

Completing the Puzzle of My Early Life

By

Kirk Schuster-Southern

The assignment was to pick a moment in my life that helped shape me into the person I am. I was stumped. My first thought was that it was hard to choose one defining life moment that was more memorable than any other. My mind raced in different directions. After 15 stressful minutes of brain storming, I realized that one experience did have more influence on my life than any other. Since I was adopted when I was three years old, I decided to write about the first weekend I spent with my biological family. That weekend took place when I was 18 years old.

Before that weekend, my life had seemed like a huge puzzle missing an essential corner piece. I could see the beautiful picture that the pieces I already had showed; but without that one small corner piece, I felt the puzzle would never truly be complete. The day I met my birth family, the missing puzzle piece fell into place. Meeting members of my biological family provided answers to many questions.

I began my search for my biological family by looking at the original birth certificate my very

loving, supportive adoptive parents gave me. When my adoption was finalized, a new birth certificate was issued identifying my adoptive parents as my parents. Fortunately, they had a copy of my original birth certificate, listing the names of my birth mother and birth father. I searched for my birth parents' names on every social networking webpage available. After hours of desperate search, I found a match for my biological father's name on *Facebook*. At first I wanted to message him. However, I thought to myself, "What if he's scared to talk to me?" "What if this man isn't even him?" "What if it is and, just like when I was a young child, he wants nothing to do with me?" These thoughts overwhelmed me and, because I did not want to be disappointed by the answers, I held off messaging him. Finally, I decided to reach out and hope for the best.

After I sent the message, I checked my *Facebook* daily for a reply. What I saw was an empty inbox folder. Then, after one week of excruciating anticipation, I finally had a reply from him. I was nervous. I could

feel beads of sweat forming on my brow. My hands moistened the computer mouse with perspiration. When I opened his message it was exactly what I was afraid it would be: This man cared nothing for me at all. Immediately, he tried to convince me that my adoption was entirely my birth mother's fault. He also elaborated on how she was a terrible woman and that he was not even my "real" father. He used every excuse possible to place the blame on anyone but himself. He did not seem to understand that I was not blaming anyone for anything. I was just searching for answers. This childish man only provided me with two things: a newfound appreciation for my loving Dad who, along with my Mom, had raised me from the age of three and the fact that I have two birth sisters. Since that conversation, I have never been in contact with my birth father, and I never will. He will always be irrelevant to my life.

Although contact with my supposed biological father was a huge letdown, I was determined to find a member of my biological family who might actually care about me. Armed with the information that I had birth sisters, my search continued. I looked for them on *Facebook* and, by God's grace, I found one of them. Although I was a little hesitant to message her because my attempt to contact my biological father had been such a demoralizing failure, I did it anyway. This time I found the satisfaction for which I had been looking.

Almost immediately, my sister responded to my message. The day I messaged her, January 4th, happened to be her 15th birthday. When she got my message, she exclaimed that I gave her the best birthday present she could ever ask for. Just from hearing those first few sentences, my lips began to spread across my face as if each end was trying to bite my earlobes. I had an overwhelming sense of happiness and my eyes were streaming tears of joy. We talked for hours and she informed me of everything my deceiving birth father hadn't. She told me that my birth mother always wanted to keep me but couldn't because of my abusive birth

father and her addiction to heroin. She fought to keep me but couldn't because of the unstable circumstances of her life. I was taken from her and placed in a foster home. My birth sister then asked me about my adoptive family. I told her I was the luckiest child on earth. I truly have been blessed with such a loving and caring family that supports me in every aspect of my life. I couldn't ask for a better family and wouldn't trade them for the world. After a few hours of talking with my birth sister, I discovered that my biological family lived in a nearby city. Immediately, I arranged to visit them the following weekend.

Anticipating this visit was the most nerve-racking experience of my life. I finally arrived at the local family bar and nightclub where I would find the corner piece of my puzzle. I felt like I was walking into a haunted house. I was scared and had absolutely no idea what to expect. As soon as I opened the door, I scanned the bar and immediately everyone stopped and stared. Right away a short woman who resembled me ran over and embraced me with the tightest bear hug I've ever felt. As she wrapped her hands around me I could feel her eyes dampening my shirt. My own tears of joy threatened to pour down my face. Immediately, I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging. I knew this woman was my biological mother.

