

# 'I was adopted at six months – and used social media to find my birth mum in Chile'

Katherine Samwell-Smith was born in Chile and adopted by an English family. She tells the story of being 'reunited' with her birth mother

By Katherine Samwell-Smith

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Katherine was adopted from Chile by a British family (seen here on the right) but it wasn't until years later that she discovered her birth mother

“I’ve always known I’m adopted. My family told me before I could understand what it meant. My adoptive mother Rosie said, ‘It was meant to be’ and that’s how I’ve always felt. It made me feel special, knowing I’d been flown from Chile to England. I remember going to school aged five, proud I was different to everyone else.

In the early 70s, my parents had my older brother Nicholas naturally but weren’t able to have more. Mum desperately wanted a little girl, and her best friend Loreto, who’s Chilean, suggested her parents back home could look for a baby. It sounds crass, but that’s how it was – there were few international adoptions then.

They visited an orphanage, the Casa de National de Ninos in Santiago, and sent a photo of me and another little girl, along with a note that read, ‘Choose the girl on the right because she’s got a lovely smile.’



Katherine with the 'other baby' at the Casa de National de Ninos in Santiago

That photo means everything to me. But it haunts me to wonder what happened to the other child. It's that sliding doors moment – what if she'd been chosen, and not me?

At six months old, I was flown to London, with Loreto's mum Margot. The pilot came out to present me, on a little shopping trolley, to my new mum, dad and brother, and they took me home to Hampstead, London.

I grew up counting my blessings – Chile was a horrible place politically then, and I was fortunate to get out. Being adopted has always been central to who I am. I work for the [Intercountry Adoption Centre](#), the IAC, as a communications officer and am passionate about helping other families and adopted children.



Katherine arriving at Gatwick airport and being greeted by her new family

For a long time, I didn't feel the need to look for my birth mother. The desire to experience Chile came earlier; as a teen, I learned Spanish and visited Santiago. I went to see the orphanage, and was blown away to discover this huge, cosmopolitan city rather than the dusty shanty town of my imagination.

I felt I'd rounded off my story, but things changed when I lost my adoptive mum in 2010, a few months after marrying my husband Michael. There's an extra sense of loss when your adoptive mum is no longer with you.

When I had my first child, Benji in 2012, I missed her even more. But it also made me think about my birth mum. Experiencing such an incredible bond with my son made me realise how hard it must have been for her to break that maternal bond and give me up. For the first time, I thought I'd like to find her, and those feelings intensified after I had my daughter Sophie in 2015.



Katherine with her adoptive mum in the South of Chile



Katherine's birth mother Ximena with the policeman, Edgardo, who first broke the news that her daughter was looking for her

I discovered my mother, Ximena, now 64, was living in a village called Chanco near Santiago. A policeman, Edgardo, told her the news. She could have said, 'No, I don't have a daughter.' But she didn't. She opened her heart to me and that meant telling her family, including my older half-brother Marco, her secret.

Gradually, I found out the story. She'd given birth to Marco as an unmarried mum, and her furious parents had brought him up while she worked in Santiago as a carer and nanny.

When she got pregnant for the second time she felt she couldn't tell them, and gave birth at the orphanage – trying to give me the best start she could.

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Left: The moment Katherine discovers who her birth mother is; right: Ximena gave birth to Katherine in secret at an orphanage

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The first time I saw Ximena, I wasn't prepared for it at all. I was on a call to my cousin Katy, who lives next door, and she suggested we Face-Timed. It was mayhem, with Ximena crying, and my kids waving the Chilean flag in the background. But it was spontaneous, and not at all strained. My Spanish isn't really up to scratch, but I told her, 'I love you'.

We've spoken since and I wrote a letter saying I'd never blamed her for giving me away, and to thank her for what she'd done for me. She sent me a video telling me she had no choice, that times were different then and she wanted me to forgive her. It's heart-breaking to watch.

Once my Spanish is better, I'll go to Chile. I want more than anything to be able to give her a hug and tell her there's nothing to forgive. Seeing her smile is the most important thing to me, because it means she will have forgotten the pain, and is ready to embrace being my mum.

Then we'll be able to look forward to the future together.

*Katherine is a project worker for IAC The Centre for Adoption. To find out more about the charity or make a donation see [icacentre.org.uk](http://icacentre.org.uk)*