

## Tattoo

by Penelope Starr

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The first time I met my daughter was a phone conversation when she was forty-four years old. A stranger introduced us.

My phone rang at eight a.m. one November morning in 2009. I thought it was odd because most of my friends know that I am not a morning person. I didn't recognize the number that flashed on caller ID, but for some reason, I picked up.

A woman's voice asked me, "Are you the person who was once known as (she had my maiden name)?" and then quickly added, "You don't have to answer my questions."

"Yes, that is me," I said simply. I knew there was always a possibility I would get this call and had long ago decided what I would do if it came.

"Did you give birth to a baby girl on (she had my daughter's birth date) in a New York hospital?" and again the reminder, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to." My hand holding the phone shook, and I started to weep.

"Yes, I did. She can contact me if she wants to. Who are you?"

"My name is Carol, and I help people find their birth parents. Your daughter hired me to locate you."

"Thank you, Carol," I said, staring at the phone after we hung up. I gulped air, wondering if I had remembered to breathe during that three-minute conversation.

Lowering myself into a chair at the kitchen table, I eyed my teacup as if it were a foreign object and glanced out the window to make sure that the mountains were still solidly bathed in morning light in the distance. Nothing had changed, yet everything felt surreal.

At 4 o'clock that afternoon, the phone rang. I watched another unknown number flash across my screen. She couldn't be calling me so soon. I was afraid that I couldn't talk. I waited through three rings, knowing that the call would go to voicemail on the fourth. Then I grabbed the phone.

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My boyfriend Bob and I were living in Chapala, Mexico, the winter of 1965, and I thought I was throwing up because of the food or water or whatever causes the turista. I didn't suspect that I could be expecting because he told me he was sterile. But, after not getting my period for two months, I thought something was up, so we borrowed a car and drove into Guadalajara to have a pregnancy test. No one in the doctor's office spoke English, and the only words I knew in Spanish were leche and cerveza, but they managed to convey that I was pregnant.

Back at the casita, Bob said, "It's not my kid. I told you that I couldn't have any. Who the hell have you been sleeping with?"

Bob and I had been fighting pretty much ever since we got on the bus in New York City a month before to make the six-day journey to Chapala. I thought he was lazy because all he wanted was to sit in the courtyard of his favorite bar sipping tequila with his American buddy Lorenzo talking art and revolution. He thought I was a pain in the ass because I wanted to sightsee and learn Spanish. The idea of getting away from him seemed like a really good idea.

"You bastard, I'm leaving," I said, pulling my father's WW2 canvas duffle bag out of the

closet, grabbing for my shoes, dungarees, and a few souvenirs I wasn't going to leave behind.

"You can't go by yourself, especially in your condition. And where would you go?"

"So now you are concerned for my welfare." Maybe he genuinely cared for me, or maybe he just didn't want to be alone in a foreign country; I didn't know, and I didn't care.

"I'll marry you even if it's not mine."

"No thanks." Marry someone I didn't even like. No way. I was nineteen years old and wasn't about to get tethered.

The next morning, I dragged my bag to the town square and caught a bus to California. As I sank into the swaying of the second-class bus, my anger faded as uncertainty crept in. What was I going to do? Of course, I could always go home to my parents, but this trip was my first excursion in the world as an independent adult, and I hated to admit defeat.

When I got to Los Angeles, I discovered I could buy a plane ticket to San Francisco for only twelve dollars and save myself from the nauseating smell of the bus's chemical toilet. When I landed in San Francisco, I hailed a cab and asked the driver to deliver me to an inexpensive hotel in a safe neighborhood where I could pay weekly. He was a kindly man, somebody's father, and he must have sensed that I was freaked out. He took me to a charming but slightly run-down hotel and wished me well. I could afford a room for two weeks in this third-floor walk-up with a claw-footed bathtub and large windows overlooking the city.

I needed time to think. Maybe Bob wasn't the father. There was that one time that I had sex with my old boyfriend at the drive-in when he was home on leave and had to return to Viet Nam in two days. But we were careful. It couldn't be him. No, Bob was the father, and I didn't want anything to do with him.

While looking for something to eat, I wandered into a used bookstore and bought a pile of

twenty-five-cent novels. I calmed myself by reading in the tub for hours at a time until I grew stir crazy. After five or six books in as many days, I dried myself off, put on clothes, and ventured out.

I stumbled upon a huge protest against the war in Viet Nam. Someone handed me a sign on a wooden stick saying End the War, and I joined in even though I wasn't very political. The passion and conviction radiating from these beautiful human beings were infectious, and when the rally concluded, I fell in with a small crowd of long-haired guys and girls. We went to a coffee house, and after hours of conversation, I revealed my predicament to my new friends.

For the next week, I visited their shabby apartments and shared meager meals with them, standing outside clubs to listen to the music we couldn't afford to hear inside. We made protest signs for the next march, sitting around a table in the basement of a progressive church. The church's young pastor called me aside and told me that baby and I could crash in the basement for free if I needed a place to live.

