
Made in Michigan

Preface

"I think I'm your Mom." It didn't take her long to say this - three or four minutes, tops.

"I was hoping you'd say that." So much for me playing it cool.

A spittin' and a grinnin'

In the late 2010s in the USA, data and technology had led to easily accessible, reasonably reliable DNA testing and matching of biological relatives. My understanding and trust in data, coupled with the loss of my brother a few years prior, led me to spit in a tube and send it off to the leading ancestry companies at the time (there may also have been some wine involved, back then). It would be fun. I wouldn't worry about it too much. And if anything materialized, it would be really neat to meet someone I shared blood with.

I started receiving bio-matches almost immediately: third and fourth cousins, multiple times removed, living everywhere from Southern California to Finland with Ukraine in between. Interesting for sure, but having just traced my adoptive family's tree a couple summers back, I knew exactly how close those "cousins" really were. I didn't reach out or respond - what was the point?

One day out of the blue, when I hadn't thought about genetics for quite some time, I received an automated email notification much like all the others - with one incredible difference.

You see, DNA matching is generally measured by "cM", which basically means the number of strains of DNA you have in common with other people. Third cousins share about 200cM. First cousins, 700cM, indicating a closer familial tie. The email that caught my eye identified someone I share 3,400cM with. And while I'm sure the ancestry companies' lawyers won't let them guarantee any connections, the email clearly said (in BIG FONT) that when people share that much DNA, 100% of the time they have a parent/child relationship. ONE HUNDRED PERCENT!

I was terrified. I had been hoping for a closer connection, but this was a bit extreme. So I did NOTHING. I left the email in my inbox for about a month before opening it again. Could that simple act of spitting in a tube really have produced my biological father?

Stalking (aka "Research")

When I finally got up the nerve to reopen the email, I stared at it a few times and then went to work. I'd been a data analyst in the entertainment industry for 20+ years, figuring out ways to derive everything from theatrical box office predictions to streaming rights and royalties. Data never lies. Data is logical, factual, and doesn't change on a whim. I trusted that and followed the trail.

Looking up the name of my potential bio-father, supplemented with some serious research from family and friends, we found him. My biodad was alive and well and living in Michigan. Whew! Since I lived in California at the time, this made him "geographically undesirable". Or "desirable", in this case. My research team rallied and we put together everything we could find out about him. Married since the 70's, two amazing and accomplished daughters, and a wife who was an award-winning volunteer for an animal shelter just outside Detroit, which was close enough to my birthplace of Flint to make sense. I started making jokes that "at least his wife likes strays" so I wouldn't fixate on the potential disruption I was about to cause to their family.

We dug deeper. We mapped his family tree back to his great-grandparents and did the math to realize that if he had fathered me, he would have been only sixteen years old at the time. Just a kid! It started to become very, very clear - or so I thought.

The Backup Plan

Trusting the data but also needing a back-up plan, I had been connecting with other adoptees who were in similar situations through the "DNA Discovery" support group with the Adoption Network of Cleveland, the ANC. I may have never heard of this group if it weren't for the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020. The forced shutdown and shift to all things virtual made these discussions accessible to me, and I felt like I had finally found "my people". Not to say I hadn't found "my people" many times in the past, as I had been working with Motherless Daughters and Survivors of Suicide groups for years to help me live with the loss my adoptive mom left when she took her own life when I was a pre-teen.

The people in these groups, most notably my Motherless Daughters sisters, had become my go-tos for support, advice, and celebrations. But this was different. Their biological moms had died very early in their lives, after all. Some of their dads, too.

Since very few of these women knew the experience of losing an adoptive parent, and even fewer could ever hope to be on a path like the one in front of me, I didn't feel right about expressing my incredible hope and potentially making their wounds deeper. Shifting focus to the ANC group, I found it to be exactly what I needed at that exact moment. Much like in Motherless Daughters, I was virtually surrounded by people who just "get it". Some had DNA surprises, mostly around genetic fathers. Some had great reunion stories, like the woman who introduced herself to her biodad at a tractor auction. And many, far too many had stories of being rejected by the very people who brought them into this world. The possibilities were endless - and so was the fear.

