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The Adopted Black Baby, and the White One Who Replaced Her

By JOHN ELIGON
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She grew up a tomboy in suburban Chicago, a fan of Hot Wheels, baseball cards and Blackhawks hockey. So when her two brothers tossed a football in the family's half-acre backyard one day, Amy insisted on playing. They said no, she begged, and one of them whipped the ball at her so hard that it sent her to the ground in tears.

"Our other sister was a real girl," one of the boys blurted out.

The comment left Amy, about 8 at the time, dumbfounded. There was no other sister, or so she thought.

She raced inside, found her mother smoking at the Eames tulip table in the kitchen, and told her what her brother Bobby had said.

"Is it true that you had a daughter before me?" asked Amy, who, like her brothers, was adopted at birth.

Marge Sandberg slowly blotted out her cigarette in an ashtray.

"Listen carefully," Amy recalled her mother saying, "because I'm only going to tell you this story once."

It was around 1970 in Deerfield, Ill., and Ms. Sandberg told her youngest child a closely guarded secret about a choice the family had made, one fuelled by the racial tensions of the era, that sent a black girl and the white girl that took her place on diverging paths.

Decades later, the journeys of the two women tell a nuanced story of race in America, one that complicates easy assumptions about white privilege and black hardship. Lives take unexpected twists and turns, this family story suggests, no matter the race of those involved. And years later, it is not easy to figure out the role of race when looking for lessons learned.

It all started in 1959 when a developer bought a plot of land in Deerfield to build 51 homes. He said he would sell a dozen of them to black people.

This small community about 30 miles north of Chicago had spent years growing in the image of mid-20th-century suburban America: tract housing, green lawns and a population that was virtually all white. Deerfield residents made it clear that they wanted to protect the racial order.

Vandals struck two houses under construction. Someone burned a cross on the lawn of a resident who supported the development. A local pastor who advocated the housing received an anonymous letter that called him a vicious racial slur and told him to "let your children marry one of them and present you with a nice dark brown grandson or daughter," The New York Times reported on April 17, 1960.

Among those who wanted to see the housing built were Marge Sandberg and her husband, Len, who had moved to Deerfield with their two adopted sons in the mid-1950s. As a Jew, Mr. Sandberg said he had always had

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sympathy for persecuted minority groups. Ms. Sandberg joined a local group that supported the development. But the efforts to get the homes built were unsuccessful; the city ultimately seized the land from the developer and built a park.

While the talk of the town was about the housing development, the Sandbergs were talking about expanding their family. They wanted a daughter. And so they hired a lawyer, who found a woman looking to put up her newborn girl for adoption. The baby, whom they planned to name Rebecca, was born on April 19, 1962, and when she arrived at the Sandberg house days later, what they saw surprised them.

She was black.

Immediately, Mr. Sandberg said, he thought of the burning crosses and racist taunts, the upheaval in their community over the prospect of black people moving in. Interracial adoptions were far less common then.

"I said at that point that I wasn't going to go forward with it," Mr. Sandberg, now 89, recalled.

His wife protested vigorously. She cried. She called on a pastor at the Unitarian church they attended to try to convince him to change his mind. Mr. Sandberg would not budge.

"I thought, 'My God, how are you going to raise a child in this neighborhood with the way people are feeling about this thing?'" said Mr. Sandberg, the owner of a prosperous manufacturing company. "It just wouldn't have been great for her."

Mr. Sandberg tells his daughter, Ms. Roost, why he did not keep the black child.

The Sandbergs returned the child. A few months later, they adopted a newborn white girl and named her Amy.

Even as the Sandbergs moved on, the impact of what they did lingered. Ms. Sandberg, who died of cancer in 1997, kept journal entries saying she thought about the girl every April, the month she was born. The Sandbergs eventually separated and divorced. The family almost never talked about what had happened.

But the white daughter they kept, Amy, who is now married and goes by the last name Roost, began thinking about the family secret again in 2012, after Trayvon Martin, a black teenager, was killed by a neighborhood watchman in Florida, setting off a national conversation about racial disparities in America. Ms. Roost wondered if the girl her parents had sent back had ended up on the short end of the country's racial divide.

Ms. Roost, now 55, had graduated from George Washington University with a degree in political science, and worked as a press aide on Capitol Hill, as a university administrator, and as a grant writer for nonprofit organizations. She became a freelance journalist, and, using her reporting skills, set out to find the woman her parents had given up. Ms. Roost documented this search for a story that will air on WNYC's Snap Judgment podcast.

Ms. Roost dug through Illinois adoption and birth records and searched the internet, eventually finding the woman: Angelle Kimberly Smith. It was 2015, and Ms. Roost called Ms. Smith, nervous about what she might say.

