

# Discovery

I never knew why Mom used to treat me differently when I was a child. My sister Sarah was almost three years younger than me, and my little brother Jacob was much younger. Mom loved us all equally, yet... when she hugged me it always felt as if she was reluctant to give me her full love.

When I was somewhat older, I learned that I was born before my parents got married. That was not such a great revelation. Many of my classmates were born to unmarried parents.

I didn't feel any different than my brother or my sister. Mom loved us, pampered us, and scolded us equally. It was only her hugs that were different, yet only I ever noticed.

I grew up, married, and had children of my own. Mom was a very proud grandmother. Her bridge partners even started complaining that she talked so much about my children that they felt they knew them better than their own grandchildren.

During a vacation Mom contracted a rare tropical disease. It was discovered only after she came home, when it started consuming her. She died a few weeks later, at the age of sixty-five.

Mom used to be a very healthy person. She didn't have any medical problems, unlike most elderly people. She didn't even catch a cold easily. And now she was suddenly

terminally ill and before we could get accustomed to the idea, she was gone. It was almost incomprehensible. I was shocked, as were my siblings, but not as much as Dad.

We spent the mourning period with Dad. He was devastated. He could not see how he could live on without his beloved wife. Mom had pampered him, never letting him do anything she could handle herself. He was now unable to handle even the necessary daily household chores.

My wife lost her parents in an accident while she was still a baby, and had been raised by her grandparents. Shortly after our wedding they also passed away. Having experienced the loss of loved ones she knew just too well how we were feeling and helped us through this difficult period.

I consulted with my siblings. We knew Dad could not live alone. We also knew it was too soon to suggest he find another mate. We decided to invite him to live with us for the next few months – a month or two with each of his children, until he recovered enough to consider something else.

I took him home with me. He didn't like leaving his home, but he knew that he couldn't stay there alone. He was reluctant to ask for anything at first, feeling as if he was intruding on our privacy. My wife and kids were wonderful. They pampered him, were attentive to his needs and made him feel welcome. It took him almost two weeks to relax and feel at home, though he never left his room before he was fully dressed.

We were watching TV that weekend evening. My wife was busy in the kitchen and the kids were in their rooms. Dad seemed very pensive. When the program finished he started talking. He didn't really talk to me. He was more

talking to himself, but meaning for me to hear it.

“You surely know Mom loved you very much. She didn't ever let her entire love show, being afraid that it could overwhelm you. Yet you should know she wasn't really your mother.”

I was utterly surprised and found this difficult to accept. “What do you mean?” I managed to blurt out.

“I had another love affair before...” he started. “I was very young then – just about twenty. More of a kid than a man. She was even younger. I loved her wholeheartedly but foolishly. It was an impossible love – like a big fire. We took no precautions. A few months later she was expecting. We married hurriedly. I could not accept the idea of having a child without marriage and we didn't consider any other alternatives. The pregnancy went quite well and then you were born – the tiniest baby in the maternity ward. We were both afraid to even touch you – you seemed so fragile.”

I smiled. It reminded me of my own reaction when I saw my first baby, Brad, soon after birth.

“You turned out to be a very nice baby. You hardly ever cried; you ate well and grew well. We were very happy with you...”

He seemed to return to his pensive mood.

“You were only three months old when your mother suddenly became quite restless. She would leave home with you and wander around the entire day. During the weekend she would leave you with me and just disappear for many hours. I was worried about her, but she used to reassure me.”

He paused, smiling, reminiscing about my birth mother.

“Then one weekend she didn't come back. It was getting quite late and I was worried. I started calling all our friends,

searching for her, but to no avail. Then I called the police. They suggested I check with the local hospital. I found her there. It turned out that a car had hit her just a block away from home. She was wearing black and the driver hadn't noticed her until too late. She died that night..."

He stopped once more, his face expressing the pain as if it had just happened. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and went on:

"I was left alone with my grieving and with a three-month-old baby. I didn't know what to do or what would happen to us; I only knew I had to survive and take care of you, but I didn't know how.

"Several friends tried to help me, but the best help came from my love's best friend – a girl about her age. She would prepare meals, feed you, change your diapers, and wash you. When you got a fever she asked if she could stay the night with you. I didn't think it was appropriate for me to sleep while she stayed awake, watching you, so I joined her. We talked a lot that night. It took you several days to recover. She stayed near you all that time and I was getting used to her being there. I appreciated her devotion to you. She told me that your mother had asked her to care for you the day you were born; that she had a feeling she would not live to see you grow up. Her friend promised to care for you as if you were her own child – and she kept her promise."

He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

"Eventually, I fell in love with her. It took her much longer to start liking me; I was just a spoiled brat, a no-good father, a mediocre student and a pain in the ass, even when I tried to ease the task she had taken on herself. She moved in with me just to be able to take better care of you – at least

that was what she said, but I tend to believe she was starting to love me. We slept in different rooms, though.