Genie in a Test Tube

On many of the ANC calls, there was mention of the ANC's Genetic Genealogist, or "The ANC Genie". Anyone who I met who had worked with her had a lightness about them, which I curiously interpreted as hope for what the future might hold. One day it just felt right, and I contacted her through the ANC to find out more about the process and cost. She explained how they search, the inputs they would need from me, and the tools and coaching they could provide if I found someone I'd like to reach out to. "Oh great," I thought, having been through enough sales pitches in my career to know when I was being built up to write a big check. Skeptical, I asked about the cost. The amount she quoted was much, much more than I could afford to pay per hour. What a racket. I asked a few more questions geared at getting myself out of the situation as quickly as I could. I then learned that the quote she had provided was an annual amount, and the search services were included. INCLUDED. All of it. I couldn't sign up fast enough.

We were off. She scheduled an initial consultation where I went through all the data I had collected, the family trees I had mapped, and the analysis that identified the man living outside Detroit as my genetic father. The ANC Genie listened intently, asked a few clarifying questions, and asked me to give her a couple days.

One day I logged on to find an urgent message from her to get in touch before I tried to make contact. Uh-oh. I thought the worst - either all my biological relatives had already passed, or I was somehow genetically linked to one of the most heinous politicians in American history. (It was 2020. Yep, THAT one.)

I braced myself and got in touch with her. Once we could chat in real time, she broke the news right away. IT WASN'T HIM. My biological father just happened to have the same name as the man outside Detroit. However, that (and being alive and well) is all they had in common. As it turned out, my suspected biodad was living in Florida.

Who's Your Daddy?

WHAT??? Was I to believe that my acutely trained data and analytics skills had failed me? Did I let emotional bias lead me down the wrong path? Had I accepted a hypothesis as fact and almost disrupt a complete stranger's life as a result? You betcha.

After I caught my breath, The ANC Genie explained that while they have the same name, the man in Florida was just as geographically close to Flint at the time I was conceived. Supporting this theory were mutual matches with some of the other genetic cousins I had started to message. We had a new target.

According to research from social media and other sources, the man in Florida had been a graduate student at Eastern Michigan University near Ann Arbor at the time I was conceived. He would have been barely over 21 at the time - not a teenager, but not yet in adulthood. But of course it raised some questions - why did he give me up? OK, one new question. Just that one, and maybe some around my medical history. But mostly that one.

Dad.

Now, anyone who knows me knows I am crazy about my adoptive Dad. Having absolutely no biological responsibility for me, he chose to make me his own, love and nurture me, and ensure that I had the best education possible, since he was my schoolteacher for half of my grade school years. He also taught me to think, to care for others, and to be of service whenever and wherever possible. He's one of my strongest confidantes, and my go-to if I ever want to have a rational and compassionate discussion about politically charged topics or current events.

Dad has always been beyond supportive of anything I decided to do and this was no exception. Years, maybe decades prior, he had provided me with all of the information he had from my adoption. This included my birth certificate with his and my adoptive mom's name on it, as the State of Michigan re-issued birth certificates for adoptees once they had been chosen by a family. He also included the name and phone number of the Lutheran agency that had facilitated the adoption, and the fact that I am "mostly" Finnish. He believed that one of my grandmothers was a schoolteacher, but didn't know on which side. Not much to go on. But it would turn out to be one of the keys to this great mystery of my origins.

Just Do It

The global pandemic of the early 2020s caused everything to come to a standstill. Schools, restaurants, shopping malls, amusement parks, and even the Southern California beaches were closed. Yes, even the beaches. It was terrifying. When it originally broke out, I sped from SoCal to NorCal to make sure that my Dad and stepmom were taking it seriously. But once that initial frenzy of fear subsided, there was a lot of time. Time to think, meditate, and figure shit out. So I tried.

I worked remotely from NorCal for quite a bit of that first year, both to make sure my parents were taking safety precautions and also to get out of the nearly-dystopian Los Angeles scene. We all stayed apart as long as we could, and then after a while, formed small "pods" of friends and family we felt safe congregating with and trusted to act responsibly with their health as well as our own. In NorCal, this pod was my parents, one aunt & uncle, and the family of my "BFD" I had known since grade school. This girl- this woman- had been there for it all, through thick and thin, since I was eight years old. She was there for my adoptive mom's death, the aftermath, and the recurring grief that I never seemed to be able to shake. She knew what a big deal this was. And no matter how brave of a face I put on, she knew I was scared.

