

LEMN SISSAY



THE NO. 1
SUNDAY TIMES
BESTSELLER

MY NAME IS WHY

'BEAUTIFUL'
Dolly Alderton

'ASTOUNDING'
Matt Haig

'INSPIRATIONAL'
Floella Benjamin

My Name Is Why

A MEMOIR

Lemn Sissay



CANONGATE

The two most important days in your life are the day you
are born and the day you find out why

—Anon., attributed to Mark Twain

I am the bull in the china shop
With all my strength and will
As a storm smashed the teacups
I stood still

PREFACE

At fourteen I tattooed the initials of what I thought was my name into my hand. The tattoo is still there but it wasn't my name. It's a reminder that I've been somewhere I should never have been. I was not who I thought I was. The Authority knew it but I didn't.

The Authority had been writing reports about me from the day I was born. My first footsteps were followed by the click clack clack of a typewriter: 'The boy is walking.' My first words were recorded, click clack clack: 'The boy has learned to talk.' Fingers were poised above a typewriter waiting for whatever happened next: 'The boy is adapting.'

Paper zipped from typewriters and into files. The files slipped into folders under the 'S' section of a tall metal filing cabinet. For eighteen years this process repeated over and over again. Click clack clack. Secret meetings were held. The folders were taken out and placed on tables surrounded by men and women from The Authority. Decisions were made: *Put him here, move him there. Shall we try drugs? Try this, try that.* After eighteen years of experimentation The Authority threw

me out. It locked the doors securely behind me and hid the files in a data company called The Iron Mountain.

So I wrote to The Authority and hand-delivered the letter. The reply informed me I had to write to Customer Services. I wrote to Customer Services. Customer Services replied to say they were not permitted to release the files. The Authority placed me with incapable foster parents. It imprisoned me. It moved me from institution to institution. And yet now, at eighteen years old, I had no history, no witnesses, no family.

In 2015, following a thirty-year campaign to get my records, the Chief Executive of Wigan Council, Donna Hall, wrote me a letter. She had them. Within a few months I received four thick folders of documents marked 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D'. Click clack clack. On reading them, I knew.

I took The Authority to court.

How does a government steal a child and then imprison him? How does it keep it a secret? This story is how. It is for my brothers and sisters on my mother's side and my father's side. This is for my mother and father and my aunts and uncles and for Ethiopians.

CHAPTER 1

Awake among the lost and found
The files left on the open floor
The frozen leaves on frosted ground
The frosted keys in a frozen door

Eighteen years of records written by strangers. All the answers to all my questions were here. Possibly. And yet, I feared what they'd reveal about me or what they'd reveal about the people who were entrusted with my care. What truths or untruths? Maybe I was loved. Maybe my mother didn't want me. Maybe it was all my fault. Maybe the bath taps in the bathroom were not electrified. Maybe that was false memory syndrome.

A friend burned her files when she received them from The Authority. Another can't look at hers to this day. I'll start by simply recording my reactions to the first early documents and we'll see how this unfolds.

ST. MARGARET'S HOUSE

GOOSE GREEN, WIGAN

(Affiliated to the Liverpool Board of Moral Welfare)

Telephone Wigan 42143

Warden and Chairman:

THE RECTOR OF WIGAN, THE HALL, WIGAN.

Treasurer: W. WILSON, Esq., 379 Orrell Road Wigan.	Assist Treasurer: Miss N. FAULKNER 3 The Avenue, Monument Park, Wigan.	Secretary: Mrs. S. RENWICK, 59 Thornfield Road, Thornton, Liverpool, 23.	Superintendent: Mrs. F. MALLOCH
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30. 6. 64.

I. hereby certify that
Lenora Sisey is free from
infectious disease'

L. Wrennall, SRN
District

St Margaret's House was an institution for unmarried mothers 'affiliated to the Liverpool Board of Moral Welfare'. On 30 June 1967, State Registered Nurse L. Winnard wrote that 'Lemion Sissey' (misspelt) was 'free from infectious disease'. In a second note on the same day she recorded that the six-week-old baby – now 'Lemn Sissey'? – weighed nine pounds.

BABY LEMN SISSEY: age 6 weeks
BORN: 21. 5. 67
BIRTH WEIGHT: 6 lb 0 oz
WEIGHT 30. 6. 67 9 lb 0 oz
PHENYLKETONURIA TEST NEGATIVE

FEEDS:
Disto milk NO1. 5 measures to water 6oz
H baby: Takes feeds well.
Fed at 9.30a. 1.30p 5.30R 9.30p
Takes a while to settle after 9.30R
feed: Wakes for night feed about
4 am.

