

"Get Rid of the Baby. Let's Go Home."

by Campbell Armstrong

"GIRL DOLL AND FLOWERED SHAWL" BY JOYCE STOLAROFF



In I Hope You Have a Good Life, Irish novelist Campbell Armstrong tells the story of his ex-wife, a English Jewish woman named Eileen Altman, and the child of her teenage years whom she was forced to give up for adoption. Campbell and Eileen met in 1961 as they worked for paltry wages in a London shopping mall. He was an aspiring novelist, she the 19-year-old flamboyant, hard-partying daughter of an Orthodox Jewish family. The night of their first sexual encounter, he noticed a scar on her abdomen—the relic of a caesarean section—and she told him the story of her missing girl.

A note on the players: Doris is Eileen's mother, Israel (or "Issy"), her father. Sydney is her brother, who keeps her secret for years. And the author is her adoring ex, who despite their divorce and his remarriage stays close to Eileen throughout her life.

In 1954 when she was sixteen, [Eileen] met a man eleven years older than she was. When Eileen became pregnant, she knew very little about her body—she was only sixteen and apparently sex education wasn't the kind of topic Doris discussed around the house. She once told Eileen, in a piece of misinformation that might have made an old nun proud, that babies grew in the backyard. And then, in this household of biological myths and social respectability and basic decency, Eileen had the searing, unenviable task of announcing she was pregnant.

She didn't have the courage to face her parents when it came right down to it, so she asked her favorite aunt and confidante, Aunt D, to tell Doris and Issy for her. Eileen waited upstairs in her bedroom while Aunt D broke the news. Eileen heard her mother crying loudly, hysterically. She went downstairs. It must have been the longest walk she had ever taken. Doris confronted her. Words like

disgrace and scandal and shame crackled in the room like electrical disturbances. Her father, quiet and pale, was trying to comfort his wife.

Since abortion was illegal, it wasn't even a consideration. It was an activity associated with backstreet butchers. But this was 1954 and the idea of a single mother carried the heavy burden of social stigma. The fallen woman, the bastard child. In Issy and Doris' world, the only feasible solution to Eileen's predicament was evasion. This was the scheme they hatched: Israel would give up his furrier's business in Glasgow and they'd go to Scarborough, a coastal resort in Yorkshire where they'd often vacationed. Among family and friends they'd circulate the story that Doris was suffering from a bad case of nerves, and needed "rest" in a place removed from stress. She was willing to accept the indignity of the label "nervous breakdown" rather than admit to anyone that her daughter was pregnant. Only one condition was imposed: in return for the support and care of her parents, Eileen would give the baby up for adoption. Apart from Aunt D, the only other person privy to the conspiracy was Eileen's brother Sydney, ten years older than she, who'd go to any lengths to protect the family name.

And he did, he kept the silence for years, until it was nothing more than a foggy memory.

* * *

They created quite an impressive make-believe world in Scarborough, and in this fairy-tale place, this time out of time, anything could be suspended or ignored—even Doris' kosher discipline. When Eileen developed a craving for bacon sandwiches, Doris gave her the money to buy them. What did it matter? The real world was on hold. Issy became a milkman.

Eileen began to think more and more of the child growing inside her. She was developing the proprietorial affection of a mother for her unborn baby. One day she asked Doris the unthinkable: might she keep the child? Doris told her to put that notion out of her head immediately.

On May 30, 1955, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl she named Barbara, after her favorite childhood doll. The idea of a girl having a baby she named after a childhood doll touched me when she told me: I thought of her in 1955 suspended in that spooky place between adolescence and adulthood, neither one thing nor the other, a child-woman.

She remained in the hospital for three weeks to recover from surgery, and during this time she bottle-fed Barbara because she'd been given medication to dry her breast milk. Daily contact with a baby you have no chance of taking home and raising. You hold the child, kiss it, adore it, take it into your heart. Only you don't get to take it home.

After three weeks, she went to the adoption society at the appointed time, where she was left alone with the baby for a short period. She held the child in her arms. She cried, pressing her damp face against the baby's. She wished there was another door through which she might escape, taking Barbara with her, disappearing into a place where they'd never be found.

No. One look at the expression on Doris' face killed any

such chance. It's done with. Get rid of the baby. Let's go home. I'm sorry it has to be this way. In the most heart-breaking moment she had ever known, Eileen whispered to the baby, "I love you. I hope you have a good life."

And Barbara was taken away by strangers.

* * *

[More than four decades pass. Eileen is diagnosed with lung cancer and is living in Phoenix, Arizona. Her daughter Barbara, in England, is also diagnosed with cancer that has spread to her lungs. In June 1997, Barbara wrote in her journal, "I am looking into the face of death. I must find my mother immediately."]

On the night of August 2, 1997, a Saturday—12 days after I have come back from America, days of constant health bulletins and messages of hope and emanations of dread from Phoenix—the telephone rings in Sydney's flat. A woman's voice: "Mr. Altman? Mr. Sydney Altman?" Sydney says it is.

"I'm trying to trace your sister. Eileen Altman."

Sydney asks, "Who am I speaking to?"

The woman has a Yorkshire accent. She hesitates a moment, then she replies, "I'm Barbara."

"Barbara?" Sydney can't place the name. Who does he know called Barbara? And then he remembers, and he thinks, no, surely not, this has to be some other Barbara. This can't be the child from all those years ago.

But it is. The woman says quietly, "I'm Eileen's daughter. I want to contact her. It's important. It's very important. I've been looking and looking for a long time. I need your help, if you're willing, and I need it quickly ..."

Sydney doesn't know what to say. His thoughts rush at once to the fact that Eileen is fighting for her life: what would a shock so seismic as the reappearance of a daughter she gave away for adoption more than forty years ago do to her position, already precarious? He decides to put Barbara off, stall her. "This is a bad time. I don't know how she could handle the news that you're trying to find her. She's very ill. She's been diagnosed with cancer."

"Cancer?"

"She just had an operation, and she's in a really weak condition, and your call comes completely out of the blue. I need time to think about the best way to approach all this—"

"I understand that ... the trouble is, I don't know how much time I've got, Mr. Altman."

"All I'm saying is we wait until Eileen gets stronger, then we'll see."

Barbara is silent for a second before she says, "I haven't explained myself properly. I've got cancer too." ■

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