

FINDING MY MENTALLY ILL ROOTS

I was adopted at the age of six weeks in Honolulu, Hawaii, where my adoptive family was living due to my father's Naval career. My childhood with my new family was loving and supportive. I was never treated any differently than my two sisters, who were born naturally to my parents.

When I was six years old, my older sister, angry with me for being a brat, told me "Mom is not your real mom."

My mother had never looked so angry. She took my sister aside and said, "Ali is my real daughter. Ali is just as much a part of this family as you are. Don't EVER say something like that again."

But I often wondered, why did my birth mother give me away? Why didn't she love me? It made me sad to think of myself as a baby, alone in this world. Despite the loving care provided to me by my family, I had serious abandonment issues. When boyfriends broke up with me or friends moved on from our relationship, I dove into deep depression, drank alcoholically to numb my pain, and resorted to cutting myself so severely, I sometimes needed stitches.

Growing up, in my imagination, I always pictured my birth mother on the back of a motorcycle, driving with the birth father away from the hospital. I imagined that going over the potholes hurt her, having recently given birth. She had just handed over her baby, and I imagined that she didn't want to go home, perhaps ashamed of her pregnancy. In my imagination, my birth parents never arrived anywhere. They were perpetually speeding down the highway.

In addition to my abandonment issues, in my early twenties, I began suffering from bipolar I disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. My family tried valiantly to support me, but really had no idea how to help. These illnesses led me to a manic trip to war-torn Yugoslavia, and to an

episode in which I lived in the Dallas airport. I suffered from catatonic depressions and manic psychosis, hallucinating dead cows hanging from telephone poles and faces on the street melting like waxen monsters.

I also put my family through two suicide attempts. The most serious one was when I swallowed an entire bottle of my mood stabilizer, Depakote. My mother found me losing consciousness, smoking a cigarette out on my parents' deck. I woke up in the ICU, tubes coming out of every orifice and machines around me beeping, just in time to hear a doctor telling my parents that I might be permanently brain damaged.

I was hospitalized twelve times in psych wards. But my family never gave up trying to help me, paying for expensive doctors and medications. Finally, in 2006, we found the right treatment for my disorders, and I began to learn again how to function in society. I had been hospitalized so frequently, I had become "institutionalized." Living life out of the psych wards was difficult and took patience, and courage.

But thanks to my commitment to being compliant with meds, and my family's commitment to helping me, I began to live a productive life. I got married to a fellow sober alcoholic, and began working in an animal shelter. I began writing again, hoping to inspire others with mental illness or families with loved ones who do so. Hoping to make a statement with my writing that there is no shame in having mental illness, to encourage others to break free of the stigma attached to these disorders.

After being stable for a few years, I started thinking more about my birth mother. Where did I get these genes from? I decided to try to find my birth mother, to get some answers about my roots and history. To find out why she had abandoned me.

I petitioned the court in Hawaii to unseal my birth records and paid \$200 for a private

investigator to locate my birth mother. Amazingly, in two weeks I learned that he had found her and given her my phone number.

Coming home on the bus the next day, I received a call from an out of state number, and I knew it was her. I panicked. I couldn't answer.

I went to the diner with my husband, and he held my hand and told me to make the call.

"Hello," I stammered. "I think I'm your daughter."

I heard a gasp on the other end.

"My name is Pepper," the timid voice on the phone said. "I've been waiting for this call for fifty years."

How do you sum up a lifetime with a stranger in a twenty-minute phone call? I told her about my childhood, my marriage, my interests. She explained that she had been in college in Hawaii when she got pregnant with me, and that the birth father wanted nothing to do with me. And we made plans for my husband Jimmy and me to come to Peoria, Illinois to visit her.

A month later, I found myself in the Peoria airport locating Pepper in the crowd. I knew her immediately. She was a tiny, bird-like woman who reminded me of an elf. With her was her brother, Tom, and his wife, Mary. We hugged, and I looked at them in amazement. I had never seen myself in someone else's features.

Tom and Mary went to get the car, and Jimmy left to get our bags. Alone with Pepper outside the airport, we tried to find something to say.

"I wanted to wear my lucky black dress today," she said, "but I'm having a problem with dandruff."

Then she squealed with delight looking at a passing car.

"Look at that license plate!" she exclaimed. "347. It's a lucky number for us!"

We got in the car and drove through the prairie to the Holiday Inn, where Pepper had reserved a room for us.

“I asked to see three rooms before choosing,” Pepper explained. “I chose the one with the best view of downtown Peoria, and the one with the luckiest numbers.”

After dropping off our bags, my birth mother and uncle took us on a tour of special places for them in their hometown. Houses they had lived in, including a doublewide in a trailer park.

