

Genetic Testing: Miracles and Science

An adoptee twice rejected by her first mother turns to genetic testing for information and discovers a whole new family.

It has been 25 years since I found my birth mother. She has rejected me two times since. My search began in California in 1986 when I was in my early twenties. I hired a private investigator and made use of the “non-identifying information” a compassionate social worker had provided. The investigator made the initial contact. It was a disaster; my birth mother did *not* want to be found.

Apparently my birth had been a frightening chapter in her life and one she wanted to keep closed. Imagine a pregnant eighteen-year-old girl in prison during the dawn of the free love movement, giving birth while incarcerated, not to mention in an era that stigmatized out-of-wedlock pregnancy. She had no desire to revisit her troubled youth through meeting me, and, the hardest part, no curiosity or desire to know who I was.

I cried. I felt awful, guilty even.

It took months to work through my emotions over this second rejection, but I finally wrote to her. She responded with a letter that expressed her firm wish to draw a line that separated her from her past. Our only other communication was through two more letters over the years that followed. They met with the same result. Time seemed to have no effect on her wounds. To this day I’ve never met her, nor spoken to her on the phone.

I know I can’t control how she feels. I can only control my own reaction. I admit it hurts, but I’m not the type to kick something around forever. Thankfully, my life is full of other moments. Great moments, especially those surrounding the births of my two sons and the years spent raising them.

As the years have ticked by though, I increasingly wondered about my birth father. My birth mother was the only person who knew his identity and she was unwilling to divulge that information.

I made a rogue attempt to use social media to locate him. My Facebook page plea included the date and place of my birth, along with several photos of me throughout the years. I waited. Several weeks went by and there was no shortage of shares. Like a cheesy 80’s shampoo commercial, I told two friends and they told two friends, and so on, and so on.

The result: nothing. In the end, I surmised that my birth mother never told him that she was pregnant. How do you find someone who has no idea that you exist?

After that failed social media experiment, I took a break from finding him, until gnawing questions about my health history prompted me to try genetic testing.

Thank you, science and technology. I spit in a test tube, waited a few weeks, and 23andMe (a genetic testing company named for the 23 pairs of chromosomes in a normal human cell) gave me a genetically “clean” bill of health. The report explained that they detected no mutations or gene variants that would indicate serious inherited conditions, only a couple of genes indicating an elevated risk for non-life threatening conditions such as psoriasis and restless leg syndrome.

This was before 23andMe suspended their health-related genetic testing to comply with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s directive.

After I received the health results, I played around with the “Ancestry Composition” section of the site. I was fascinated to find out that I was mostly British and Irish, which was at least partially similar to my adoptive parents’ British and German ancestry. Given my propensity for arguing, raising my voice in exciting situations, and talking with my hands, I figured there would be a bit of Italian in me. Nope. I was enchanted anyway with the idea of being British and Irish, and fantasized I was related to Bono.

Initially, I never thought to look at the “DNA Relatives” section of the site. I already knew who my biological mother was, and I knew she hadn’t had other children. As for my birth father, I figured he wouldn’t be looking for me, and given his age (early 70’s), he probably wasn’t spitting in a test tube to get in touch with his genes.

A few weeks after analyzing the health data, I received an email from 23andMe. It was a conduit email from a “potential relative.”

Hi – Through our shared DNA, 23andMe has identified us as relatives. Our predicted relationship is 4th Cousin, with a likely range of 3rd to 6th Cousin. Would you like to explore our relationship?

Fourth, maybe even a 6th cousin? Whoop de doo. With no blood relatives that I actually *knew*, except for my own boys, a 4th cousin was too distant to rouse my curiosity. Even if he were related to me on my paternal side, how would I know? These potential matches typically request lineage information—a list of surnames to help piece together a family tree. I had no surnames to offer, so I ignored that first message.

I received a few more requests, but they were all the same—distant cousins. The flurry of them, though, finally prompted me to check 23andMe’s “DNA Relatives” section. I could have shut off these notifications, but now I was a curious to see if there were other matches who hadn’t reached out yet.

On that page, 23andMe reported that I had 762 potential relatives. 762! What does one *do* with this kind of information? Okay, maybe a lot of people care about distant cousins—it’s a way to find common ancestors and build your family tree—but I didn’t have a family tree. I barely had a shrub.

Then I saw it: “One Close Family.” What? Who? I clicked on it, but before

23andMe would reveal any details, a warning popped up. I had to confirm that I *really* wanted the information.

23andMe asked for two layers of consent before it revealed a close family relationship. First, I was given the chance to turn off the “relative finder” function, which shows relations as close as second cousins. Once you’ve opted in, if 23andMe finds a close relative (closer than a second cousin), a pop-up warning explains how this “new” evidence of a close family relationship can be unexpected and even upsetting in some cases. Upsetting? Been there. Of course I wanted to know! I clicked, then:

You may learn information about yourself that you do not anticipate. Such information may provoke strong emotion.

Thanks 23andMe. Now I was scared. But I clicked “proceed” anyway. Then I saw it: **Male, Father, 50% shared, 23 segments**

Father? My *biological* father?! 23andMe had found my biological father! Boy, this was not some online game, yet I felt like I’d just won the lottery—*50.0% shared, 23 segments.*

I had to contact this guy. 23andMe required that initial contact be made through them. I could hardly think straight as I typed out a message to *my father*:

Hi,

I am contacting you because 23andMe has identified you as a relative of mine because of our shared DNA. 23andMe has predicted, through our DNA “match,” that you are my biological father. You won’t recognize my name, because I was adopted and bear the name of my adoptive parents. However, my birth mother’s name is Margaret Michaels. I hope that the name Margaret Michaels is familiar to you, although it was 50 years ago and I understand that it was a difficult time for both of you. I hope that you will respond to my message and that you are interested in exploring our relationship. I look forward to hearing from you! Laureen Pittman

(Original birth certificate reads: “Baby Girl Michaels”)

It hasn’t been an easy journey. At first, he thought our match was a mistake. My birth father—a self-proclaimed “old hippie” and artist who had fully immersed himself in the early 1960’s beatnik culture—had no recollection of his encounter with my birth mother. He doesn’t even remember her name, but since the geographic details and genetic facts all added up, our match could not be denied.

He lives in another state and I have yet to make the journey to meet him. We’re taking things slow and communicating through email. I’m grateful and amazed at his openness. He is telling me his truth, his story, and I am telling him mine. It’s really something to hear and be heard by a biological

relative, and hard to explain how powerful that is to people who grew up with the ability to take that for granted. It feels like a miracle, like a whole new world opened up, with a little help from science.

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