"I finished my studies. During that last year of university I tried as hard as I could. I wanted to impress her and to build a good base for our future, if she accepted me. I managed to be in the top-ten list of my class and got a kiss from her as a reward. A few nights later she joined me in my bed for the night. Six months later we married."

He was smiling broadly now. "She told me she used to think about marrying me just to be close to you, but she couldn't marry without love.

"You know most of the rest of the story. She raised you like her own. She loved you even more than she loved her own children, if that was possible. She turned out to be a very loving wife and mother. Our love grew stronger each year, as did her love for you.

"Ever since you were twelve she wanted to tell you the truth, but she couldn't find the right time. Maybe she was afraid of your reaction. The night before she died she told me: 'It looks like I'll never get a chance to tell him. Please tell him, but do try to make it easy on him.' Well, I'm not sure I succeeded."

He looked at me worriedly, trying to see how I was affected. As much as I was moved by his story, I had to reassure him: "No, Dad. You didn't hurt me, you just surprised me."

He looked for a moment like somebody who just managed to play a practical joke, and then turned serious again.

"My wife is waiting for me. I should go to bed. Good-night."

I thought he was somewhat confused by the story he

had just told me, but decided not to correct him. I said “Goodnight” just the same, not noticing at the time that he didn’t add “see you in the morning” as he always had before.

Dad didn’t come to breakfast the next morning. When it was nearing midday I asked one of the children to check in on him. He knocked on the door but heard no response. He came back and told me.

I didn’t knock; I went right in. Dad left his shoes in an orderly manner near his bed. He was lying barefoot on the bed, still wearing the same clothes he had worn the night before. He was smiling happily, but his eyes were blank; he wasn’t breathing and he had no pulse.

I looked at him some more. He was at peace with himself. He didn't fear death – it was a way to reunite with his beloved wife. I couldn't feel sorry for him, as he had achieved what he really wanted, but I felt a deep pain inside. Mom had left us just a few weeks earlier and now Dad followed her. I would never be able to talk with them again, joke with them or argue with them.

I called the police immediately. They came quite soon with a doctor, who examined my father, but there was nothing he could do. “It was probably a stroke,” he said. We had to go through a routine inquiry before I could phone my sister and my brother and tell them.

Dad was buried near his wife, as he willed. We spent several days in the old house, trying to decide what to do with all the stuff we found there. I found a few old albums in the attic. They showed my father with a beautiful blond young woman – probably my real mother. I didn’t show them to my siblings – they were not interested in old

albums. I also found my birth certificate and Dad’s two wedding certificates. I gave the newer one to my sister, but I kept the old one – the one testifying to the marriage of my real mother to my father.

I could find nothing else concerning my real mother in the house, but this didn’t seem strange since it had been more than forty years since her death. I wanted to know more about her, but I had nobody who could tell me, nobody who could answer my questions.

We didn’t sell the house outright. All three of us were reluctant to part with this house that meant so much to us. We decided to keep it and meet in it regularly.

I took home with me the albums and the two documents. I could learn from them my mother’s name and my exact place of birth. I studied the photos in the old albums. My mother was a beauty, that was evident – but Mom was just as beautiful when she was young. There were many photographs showing them together. She had even been a bridesmaid at the wedding.

Try how I might, I couldn’t find any additional information about my real mother. I had her full name, her maiden name, and her date of birth. I couldn’t even find the date of her death.

I looked at the back of the old photographs, in case there was some additional information written there, but found nothing.

I checked with my siblings, asking them for any documents they may have found concerning Dad before he married Mom. They managed to find his diploma, a few receipts for rent, and one receipt from a doctor for a pregnancy test, but they bore his name alone. They had

many documents concerning the time after he married. We knew all of Mom's relatives and were on very good terms with them, as well as those on Dad's side, but there was no mention of any other relatives.

It became an obsession. I felt I had to find more about my real mother and her family – my family. I had to bridge a gap more than forty years wide. I didn't know how to proceed.

## Search

Being a married man has some benefits. One of them is always having someone to talk to. I talked with my wife, telling her of the last conversation I had with my father, about Mom and about my mother. She was just as surprised as I had been, learning that the woman I loved as my mother was not my real mother. She was just as reluctant as me about telling my siblings about my findings. "It doesn't really matter, you know, but they may resent the idea that the facts were kept secret, or they may feel some estrangement from you. It won't hurt anybody if they don't know."

I was more concerned at that time about finding out more about my mother. If she had been such a close friend of Mom's, maybe Mom's family would know something?

Only Mom's younger sister and a few cousins were old enough to know anything about mother. I invited them for a visit.

I took a few photos from the old album, showing the two young women together, and asked the visitors if they could recognize them. They all recognized Mom, but none seemed to know who the other woman was. Only her sister thought she once heard Mom telling about a good friend she had during her university years, but she knew nothing more.