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### How I Found and Reunited with My Biological Family

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KUCC

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### How I Found and Reunited with My Biological Family

People often take their families for granted. I was never given that option. Growing up, I observed classmates drawing their large families and saw Christmas movies where everyone got together and had a wonderful time with each other. I wondered why I didn't have a large family.

Three of my four grandparents died many years before I was born, and my one grandfather who was still alive could barely hear; I couldn't even speak with him. My father was an only child with no living aunts, uncles, or cousins in the area. My mom had a large family, but they were much older than me and we were not close back then. It was just my dad, my mom, and me.

I remember drawing my own family in school; however, instead of everyone standing in a line holding hands, I drew my family members as angels flying in heaven. I even imagined what my life would be like if my grandparents were still alive to come over for Christmas.

In December 2011, I expressed my sorrow to my father. I cried and asked him why I was the only kid my age that didn't have an extended family or grandparents. He listened to me cry for a brief moment. I didn't know it yet, but my father was keeping a secret from me. Fearing I wouldn't understand, my father decided to tell me his secret when I turned 12. I was only eight then, but he could not see me upset, so he sat me down on the bed and asked if I knew what adoption was.

I told him that I did. He told me that he was adopted as a baby. Turns out, my father was the result of a teenage fling. The father wasn't in the picture, and the mother was too young to

raise a baby, so she asked her sister if she could raise my dad. Therefore, my father was adopted by his aunt and her husband. It's a confusing situation, I know.

In my eyes, I acquired two more grandparents that day, for a grand total of 6. See, most people either consider their biological or adopted parents to be their family, but I say, "why not everyone?"

When you have six grandparents, one of them should have a family you can be close with, right?

My father then told me about my biological grandmother. She was still alive and had three children. She didn't live too far away from us either. I remember seeing her picture for the first time and thinking, "cool". However, due to the adoption, my grandmother and father were not close.

But the real drama came when I asked my dad who his father was. He told me he didn't know. "How is that possible?" I thought. My dad explained that he knew very little information about him. He knew his name, his approximate age, and where he used to work back in the 1970s. No one had heard of him or from him in 42 years.

Wow. 42 years. I couldn't picture that amount of time in my head at eight years old. It made me sad to think that I had this new family at my fingertips, but I could not reach them.

I knew I wanted to be close to him and his family, but how would I do that if no one even knew who or where he was?

Well, I had been watching a lot of missing person documentaries at the time, and it sparked a brilliant thought to form in my mind. "If the police can find missing people, then I'll go ahead and find my missing grandfather."

Funny how kids think, right? “I’ll just search up his name, we’ll find him, he’ll want to reunite, and we’ll all be a big happy family.” Very optimistic. But I was serious. I was motivated to find him. I just didn’t know how hard it would be.

For the next five years, I searched for him on and off, typing his name into Facebook or Google and looking at each 60-something-year-old man I could find, hoping one of them would be him. You might think five years is a long time to search, well unfortunately for me, my grandfather had a very common name.

Over the years, I grew attached to my grandfather. I’m not sure why. I didn’t know how old he was, what he looked like, what kind of man he was, or even if he was still alive, but I still loved him. I genuinely believed that he would care about us and that when I found him, I’d be close to his family as well.

In 2017, I begged my dad to get the Ancestry DNA test. For context, Ancestry.com is a company that specializes in DNA testing and has old records you can access for free. You can figure out your nationalities as well as DNA relatives through this test. I heard many adopted kids found their biological families through this test. However, it was pretty expensive, around \$100. After a couple of months of begging, my dad agreed to buy it for my 14th birthday. I got the results of my DNA test back, hoping to find something that could help me. I opened my DNA nationality results and discovered I was 1/4 Polish. This had to be from my grandfather’s side, as everyone else in my family was Italian, British, and Irish. Then, I opened up my DNA relative results. I crossed my fingers and hoped a close family member would show up. But, there was none, just a lot of 3rd-8th cousins.

Over the next five years, I waited and waited, hoping someone new would take the test and show up as my aunt or cousin, but that never happened.

As I waited, I sent a message to all of my third cousins, asking if they recognized my grandfather's name. None of them did. However, there was something peculiar about most of them. Almost all of my third cousins were from Massachusetts. This was bizarre because everyone in my family was a semi-recent immigrant, who came to America around the 1920s, and everyone settled in Philadelphia. My grandfather's family had to be from Massachusetts, but what was my grandfather doing in Philadelphia in 1970 when he met my grandmother? If anything, this DNA test produced more questions than answers.

As I got older, I started to wonder more about this mystery man I had spent so long looking for. What if I never find him? What if I find him, and he wants nothing to do with us? Is he a good person? If he's alive, and we do get to meet, what would I say to him? How do you catch a man up with over 50 years of your and your father's lives? My questions definitely made me more anxious to find him, but they never swayed my determination to look.

