

My Real Mother

I'm a stalker.

That's what my best friend Becky tells me as we wait in a nondescript mom-and-pop restaurant for my birth mother, Linda Wiley, to show up.

I prefer to think I'm on a voyage of self-discovery.

I also like the term "scouted" over Becky's insistence that I "cased the joint," which is the reason we are sitting at the bar, perched high up on stools that swivel, affording us a bird's eye view of every table and booth.

Furthermore, I'm partial to "overheard" as opposed to "eavesdropped," which is why I know Linda will be here any minute.

"What if she senses she's being followed?" Becky says, "She probably terrified!"

"Don't worry, Becks," I say, "she's not on to me. In the last week I've worn four different pairs of sunglasses, three wigs and a motorcycle helmet."

"Listen to yourself, Jo. You're scaring some feeble old lady out of her mind. What would you think if you saw someone wearing a motorcycle helmet when it's still too early in the year to be riding a motorcycle?"

First off, Linda Wiley is no feeble old lady.

Secondly, you'd think you could count on your best friend to cut you some slack, but no. Becky's irksome tone continues. "Why don't you just cyberstalk her like a normal person?"

I don't answer. It's grueling trying to keep an eye on the front and back entrances (even though neither has opened in the last 10 minutes) and argue at the same time.

Although I must admit that most of the time we're pretty good at multitasking when it involves bickering with each other.

Besides, I tried to cyberstalk Linda as soon as I got the paperwork from the PI, but her privacy settings were brutal.

Becky touches my arm and smiles her smile, that one she saves for me, the one I've always interpreted to mean I'm a worthless cause but she's still rooting for me anyway. She's beautiful when she smiles like this, even though she downplays her beauty, all her long thick hair pulled straight back into a ponytail. She's still not tempted by cosmetic counters, even though we've both left our fortieth birthdays firmly behind us.

She ratchets down the harshness in favor of speaking to me like a fifth-grader. "Here's what I'm saying, Jo. Maybe this should be the end today. Either introduce yourself to her, tell her you're the daughter she gave up for adoption when she was 17, or walk away."

I'm not listening, because Linda is strolling through the front door, and luckily, over to a table that's only 20 feet away from us, and one with great lighting.

Our heads bent over our menus, we both watch her out of the corners of our eyes as she pulls her coat off and lets it drop from her shoulders onto the chair behind her. Like the other days I've trailed her, she is wearing casual but expensive clothes; today it's jeans and a long-sleeved blouse. She's got money, but I don't care. I have money too.

There are a few other patrons in the restaurant, and some turn to look at her as she drops her keys—many, many keys—onto the tile floor. She was aiming for a pocket in her coat but missed. Their eyes linger on her as she pushes her chair out and bends over to pick them up. The wolf-whistle gorgeousness she obviously once possessed has faded, but

there's still a charisma about her. She's fair-skinned, and I bet her short gray hair was once blond. She has wrinkles, but not around her eyes, only sun rays that fan out from beneath her rosy cheeks. Exceptionally big blue-green eyes glimmer as she rolls them at her gracelessness.

There isn't an iota of resemblance between the two of us. I've inherited none of her beauty. My eyes are big but they're plain old brown. My hair is dark too, and even if my cheeks were pink and rosy, nobody would notice because they're hidden somewhere in the space my nose is taking up. I'd assumed that surely there was a critical mistake in the PI's report. I checked. There wasn't.

Becky and I have been friends for so long, I not only can finish her sentences, I can start them. But this time it's easy. She whispers, "Are you sure that's your biological mother?"

"Yep."

"Honestly," Becky blurts out, "You look more like Gladys."

Gladys is my adopted mother, the one I've known my whole life. Our predicament is that we've become strangers to each other. She's forgotten that I'm her daughter. Instead, I am her long-deceased sister, and I find it peculiar that she never forgets to call me Eloise.

Even though she's smack dab in the middle of the house she's lived in for the past 40 years, she's constantly on a quest to find her home, and resolute in her attempts to destroy her current surroundings. She plugs up the sink or the tub and turns on the water. She gravitates toward the stove, because what she loves the most is setting fires, and she somehow deducts that the first thing could help her accomplish the second. I've never had

children—have never been married for that matter—but over the years I’ve learned how to childproof, and to stay one step ahead of her at all times.

At least Mom doesn’t have a clue that I’ve contacted Three Rivers, doesn’t know I’ve recently received a return call.

Three Rivers is the *crème de la crème* as far as nursing homes go. That’s why a few years ago, after caring for Mom for five years at that point, I put her on the waiting list. Their receptionist called a month ago to tell me a room is going to be available. It’s quite an ethical quandary for me because there’s been no change in Mom’s condition that I can’t handle. So far I’ve been able to juggle the workload of my job by accomplishing as much as I can on my home computer and hiring caregivers when I have to go into the office. If I skip this opportunity now, though, and then something happens that I can’t manage, I might have to put her in Cedar Lake, where there are no evergreen trees and no lake, and the caregiving is rumored to be horrendous.

