

# 1

**T**hirty years was a long time to wonder if I would ever meet my brother. But finding him would feel like a side trip by the time the search had led me to its real destination. The most remarkable discoveries seem to come while looking for something else, as long as you're open to the possibilities.

Greg would turn out not to match the image my wife Tibby and I had in our minds. We didn't know that at the time, so there was hopeful excitement in Tibby's voice when she called me from her office. It pulled my attention to her words, drawing me away from the pile of papers on my desk.

"Motty asked me if you had an older brother." Tibby was trying, unsuccessfully, to mute the effect of her news on me; she was the calm one in our relationship. "She said she sat across the aisle on the subway from a guy who looked just like you, same build, everything, just older." Motty was my wife's friend and co-worker; she had seen me often enough to picture someone as my brother, but would not have had the confidence to approach the guy and ask him the question.

"What did you tell her?" It shouldn't have been a hard question for anyone else to answer: Does he or doesn't he have a brother? Few people knew that I was adopted; even fewer knew that I had a mystery brother.

I suppose *this* would have been the moment, if I had that magical power to go back and change events, that stands out as the time and place to revisit, the moment where my new life was beginning. If I had been the only factor in the equation, I don't think I would choose today to take a different route.

But I wasn't alone, in any sense. Tibby and I had been married for fifteen years, and now seemed to go through life as a unit. We may have even seemed insular to our friends, but it was just that we were confident in our knowledge of each other, a self-reliant couple. How could I have failed to wonder, at that critical time, whether Tibby's choice would have been the same as mine? That's what I would go back to find out, at least to feel right about myself for having asked the question.

\* \* \*

I can't remember a time when I didn't know I was adopted. My parents decided to tell me the simpler facts of my birth as soon as they thought I could understand. Until I was ten, my curiosity had not reached beyond those simple facts. That was about to change as my mother sat at her dressing table one evening, carefully applying makeup and only half-listening to my familiar questions.

The ritual began again as I stood watching Mom put on eye shadow. I was fidgeting around the room looking for ways to entertain myself while she rushed to get ready for a dinner party. She leaned into the mirror, chin tilted up, face just inches from the glass, her lips pursed in concentration as she applied the mascara brush to her lashes.

I made a twisted face in the mirror and, out of boredom, asked the question my mother had heard many times before: "Mommy, when did you see me for the first time?"

She sighed, knowing that we were starting an old conversation again, but her soft Virginia accent hid any impatience she may have felt. "Honey, we saw you a few days after you were born, in the maternity ward at the hospital." I never asked about my birth parents, the missing faces in the maternity ward. They didn't seem to fit into the story I wanted to hear.

"What did I look like?" I stumbled around the room, pretending that I was a peg-legged pirate, not really thinking much about the question.

“Oh, you were the most beautiful, little pink baby. All the nurses said so, too.”

“What did you do when you saw me for the first time?”

“I asked when I could hold you.” She pulled her crossed arms to her chest, as if cradling me once again for the first time, her hands still holding the momentarily forgotten mascara brush and case.

We had gone through the standard questions and answers up to this point. Children seem to find comfort in repetitiveness, asking the same questions and expecting the same answers, just as they listen to the same bedtime stories until their parents no longer need the books to recite the lines. But this time I asked a question that hadn't been on my mind until the moment I asked it: “Mommy, why didn't they want to keep me?” I stopped playing aimlessly with the coins on Dad's bedside table and turned all of my attention to my mother.

I would have been satisfied with any answer, but my mother didn't push the question aside. She twisted around slowly on the upholstered bench and looked at me cautiously. “David, I'm sure they wanted to keep you. They just couldn't.” The strain in her voice made it sound like she was pleading with me to accept what she was saying. “They were a young married couple. They were struggling to get by and wanted a better home for you than they thought they could give you. Their other son...” She drew in her breath and turned back to stare at herself in the mirror, as if trying to see in her face what to do next.

I was studying her face in the mirror, too. She glanced at me self-consciously and saw that I understood what she had let slip.

“Oh, dear.” Tears pooled in her eyes; her shoulders sagged. “I didn't want you to find out like this.” She paused, resigning herself to finishing the interrupted sentence. “They already had another little boy when you were born. We were told that he was seven years old and had a lot of medical problems.”

The idea rolled over me in a warm wave of excitement: I had a

brother! My mother may have seen shock on my face, but it was fascination, my eyes focusing on nothing while I considered this strange new concept. She may have wanted to save me from agonizing over why my birth parents would keep one kid and not another, but that wasn't on my mind. I was completely absorbed by the raw appeal of having a big brother, a chance to hope for something I hadn't even imagined in the past. But I acted as if the news was a minor curiosity, withdrawing into myself to figure out what I thought.

