

ADOPTION SHOCK

Mum was murdered

BY SERIAL KILLERS

YOUR real-life stories

I wanted to give my mum a voice

Nothing had prepared Cheryl for the truth about her birth mother

Cheryl Gyant, 47

I sat back in shock as the words I'd heard sank in.

'I'm your aunt Abbie,' the lady on the phone had said. 'Your mum Sheryl's sister.'

She'd tracked me down after finding a photo of me as a baby, with my name on the back.

Aged 26, I'd been longing to find my birth mother after learning I was adopted 16 years earlier.

I'd had a wonderful childhood with two loving parents but, as a teen, I'd look at women in the supermarket and wonder,

Could that be my mum?

When I asked my parents, they told me something bad happened, but refused to divulge more.

Nothing could have prepared me for what my aunt said next.

'I'm so sorry. She was the victim of serial killers,' she revealed.

Distraught, the news made my head spin.

She gave me details of a retired detective who'd worked on Mum's case, and I emailed him right away.

He called me the next day and explained that evidence had led authorities to believe my mother, Sheryl

Okoro, was murdered by serial killers Leonard Lake and Charles Ng.

I reeled, remembering seeing Charles Ng in shackles on the news three years earlier, after he was arrested for murdering 11 people. I never imagined my birth mother might be one of the victims.

The detective also had an 11-page letter written by my mum that was found at the site of her death.

'You've got to read it to me,' I begged him.

In it, she'd recounted the terrible abuse she'd suffered as a child, and how, at 15, she fell in love with my father, before falling pregnant with me.

I had a girl and named her after me, she'd written.

But my father was an older man and her parents forced her to give me up at six months old.

She later had three more children – two daughters and a son.

But in a dark twist of fate, at 26, she was offered a job by her neighbour Leonard Lake, in 1984.

Leaving my half-brother Wesley with a babysitter while she went to

work, my mum was never seen again.

On the letter, dated 1985, were her birthdate and social security number.

She died tragically never knowing if anyone would ever read it.

When I held the letter and Mum's photo in my hands, I broke down in tears. It was all I had of Mum.

I looked so like her. Desperate to learn more, I discovered Leonard Lake, inspired by a 1963 thriller novel called *The Collector*, and his accomplice Charles Ng kept their victims as slaves in a remote spot.

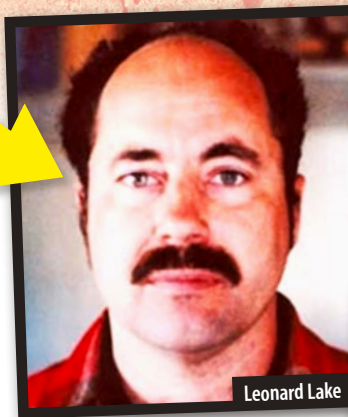
Mum must have written the letter while she was held captive.

Their reign of terror only ended when police arrested Lake for shoplifting in June 1985. Searching his car, they found belongings from missing persons.

Lake took a cyanide pill before he could be questioned, and died.

When detectives found the house of horrors, they discovered shallow graves with bodies in them, as well as thousands of charred bone fragments and dental specimens, after the men had attempted to burn their victims.

There were also horrific videotapes of their crimes.



Leonard Lake



Charles Ng

And Lake detailed them in his sinister 250-page diary.

Photos of my mother were buried along with Lake's diary and it was suggested my mother was one of the first victims.

Forensic pathologists confirmed a neck and leg bone found near their lair belonged to my mother.

Prosecutors were convinced he'd done it but, unable to prove Lake hadn't acted alone, Ng wasn't charged.

Charles Ng fled to Canada, where he was arrested for shoplifting and shooting a security guard.

He was jailed for four and a half years.

Around a decade later – the delay due to legal difficulties – he was put on trial in the US for the murder of six men, three

women and two babies. In February 1999, Ng was convicted of 11 counts of murder and sentenced to death. He remains on death row.

That same month, I was thrilled to find my birth father. A wonderful charismatic man, he still lived nearby.

'Your mum was a sweet soul,' he said.

I also met Abbie and my birth sisters, Hattie and Ruby.

Overjoyed, I finally knew where I came from.

But I was still desperate to give Mum justice.

I'm going to tell your story to the world, I vowed. So I stated writing a fictional version of her life.

During research, I learned she'd pleaded for me to be

They told me something bad had happened, but no more

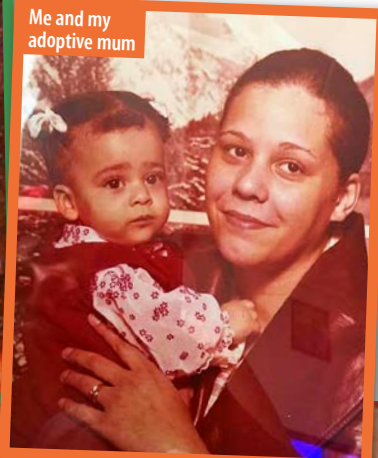
She'd given me the gift of a wonderful life



Have you honoured a loved one's memory? Tell us about it at thatstlife@aremedia.com.au



My biological mum Sheryl



Me and my adoptive mum



Part of the killers' house

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