I decided to call my parents. I told them it was time for me to come home, and they sent me a plane ticket. When I got back to Long Island, all I had was pocket change and a secret.

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The matchmaker told me that my daughter's name was Nancy. In the hospital, just before I signed the papers to terminate my parental rights, I had named her Elizabeth. Over the years, I had fleeting thoughts about Elizabeth, but now that person was gone, and Nancy was in her place. What do you say to a child that you relinquished? Is she going to be furious at me? Does she already hate me? Do I really want to deal with this now? Do I love her? Should I?

"Hello."

"Hello."

Longish awkward pause. I realized that it was my turn to say something. “This is so awkward.”

“Yes,” She didn’t know what to say either.

“I’m really glad that you contacted me,” I said. “I always thought that you would. I didn’t want to initiate contact because I figured that you have your life, and I didn’t want to interfere.”

“I’m glad that you are willing to talk to me.”

We were both in gratitude mode. I was crying, and I suspected she might be too, although I couldn’t tell. I didn’t know her. How to catch up on forty-four years? What do you share with your adult child in your first conversation? How far will this go? What are we to each other?

We shared statistics – location, family, time frames, just like getting to know someone on a first date. After fifteen minutes, I was exhausted from nervousness and giddy joy. I told her that I needed a break but wanted to continue the conversation another time. I think I heard a small sigh of relief from her end of the phone. We agreed that we would talk again the next day.

Jumbled conflicting thoughts consumed me. How do I know that she is really my daughter? Could it be a scam? Am I a horrible person for even thinking that? What sort of emotions, besides happiness and sadness should I be feeling right now? Confusion? Fear?

We had exchanged email addresses and sent photos of ourselves, so I gazed at Nancy’s face when I called her back the next day. I desperately did not want to disappoint her. And I didn’t want to be disappointed either. Our conversation was tentative, a cross between blurting out probing questions, “Who did you vote for in the last election,” to the gentler, “What would you like to know.” I was afraid I would shock her when I said, “I’m bisexual but have only had girlfriends for many years.” She said, “I’m bisexual too! That explains a lot.” By the end of the call, we had decided that she had to visit the next month.

I wanted my son to meet his older sister, and I needed his support, so I asked if he would come too. He arrived a few days early, and we went to the airport together.

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The first time I was on an airplane was the trip back to New York to confront the dilemma I found myself in. Back then, you dressed to get on a plane, so I packed my jeans and put on my wrap-around skirt. I remember that the food was delicious, served on cunning little compartmentalized trays. I was doing my life in the same way – keeping some things barricaded from other things. But now, the rebellious girl was headed for a conflict with her loving but prudish family. My go-with-the-flow attitude was being pulled up short with the reality of bringing another being into the world.

To be sure that I wouldn't upset my family unnecessarily, I went to the family doctor to double-check my pregnancy status. When I got the results four days later, I called a family meeting with Mom, Dad, and my younger sister. Sitting them down in the living room in front of the fireplace, I said, "the rabbit died," a flip reference to pregnancy tests in the 1960s. My mother cried, my father gave me "The Look" of disappointment and disapproval, something that I dreaded more than his anger, and my sister was clueless.

In 1965 it was scandalous to be pregnant and not married. Shameful. Abortion was a vague option, either a dangerous back-alley procedure or a flight to Puerto Rico. Either way, it was illegal. The most popular option in the NY suburb I lived in was to go away quietly and have the baby in a Home for Unwed Mothers while your parents told everyone you were staying with an aunt in the Midwest and, after you relinquish the baby, return to your life as if nothing had happened. Since my sister was still in high school, I thought I could protect her from gossip and judgment in our small town, so I agreed. She thought that I was being punished. Maybe I was.

I stayed home until I was showing, about six months gone, and then packed up for the best address I'll probably ever have, East 71st Street right off 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, New York City. I think it was associated with the Episcopal church, but I have a possibly false memory of nuns in habits running the show. Maybe they just were stern women who acted like I thought nuns would act. Very judgmental. They tortured us in subtle ways; we had to walk up and down the four flights of stairs while they took the elevator, there was a room full of baby clothes when most of us were giving our babies up and, worst of all, salt-free food.

The Home was a favorite charity of New York socialites (although my father paid plenty of money for me to be there), and Junior League women need a project. We were theirs. Once a week, two or three stylishly dressed volunteers would show up with department store bags of donated makeup. Sitting at tables on the top floor of our brownstone, they smeared foundation, rouge, and eyeliner on our puffy faces. And then we all played bridge. It passed the time, which seemed to drag on at a snail's pace the closer we got to our due dates.

The birth was hell. I was alone, and the nurses knew that I didn't put a father's name on the paperwork, which might explain why they were mean to me. "Don't be such a baby and stop yelling. You are scaring all the other mothers." The real mothers, the ones with husbands.