Bullocks satisfactory:

L. Winnard SRN

In the letter below I'm six months old. At this point my mother is invisible.

Patron:
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH THE QUEEN MOTHER
President:
HER ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCESS MARGARET
COUNTRESS OF SNOWDON
Chairman of Council:
SIR ALFRED OWEN G.B.E.

General Secretary:
F. J. V.E.A.
General Superintendent:
V. L. CORNISH M.A.



DR. BARNARDO'S

Head Office: STEPNEY CAUSEWAY LONDON E.1.

AREA OFFICE: 248 UPPER PARLIAMENT STREET, LIVERPOOL 8

TELEPHONE: 06170916291

13th November, 1967.

OWW/PJ

OUR REF:

YOUR REF:

Dear Mr. Goldtherpe,

Further to your Department's enquiry regarding the possibility of our Adoption Department being able to place a part Ethiopian, part Greek baby boy for adoption. Our Senior Adoption Officer has written to us asking that she be supplied with full information about this baby; in particular, details of his background and whether Ethiopian means that he is negroid or not.

N. Goldtherpe Esq.,
Children's Officer,
County Borough of Wigan,
Children's Department,
Civic Buildings,
Parson's Walk,
Wigan, Lancs.

Yours sincerely,

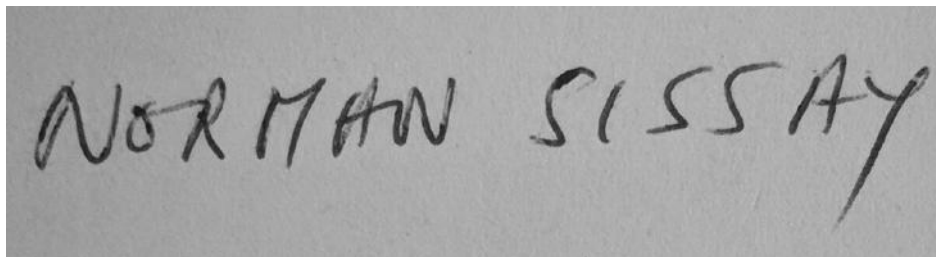
O. W. Woods

O. W. Woods
Assistant Executive Officer
(Dictated by Mr. Woods and
signed in his absence)

And then there was this:



On the back of the photo it says:



NORMAN SISSAY

So my name has changed to Norman Sissay; I am supposed to be part Greek. An adoption agency asks whether 'Ethiopian means he is negroid or not'. This is the first time I have seen myself referred to as 'Norman Sissay'.

Foster Child Lemm Sissay 21.5.67. Mother Ethiopian; putative father possibly Greek. Protestant.

It is anticipated that this will be a permanent foster home for Norman, and responsibility for payment of boarding out allowances and supervision will be retained by this Authority.

Yours sincerely,



Children's Officer

When the letter from which this extract is taken was written, I was almost eight months old. In England unmarried pregnant women or girls were placed in Mother and Baby homes like St Margaret's with the sole aim of harvesting their

children, then the women were shipped back home to say they had been away on a little break. *A little break.* They were barely adults themselves. Many of them didn't understand the full implication of the word 'adoption'. They were sent home without their newborns after signing the adoption papers. They must have been bewildered and in shock at the loss of their first child. I found testimonials online from people who lived near to St Margaret's.

It was very eerie in certain parts it really felt haunted.

I can remember being in the Billinge Maternity unit when one of the young girls from St Margaret's had her baby. The only visitor was a lady social worker and on the day mum and baby were due to leave, mum was taken away in one car (crying) and baby hurried away in another!

My mother would not sign the adoption papers for Norman Goldthorpe. So Norman Goldthorpe defied her and assigned me to 'long-term foster parents' Catherine and David Greenwood.

COUNTY BOROUGH OF WIGAN — CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT

AGREEMENT OF FOSTER PARENTS

We/I MR AND MRS GREENWOOD
of 68 SWINTON PRESENT, UNSWORTH, BURY
having on the 3rd day of JANUARY 1968, received
from the Wigan County Borough Council (hereinafter called "the council"),
(NORMAN) LEMN SISSAY who was born on the
21st day of MAY 1967, and whose religious
persuasion is PROTESTANT into our/~~my~~ home as a member of our/~~my~~ family,
undertake that:—

1. We/I will care for NORMAN and bring him/her up as we/I would a child of our/~~my~~ own.
2. He/she will be brought up in, and will be encouraged to practise his/her religion.
3. We/I will look after his/her health and consult a doctor whenever he/she is ill and allow him/her to be medically examined at such times and places as the council may require.
4. We/I will inform the council immediately of any serious occurrence affecting the child.
5. We/I will at all times permit any person so authorised by the Secretary of State or by the council to see him/her and visit our/~~my~~ home.