Eventually, I gave up on Ancestry, and I set a new focus on another DNA testing company, 23 and Me. They do the same as Ancestry, but they don't offer old records. I thought there may be new people on this test. I begged my father to buy me it for about a year. It was \$200, and my dad was worried there would be no new information on the test.

Eventually, the test went on sale, and he bought it for me. This time, he was the one who took the test. We got the results 3 days after my 19th birthday. The DNA nationality test was the first one I opened. It said the same as Ancestry, so I knew this test's results would be valid. Next up was the DNA relative list. I was nervous to open this one. I was disappointed last time, and I feared being disappointed again. I crossed my fingers and opened the results. "1 close relative" was written in bold font at the top of the page.

The breath left my body. “Who could it be?”. I crossed my fingers harder as I hoped desperately that this person was from my grandfather’s family.

It listed the name of a woman who shared 10% of her DNA with my father. She was his first cousin. I uncrossed my fingers and stared at the computer screen, adrenaline running through my veins. This was what I was looking for. She was my grandfather’s niece.

I sent her a message, and after a day of no response, the excited kid in me took the reins, and I decided to continue searching for my grandfather, now with the biggest lead in 52 years.

Through online white pages, I found the name of her mother, who passed away in 2012. Her obituary gave me the names of my great-grandparents, one of which was Polish. I knew I was on the right track.

Then, I looked up their names on the Ancestry free records site, and I found their marriage license from the 1940s. It stated that my great-grandfather was living in Fitchburg, Massachusetts at the time of his marriage. Now my third cousins being from Massachusetts made more sense.

I began searching for records of my grandfather on Ancestry, now knowing he was probably born in Massachusetts. After looking through various records, I came across one that caught my attention. It was an obituary that listed the relatives of the deceased man. One of the names on the relative list I had seen before. It was my great-grandmother’s name, and she was listed on the obituary as the deceased’s mother.

It was him. I found my grandfather.

Staring at the computer screen, I felt a wave of happiness, shock, and sadness overcome me at the same time. It was like an emotional hurricane. I was happy I found him, finally after 11 years of searching, but at the same time, I just found out he was dead.

I cried for the next hour, not able to read the obituary until I calmed down. My dad sat down by the edge of my bed, and I read the obituary out loud to him. It was long and it told us so much.

It said my grandfather was a good man who was loved by many. He worked at the same place his whole life and loved his large family. He had cancer and passed away at the age of 55. May 11, 2004. I was one year old. It was the start of my life and the end of his. I never had the chance to meet him. It was a lot to take in and comprehend. I still had no idea what he looked like, either.

The next day, I went through his obituary's relative list and began searching for his siblings on Facebook. Eventually, I found his brother, who allowed me to find the rest of his siblings and his mother. It was so bizarre to see my long-lost family's faces right in front of me. I felt a little creepy too, like a stalker, but I figured they would be okay with it.

I messaged his surviving sister and brother, explained the situation to the best of my ability, and hoped they would see the message, believe me, and contact me back.

Five days later, my grandfather's brother called me on Facebook Messenger. I was afraid to answer the phone. 52 years of no contact was about to end, and I didn't know if he was going to be welcoming, nasty, or confused.

Luckily, he was very welcoming. I talked to him more after our phone call, and I even called my grandfather's sister a few times, and she was always happy to talk to us.

In August 2022, my aunt set up a family reunion at her house. All of my grandfather's siblings, nephews, and nieces were going to be there, and they were all excited to meet us. It felt like those Christmas movies I used to watch when I was little, where the families got together

and spent quality time together. It was literally a dream come true, and I could not wait until the day came.

On August 20th, 2022, my dad and I drove 3 hours to meet our biological family. We met everyone and heard stories about my grandfather, my aunts, and my great-grandparents who died before I got to meet them. I even got to see pictures and videos of my grandfather.

Everyone was so nice. We ate at a restaurant, got ice cream, and watched the sunset on a beach in Cape May. We were there for 12 hours and left at midnight, much to the dismay of my aunt, who loved us so much she wanted us to sleep over.

Overall, the entire situation worked out in the best way possible. I would have loved to meet my grandfather, my great-grandparents, and my aunts who passed, but I know not to take my surviving family members for granted. I have everything that I wanted as a kid. I am very close with my uncle, aunt, and a couple of my cousins.

I tell this story to make you think of your own family. Most families are crazy and have their fights and make-ups. It's easy to ignore your family and become strangers over time. Sometimes, certain family members are best ignored, but other times, families can fall apart simply because they don't speak enough.

I want to highlight that it is a privilege to have a family you can take for granted. Please try and remember to message or spend time with your family members once in a while. You truly don't know what you have until it's gone.