

Sara-Jayne Makwala King is a radio presenter and journalist, and has written a memoir about being adopted as a baby and growing up in England. After the publication of her book, she found her biological father and was reunited with him.



Family Ties

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

Who doesn't love a good family reunion? Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman's characters in *Rain Man*; Tia and Tamera Mowry as twin sisters separated at birth who're reunited as teenagers in *Sister, Sister*; and another set of twins separated at birth, both played by Lindsay Lohan, in *The Parent Trap*... It's a favourite topic on daytime talk shows and the subject of several reality shows for good reason: we love seeing people find their long-lost loved ones.

You'll remember the story of the woman known to the world as Zephany Nurse. In 2015, a selfie with a fellow high school student who bore a striking resemblance to her led Miché Solomon to discover that the only mother she'd ever known had kidnapped her from Groote Schuur Hospital when she was just three days old. Her story made headlines around the world and everyone rejoiced: How happy she must be to have learnt the truth and be reunited with her 'real' family! But the reality was far more complicated. In the aftermath, Miché revealed how she struggled to form a relationship with her biological family – she still goes by the name given to her by the woman who kidnapped her. Although we're happy to report that she has

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS MADE IT MUCH EASIER TO FIND PEOPLE LIFE HAS SEPARATED. WHILE THERE'S OFTEN A HAPPY ENDING, SOMETIMES... THERE ISN'T. WE SPOKE TO THREE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TRACKED DOWN A LONG-LOST FAMILY MEMBER.

since bonded with her biological family (in part thanks to lockdown), reunions are often bittersweet, and not just for those directly involved.

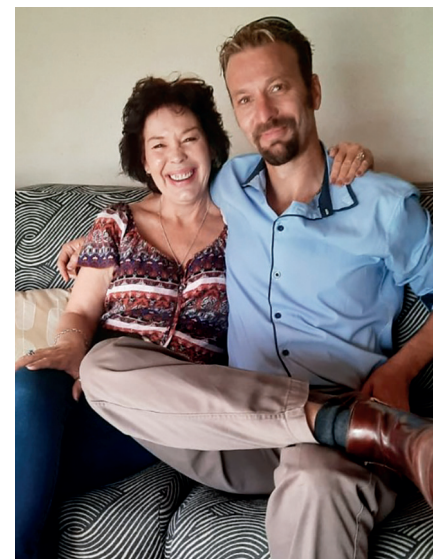
These are the stories of three people who managed to find a missing family member.

'I never gave up hope of finding him'

'How is he going to feel about me? What if he rejects me?' Salomé Tadford needn't have worried. Forty years after she had last held her son, there he was, pulling her into a hug.

Salomé was impregnated by a trusted family friend at the age of 12. When she gave birth to a little girl, Salomé's mother told her to pretend her daughter was her sister. Soon afterwards, a family member started molesting Salomé

and she fell pregnant again, at just 13. Neither of the men who assaulted her was ever brought to justice.



Mother and son, Salomé Tadford and Brandon Blignaut

She gave birth to her son Frits Brandon on 17 September 1981 with only a doctor and a nursing sister there – none of her family was with her. She took her son home and cared for him and his sister for three months – until people who claimed to be from welfare knocked on the door, saying they were there for her son. ‘I was still so young; I just did what they asked me to do. And then, after that, I never saw him again.’

All Salomé had was a single picture of her son, which she carried around with her, hoping that one day they would be together again. Many years later, she turned to websites that promised to reunite people with loved ones – and then Facebook came along. In 2019, she created the Facebook group SonWhereRU, which caught the attention of local media.

On 5 July 2022, at about 5 am, Salomé received a message: ‘Hello, I’m sorry to bother you so early. But your story has me in tears, and I think I may have information. I know a Brandon...’

‘It was a strange message to read so early. I couldn’t even comprehend what I was reading. My husband and I didn’t know if it was a scam,’ Salomé says. ‘We asked the caller if she had any documents supporting this, and she sent me a copy of his adoption papers.’