Unlike my oblivious mother, Becky knows the looming decision I’m faced with, and I shoot her a nasty look for reminding me of it.

She has the grace to wince at her tactlessness. “Not that you look anything like Gladys either,” she mumbles.

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This is the last day of my week’s vacation. Early every morning I’ve parked my inconspicuous gray compact car on a side street perpendicular to the Wiley bungalow. Keeping my fingers crossed that my childhood infatuation with Nancy Drew would finally pay off, I’ve waited for Linda to materialize.

That first day when she emerged from her house, it wasn't early enough for her to be going to a job, but it wasn't late enough that I was cleaning out my glove compartment. She hopped into an illegally parked blue Jetta wagon, but I suppose if you block your own driveway with your car, nobody calls the police department.

Linda's apathy to traffic laws didn't end with nonmoving violations. I detested turning a blind eye to speed limit signs, and I began hyperventilating when I rolled through all those stop signs. But I kept up. When she parked, so did I, and I did it better, all my tires between the two painted lines. I heard Nancy Drew tsk-tsk'ing me though, because I should've known when Linda left her house with all those books that she was going to the library. I hadn't needed to follow her at all.

Having never ventured out of the fiction stacks myself, I was shocked to find Linda perusing books about people who actually existed. I sat down at a computer about 12 feet away and listened to her hum as she opened a few and read the front and back jackets. I clicked the mouse a few times but I didn't need to. She was oblivious to the fact that another person loomed so near, and although part of me—most of me—was relieved, there was a teeny-weeny part that wanted her to walk over to where I sat and say, "I know you are the daughter I carried inside me 43 years ago, and I think of you every day."

Or something like that.

But how could I expect this sort of revelation from her? I knew for a fact my life had begun in her belly, and all I felt was my right eyelid twitching, nerves from my earlier hot pursuit.

In the grocery store on Tuesday, she talked out loud to food products, voicing her disdain for their high prices, the aisle in which she finally located them, and their revamped

packaging. I didn't notice if she looked at me weirdly—a woman wearing a motorcycle helmet in February—or if she glanced my way at all.

On Wednesday she went to a wooded park and pulled a backpack from the hatch of her SUV, then crammed seven or eight phonebooks into it. (I wondered where she got the phonebooks, did they even make them anymore?) Then she effortlessly heaved the straps of the pack onto her shoulders and walked briskly into the woods.

As she was quickly smothered by huge trees, I stayed in my car. I couldn't help but notice the trail marker that boasted a length of seven miles. I weighed the pros and cons, but what could I possibly learn from walking that far in bad shoes?

Thursday it rained, and Linda took her paraphernalia to a shopping mall. I wanted to impress upon Nancy Drew that I was a worthwhile mentee, I really did, but the Nike shoes I'd worn weren't broken in yet, and I could feel blisters at my heels just walking in from the lot. I'm disgraced to admit I couldn't have kept up even if I'd tried. I bought a book, sat at a table in the food court, and watched Linda pass about 12 or 13 times.

Friday I watched the presumed Mr. Wiley walk to his car carrying what looked like a gym bag. I followed him just for the hell of it, not surprisingly, to a gym. That was the end of that as I, of course, was not a member.

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After requesting from the waitress cocktail sauce (me), sliced lemons (Becky), and a side of cilantro (Becky, a dollar extra, but she doesn't care because it's my treat today), there are finally fish tacos sitting in front of us that are to our liking. But just as we're ready to partake in our first chomp, a girl of about five years old explodes through the door and rockets into Linda's lap.

“Grammy!” she exclaims, as if all the air in her little lungs is being expelled with that one word.

“Ava!”

They are like sandpipers pecking sand on the beach, planting kisses on each other’s cheeks, oblivious to the commotion at the entrance as a woman tries to squeeze through the door with a baby carriage. Finally, the woman shuffles over to the table and kisses Linda’s left cheek, the one that’s not currently occupied. Then she plops down across from her and removes some blankets from the baby.

“How’s my little Jimmy, Karen?” Linda asks, pulling the buggy closer to her, something of an accomplishment, as the little girl still hasn’t released the unyielding grip she has on her neck.

“Asleep, Mom,” Linda’s daughter replies, beginning a game of tug o’ war, pulling the buggy back toward herself. “This time, let’s try to keep it that way.”