One day, my doorbell rang and there she stood with her purple hair, her iMac, and a "don't fuck with me" look I had seen countless times over the years, but rarely directed at me. She was here, and she meant BUSINESS.

Less-than-Honorable Discharge

As part of the search service, The ANC Genie had provided a list of possible phone numbers for Mr. Florida along with some scripts to use when connecting with DNA relatives for the first time. Sharing a pair of wireless headphones, BFD and I tried the first number. No answer. The second, third, ... ninth... still nothing beyond unanswered rings and disconnected numbers. I was off the hook. At least I tried. Maybe we'd have a better result on a different day. But then I remembered who was sitting next to me, and knew it wasn't going to be that easy. "Try the first one again," BFD said softly but sternly. She could see my phone. I couldn't fake it.

Redial... ring... "Hello?" A deep voice answered.

Script? What script? I stumbled a bit and then started ad-libbing with something about researching my medical history and thinking he might have some information about it.

Thinking about it in retrospect, any reasonable man who was sowing his wild oats in the late 60's is probably dreading (or at least imagining) that one day he would receive one of these calls. It sounded like this was his first, and that he was caught off guard. It also sounded like he had a house full of people, which reminded me of some of the ANC Genie's guidance. Don't push too hard. Slow down the pace. Remember that the person you're talking to most likely hasn't been immersed in research and support groups like you have. GIVE THEM TIME.

I switched to "work mode" and started giving him some context with an air of professional detachment. Game on. I'd learned to hide my feelings very early in life, so this is a role I knew well. I repeated what I had initially said - my name, that I was calling from California, that I'm adopted, and that I was trying to connect with genetic relatives to help decipher some medical issues I was having. I thought I had gotten the point across when he finally said, "So you're from California?" I confirmed that's where I live now, but that I was born in Flint, Michigan in February 1969.

DEAD SILENCE.

He finally spoke. "I still don't see why you would think I would know anything about that." Similar words, but very different tone. He was coming to. I just had to get out of the way.

I apologized for any confusion I may have caused and asked if I could run a few names by him to see if he recognized anyone. "Sure." Good. Get him to focus on something tangible. I named a distant cousin - nothing. I named a woman he went to college with who was the top candidate in The ANC Genie's maternal theory for me. "Nope." OK, so if he really knew my biomom, he was either a player or a total jackass (or maybe both). Being a scientist at heart, I knew there had to be a "control" test to indicate the reliability of the outcomes - meaning I wanted to give him a question to which the answer clearly should be "Yes." How he responded would help me decide whether I could believe his other answers. I then named his nephew - his brother's son who shares the same last name - who he had recently interacted with on social media. "Sorry." OK, so now he's a liar. At least I knew what I was dealing with.

I apologized again, thanked him for his time, and asked if I could give him my number in case he remembered anything later (say, for example, CREATING A HUMAN BEING). He said no, but that if I called him back in a couple weeks or a month, he "might remember more." Jackass.

The Kids Are Alright

I connected with a couple of my paternal cousins on social media and began messaging with them about some of the other branches on my father's side of the family tree. Through these interactions, I discovered a few things:

1. My genetic paternal side has no idea that I exist
2. Mr. Florida himself was raised by a man who was not his biological father
3. The part of me that's not Finnish aligns with his ancestry: European, Ukrainian, Ashkenazi Jewish.

They also confirmed that I had (at least) three half-siblings from him. I learned that his wife of nearly 50 years had recently passed. OK, so maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. But how could I learn more about him if he wasn't going to help?

