



TAKEN AT BIRTH

Stolen Babies, Hidden Lies,
and My Journey to Finding Home

JANE BLASIO

“Jane takes you on the ride of her life, weaving, in emotional detail, the search for her birth family, the shocking circumstances surrounding her adoption, and the dark secrets as deep as the small southern town where it all began. Through thoughtful investigative work, she effortlessly puts the reader front and center as this real-life story of deceit, trauma, and ultimately redemption unfolds. Regardless of our start in life, Jane reminds us, we all have the ability to find humanity if we know where to look.”

Lisa Joyner, host of *Long Lost Family*, *Taken at Birth*, and *Find My Family*; adoptee/adoptive mom

“In this gripping story that unfolds like a puzzle with no lid to provide the finished picture, Jane Blasio encounters numerous questions and too many missing pieces of information regarding her origins. Jane’s search for answers, meaning, and belonging will take the reader to the darkest places in the human soul, ultimately unveiling the hardest truths to bear and then revealing the beauty found among the scattered pieces of the puzzle.”

Anna LeBaron, author of *The Polygamist’s Daughter*

“People like to say it takes a lot of courage to do a book like this: I think it takes a sight more than that. Jane Blasio lived a story that most of us could only imagine—from being sold as an infant by a small-town doctor to years of searching for her birth mother. A gut-wrenching ordeal. But she not only lived it, she wrote about it, bringing it all to life for the reader as it poured out of her. Sometimes you have to remind yourself that this was a life lived, not one just crafted.”

Rick Bragg, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, journalist, and author of two bestselling memoirs, *All Over but the Shoutin’* and *Ava’s Man*

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JANE BLASIO



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The names and details of the people and situations described in this book have been changed or presented in composite form in order to ensure the privacy of those with whom the author has worked.

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Jane Blasio, Taken At Birth

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To Joan, Kitty, and Carlynn
for being who they were and
teaching me about love.



Thank you, Rick Bragg,
for giving your support
and telling me years ago
I could tell this story.

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Introduction

I'VE HEARD IT SAID that the devil is in the details. I never thought my life was very different from anyone else's until I began searching for my birth family. What should have been a simple process to access my adoption records became a lifelong quest for truth. A quest riddled with too many details and the devil was definitely in them. My name is Jane Blasio, and I was sold as a newborn in January of 1965 by a doctor in the small North Georgia town of McCaysville.

A factory worker and his barren wife made the journey south to Georgia from their home in Ohio because they had heard they could get a healthy baby from the town's beloved physician, Thomas Jugarthy Hicks, the man who sold me. They kept the car running as Hicks passed me through the back door of his clinic.

The heartbreaking thing is that I wasn't even special. Starting in the forties and lasting over a span of almost thirty years, Doc Hicks built a lucrative business selling babies out of his clinic. In the small town, women had few options and would go to the doctor for help. Some gave their babies freely to him with

his promise to find homes and a better life for their children. But others were local housewives who were simply told by Doc Hicks that their babies had died; then he sold them to willing couples with the good fortune to afford them.

The twin cities of McCaysville, Georgia, and Copperhill, Tennessee, share most of everything except zip codes. The painted state line across the blacktop of the grocery store parking lot being the only way to distinguish between the two. Walk with me and see glimpses of the townsfolk, some who, even to this day, believe that Doc Hicks was a godsend—a man who healed both family and friends. Meet churchgoing people and bootleggers alike who feared the doctor and yet did business with him.

You will see the two main characters' lives touch briefly as they move through time and come back together in the search for truth. The two main characters being the doctor who sold me and myself as I grew up always second best, always sitting in the laps of strangers. I'll show you the struggle to understand how flesh and circumstance could be brokered so easily. Cash for a baby and a fake birth certificate.

Let me take you on my personal search that spanned over thirty years, and I will show you, with all the care I can give, the women who lost their babies through the back door of the Hicks Clinic. Let me pull back the veil to show you the many lives touched by both darkness and light. Let me take you through time to the quiet town of McCaysville, to the small brick building of the Hicks Clinic, and introduce you to a baby seller.*

* The stories you're about to read are retold as I envision them, having heard the accounts by those who were personally affected. So many were hurt by their experiences at the Hicks Clinic. I've disguised details here to protect their privacy.

