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A tale only an adoptee could tell

I have two "life stories" that I have kept separate. Last week, those lives came together at the funeral of a woman I consider my aunt.

Inside a small Southern California chapel, I stood among her grown children, daughters, sons-in-laws, 30-plus grandchildren, and 20-plus great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren. I was surrounded by relatives, many of whom I had never met and others whom I have not seen in more than 30 years.

During the eulogy, I heard my first name mentioned with a different last name. The minister, her son, was a former gang member turned born-again Christian. By DNA, he is my brother.

In fact, I learned I was one of 11 children.

The funeral was for my biological mother, whom I have known since childhood. She died Jan. 29 at age 87. She is survived by her husband.

Maybe you're like me, among the 5 million Americans who are adoptees. My adoption is termed an "informal adoption," in which a relative adopts a child. My adoptive parents were Carlos and Rachel Aguirre, both now deceased. Rachel was my biological mother's sister.

My adoptive parents, who had two children of their own, told me this family secret when I was 15. This is how the story goes: I had been sick as an infant. My biological parents had other children to care for. My adoptive parents volunteered to take care of me on a temporary basis. At some point, it was agreed that I would be better off with my aunt and uncle.

Since my biological and adoptive mothers were sisters, our families spent a lot of time together. I didn't know it at the time, but the cousins I played with during holidays actually were my brothers and sisters.

As I got older, I wanted more details about the circumstances surrounding my adoption. However, both parents brushed my questions aside with "the past is in the past" answers. Eventually, I wrote a letter to my "aunt" saying I understood her decision. I resigned myself to never knowing the entire story.

I learned more about my biological mother during the hourlong funeral than I had in 50 years. Her grandchildren spoke about the love showered on them and the happy times spent at her home.

Others spoke about her sense of humor, which was evident when her oldest son, Albert, recalled how his mother had planned and paid for her funeral five years ago: "She said, 'I don't want to have a car wash.'"

It took me and the others at the funeral a minute to get the joke. She didn't want her kids to have to hold a car wash for donations to pay for funeral expenses.

While I initially struggled with my decision to attend the funeral, ultimately, I couldn't deny that this woman had given me a tremendous gift.

Being adopted gave me an I'll-show-them drive to succeed. My parents, while not rich, lived in a nicer neighborhood than the barrio my biological siblings knew as children. I would have more opportunities, stability and, ultimately, a better education to rise above poverty.

My father, Carlos, legally adopted me when I was 17. The birth certificate that once read Yvonne Briano reads Mary Lou Aguirre. My two siblings are Dora Hernandez and Peter Aguirre.

I felt more emotion at the funeral than I anticipated — not for losing a mother, but for knowing I would never get the complete story about my adoption. There would be no Lifetime Movie closure. No letter written long ago by my biological mother that I would receive upon her death.

Still, I know she had made a hard choice, and my life was better for it.

► The columnist can be reached at maguirre@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6482.



MARY LOU AGUIRRE

The Green Fairy

Absinthe, famed drink of bohemians that packs a wallop, is back.

By Don Mayhew
The Fresno Bee

The phrase "think green" is supposed to stir ecologically friendly mental images of clean air, unpolluted streams and lush foliage.

But for this country's lovers of absinthe, the term has an entirely different meaning. The U.S. ban on the liquor, known by devotees as the Green Fairy, has been lifted after more than eight decades.

While it's unlikely that the anise-flavored aperitif, which more than a century ago in France rivaled wine in popularity, will ever again enjoy that kind of widespread acceptance, the people who drink absinthe display an extraordinary passion for it.

That has as much to do with the lore and ceremony surrounding the drink as the flavor itself, which can be bitter and complex — a nice way of saying it's often an acquired taste.

"It's not particularly flavorful," says Ken Fugelsang, an enology professor at California State University, Fresno, who touches on the distillation of absinthe during his wine production class. "It can be very bitter."

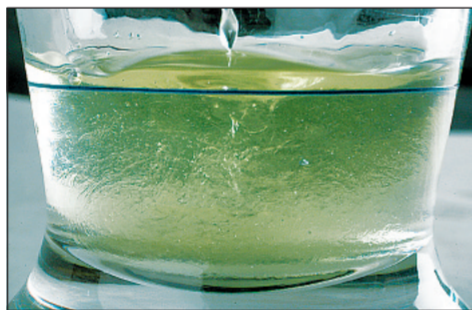
But what absinthe lacks in savory sweetness, it more than makes up for in cultural cachet.

It was the choice of drink by many of the influential artists and writers of La Belle Époque, among them Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Verlaine. It appeared in the paintings of Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso. It's said Van Gogh was driven to cut off his ear while under its influence.