Cousins. I had heard from others working with the ANC that cousins were often more helpful than immediate family members, since they weren't as emotionally connected to the situation and most likely had nothing to hide. I sent off a bunch of messages to those DNA connections, but had come this far and didn't want to just wait for responses. ANC to the rescue again! Since Mr. Florida's wife had passed during the pandemic, her memorial service had been live streamed and also recorded by the funeral home - and The ANC Genie had provided a link. One click later, I was watching the video. Mr. Florida had delivered a eulogy and seemed charming, sincere, and sad. The photo montage constructed for the occasion showed me the last 50 years of his life - starting just after I was born. Seeing his two other daughters in their childhood pictures gave me a twinge (of what, I'm still figuring out) but I didn't have any wishful thinking. After all, I have a great, amazing Dad who chose and committed himself to me when I was only a month old and has been my biggest teacher and supporter my whole life. We can talk about anything - or so I thought.

All by Myself

Of course I wanted to share the news with Dad, so I called him right away to tell him I had connected with biodad (and that biodad wasn't all that friendly). Dad had far fewer questions than I thought he might, particularly since he had given me so much information on my adoption. The one time Dad had asked why I had decided to pursue this NOW, I assumed it was just another one of our many conversations and I didn't think he sounded concerned, especially when I told him that I miss having siblings. But for some reason, he didn't want the play-by-play. Not a problem, I thought, especially since I still had a whole maternal side to figure out.

Can't See the Forest for the Trees

Now, when considering the Finnish population in Michigan, keep in mind the family trees have deep roots and centuries of branches. They bear fruit that have names which over-index on vowels and also have a whole lot of "K"s. How such a tiny country can produce so many people was beyond me - until I considered the long, dark Lapland winters. Duh.

My paternal tree was pretty complex due to my biodad having his own secret biodad with very different ancestry than the man who raised him. My maternal tree was just as voluminous and far-reaching, and all the multisyllabic character strings made it easy to quickly get confused as to who begat whom. I abandoned any hope of connecting with anyone closer than a distant cousin, and since the ancestry service had served up plenty of those, I started writing.

Targeting those "DNA Relatives" with Finnish ancestry, I shot off a bunch of messages, and to my delight, received a reply from a second cousin who is very into genealogy. I explained who I was and dropped some hints based on The ANC Genie's maternal hypothesis. Narrowing it down to five Finnish women of childbearing age who were living in Eastern Michigan the year I was born, my Cousin identified five potential "mothers" who might be the person who brought me into this world. One of the descriptions matched the top candidate from The ANC Genie's hypothesis. My heart stopped when he told me that only three of the women were still alive. The top candidate was one of the three. This was closer than I had ever gotten before - closer than I ever let myself believe was possible. FIVE women. THREE living. ONE mother. Potentially.

I asked my Cousin if he knew the women well, and he offered up some recent photos from their latest family get-togethers. I saw her. I saw me. I SAW MY MOM.

Playing it Cool

Not wanting to make the same mistake I almost made with Mr. Detroit, I thanked my Finnish Cousin and let him know that I had already written to the county records department and the agency which held the records of my private, closed adoption. More precisely, I had sent a copy of the original probate county order of adoption and a copy of my reissued, adoptive birth certificate along with a formal request for any background info they might have on me - birth parents' ages, whether they had any siblings, significant medical conditions, and the like. The original agency which arranged my adoption had closed decades prior, so I was already dealing with a records department "once removed". I didn't have any information on the hospital where I was born, nor on the foster family who cared for me for the first month of my life. Not a lot to go on, but more than I had a year ago. More than I had a month ago. Had to keep pressing forward. I told my Finnish Cousin that I'd get back to him as soon as I heard anything so we could try to narrow it down or possibly even confirm that the woman in the pictures he sent (who bears a striking resemblance to me - or me to her) was her. HER. MY MOM.

Almost as an afterthought, I asked my Finnish Cousin to feel free to have a conversation with my potential mothers if the opportunity presented itself. I didn't expect anything out of this, but had forgotten that while mild-mannered, the Finns are not a passive bunch. A few days later, I received an email from him with one woman's email address, phone number, and a request to contact her.

We exchanged a few polite emails and quickly decided it was time for us to have a call. This was it - or maybe it wasn't. We were about to find out.