ONE

Stolen Babies

I THANK GOD for tattletales. If someone hadn't gossiped like an old hen and let the truth out, no one would have ever known I was someone else's child. My father was clear that he never intended on telling my sister, Michelle, and me that we were adopted, much less that we'd been bought from a clinic best known for abortions. When I first began asking questions, he lied, and when I was older, he admitted that he saw no reason to tell us the truth. My parents knew what they had gotten into when they bought two babies, and everything was, in their eyes, best buried deep somewhere. What a way to live, fearing every day that someone would show up at the house and take us from the front yard. Fear and shame are consequences of keeping secrets, especially when you have so much to lose when they can't be contained.

My father was angry at the person who told his secret. My mother kept quiet because she was afraid. My parents wanted a baby desperately, and they had heard from my mother's aunt Alice that they could get a baby for cash in North Georgia. Aunt

Alice's friend knew a doctor who was selling babies, and they made their way down there to get one.

Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Hicks Clinic, which looks today like it did then, is a small, square, brick building the color of homemade butter pecan ice cream, the good kind. The simple, clean architectural lines of the building don't hint at what took place inside. It sits just a stone's throw away from the mild and soft-flowing Toccoa River that snakes its way quietly around McCaysville, Georgia, going deeper into Tennessee and becoming treacherous as it weaves through falls and rough rocks. Just a couple miles downstream, it transforms into the mighty Ocoee River, which is known for its whitewater rapids. The front of the Hicks Clinic faces one of the two main roads into the town, just across the street and down a-ways from the IGA store that straddles the Tennessee and Georgia line. If you were in the courtyard of the Hicks Clinic, you could watch the trains pass behind the IGA parking lot.

Doctor Thomas Jugarthy Hicks planted his building in the heart of McCaysville like you would plant a garden: methodically, one step at a time. The original Hicks Clinic was a house around which he placed offices and examination rooms. When the new clinic was built, the original structure was torn down. In old photos, nothing hints that the original building housed a medical facility or doctor's office. The old structure stood in what's now the courtyard of the Hicks Clinic.

Hicks tended the locals, mostly poor copper miners and their families, for colds, flu, and everyday medical mishaps, but he made his name and wealth through abortions and the sale of babies. He built his practice around the missteps of his life.

In the early 1940s Hicks was arrested and went to prison for selling drugs to the local miners and then lost his medical license and was barred from practicing in Tennessee. But after his release, the people of Georgia took him in and looked the other way long enough for him to open for business in McCaysville.

Hicks was a businessman first. That has never been questioned by anyone who knew him or knew of his practices—local families, workers from the copper mine, young girls seeking help, men needing a forged birth certificate to avoid or get into a war, and those who had to turn to him because they were unable to make it to a hospital. Patients could pay for his services by cash, check, or bartering, depending upon their economic status or inconvenient situation. Hicks's reach included catering to the debutantes from Atlanta. He was the town doctor, abortionist, and baby seller. With prices ranging from one hundred dollars per baby in the 1940s to one thousand dollars per baby by the 1960s, Hicks sold newborns to barren couples from up North who were looking for babies to call their own.

My adoptive father didn't want anyone to know about the Hicks Clinic or the long drives to McCaysville that he and my mother took to buy my sister and me. He especially didn't want others to know about the doctor who was selling babies or the steady stream of women who ended up at the clinic to use the doctor's services for many things my father most assuredly couldn't speak of. The details of what went on at the clinic would be too much for many of our family members and friends. How do you explain buying a baby?

I was around fourteen years old when I saw my birth certificate for the first time. I studied it like an old-world map and used it to launch into many dreams of my birth story. I began

piecing together my connection to the Hicks Clinic when I first laid eyes on the document, but my journey started years before on a crisp fall afternoon in Ohio. My first clear memory as a child was when I was told I had been adopted. It was late 1971. I was six years old. Radio stations played James Taylor and Janis Joplin, and President Nixon appeared on the television news. It was a perfect afternoon to play in the backyard.