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I’m one of the lucky ones in that I met my son and he was open to meeting me. That’s not always the case.

Salomé had always questioned the legality of her son’s adoption. She’d been told that she had signed the paperwork, even though she knew this couldn’t have been the case. But now that the adoption papers were in front of her, she recognised the handwriting: it was her mother’s. ‘All that time, she never talked about him. She never mentioned him ever again.’

Later that same day she spoke to her son, although they kept losing the signal because of load-shedding. Eventually she and her husband got into their car and drove out to meet him. ‘I found that missing puzzle piece.’

Today, Salomé says her life is complete. ‘I have three children and lots of grandchildren. My life is full.’ Brandon’s adoptive mother passed away when he was just 11, and his adoptive father died in 2008, but if she could, Salomé says, she would thank them for taking care of her son when she wasn’t able to do so. Through all of this she has also come to forgive her mother, who has since passed away. ‘I would have loved to have talked to her about it, but I can’t. And I’ve made peace with that.’

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Still, Salomé doesn’t think it should stop others from reaching out. ‘I always thought I’d most probably only meet my son when I was old, so it has been wonderful to meet him now, while I am still in good health.’

‘That’s a Makwala!’

Well-known radio personality Sara-Jayne Makwala King is quick to correct people who tell her she has

found her happy ending. ‘For a lot of adoptees, it’s not about finding that happy ending; it’s about finding a sense of identity.’

Fans of the CapeTalk presenter and those who read her first book, *Killing Karoline*, will be familiar with her story, but for others, here’s a summary:

Sara-Jayne was born Karoline King in 1980 – the child of an interracial affair, something that was illegal under the Immorality Act. To cover up the affair, her biological mother, a British citizen, took Karoline to England to be adopted by an English family, and when she returned to South Africa she told everyone Karoline had died.

When she was about 19, Sara-Jayne contacted her biological mother, who made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with her. The only information she would offer about her biological father was his name, but she told Sara-Jayne there was no hope of her ever knowing anything else about him.

‘I remember when my adoptive family first got internet (the days of dial-up!), now and then I’d feel the compulsion to search for him.’

As she got older, she turned to private investigators, but nothing ever panned out. ‘One told me I should just give up.’

When Sara-Jayne wrote her first memoir, she changed the names of her birth parents. ‘The reason for my hesitancy to say his name was threefold. After my mother, I didn’t think I could handle another rejection. I also wasn’t sure if there were other people in his life who might not know about me. And I understood that, as a black man living in apartheid South Africa, it could not have been easy, and I didn’t know what his experiences had been.’

While promoting *Killing Karoline*, with some gentle pushing from

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Sara-Jayne Makwala King and her father, Dackson Makwala – she says she cannot imagine not having him in her life now.

her colleague and friend Koketso Sachane, she said her father's real name live on radio. 'Black Twitter sprang into action and, within 24 hours, someone contacted me, asking, "Could this be your father?"'

It was. That very day, they spoke on the phone and, a week later, Sara-Jayne found herself in Joburg meeting not only her biological father but also her siblings.

In complete contrast to her birth mother, Sara-Jayne's father is an open book. He has spoken about the guilt he felt for not being there for her. 'Which I don't understand, because he wasn't in any position to be there for me,' she says. 'A few days after my mother gave birth, she brought me to the hotel where they both worked. Pulling back the blanket covering my face, he said to her, "That's a Makwala."'

Even though Sara-Jayne now has the family she so desperately wanted,

her situation is bitter-sweet. 'I'll never get that time back,' she says. 'We

are close now, but I'll never have the relationship with my father that my siblings have with him.'

Sara-Jayne lives in Cape Town with her partner and two children, whereas her father and her siblings live in Johannesburg. She hopes that one day they can all live closer together.

