

### **Learning to Walk Myself Down the Aisle**

In the late fall of 2006, an unlikely pair vowed to love each other endlessly, in sickness and in health. The wedding took place in a garage decorated with white lace, soft lights, and sweet smelling flowers. It was a small ceremony, and only about thirty people attended. However, those thirty were all it took to make the day unforgettable. Pictures were taken, words of wisdom were passed on, and tears were shed. Of course, the dog that wouldn't keep off the train of the dress, and the temporary misplacement of the rings were major developments at the time, but now serve as happy reminders of a distant day.

The woman was young, only 24 years old. Her attitude and personality more than made up for her slight frame. She radiated a sort of tenacity and energy that most people noticed as soon as they met her. That day, though, her usual demeanor took the backseat; she was gracious and almost laughably calm. To add to her already exciting day, she was also four weeks pregnant with her second child.

In contrast, the man was 32 and large both in size and in humor. He was always smiling and positive, shining his light on everyone around him. His cheerful, booming laugh filled the room and carried the crowd for the majority of the night.

At seven years old, I could already tell that my family loved this man. They spoke warmly of his stories and jokes, and swooned over his affinity for children. Their frame of reference, of course, was me. And they were right, because from the moment I met him, I felt at home. I fell for Rick almost as hard as my mother had.

Sometime before the wedding, I was alone with my soon-to-be stepdad. He told me how excited he was to have me as his daughter. In retrospect, he probably wanted me to say

that I was excited to have him as a dad, but instead I just smiled at him. It wasn't until this moment that I realized I had never called anyone "dad." Up until this point, I lived with my grandparents, so of course, I always had my grandpa. And, for the first six years of my life I also had Adam - my mom's boyfriend. While I love both of these men, I never considered either of them my father. That's not to say I didn't look up to them, but I just never felt that special connection that others have with their dad; there's a certain void that no one else can fill when a father is missing. His absence caused me considerable stress for many years, but I kept it to myself.

Growing up without the one man who was supposed to, according to everything I had come to understand, love me unconditionally, caused me to develop the irrational idea that all boys were bad. I didn't trust them, and I went out of my way to avoid them. With time, I grew out of this aversion toward men, or so I thought, and decided to begin dating one. Although it went fine for a while, I soon realized that the boy, Jack, would never be able to understand how lonely I felt surrounded by his family — his sister, mother, and especially his father. This, coupled with having deceived myself into thinking I was ready to open up to him, led to feelings of distrust and indifference on both sides. I ended things on May 4th. That evening, I was reflecting on what went wrong and came to an important understanding about what I needed in order to truly move forward in any future relationships.

Everything came back to not knowing my dad. It was the irrefutable fault in my life that ultimately led me to break Jack's heart. It became clear to me that not having my father in my life had affected me more than I ever knew, so I decided to do something about it. I had to

approach my mom. It was still late in the evening, so I knew I'd be interrupting, but I called her anyway. I had to know his name.

She picked up the phone and I immediately heard my brothers, Peyton and Remington, playing in the background. The dog, Lou, was barking in defiance of Rick yelling at her. I listened as my mom swore about the noodles that had just boiled over on the stove. I couldn't make myself care about the noodles, though, because I was rapidly approaching my *own* boiling point. She impatiently asked what was up, so I told her about the breakup. I slowly built up to the line that I had practiced for years, but could never perfect. When I tried to say it the first time, my throat tightened in fear. I was frustrated at my hesitation, but I knew that the conversation was past due. With this in mind, I finally choked out, "Mom, I need to know the name of my father."

She said nothing for a long moment. I thought I heard her snuffle, but I couldn't be sure, so I stayed quiet. She went on to tell me the same story I had heard from Rick, from my grandparents, from Adam, and from my aunt- that she just didn't know, but a lot of guys were tested and the results were all negative. I was silent, defeated. I tried to talk but, again, was only able to manage partially formed words. She took a deep breath and admitted that there was "this one guy," but made it clear that she wasn't absolutely sure. I could tell she was humiliated and angry, but I felt relieved and even excited. This was what I had wanted ever since that night with so many years ago, when Rick told me he was excited to have me as his daughter.