In the previous week I’d learned Linda was an avid reader of biographies, that she thought traffic laws were for other people, and that she was in great physical shape, not only for her age but for any age. There was one thing, though, I’d thought I knew about her always: She wasn’t fond of children. Now I know that there was only one child Linda Wiley’s wasn’t partial to. That would be me.

I’m sure Karen and Ava are snapshots of Linda at younger ages. Karen is maybe 30 pounds heavier than her mom and Ava is just a child. Yet the resemblance is so blatant, I marvel that there had to be men’s genes involved in the reproductive process.

My brain is working hard to digest everything my eyes are assimilating. Forgetting for a moment that Becky is still sitting beside me, I'm shocked when I hear her whisper, "Oh my God."

I look at her, and then to the door where Becky is staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

The woman pulling the door open, then discovering and walking toward the group we are scrutinizing, looks so much like me that my initial response is to duck behind the bar like I'm playing hide-and-seek. I don't. I'm too mesmerized as I explore her hair and nose and eyes, all so much like my own. I was never consciously aware of it before, but now I know I've yearned for this my whole life—to look like someone, and not because it's a fluke, but because we share DNA.

The ironic thing is that, even though she's nothing like her glamorous mother, the few male patrons here survey her as she enters. If we bare such a striking resemblance, I ask myself, what is it about her that makes heads turn, while my entrance always goes unnoticed? Of course I'm older, I figure a decade or so, but there's something else. Maybe it's her smile or perhaps the way she carries herself, a vibe she gives off, as if life has always been an exhilarating experience for her.

I remember a lust for living. It's that thing I stopped experiencing seven years ago.

"Aunt Sara!" Ava descends from her grandmother's lap and runs to greet the woman, who bends down, scoops her up and fake growls into the child's neck as she squeezes her tight. Ava giggles and squirms. Sara puts her down, and Ava dashes back to the lap she'd vacated.

Greetings are exchanged, cheeks are kissed, a family is reunited. Is the reunion complete? It is for today, because Linda chose a table for four. But are there other children, other grandchildren? Should I make an effort to have these questions answered? Or should I be satisfied with what I've already discovered?

The same teenage waitress who'd brought us our tacos distributes menus to them, and the three adults talk to her as she does, effortlessly embracing a complete stranger.

After they place their order, Ava abandons Linda and plops down in the empty seat. Then Linda unfolds a map and spreads it across the table. Karen retrieves a box of crayons from her purse, and Ava begins vigorously scribbling on the section of the map nearest to her with black and brown colors. Hopefully no one is going there.

Linda points to a spot far away from Ava's energetic doodles. Sara leans in closer, Karen walks around the buggy to their side of the table, and the three of them drop their heads to survey the selected spot. Now that they're so close to each other I can no longer make out what's being said, but then they all laugh, and I have no trouble hearing that.

I must look as sad as I feel because Becky says, "We could go on a vacation again, Jo. Or take a long weekend or something. My kids are old enough to care for themselves when Steve's at work." She shrugs. "At this point, they might not even kill each other."

She adds, "And Gladys will be well taken care of at Three Rivers."

But it's not the vacations I've been unable to take for the past seven years that I'm thinking about. What I miss is the laughter. As far back as I can remember, Mom could always make me laugh. Her happy-go-luckiness was funny, but even when I was a child it made me uneasy sometimes. She would belt out show tunes while she burnt dinner. She

might pick me up late from school, but then she'd take me to the zoo, leading me through the drainage tunnel so we'd get in for free.

Should I have known all along what her zaniness was leading up to?

"Remember that time we went to Gatlinburg?" Becky asks. "I can't believe it was over 20 years ago! Do you want to go there again?"

"No," I say. There's a sharpness to my word that I didn't know was going to be there. Probably I'm upset that she's once again reminded me of the Three Rivers situation.

As Linda sees the waitress approaching with their food, she deftly begins to fold the map into a small enough square so that Ava can continue to deface a section of it.

"Thanks so much," the three adults say to the waitress as she sets their food down, and I can't help but notice that that's all there is to it. Becky and I, no matter where we are, dive or fine-dining restaurant, immediately scan our food that's arrived and bombard the waitress with special requests to accompany it before she escapes. Their behavior is more polite, but I'm sure our food is tastier.

Sara takes a bite of her sandwich, Linda cuts some food up for Ava, but Karen sits with her hands on her lap.

"Mom, I don't like this whole thing," she says. "Who will be with you on the weeks not covered by friends or family?"

"Hon, I'll be meeting people along the way. I've already met other hikers on the Internet who're starting the same time I am."

Karen groans. "You're not making me feel better, Mom." She picks up her knife and cuts her sandwich in half with much more gusto than appears required.

Sara shoots her sister a dirty look. "I'll be with her for the first two weeks, Karen," Sara says. "Then Joe is going for the next two. Bob's going to meet her at the start of the sixth."