After being bombarded with kisses, my biological mother finally let go of me. She introduced me to the others present-- aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, family friends and, most importantly, my two biological sisters. They all pampered me with love and made me feel welcome. You would have thought I had just come home from a long deployment at war. We all hung out for a while happily shooting pool, dancing to reggae music and eating Portuguese food. People said: "I remember when I used to play with you when you were a cute little baby! You look so much like your mother now!" Then they told me stories about when I was a baby or asked questions about my fifteen years apart

from them. I was the center of attention and, of course, I liked it.

My biological mother's car was an extremely old, beat-up Volvo with missing windows and a creaky door that didn't quite open all the way. Her car looked like it had been on a golf course where oversized golf balls hit its sides and top. I could feel the car's loud humming. My seat vibrated and with every bump I expected to hear the loud crash of the rear bumper falling off. Riding in her car made me realize and appreciate the three perfectly-running cars in my driveway at home, one of which was mine. After that car ride, I never again complained about my little blue 2003 Corolla. I started treating it like the blessing it truly was.

When I arrived at my biological mother's apartment, I stared in disbelief. Upon entering, the odor of cigarettes filled my nostrils and clogged my throat. My eyes instantly began to water. It was hard to keep from coughing. Her attic apartment was not heated. I felt a chill as the cold air nipped at my skin. Her apartment wasn't much bigger than my own living room and kitchen combined. The place barely qualified as an apartment. Its white walls were smudged with dirt and holes were clearly visible in corners. The heavily-stained rug on the floor was beyond washable. Except for a few pieces of old, beat-up furniture scattered in different rooms, the apartment was pretty empty. There was only one small television with less than twenty channels in her closet-size bedroom. The small bathroom in the apartment smelled like a sewer. In order to enter and shut the bathroom door, a person had to step into the cracked, dirt-stained bathtub. At that moment I realized just how poor my birth mother really was. It came as a huge shock to me because, during the hours at the bar, she seemed so happy and carefree. If I had never gone back to her apartment, I would have never known that she was barely surviving.

That whole weekend my biological mother wouldn't stop offering me things I knew she didn't have to give. At night she would ask: "Kirk, are you hungry? I know you're a growing boy. Mommy wants to feed her son." I graciously lied and said no because I knew that small fridge in the barely-functional kitchen was nearly empty. I also suspected that she was a lot hungrier than I was. Still, she emptied her cabinets to make me a plate of food and waited until I had finished it. I felt awful eating. It touched me immensely to see someone with almost nothing be so quick to share. Seeing my birth mother in such a horrible living situation, yet with a smile on her face and generosity in her heart, truly changed me that weekend.

Since that weekend, I have gone to visit my biological mother frequently. To this day I have not once heard her complain about the way she is forced to live. I can truly say that after the first weekend I spent with my birth mother, I have a better appreciation of all the little things in life with which I have been blessed. Food has tasted a little better. I have come to appreciate everything my loving parents have provided for me. I no longer argue with them when they ask me to do things like cleaning my room or folding clothes. I am thankful to have a room to clean and clothes to be washed. When I drive my car, I now treat it with respect and no longer complain about putting gas in it. I'm relieved I don't have to choose between buying gas and eating that night. I no longer look at school as a torturous place to be; but instead I see it as a way to make sure I don't ever have to struggle for a meal at night. This experience had affected me so much that it is almost impossible for me to walk by a homeless person without dropping a few coins in their cup or buying him meals from McDonald's.

In conclusion, meeting my biological mother was the most life-changing, humbling experience I've had. That experience lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. Although it may sound like a cliché, my heart could

finally be at ease. In many ways, that experience helped to shape me into the person I am. It also provided me with a strong sense of appreciation for the blessings I have in my life. Those unforgettable moments with my biological mother allowed me to complete the puzzle of my first three years of life.

About the Author: Kirk Schuster-Southern, 21, is a junior at Plymouth State University in Plymouth, NH. A Marketing major, with a concentration in Sales, Kirk is also a member of the PSU Rugby team. Kirk wrote the original version of this essay during his freshman year at PSU. In 2013, while attending PSU full time, he began working for the Vector Corporation as a sales representative. He was promoted to branch manager within one year, and is currently a senior branch manager. Kirk can be reached at kschustersouthern@gmail.com.