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A different mid-life crisis: Man learns he's adopted

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Columnist

For 40 years, Patrick Callahan lived a relatively uncomplicated life, believing among other things that he was the only son of Eleanor and Arthur Callahan. His mother died in 1978. His father died in 1994. That's what he believed.

Only, Eleanor and Artie Callahan were not actually Patrick's parents. They had raised him from the time he was five days old, but technically they had never adopted him. An Essex County lawyer, operating outside the law as an adoption broker, had arranged for the infant to be handed over to Eleanor and Artie by orchestrating what amounted to a black-market deal.

It was 1956. The baby's father was a cop from Hillside. The mother was a woman who once worked in a bordello above a candy store in Newark.

There was a nice young couple that couldn't have a child of their own. They were willing to take out a second mortgage on their home in West Orange. Everyone would get their cut — the birth mother, the lawyer, the local officials who agreed to look the other way — everyone would be happy.

What could possibly go wrong?

Forty years later, two years after Artie died, Patrick began wondering why the Callahan family had turned its back on him. These were aunts and uncles he had known his whole life. They would no longer call, no longer invite him to family get-togethers, no longer have anything to do with him.

He was hurt. He felt abandoned. But he couldn't figure out why these people were shunning him. So one day he wrote a letter to Florence Staats, an aunt who had moved to upstate New York after having a falling out with the rest of the family. She wrote back and told Patrick to call her.

"Two sentences into the conversation she said, 'I always thought it was wrong they didn't tell you that you were adopted,' " Patrick remembers her saying.

"I couldn't even continue the conversation, I was so shook up. After that I called my relatives to ask if it was true, and they all hung up on me.

"I think I felt every emotion you can feel — shock, anger, disbelief, hurt, betrayal. . . . I saw a few different shrinks."

This was in 1996. He was 40 years old at the time, an electrician with his own business. Now he's 52,

and an electrical inspector. He and his wife and their two daughters live in Spring Lake Heights.

For 10 years, Callahan worked on a book about a guy who discovered at age 40 that everyone had been lying to him all along.

He tracked down his birth mother, a hard-drinking woman who still lives in West Orange and is known as Big Flo around town. He pieced together information about his real father, who died in 1980. He was a cop who was forced to resign because of a mysterious shooting incident and a beating. There was also something about him holding a gun to a woman's head.

His birth mother once tried to abduct him when he was a toddler, Callahan found out. She stalked the family for years, even after they moved to the Shore. The stress was too much for Eleanor Callahan. She died at age 51. "She drowned herself in prescription drugs," Patrick says.

Artie Callahan worked for the Postal Service. He was a Marine in the Pacific during World War II, fought at the Battle of Guadalcanal. He came home permanently shaken from what he had lived through.

The Callahan family always blamed Eleanor for wanting to adopt a child, Patrick believes. They blamed him too, he says.

Growing up in Wall, he remembers the kids in the neighborhood telling him he was adopted. He would run home in tears. Eleanor and Artie would say it wasn't true. It was just kids, they'd say, they always pick on an only child.

The kids knew, though. Their parents knew. The birth mother was always around, stalking the family, looking for more money to keep quiet.

Listening to Callahan tell the story, you have to wonder why he hasn't been on Oprah yet. Son of a prostitute and a disgraced cop, raised by a couple who could never bring themselves to tell him the truth, finds out about all this and more at age 40, writes a book . . . sounds like it's right up Oprah's alley.

Never mind Oprah. Callahan can't even get a publisher to take a chance. He's got a 439-page manuscript, 10 years of research, and all he has to show for it so far is "a stack of rejections slips like this," close to 200 of them.

Still, it's not like he didn't get anything out of his extensive search.

"I think I healed myself," he says. "This whole search was cathartic for me. But it probably took me five years to start feeling better."

For years, he would lie awake at night, sorting through the memories, searching for clues, running the tiniest details over and over in his head.

How many cops visited prostitutes above a candy store in Newark? How many candy stores were there, in how many towns? How many babies were born as a result of careless trysts in a carefree time?

"They sold the babies," Callahan says. "And I was one of those babies."

He needed to look into this. When word got out in Essex County that someone was poking around the

Hall of Records, he met with some resistance.

"Why were all these retired cops in their 70s and 80s all coming around very angry?" he wondered. "They'd fathered illegitimate children. That's why.

"My friend in the prosecutor's office up there called me and said, 'Whatever you've uncovered, it's big.' "

He laughs about this now. By then he had already located Big Flo. Reluctant to meet with him at first, she eventually overcame her fears and began filling in some of the blanks for the son she sold in 1956.

They sat in her apartment and had a beer, a Budweiser.