I painstakingly tracked down the man my mother had revealed to me. As I learned more about Todd, I encountered several things that made me significantly less excited. First, I learned

that he had gone missing in New York City in 2004, having last been seen on the edge of the 59th Street bridge. I also discovered he had a son that had taken his own life in 2012. In addition, I found out that one of his sisters lived down the road from me. Because of this information and my vulnerable state, I mourned the deaths of Todd and Trevor, despite never having met them. The irony of one of his sisters living three houses down did not escape me, either. It was like my whole life had been hiding in plain sight, right under my nose.

Needless to say, I gradually came to believe that Todd really was my father. However, as the months went on, I became increasingly frustrated with all of the uncertainty. To remedy this, I talked my mother into DNA testing. She wanted to go through the court system, but I didn't think it was fair to force Todd's family into anything. So, against her wishes, I contacted his family through a letter and explained my situation the best I could. About a week after mailing it, I received a text.

I avoided opening it at first because I couldn't quite handle the prospect of being rejected. I stared at the notification for hours before finally working up enough courage to open it. The sender identified herself as Wendy, Todd's sister. With bated breath, I read, "Wow! What a surprise! I want you to know that we will help you in any way possible on your quest to find your biological father. I would love to meet with you and your mom..." After discovering that my fears were completely unfounded, I was ecstatic. Within the week, the three of us met up at the local Barnes and Noble and talked for hours about everything from New York to desserts. Considering the circumstances, it went wonderfully. It was this night that we decided we needed proof. We needed to know.

On November 3rd, 2016, I met Wendy in the parking lot of my local K-Mart, next to a lamppost and five rows back from a McDonald's drive-thru lane. I parked and cautiously looked into her white, four door Toyota, where she was nervously smoking a cigarette. Her wandering gaze caught me staring, prompting her to roll down her window, discard her cigarette, and climb out. I quickly followed her lead. We exchanged niceties for a few moments before she took the envelope out of her pocket.

She obviously wanted me to say something, but I couldn't, so we stood in silence. Just as I was about to back out, she asked me if I'd like to open the envelope. I felt a rush of panic that lent itself to a squeaky, "No... you can do it." Wendy shook her head and ripped open the paper that seemed to hold my entire life within it. Immediately, her eyes began scanning the sheets and I became hopeful. I was convinced that all the pieces of my life were falling into place. That is why, when she looked up at me with tears in her eyes and said, "I'm so sorry sweetheart, the results are negative," my knees almost gave out.

I cleared my throat, preparing to apologize and wish her well, when she stepped forward and hugged me. Wendy took a step back, still holding my shoulders tightly with her shaking hands, and told me that she'd still be my aunt if I wanted her to be and that, "the DNA results don't change anything." I thanked her and nodded lamely, and, with a newfound sense of brokenness, bit back the words that were on the tip of my tongue. I couldn't bear the thought of ever seeing her again.

From 6:26 to 7:01, 25 minutes, I texted my mother the news, called Rick, and got off on my exit. Then, I pulled off to the side of the road and sobbed until my tear ducts were dry and my throat was raw. I desperately used old receipts as tissues and eventually had to remove a

layer of clothing because I had gotten so overheated and worked up. By the time I was done, my whole being was exhausted, body and mind defeated. I had been banking on this man being my father for close to six months, longing for the closure I so deeply needed. I was devastated, because as my mom had put it, this man was the last possible chance I had at knowing my father. With a heavy heart and tired mind, I began removing myself mentally from the people that I had come to think of as my family, and those who I had mourned as such.

This experience has not been kind to me, but I know that I am stronger because of it. The thing about hardship that is often overlooked, or simply ignored for the sake of convenience, is that healing takes time. I am no exception to this, so I can say with complete honesty that I haven't fully overcome this ordeal. I still have to remind myself that I don't have an older brother, a quirky aunt, or a father to hold me and tell me that everything will be alright. However, I am learning more about my myself and my ability to endure everything that life has to offer, both good and bad.

Even though I still don't know my biological father, the lessons that Todd and his sister taught me will last a lifetime, and for that I am forever grateful. I know that Adam, Rick, and my grandpa would all walk to the ends of the Earth for me, so perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned from all of this is that family — especially fatherhood — isn't always decided by blood.