\* \* \*

My parents had been guarded with outsiders about my adoption when I was growing up, and that seemed natural back then. Adoption was not an open topic for polite society, and I had grown up thinking that there was a stigma to it. I still remember my parents' shock, and my sense of betrayal, when I was described in one of my dad's office newsletters as their teenaged *adopted* son.

As an adult I hadn't worked so hard at secrecy, but "adopted" was not one of the labels I used to describe myself to others. Those labels would necessarily have included "Washington lawyer," the career choice that defined me against my will after fifteen years in big law firms. I had been hunched over my desk at the office when Tibby called about my look-alike on the D.C. subway.

My wife's whisper sounded conspiratorial. I could picture her talking into the phone with her hand cupped around the mouthpiece. "I told her, 'No,' you didn't have a brother, but I asked her where she saw him. She thinks he got on at the Falls Church station but he was still on the train when she got off at Farragut West. I asked her as many questions as I could without acting too strange." It was easier for Tibby to say "no" than to give the more complicated answer.

I had turned away from the legal document glaring at me on the computer screen, caught up in her words. "Do you think it's possible

the guy is sitting at a desk a few blocks from here, working on something just as boring as I am?" I pushed the phone tighter to my ear as I swiveled away from the desk and stood up to look, blindly, out the office window. The cord tightened, tugging the phone across the desk as I pressed my forehead to the glass. Could this possibly be the day that I found my brother, or at least a fresh trail to him?

\* \* \*

I had tried from the very first day onward to imagine what my brother would be like. He would have been seven years older than me, if my mother had the facts right. Our age difference would have made my brother and me unlikely co-conspirators if we had grown up in the same house. But in those early days, when the idea of my unexpected brother was so fresh, my kid fantasies were that we looked and acted a lot alike, even if most of the real brothers I knew didn't. We would have been best friends.

My fantasies were uncomplicated and idealistic, just as childhood fantasies should be. In real life, I was already beginning to see myself as out of step with the world around me. I was sure that my brother would have helped me understand how to fit in, easing my morning terrors as I walked to elementary school.

The school was on the edge of a neighborhood that hadn't existed three years before. My route was a muddy path through undeveloped fields, along an old barbed-wire fence intended to keep in the bony Florida cows whose hooves had carved the rut in the first place. The cows were long gone, and their path would soon be replaced by a road running from one assembly-line housing project to the next.

I scuffed along the path, banging my tin lunch box against each fence post and trying to work out how to slow my progress toward the torture chamber without being late for the bell. I was so good at worrying that I could build my fears around two mutually exclusive

objectives; disaster awaited whether or not I got to school on time.

The prevailing smell intensified my misery as I walked: The janitor fired up the incinerator on the edge of the schoolyard as his first task each morning, pushing yesterday's trash into the flames. The humid Florida air filled with the smell of the burning stale milk that coated the insides of all those wax-paper cartons forced on us in the cafeteria at lunchtime.

My brother would have been with me on those walks to school, emotionally if not physically. He would have shown me how to fit in where I didn't think I belonged, would have been the confident force behind me proving that life was easier than I feared. I wouldn't have noticed the nauseating stench in the damp morning air. It all would have been better somehow.

All those years later I stood with my forehead against the window glass in my office, looking more at my own reflection than the street scene outside. I wanted to find my brother.

# 2

It seemed like a good time to start chasing my brother's shadow. I was approaching my fortieth birthday and had long since lost enthusiasm for the practice of law, the activity that swallowed most of my waking hours. Early on, my career choice had rewarded my perfectionism; when practiced well, the law was a nitpicker's game, full of details to trip you up if ignored. The job otherwise left me aching for creativity in my life. I was at just the point when I could use an interesting detour.

I needed to find my brother one day, probably long after my birth parents had died, but what if he was right here, right now? What if I continued to hedge my emotions, refusing to admit how much I really wanted to find him, only to discover years later that he had worked around the corner from my law firm but had drifted away before I began the search? Or that he had died while I made excuses? It was time to accept the risk that I might not find what I was looking for, or that I would be rejected when I did.

I was warming to the idea of learning more about my birth parents as well. I had never allowed them to be part of my fantasies in the past. They hadn't wanted me, so I had ignored them in return.

It was safer to pretend that I didn't need to find my birth family, so I hid behind another reason to justify the search: Just when my fantasy brother may have sat down across from Motty on the subway car, I had been suffering through months of medical tests for an elusive problem whose diagnosis could have been made obvious by my family medical history, if I'd only had access to the information. The reality

was that my thyroid had shut down, leaving me exhausted by a slow metabolism. I didn't fit the doctors' stereotype of the older women who usually came in with that problem, so the correct diagnosis (and its easy treatment) wasn't on their minds. Ignoring the obvious had led to increasingly exotic and pessimistic theories.