'We reconnected in 2019, and I can't imagine not having him in my life now. One day my dad will be gone, but my siblings and I will continue as Makwalas, and our children will continue that legacy.'



‘My mom gained a family, but did I lose my mom?’

After a family tragedy, Cecilia* and her brother lost both their parents. With no one left to claim them, they were both adopted.

For years, Cecilia told no one about her roots – not even her own children. ‘I remember we had a children’s book about being adopted, but it was never something we spoke about in our house at all,’ says her son Jason*. It was only when he turned 18 that his mother showed him a family tree filled with names and surnames he didn’t recognise: the only thing she had left of her previous life.

This was 2005. Thabo Mbeki was president, Tom Cruise jumped for joy on Oprah’s couch and, other than a few US college campuses, Facebook wasn’t yet a thing. But there was Google. ‘I was pretty lucky in the sense that I had full names and dates that I could work with,’ Jason says. Soon enough, he found a post on a forum from someone in the UK looking for his mom and uncle. The only problem? The post was two years old.

‘At the time, people used to change email addresses frequently, so I wasn’t even sure I’d still be able to reach them.’ But within a day he got a response and shared it with his mom. She was thrilled by the news that she had a whole family she never knew about – and that they were looking for her.

After many emails and expensive international phone calls, they started arranging visas and flights so his mom could meet her blood relatives. Since meeting her aunts, uncles, cousins and second cousins, Cecilia has moved to the UK and now lives with her extended family.

Although his mom was excited to reconnect with the family she never knew she had, her brother chose

not to do so. Jason also admits that a part of him feels as though he ‘lost’ his mom in the process. ‘We’re not well off, so we can’t jump on a plane to visit her, and she can’t just come and visit us.’ The last time he saw her was in 2014.

He doesn’t have any regrets, though. ‘I’m glad I could help my mom find her birth family, and that I could give her this opportunity to find out more about who she was beyond the sad story of how she came to be adopted.’ ❖

** Names have been changed.*

HOW TO NURTURE THIS NEW RELATIONSHIP

As with any new relationship, when you reconnect with someone from your past it’s important to proceed with care. Even though you have shared DNA, the person is essentially a stranger. ‘With these types of reunions, it’s important to practise expectation management,’ says clinical psychologist Audrey Katsidzira. She cautions against using the phrase ‘lower your expectations’, but says that you should instead simply prepare yourself, as it’s an unpredictable scenario you’re entering.

Handling rejection

The other side of the story is a sad one: not everyone wants to be found. ‘Every day, we face the possibility of rejection, whether it is in the workplace or in our personal lives,’ Katsidzira says. Still, this is a tough one to navigate. It’s important to allow for rejection and the grief that may come with losing that person again. ‘As we’ve often seen, biological relationships aren’t always functional, and you may find yourself unable to connect with them.’ Having a good sense of self-worth is an

PSYCHOLOGIST AUDREY KATSIDZIRA SHARES TIPS ON HOW TO CREATE A LASTING RELATIONSHIP WITH A ‘NEW’ RELATIVE

- 1 Start with self-acceptance.** You need to accept yourself, and also have self-awareness of your biases and your prejudices. This person is coming from a different social frame and they may have a different outlook on life.
- 2 Be open.** Understand that you’re privileged to have this relationship, because it could go away at any moment.
- 3 Make room for forgiveness.** There will be certain things that you’ll have to forgive, even if you don’t understand them.
- 4 Create boundaries.** People in these situations can try to overcompensate, so maintain healthy boundaries. Be a safe space for yourself first before you can be a safe space for that person.
- 5 Get to know them.** Be curious, be excited, be hopeful... and ideally they should do the same.

important first step, even before reaching out. ‘No matter how much you’ve longed for this relationship, remember that you have value and worth outside of it.’

Often, when we’re missing important relationships, we find people in our lives to fill these gaps. When dealing with rejection, it can help to come back to these non-biological relationships, and ‘to appreciate them, and know that you have developed a community of your own.’

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