6. We/~~I~~ will allow him/~~her~~ to be removed from our/~~my~~ home when so requested by a person authorised by the council of the county borough where we/~~I~~ live.
7. If we/~~I~~ decide to move, we/~~I~~ will notify the new address to the council before we/~~I~~ go.

Signed B. Greenwood

Signed B.H. Greenwood 19

Date 3rd January 1968

I was 228 days old at the time. I must have been with them from at least 150 days old. My foster parents told me some years later that I was alone in the hospital because no one would adopt a 'coloured' baby. They said they chose me after praying to God and that my mother didn't want me.

Mr Goldthorpe was adamant that my name would be Norman. Norman means 'Man of the North'. The foster parents wanted to call me Mark from The Gospel of Mark, and their last name was Greenwood. My name was Norman Mark Greenwood. The Authority wouldn't officially acknowledge the name my foster parents called me. I am Norman Sissay in the files. The foster parents wouldn't acknowledge the name The Authority gave me. I was Norman Mark Greenwood and I knew no different. It was a land grab. But without my mother's signature on the adoption papers The Authority could not adopt me.

My mother must have been at her most vulnerable. She was pregnant and alone in a foreign country where she had come to study for a short period of time. Her college in the South of England sent her to the North of England to St Margaret's to deal with her pregnancy.

These places were baby farms. The mothers were the earth and the children were the crops. The church and state were the farmers and the adopting parents were the consumers. My mother was supposed to give birth and sign the adoption papers. She didn't. She wouldn't.

Testimony has come to light in national campaigns for unmarried mothers in England that in the 1960s coercion and subterfuge were used to get vulnerable women to sign the adoption papers. This is exemplified in the 2013 film *Philomena*.

My mother understood what adoption meant and would not sign. Her father – my grandfather – was dying in Ethiopia. She had little choice but to return to Ethiopia without me. With my name changed and the foster parents' identity hidden there was little chance she could find me if she wanted to.

I was three and a half years old when The Authority served a Notice on my mother via her church in Ethiopia to say that 'all the rights and powers of the parent of Lemn Sissay be vested in the local authority it appearing to this Authority that the parent has abandoned this child'. The document further states that: 'If not later than one month after the service of this notice, you shall serve a notice in writing on the Council objecting to the resolution, the resolution shall lapse on the expiration of fourteen days from the service of the notice of objection . . .'

She was given one month to object to the notice. Then she would have fourteen days to take The Authority to court, where she would have to prove to the court that she was a fit mother. The notice would have taken approximately a month to arrive in Ethiopia and another month for the letter to return. There were no direct flights from Addis Ababa to London. My mother would have had to fly from Addis Ababa to Athens and then from Athens to London. It was an impossible deadline. It was a set-up.

The Authority depends on the sleeping prejudice of assumptions because for this notice to have any premise we must *assume* that the mother didn't want the child or that she was unfit to keep the child.

Miss Y. Yemazebet Sissay
c/o Ethiopian Union Mission
P.O. Box 145,
Addisababa,
ETHIOPIA



COUNTY BOROUGH OF WIGAN
CHILDREN ACT 1948 AND CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PERSONS ACT 1963

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that on Tuesday the second day of December One Thousand Nine Hundred and Seventy the Mayor Aldermen and Burgesses of the County Borough of Wigan acting by the Council the Local Authority for the said County Borough (hereinafter called "the Council") did resolve:-

"That in pursuance of the powers contained in Section 2 (1) (b) of the Children Act 1948 and Section 48 (1) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1963, all the rights and powers of the parent of Lemn Sissay be vested in the local authority it appearing to this Authority that the parent has abandoned this child."

You are the mother of the aforesaid Lemn Sissay and therefore pursuant to Section 2 (1) (b) of the Children Act 1948 and Section 48 (1) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1963 your attention is drawn to the fact that if not later than one month after the date of the service of this notice, you shall serve a notice in writing on the Council objecting to the resolution, the resolution shall lapse on the expiration of fourteen days from the service of the notice of objection unless within that period the Council make complaint to the Juvenile Court in which case the Court has power after hearing the complaint to order that the resolution shall not lapse.

DATED this 2nd day of December, 1970.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'J. S. Sissay', is written below the dated text.

My story begins without her or any knowledge of her.