Fall 1971

The warmth of the sun and the smell of leaves and dirt filled the afternoon air as I played with friends in our backyard. My sister came out to the back porch and called me to come inside. Michelle was ten years old to my six. Answering her as I dug my sneakers into the grass, I checked out my torn jeans. I'd be in trouble when Mom noticed. As I entered through the back door, expecting sweet smells of dinner and finding an empty table, confusion moved me across the room. It wasn't until I passed through the kitchen that I saw the three of them in the living room, silent and scared.

Cigarette smoke filled the room, swirling upward to the ceiling and clinging to its surface. Sunlight filtered in from the kitchen and lit the corner of the living room where my parents were sitting on the sofa. The air was thick with tension, the tightness alarming. It put my guard up and burned the memory into me. Taking it in, I stopped abruptly, then slowly moved closer to stand before them. Jim and Joan Walters didn't look like they were ready to share their news.

My father mumbled as he looked to the floor, speaking just under his breath. I could barely hear him. "We have something

to tell you, and it may be hard for you to understand.” It was difficult to see him clearly, as he slumped just beyond the shaft of light coming from the kitchen. Cigarette smoke wrapped around his face as he brought his cupped hand to his mouth for another drag. Again silence.

The tension intensified and he finally raised his head without making eye contact, speaking toward Michelle, though not to her, even as she stood directly in front of him. “You heard from the kids on the playground that you were adopted?”

Immediately and through tears Michelle broke open, half screaming from the confusion of what she already knew and the fear of what she was about to be told. “Yes. They said I was a black-market baby too! They said you bought us!”

Even at my young age, I sensed that my father was embarrassed for the intrusion into his private dealings. He could say little more, dumbfounded that it would be so easy to unravel his well-laid plans. My mother’s family had always thought the transaction was suspicious, but they had never promised to share in keeping the secret. My father never wanted us to know.

My mother shook off the tension of the moment. Looking between both of us, she spoke with control and little emotion, opening the conversation. “You two were adopted. Do you know what that means?”

Innocent wonder made me look over to Michelle for a hint of what to do. She was my big sister and should’ve known how to react in that moment. I looked and looked until I realized she wasn’t looking my way. She had her head down, and she was crying. I was on my own. My mother turned her attention to me, irritation showing on her face. “How about you?”

I didn't understand the tears or the drama, and I was okay with that, ready to escape. Half asking, half pleading, I jerked out a reply. "Can I go back outside?"

Relieved, she nodded, and I left them fast behind, busting open the screen door. The late afternoon air was a relief from the heaviness of the scene inside. The swing set beckoned me, and I sank into the faux leather of one of the seats, barely shaking the chains that attached it to its metal frame. I forgot about my friends playing out back as the sun was still bright but setting fast. All I can remember is how scared I felt. I'm not sure why; I just was.

My aunt Darlene came around the driveway side of the house, saw me in the yard, and came up to where I was sitting. She didn't know what she was walking into when she stopped by the house. She was my dad's sister, but she was ten years younger than him and was always looking out for Michelle and me. She would detangle my long hair ever so softly, make us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with our favorite strawberry jam, and make sure we had a good time no matter what we were doing. She was close with and loyal to my parents and lived just down the street from us with Uncle Robby and Cousin Robin in the house Grandpa Walters built.

"What is a black market, Aunt Darlene?" I said, peering up at her through my crazy-cut bangs. She looked nervous, and that was odd, especially since she'd never looked anything but confident and mostly defiant. She took a breath, and I could tell she was thinking.

"Well, that's a question, all right. Ask your dad." She hesitated a moment, then added, "But not today, monkey. Wait awhile."

I never asked him. It all seemed like too much to ask about. And who was I? My aunt didn't bring it up with my parents until I was much older. I'm sure she was waved off and told to stay out of it. My parents had been caught red-handed and didn't want any further talk. They didn't realize their secrecy fueled my interest and a fire began burning, bringing to life in me a desire to know what it all meant for a six-year-old to be adopted and *black market*.

From that point forward the whispers became more evident to me; I heard more of the chatter. Almost wolflike senses appeared when I heard my parents whisper whenever anyone would say Michelle or I looked like them. Or more frequently, when my grandpa talked about how we were different or special. I began noticing how adult relatives smiled hard at Michelle and me every time we walked into the room, as if the uncomfortable grins would hide the elephant sitting in the corner holding a fake birth certificate.