"I know the schedule, Sara," Karen says, not without anger. "But there're bears out there, and no cell phone service, and cliffs she could fall off of."

Even eavesdropping strangers can tell they've had conversations similar to this one before. "It's the Appalachian trail, Karen," Sara says, her patience obviously waning. "Thousands of people hike it every year."

"How many are women doing it alone who are going to turn 60 out there?"

Becky chooses this moment to start laughing so hard that she starts to choke on her taco. "She's going to hike the Appalachian Trail!" she manages to say. How could it be that Becky is just now figuring this out?

"Shut up," I whisper angrily. She might need the Heimlich maneuver, but dammit, I lectured her over and over how she was not to draw attention to us today.

To her credit, Becky quiets down. Her eyes are watering, but she doesn't even clear her throat. "Do you remember on our way to Gatlinburg how we couldn't find a gas station so you had to pee in a cornfield? You had post-traumatic stress disorder for a month."

I don't respond. I don't want to encourage more laughing. But I have to admit I certainly didn't inherit Linda's love of the wilderness.

Becky, who has sort of fallen off her stool a little, is struggling to pull herself erect. I don't help her.

"You know," she says, "it'll be worse for your quote-unquote mother over there." She adds in a stage whisper, "Number two will be involved."

By the time Becky's settled down, the three women have moved on to another discussion. They're talking about the latest pop-star gossip. They take turns trying to get Ava to eat. They steal food off each other's plates, slap at the hands that do it.

I picture myself pulling a chair up to their table. There's plenty of room. I tell them my story, and they let me tell it without interruption. Linda cries and hugs me close. But nobody steals food from me, and worse, they no longer steal it from each other.

And I realize I'm not going to tell Linda who I am. I was never going to tell her, but I didn't know it myself. The fact that I was adopted as an infant had always gnawed at me, like a flea buzzing near my ear. In these last seven years of so many annoyances, big and small, it was one thing I had the power to do something about.

What Becky said when we got here—that this should be my last day of stalking—starts to sink in.

I *am* a stalker.

Suddenly, all I can focus on is getting out of here.

As discretely as possible, I wave at the waitress. When she comes over, I hand her my Master Card without ever seeing the check.

"You were right," I whisper to Becky, semi-frantically. "I was wrong. Let's get out of here."

Becky, I'm sure, can see my bulging eyes, hear my quickened breathing, and feel me clutching the sleeve of her blouse. She says, "I'm not finished eating."

I really have to find a new friend.

I take the lid off the pepper and pour it on top of her tortilla.

I guess we should both find a new friend.

The waitress returns with my credit card, and I add a tip on the merchant's copy that will make our waitress's week.

Becky is looking at what's left of her meal like it's a town that's been leveled by an earthquake. For some reason, this calms me, and I say, "What sort of woman throws her mother out like she's yesterday's trash?"

Reluctantly, she pulls her eyes away from her plate. She furrows her brows. "Do you mean *daughter*?"

I shake my head.

"Oh," she says, and then she adds, "oh, no." She grabs my wrist and squeezes. It hurts.

"Goddammit," Becky adds, but there's no gusto in her curse word, only frustration. "Please don't back out on Three Rivers. Please. I love your mom, Jo. I do. But she doesn't know where she is, she doesn't know who you are. She wouldn't want you to give up your life to take care of her."

Becky's right. Mom always wanted me to be more like her. She thought I'd be happier. The fact that I turned out to be prudent, reliable and responsible was a disappointment.

"From now on," I say, not acknowledging I've heard a single word of her eloquent speech, "we eat whatever they bring us. No additions, no substitutions. No more pissing off waitresses."

Becky stands up. She juts out her chin and takes a deep breath. Gingerly, she picks up her purse. Ballerina-like, she ambles over to the baby buggy. With that smile of hers that is meant just for me, she peeks inside.

“What a cute baby,” she says, taking her time, smiling at each woman in turn.

Then she sashays out the door.

I know I should be fuming, but I feel like laughing, so hard that I cry and cry and cry.

I leave through the back door. That’s where I’ve hidden my little gray car, just in case it’s not as inconspicuous as I think it is, just in case Linda Wiley was once a Nancy Drew fan herself.

The bright sunlight is like an assault. I squint. Then I pull my phone out of my purse. I call Three Rivers Nursing Home and tell the receptionist to take my mother off the waiting list.

Before I left Mom today, sitting at the kitchen table with the lady from the agency, I gave her a roll of paper towels and a bandage scissors. When I get home I know she will be hidden behind a mound of Bounty cut in perfect inch-wide squares. She will peek out from behind her work of art, and when she sees me, her whole face will light up. She doesn’t recall that she’s my mother, but she remembers I’m someone she loves.