say that I'm luckier than most. I had a mum and dad who wanted me more than anything, and a new family who have welcomed me into their lives. I often think back to how the secret of my adoption must have weighed upon my parents and wonder if, given their time again, they'd do it differently. However, I have no regrets, and Tom and Mary Lawson will always be my mum and dad. They made me who I am – Val Lawson – and I can't be angry with them for that.

The 'new' family – Colin, his wife Gemma and their daughter Deirdre.