Add to that the elaborate way absinthe is traditionally served — either set afire with a sugar cube or mixed with chilled water poured over a sugar cube — and you've got an intriguing drink.

"I just pulled up eBay," Fugelsang says. "There were no fewer than 58 different

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DARRELL WONG/THE FRESNO BEE

Sugar and water are mixed with Lucid, an absinthe that has been approved for sale in this country after a decades-old ban.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DARRELL WONG AND BOB CAMPBELL/THE FRESNO BEE

Eco-therapy sheds light on exercise

Green activity means taking it outside.

By Julie Deardorff
Chicago Tribune

It's no wonder that fitness resolutions tend to fizzle in February. Americans vow to get in shape at the worst possible time of the year; just when miserable weather forces us indoors.

We do have health clubs. And winter kicks off the mall-walking season. But some suspect that we need more than just physical exercise to stay healthy. We need the emotional healing benefits of green exercise.

Also known as eco-therapy, green exercise simply means doing something, almost anything, outside. You won't necessarily burn more calories in nature's green gym. But you can get substantial mental health benefits — reduced stress, depression and anger, and enhanced mood and self-esteem — simply by seeking out the natural world, according to growing evidence from researchers in the United States, Scandinavia and Britain.

In fact, in color therapy, green balances the nervous system and is believed to have a calming, soothing effect.

Reconnecting with the environment could be as simple as viewing nature in a picture or through a window. Studies have shown that prisoners and hospital patients reported better health when living in rooms that face farmland and trees rather than brick walls.

Scenery also made a difference for another group of shut-ins: treadmill runners, according to researchers at the University of Essex in Britain. They found that runners who zoned out on idyllic rural views during a 20-minute run had the most substantial drop in blood pressure and the most improved psychological outcomes.

The runners forced to look at gritty city environments, or "urban unpleasant" views, fared the worst.

Even those who had "no view" on the treadmill reported better outcomes than the ones looking at the run-down urban scenes.

Or green exercise could mean sitting in a park, biking to work, walking, fishing or digging in the dirt.

The stress-reduction benefits of healing gardens in hospitals (which we could now call "green care") date to the Middle Ages.

50TH ANNUAL GRAMMY AWARDS

Stars hit the fashion floor

Classic, floor-length numbers were preferred among Grammy celebrities.

By Melissa Heckscher
Los Angeles Daily News

LOS ANGELES — The Grammy Awards may be known for outrageous clothes and quirky rock-star styles, but this year's roster of nominees went for the more classic look — with floor-length gowns, solid colors and basic blacks taking over the Staples Center red carpet on Sunday afternoon.

Floor-length gowns trumped short dresses. Beyoncé arrived in a light-blue strapless gown with silver bodice; Fergie looked classic in a Calvin Klein lemon-yellow strapless with asymmetrical hemline; Nelly Furtado was draped in electric blue; and Alicia Keys went for high fashion in a Giorgio Armani Privé navy high-neck halter dress, with her hair styled up on top of her head.

Former "American Idol" Fantasia Barrino didn't meet the challenge. The nominee for Best R&B Vocal Performance and Best Contemporary R&B Album was one of the first artists to show up and was wearing a strapless black gown that was so

long that an assistant had to pick it up and dust it off before she faced photographers.

Gold jewelry, silver dresses and sequins were popular among the women. Miley Ray Cyrus sparkled in a knee-length white-and-silver dress accented with a silver purse and shoes. Also in a knee-length dress was Rihanna, whose blue Zac Posen with a full skirt was unfinished at the hem.

When it came to the men, the red carpet was a sea of black-on-black suits and penguin-style tuxedos. Rapper Akon wore a black trenchcoat with a black fur collar and a black button-down shirt (as well as black pants and shoes). Seal was all in white with a skinny black-and-white tie.

As for accessories for the men, it was all about hats and glasses. Hard-core rocker Slash wore a black leather top hat that made him look a bit like a goth version of Willy Wonka. And even though it wasn't sunny under the Grammy's chandelier-lined arrival tent, almost all of the male hip-hop stars, R&B artists, rockers and rappers wore shades.

Bling kings Paul Wall and Johnny "the Jeweler" Dang showed up, each wearing \$20,000 worth of diamonds fitted to their teeth.

"These are 50th year anniversary grills," Wall said, smiling to reveal sparking

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PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES
Miley Ray Cyrus, top, opted for a more casual look while Akon, above, sported a black trenchcoat with fur collar.



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Grammy nominee and performer Beyoncé was aglitter in a light-blue strapless gown with a silver bodice.