Pepper was full of strange details.

“In our trailer, my room was blue. There was a window overlooking a peach tree. I lay in bed talking to the squirrels.”

Then we arrived at Pepper’s house. It was a simple A-framed structure in an otherwise empty lot. She told us she had bought it with money she inherited from an aunt.

Pepper opened the door gingerly, and told us to squeeze in. Inside, Jimmy and I were astounded to see a hundred or so boxes of Barilla pasta against the wall. Yet her stove was covered in garbage. How did she cook the pasta? There were also hundreds of empty cans of cat food piled up like a mountain. Yet she didn’t have a cat.

Going up the cluttered steps, we saw a room packed from floor to ceiling with garbage. A small mattress on the floor was positioned to watch a little television. There was also a space heater, dangerous with so much loose paper around. Pepper explained that she didn’t have heat or hot water.

I didn’t know what to say. I was quiet in the car ride to Tom and Mary’s house, which fortunately was much nicer, overlooking a river.

Over tea and cookies, I showed Pepper pictures of myself growing up. She was delighted that I had landed in such a loving family.

“I wasn’t sure if I wanted to keep you,” she told me. “They took you to a foster home while I was deciding. They gave me little green pills to dry up my milk. And they brought you to see me every couple of weeks, until I finally decided you would be better off with another family.”

“I wanted to kill myself when I was pregnant with you,” she continued. “I wanted to swim out into the ocean in Waikiki until I was too tired to swim back. But I didn’t want to hurt my baby. So, I told a policeman what I was planning to do, and he took me to the home for unwed mothers.”

She went on to explain that my name on my original birth certificate was “Sky.”

“I was in my parents’ house, visiting from Hawaii, when I was pregnant with you,” she said. “And the ceiling opened up, and I saw the sky. I was falling, into the blue. Drifting through the clouds. And that’s when I knew your name.”

When I asked for more details about my birth family, Pepper stunned Jimmy and me by saying that two of her brothers had committed suicide while in their twenties.

“I found them both, hanging,” she said, strangely detached and emotionless.

I was beginning to understand where I had inherited my mental illness from.

“I’ve never stopped thinking of you,” Pepper said.

Later that afternoon, while Jimmy was entertaining Pepper with stories about me and my family, I found myself alone in the kitchen with her brother, Tom.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” he said carefully, “but Pepper is ‘special.’”

“That’s a good way of putting it,” I said. “I have severe bipolar I disorder. I’ve been in treatment for years. Was she ever diagnosed with something like that?”

“She was diagnosed with exactly that after giving birth to you,” he whispered. “But she refused to take the Lithium prescribed to her, and after a while refused to see any more

psychiatrists. To this day, she refuses to discuss it, and denies having any sort of psychiatric disorder.”

I peered into the living room at Pepper smiling and talking to my husband. I was overcome with survivor’s guilt.

It seemed that, since giving me up, Pepper had lived a solitary, exiled existence in her hoarded house. Always wondering where I was; if she had done the right thing. She had never married, never had other kids. She had never gotten help for her own obvious mental health issues. She had never gotten over letting me go.

But clearly, Pepper had made the right decision. If she had kept me, I would have grown up in a trailer park with a mentally ill mother and two uncles dead from suicide. And I might never have gotten the help I needed for my own psychiatric disorders.

Giving me up was the most loving act Pepper could have done for me.

After our visit, I began to realize that Pepper was sitting by the phone every day, waiting for me to call. Without an answering machine or a cell phone, she was afraid to leave the house in case she missed me.

My friend William, a fellow adoptee, encouraged me to set a time to talk to her each week.

“What happened was even more traumatic for our birth mothers,” he told me. “We were welcomed into loving families and had good lives. They were left with a hole that could never be filled.”

So, Pepper and I now talk every Sunday, and we are getting to know each other. I cherish our relationship, but it probably means even more to her.

For Mother’s Day, the first year we knew each other, I sent Pepper a bouquet of flowers. She called me when she received them, and she was livid.

“Don’t ever send me flowers again,” she said. “I don’t believe in flowers. Use the money you would have spent to buy nuts to feed squirrels in the park.”

I was confused, but I did as she asked. I bought a bag of unsalted almonds and went to Union Square. I clicked my tongue at a squirrel and reached out my hand with a nut. He cautiously came toward me, then grabbed the almond and held it in his little human-like hands.

“This is for Pepper,” I told him, and he ran away.

It was the least I could do for her, given what she had done for me.

I imagine Pepper can finally get off that perpetually in-motion motorcycle. She has finally arrived.

After years of feeling abandoned, I now know that she loved me so deeply, she was willing to live the rest of her life in pain just to give me a better life.

My birth mother didn’t abandon me.

She set me free.