

# A long-distance mother checks in

*I'm still puzzling over this romantic idea that giving birth is somehow more significant than 24 years of cooking, cleaning, caring, worrying — and mothering.*

BY PAUL FINLAYSON

I CAN'T get the image of **Joni Mitchell** and her long-lost daughter on the cover of Macleans out of my head. The cover suggested a glorious reunification, the return of the prodigal adopted child. It reminded me of my own adoption.

But to me the identity of my birth mother isn't much more than a technicality — my real parents were the folks in the room across the hall. Technically, the woman I call Mom wasn't the one who gave birth to me one fine day in 1973, but my memory doesn't kick in till the age of 5 anyway.

If my parents had never told me I was adopted, I would never have known the difference, except for questions about why I was 10 centimetres shorter than my dad. That is — until the other woman showed up.

She'd found out about my identity through a bit of detective work and some luck. She was at the other end of the phone.

"Can we get together?"

I went along with it.

I kept thinking about the mom who had put in her 24 years of service, who changed my diapers, who picked me up when I fell down a flight of stairs, who practically punched the principal in Grade 4 who thought he could give me the strap for throwing a mudball, who harangued me into recognizing the virtue of making one's bed, who had sacrificed her career to raise me and my sisters. And who I'd watched take her last breath, succumbing to cancer nine months earlier.

But I pulled up at the woman's house and she let me in. She had curly black hair and teeth that reminded me of mine before the years of wearing a night brace. First

she went back to her phone call, talking about how her long-distance telephone company was ripping her off.

A surly poodle-cross with its hair falling out above its eyes walked toward me and nipped me on the ankle. I kicked it and it ran down the stairs. As I waited for her to get off the phone, I ruminated on the concept that this woman gave birth to me. Why wasn't I feeling anything?

We passed the afternoon talking about her dog's leukemia and my family tree — my "blood family" tree, to be exact. When I asked her about the circumstances of my adoption, she stammered about being young and one thing leading to another. At the end of the sordid little affair, there I was, and there she was on the phone to the adoption agency.

Part of me wanted to know more about this family tree, but it all seemed somehow disloyal. Besides, you can't have two different lines of relatives. And my mother wasn't here to defend herself.

"So what happened to my dad, I mean the man who got you pregnant?"

"Went to live in Saskatoon and doesn't keep in touch."

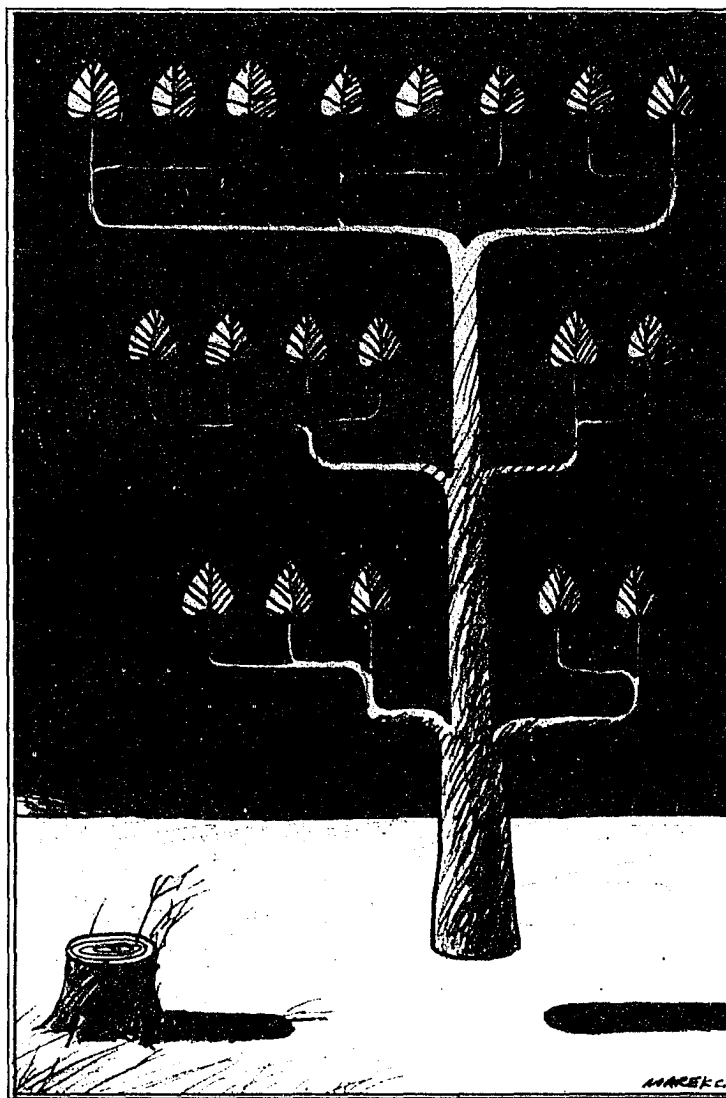
"Embarrassed about my birth?" I asked.

"No, didn't like the winters here."

I've known I was adopted as long as I can remember, and nobody had ever said much, but in the months that followed, many now referred to this mother-woman as "your mom," which I found insulting.

"Birth mom," I would respond. "Just babysat me for nine months." Others celebrated with delight the discovery of my "real mom." Was my mom who raised me a fake? Was adoption second-rate compared to a direct genetic link? Was there any cause for celebration?

Yes, this woman had borne the pain of childbirth, borne the stigma of illegiti-



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macy, and had the moral strength to call the adoption agency. For this I am grateful. But there is no issue of my "real mom." That title was earned in those 24 years. And thus I'm still wondering why

they put **Joni Mitchell** and her daughter on the cover of the magazine. Where was the woman who raised the daughter? How could they relegate her to the back pages?

Paul Finlayson lives in Calgary.