Cousins would make remarks about us being made differently than they were. We were a special delivery of sorts. The neighbors had heard the stories and would share sad looks as my mother and father kept us in the backyard. My mother would all but have a breakdown if we strayed into the front yard or if a car rolled by too slowly out front, fearing someone would come to take us back. I remember the funny looks and comments from the kids at school who, themselves, didn't completely understand why we were different in everyone's eyes. Kids can be cruel and easily pick up on and react to the slightest tension or uncertainty.

Even if someone dared bring up the mystery surrounding my sister and me, how could you explain black-market babies to the third graders at Bettes Elementary School?

Spring 1974

The clock on the wall of the teachers' lounge was ticking too loudly and too slowly. I wanted to go home, to hide. The third grade was not a place of refuge. Not for me. Not on this day or too many others that came after. The large, very blonde teacher on recess duty had brought me in and seated me in the teachers' lounge to get me away from the other children. Three Dog Night blasted from the radio about Jeremiah the Bullfrog but I could still hear the teacher's polyester pantsuit rustling as she hovered mountainous above me with a worried brow and pursed lips. She had found me huddled under a bush on the playground while the other kids laughed and kicked dirt my way.

A cousin of mine had overheard an adult conversation about my adoption. That day I absorbed some of the meaning of *black market* as she matter-of-factly told my classmates that I was paid for in cash like a dog at the store. "A puppy in the window. That's what she is with her new outfit and pretty braided hair. Just a little dog with a new collar." I was wide-eyed with the meanness of it all.

I vividly recall seeing my new red corduroy pants covered with dirt as I looked down at the ground and the children snickering, taunting, and pushing me to tears and confusion with words that I had never thought about or dreamt could be applied to me. As they continued their verbal assault, I stepped back and fell to the ground, kicking up a mess around me. There I sat under the dirt and leaves, now like the very dog I was accused of being, cowering from the blows. But I wasn't a dog. I knew I was adopted but not that I had been bought.

I know now that I was too young to fathom the depth of it. Back then, nobody told me it was okay to ask or wonder about what was being said. They weren't sure what to say to me since I was a child. And I wasn't their child, so it was risky territory for an outsider or anyone wanting to stay in my parents' circle of friends or relatives. The teacher had brought me inside to shield me from the children's cruelty. She smiled a lot and did some low-level doting, wiping my hands and face off and attempting to clean my new outfit enough to look as normal as possible. I'm pretty sure she knew who I was and had heard the circumstances of my "adoption." It was a close-knit neighborhood, and everyone knew who hung what on the line on laundry day. The story most assuredly got around way before I showed up on the playground that day.

I bolted out of the chair and ran when she told me I could go, never once looking up as my classmates moved out of the building as the bell rang for everyone to go home. I wanted to get away. Away from the big blonde hair and the sounds of barking that played over and over in my head. Embarrassment, confusion, and fear moved my legs and arms, propelling me away from the school and toward my house as fast as I could go. Running away from the children and their taunts that were stuck in my mind from earlier and were now a part of my lessons in trust and discernment.

These early lessons became the cornerstone of my fear of never finding the truth. They pushed me as I grew older. I began looking in every dark place, grasping at the tiny pieces of the puzzle I'd glimpsed that day on the playground. I collected everything and anything I could from an offhanded remark, a hushed conversation from my parents or grandparents, a torn page in the

family Bible, or an odd number in my mother's contact book. I kept my guard up like a lookout at a bank heist and romanticized the escape. I had to know. The search was on in my very young mind, and although I still wasn't sure what I was looking for, I knew I had to find something, anything, to explain *black market*. On a cold, snowy break from school, my first attempt at direct-line questioning was merely the natural progression of my search.

Winter 1976

Snow covered everything, and at first, it brought the delight of afternoons playing outside, half-buried as we made snowballs and forts with the neighborhood kids and ran around pumped with adrenaline until we couldn't feel our fingers or toes. We'd retreat into the warmth of home, only to thaw out and prepare to do it again once given the go-ahead. Snow. Thaw. Repeat. That's a lot of work for a twelve-year-old.