By the time the doctors had dragged me through the possibility of a rare brain tumor, with delayed testing results to prolong the terror, the need for a biological past had become my new excuse for finding my birth family. I could point to all those times I sat in a doctor's reception room filling out the new-patient forms. I always had to scribble "adopted" across the section that asked for my parents' medical history. It simplified and complicated things at the same time. That one word was a complete answer to all of the questions, but it made the doctor's job that much harder. I had no clues to my past and the doctor had none to my hereditary weaknesses.

\* \* \*

Tibby's strong mental image of my brother also helped to nudge me into the search. She had been sautéing onions for dinner the night the doctor had called to say that I wasn't dying of a brain tumor. I was chopping carrots, the little stuff that let me pretend to do my share of the cooking.

The reprieve had put Tibby into a reflective mood. It was good news, but a reminder of the fragile mortality that was an unstated theme while we waited for the test results. She spoke without turning away from the stove. "What do you think he looks like?" We had gotten used to understanding each other's context-divorced questions. I knew she was talking about my brother. He had been one of many diversionary topics that week.

"Got me. If I had seen Motty's guy on the train, I probably wouldn't have given him a second look."

“Like when people say you look like Rock Hudson or Christopher Reeve?”

I laughed derisively. “And who were some of the other ones? Alan Alda? Or is it just that I’m supposed to sound like him?” I had to admit that, whenever I heard my recorded voice, there was a bit more of the wry Alda to my tone than I would have liked. I didn’t want to hear myself coming off as elitist or cynical.

I self-consciously tried not to sound like Alan Alda as I kept on. “Do you actually think, standing next to them, I would look enough like any of those guys that somebody would say we looked like brothers? And how many brothers actually look that much like brothers, anyway?”

“Well, Motty said he was tall and elegant, just like you. She described his Italian suit. She even said he acted like you, kind of above the crowd.”

I winced. “Like snobby?”

“No, like impervious to the masses on the subway.” She laughed, pairing her words with a chin tilted upward.

“Course, doesn’t everybody say we’ve started to look and act alike, just like people and their dogs? And you’re the ‘Pup’, so I must be the master.” I had many, ever-changing nicknames for Tibby, most of them nonsensical. “Pup” and “Pip” seemed to be the least curious ones I allowed myself to use in front of other people. “Be careful,” I scolded. “You might just be describing yourself.”

Suddenly I grabbed my wife around her trim waist and started the maneuver that shocked our mothers whenever (infrequently) they saw it: I lifted Tibby two feet off the floor and began to swing her upside-down. It always seemed to amuse her, so she would stiffen to attention, making herself an inert object that was easier to lift. I shook her up and down, gently, while pretending that she was being punished for her impudence. After reversing the process and returning her safely

to the ground, I ended the performance with: “Now that you’ve been punished, have you learned the error of your ways?”

She pushed her short brown hair back into place and smoothed out her blouse, pretending that her dignity had been destroyed. Then she gave me the look that also shines from the grainy, black-and-white photo that’s always on my desk: The three-year-old Tibby is standing on the concrete edge of a pond in the center of a Chilean town, the string in her hand running down to a toy sailboat bobbing in the water, a little girl staring at the camera with a smile that is strangely shy and devilish at once.

\* \* \*

Tibby wanted the sighting of my older twin to be true, even if she was just as doubtful as I was that the subway rider could be my brother. She thought my brother would be everything I was, only older and wiser. He would be a strong influence on me, helping to hone my better instincts while sanding down my rough edges.

Tibby’s father had died suddenly when she was a young teenager. I had heard many stories about the talented and enthusiastic man she so clearly loved as both father and friend. She strongly believed that he and I would have enjoyed each other’s company, and I would have liked the opportunity to see whether she was right. I suspect that she had used some of her father’s qualities to paint a mental picture of my brother.

Tibby poured chicken stock into the pan of onions. “You know my theory on growing older.”

“That we shouldn’t do it?”

“That, too,” she nodded. “But I think we just become more of whatever we really are. A jerk just becomes more of one. We lose the ability to hide our best and worst traits. Whatever’s at the core gets concentrated.”

“Doesn’t sound too promising for me,” I responded with a wince. Tibby had had to stand by more than once, waiting for my latest red-faced tirade to come to an end. She knew that I took everything too personally, suffering no transgression easily and holding everyone to impossible standards of conduct.

“Of course it does, my love,” she countered. “I think your brother’s going to be like you: smart and curious about life. He’s going to have done interesting things, and he’ll want to tell you all about them.”

I laughed. She sounded like a little girl playing make-believe. She chose the words carefully to describe her hopes for my brother, realizing that a wish list of his sterling qualities might sound like a reverse catalog of my deficiencies. I liked hearing her optimistic theories, even if I would have been satisfied with a lesser man than she imagined. Maybe that’s why I wasn’t quite as disappointed as she was with how things turned out.