I had decided that I wouldn't hold the baby. I was afraid if I smelled her, I wouldn't go through with the adoption. So, I avoided the glass cage where they showed off the rows of babies in blue and pink. On the day I left the hospital she was still in her plastic bin, and I went by to say goodbye. Dark hair, tiny fingers, goodbye.

Every girl at the Home went to weekly meetings with a therapist, and we could continue seeing her after "graduation" if we wanted to. I went for a few additional months until I felt

satisfied that I had done the right thing. The counselor must have been pretty good because I never felt any guilt. Only shame and extremely vulnerable.

Seven years later, after many adventures, I had another child, but I did it in a socially acceptable order this time. First, I got married, then I got pregnant. When my husband and I split up nine months later, I became a single mother legitimately. Things were changing in 1972. Feminism was happening, at least in my world. I went back to college and learned that women have a right to control their bodies, that shaming is an act of domination, that I could design my own life. My secret seemed trivial, limiting, and ancient.

Sitting on a floor cushion surrounded by the women of my consciousness-raising group, I gazed around the room, tears sliding down my face, and confessed, “I had a baby out of wedlock.” A few gasps, sad head noddings, and some reassuring pats on the back. I told them that I felt fortunate to have escaped the tyranny of marriage to a man I didn’t love, and my sisters congratulated me on my bravery. Then we used it for a teaching moment. We talked about The Patriarchy, women’s mandatory chastity, body image, the oppressiveness of secrets, taking back our power.

I felt liberated. And still a little scared, so I started to share the story with everyone I met. Not quite, “Hi, my name is Penny, and I had a bastard child,” but close. It was still possible to shock people with that confession in those times, and I found that part quite enjoyable.

Some people reacted by telling me their horror stories about adoption. My neighbor, Shirley, told me about her daughter finding her and demanding money and an apology. Rob and his girlfriend went on a search for the child they had relinquished so they both could finish high school. When they found their son, he was in San Francisco, a gay man dying of AIDS. He was mad as hell at them and the world. Zoë told me that she finally visited her birth mother and

siblings in Georgia after years of searching. Her romanticized fantasy of her real Mom clashed with the reality of a worn-out bitter woman with seven other children who was resentful that her past was being stirred up. Zoë was heartbroken to know that she was the only child that was given away.

Although I had already decided not to do a search, each of these stories cemented my resolve to let well enough alone. I imagined that Elizabeth had been adopted by a lovely stable artistic family, having all the love she deserved, and I had saved her from being raised by a rambling risk-taking hippy.

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My son kept me calm as the plane landed. “It will be fine, Mom, don’t worry.” We both stared at the monitor to get an advance glimpse of my daughter, his sister. He spotted her first.

“There she is.”

“No, that can’t be her, she doesn’t look like her picture.”

Do you hug someone you’ve never met before, even if they are your blood? Is it OK to sob in disbelief? I wondered if she had agonized over what to wear just like I did. I marveled at the identical smile that both of my children had. We did a lot of wordless grinning. There is no page in a book of etiquette for this situation. We all talked at the same time and apologized. Nancy didn’t check a bag, so we went directly to my car, and she sat in the front seat next to me. The seat of honor.

“Is that a snake on your dashboard?” she asked me.

“Yes, a plastic snake.” Oh no, I worried. Is she afraid of snakes?

“I have the same snake on my dashboard!”

“What! That’s impossible.” How could we both love snakes? Is it genetic?

Now, years later, I've finally stopped my emotional weeping when I tell people our story. We still marvel at the nature versus nurture experiment going on in our relationship. Nancy is very tidy. Nothing rests on her pristine countertops for very long before being put in its proper place. I do the same. Her house is filled with art. So is mine. She loves her children fiercely, and so do I.

I believe she was at a stage in her life when she was questioning her choices and searching for her true self when she made that phone call to me. Part of her journey was to find her roots, and part was to be honest about her sexual identity. She divorced her husband, and now she has a woman life-partner, as do I.

It took me a long time to believe that she was my daughter, even though she looks like me. Even though the DNA test came back positive. At first, I couldn't call her my daughter without the qualifiers of "My newly discovered daughter" or "My daughter that I did not raise." Adjusting to bringing her into my present and future was a process of relearning my past.

Last year she talked me into getting a tattoo, my first and her fifth or sixth. I loved the idea of having a permanent mark on my body (other than stretch marks) that declared our connection. We worked out the design via email, sending links to photos of tats we liked. We went back and forth, tweaking a little of this and stretching a bit of that, and finally came up with something we both agreed on. I made back-to-back appointments at a local tattoo parlor. The highly visible bracelets encircle our right wrists with swirly lines, two red stars, and some dots.

I thought of our matching tattoos as a symbol of our reunion and about me still being a wild child at age sixty-seven. When people asked me about it, that's how I answered, but on closer inspection, I realized that the two stars could signify my two children. The lines swirl but don't touch, which could symbolize distance and integration. One star has five dots, which could

be Nancy's five children, and the other has one, Eli's child. It wasn't conscious, this decision to write my history on my arm, I allowed myself to find out what it meant after the fact.