School had been canceled for the third day in a row because of the onslaught of lake-effect snow coming in across Lake Erie with a vindictive streak, trickling down all the way from Cleveland to Akron. In the 1970s Akron public schools never canceled classes because of snow, so this was a rarity. But by day three I was bored and agitated from sitting around so long.

Having already exhausted almost every opportunity for entertainment outdoors, I decided it was time to explore the house. Curiosity overrode my sense of propriety and drove me upstairs to my parents' bedroom to look for any forbidden thing lurking there. After rummaging through the closet and under the bed and finding little of interest, the dresser was next. Opening

the top drawer and making a quick glance back to check that I was still alone, I gingerly touched each stack of my mother's lingerie, fumbling over the softness to see if anything was hidden beneath. Nothing. I went to the next two drawers and repeated the same action, finding only souvenir stamps and silver dollars, leaving me to put all hope into the last drawer.

Finally, the dresser gave up its bounty. Under the thickness of sweaters and scarves, I found what at first glance looked like a scrapbook. I pulled it out and carried it to the table next to the bed. My mind reeled in anticipation as I slung my tiny frame across the mattress, grabbed the book, and settled in for the shameless invasion of privacy. I ran my fingers over the smoothness of the worn, pink quilted satin on the outside of the book and meticulously wound my way to the inside of the front cover. The cream-colored pages were decorated with hand-painted clouds in taupe and blue that floated among images of rattles and storks. The clouds were the backdrop to vital statistics that had been penned by a human hand.

Losing myself in numbers representing the weights and lengths of two babies, the book fell from my grip. It landed in an awkward position, the paper bending against the wood floor. I looked down from the bed but didn't touch it. Instead, I stretched as far as I could over the side without falling, placing my fingers flat against the cover to keep steady as I studied the clouds on the folded, open page.

Two dates were written on the paper, September 20 and January 15. I recognized the first as my sister's birthday, but the second wasn't mine. And when that fact paired with the familiar writing of my mother, it opened a Pandora's box that exploded in a way I can still feel today. My birth certificate, the only one

I knew of, the one I had scrutinized since I was old enough to read, had December 6 on it. The day we celebrated with cake and the birthday song.

It didn't take long to all but fall from the bed, scoop the book into my arms, and descend the stairs, stumbling my way to the kitchen table where my mother sat. I shoved every square inch of the pink book in her face, and she blinked hard, amazed at the sixtyish pounds of sheer attitude standing in front of her, demanding answers. Without a hint of mildness, she spoke in a voice louder than her usual. "That was the day we picked you up from the doctor in Georgia. You were born sometime in January. That's all I know. Your father can tell you more if that's what you want."

The tapping of her fingers on the table and her arched eyebrows told me I had pushed enough for one day. She, too, had had enough of me in the house for three straight days without a break. Triumphantly, I turned and walked away, hearing her now-straining voice behind me, "Put the book back where you found it and stay out of my room." I'll always remember the look on her face, the cigarette smoke billowing as she sat in front of the sliding glass doors, focused on me and my next move.

I didn't stay out of her room as I should have, but the book disappeared. I never saw it again.



These fragments of my early childhood started everything, from my questioning and searching for who I was to the moments of my life that influenced and prodded me along to find out who I am. Those experiences made me feel alone and, most of the time, less than. Everyone else seemed to have so much

more insight into life and belonging while I struggled to understand. Struggled to fit in.

Most importantly, these were the moments of sheer truth, of what I had been seeking, and sometimes demanding my whole life. Thankfully not all of my childhood memories are mysterious or challenging. But the yearning to know more didn't stop with each new experience. No, the pull toward the truth was stronger and meant so much more with every year and every clue my hands wrapped around as I grew up and learned more about where I was born and the possibilities of who I really am. I thought about it all of the time, and it danced in the back of my mind no matter what turns my life was taking.

All of the questions I had about who I looked like and who I sounded like and where I came from started to add up. Those simple questions slowly evolved into what I wanted to know most. These are my moments, my memories, but there's so much more to this story than just me. This is about the town of McCaysville, the Hicks Clinic, and the women who stepped into that building and came out without their babies. It's about the family I grew up with and the family I wasn't given the chance to grow up with, the family that lost me. It's about all those who were wrapped up in what Doctor Hicks was doing, and above all, it's about all of those seeking truth.