The conversation did not go as Ms. Roost had imagined.

"She was really, really cool about it," Ms. Roost said.

Ms. Smith explains how she felt upon learning that a white family had given her up when they found out she was black.
That's because after the Sandbergs had given her up, Ms. Smith had landed with a loving couple, Harry and Ruth Smith, who were black. Her father ran a stationery store. He also was heavily involved in an underground lottery, with tentacles that extended into the city's political and organized crime worlds, she said. Her mother was a homemaker. Her upbringing, Ms. Smith said, was comfortable and loving in a solid, black middle-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. She attended a private grammar school.
But tragedy struck when Harry Smith died of a heart attack when his daughter was just 8. Ms. Smith and her mother endured. Her mother ran the stationery store, she said, and neighbors treated them like family.
"I was raised by people that really loved me and really wanted me," said Ms. Smith, now 55.
As she entered adulthood, Ms. Smith moved to Los Angeles, lured by the prospect of a glamorous life. Instead, she found trouble.
In spite of her stable home life, Ms. Smith said she was sucked into freewheeling circles in which drugs were common. She became addicted to cocaine, she said, and became homeless and was incarcerated for burglary. She had four children, two of them while living on the streets, and lost custody of all of them.
Ms. Smith eventually pulled her life back together. She earned an associate degree, started working on bachelor's and master's degrees online and worked as a counselor. By 2007, all of her children were back in her life.
She wanted to learn more about who she was, so she searched for her biological parents, listed as Neal Gordon and Juanita Green on her birth certificate, but never found them.
But life had taken so many twists and turns that by the time she heard from Ms. Roost, she felt she could handle anything. She greeted the news that she had been given up by a white family by telling Ms. Roost that she held no hard feelings, and would not have wanted to be raised by white parents in a white neighborhood.
Over time, the two women built a relationship, discussing the good and the bad places that life had taken them. They talked openly about whether they had traveled stereotypical racial trajectories — the white girl soaring to success with the support of a wealthy, white family; the black girl struggling in despair.
That jaded narrative, it turned out, was far from the reality. Ms. Smith wondered whether she actually would have been worse off had the Sandbergs kept her.
The way she saw it, Ms. Smith said, race never felt like much of a determining factor in her life. She went to school with white children and enjoyed some of the same benefits as white people, from her education to her family's vacation home. She felt lucky to have grown up in a predominantly black neighborhood, rather than in Deerfield, where she said she likely would have faced discrimination.
"There were no people of color in that community at all," Ms. Smith said, adding that "when white people have to deal with black people, I think, there's a misperception of who we are, what we stand for."
When Ms. Roost learned what Ms. Smith had gone through as an adult — hustling to make ends meet, living in Los Angeles's once notorious MacArthur Park — she could not help but think of how different her own life had turned out and how her parents' racially motivated decision might have impacted both of them.

As she contrasted her life with Ms. Smith's, Ms. Roost said she believed that without having to face racism, her family was able to do well financially, allowing her to get a

college education and stable jobs. It felt like white privilege, she said.

Yet she also realized that her assumptions about Ms. Smith's life did not fully ring true.

"When I found out she had been adopted by a black family, I assumed her life probably wasn't as good as mine," Ms. Roost said.

But Ms. Roost has endured her own tumultuous times, despite enjoying the overseas vacations and luxe Christmas parties that her family's wealth afforded her. A family member sexually assaulted her. With her parents divorced by the time she was 10, her relationship with her father grew distant and her mother's alcoholism complicated their relationship.

"You can look at it and think, 'Oh, the white child probably had the better childhood in this ritzy, tony suburb,'" Ms. Roost said. "But then again, peel it back a layer and you'll see it was a horrible childhood."

Had she experienced Ms. Roost's childhood, Ms. Smith said, she very well might have slid into drug addiction more quickly.

Those possibilities, however, are of little consolation to Mr. Sandberg, the man who refused to keep a girl because of the color of her skin.

"It was a tough decision and I did feel guilty," he said. "I'm ashamed of myself. I don't know whether I made the right decision or the wrong decision. As I look now, in this day and age, I feel that I was wrong."

When he met Ms. Smith two years ago for the first and only time at a restaurant in La Jolla, Calif., she ran toward him and they embraced.

"Thank you so much," Ms. Smith recalled whispering in his ear.

Ms. Smith explains why she empathizes with the decision that Mr. Sandberg made.

He asked why she was thanking him.

"'I don't know if you've battled with this through the years, but you did the right thing,'" Ms. Smith recalled telling him, adding that he seemed visibly relieved. "I watched 50 years worth of guilt and shame roll off of him."