I called her at the agreed upon time - ring, ring, ring. No answer. CRAP. This was about to become another sad tale of a mismatch or missed connections. She must have decided she wasn't ready for this. I had heard others' stories that didn't have a happy ending - why should this be any different? I set the phone down and tried to convince myself that I didn't care. I had a great life, small but loving family, trustworthy friends, and a Hollywood career. (OK, the Hollywood part is on the technology side, but still Hollywood.) The few tears I silently shed were almost dry when the phone rang. A name came up on the phone screen - her real name, not "Mom" or "Possibly Mom" or "the person who was actually THERE when you were born." No warning. Still a stranger. **Play it cool.**

Feels Like the First Time

I took a deep breath and answered. She said she had just missed my call, and I went into the spiel. Adopted, born in Flint, looking for medical history. Sure, the medical history was part of it, but what I really wanted to know was whether this was the mystery person who had given me up for adoption. I had never before pictured a face, or imagined a voice, or any of it. It never occurred to me to do that since I had never met anyone I shared blood with. I knew from genetics classes that we could have the most DNA in common and look nothing like each other due to the influence of recessive genes. Our social media profiles had some pictures that looked similar, but that could have been the lighting or the hairstyle or me desperately wanting for this to be real.

I don't know if she heard the hesitance in my voice, or if she wanted this as badly as I did, or a combination of both - but after a few minutes of polite chit-chat, she said it.

"I think I'm your Mom."

"I was hoping you'd say that." I was all-in.

Synchronicity

As we chatted more and got to know each other, we found many similarities. Independent, driven, innocently mischievous. Love of all things Michigan, hatred of all things Ohio, the perpetual list of projects and the refusal of any offers of help. Gardening as therapy and an inherent belief that things will work out the way they are supposed to. And ketchup (love, of course).

After negotiating an exception for the ANC, which is based in Cleveland, Ohio, we got down to business. She started with medical history, and quickly rattled off the "big ones", some which I had already started to experience. High blood pressure? Check. Early onset arthritis? "You mean Cousin Arthur?" Definite check. When she started in on mental health and a history of depression, I reassured her that I maintained a keen awareness of my own, which started after my adoptive mom's suicide when I was twelve. She went quiet - for longer than the typical pause I've learned to take when telling my story (the pause that gives time for the other person to sigh and say "I'm sorry" with a pitiful look in their eyes). I remained silent to see what she would say next. Was she judging me? Had I been through too much, and was I too damaged, for her to want a relationship? WAS I GOING TO LOSE HER AGAIN?

Finally, she spoke. In what seemed like very, very carefully chosen words, she said, "My Mom did the same, but I was fifteen."

HOLY FUCK.

Does this mean that, for all these years, when I thought that I was "safe" because while my adoptive mom had taken her own life, I didn't have to worry about being at an increased risk for suicide since I didn't share her DNA? The number of times I uttered the phrase "thank god I'm adopted" started adding up in my mind - I could almost see the numbers flying by like pages being ripped off a calendar. Oh, crap. Karma's a bitch.

AND SHE'S IN MY BLOOD.

The "Why"

Another very strong coincidence that she and I share is the tendency to believe in connections more than coincidence. We dug in a little deeper. Why are we meeting, but not until now? I knew the reasons I had been giving when asked - the data & technology were finally mature enough, I wanted to know my medical history, I missed having siblings. Deep down, I was hoping to possibly experience having the kind of Mom that my Motherless Daughters friends were mourning. Someone to be my "biggest cheerleader" and to always respond, no matter what time I called or texted. The kind who took interest in what I was doing and when, and who would reach out afterwards to see how things went. When I was younger, I thought that any woman my Dad married should naturally do these things. Now that I had been a stepmom for nearly a decade, I knew it wasn't that easy.

And here I was, with a potential mom who not only could acknowledge these feelings, but who had personally felt the depth of her own void since she was a teenager. Oh, wow. She could possibly, potentially, heal this for me, or at least understand why it wasn't like flipping a switch and "poof" I had a Mom again. Except it kind of was. Just like with my adoptive mom's death, there was a "before" and an "after". The difference was that this time, the "after" was (is) a much better world.

I was so excited! But what could I offer her? All the work I had done with Motherless Daughters, AFSP and suicide survivors, and the ANC support groups came flooding back and reminded me that any one of these three situations is often accompanied with misguided feelings of being "not enough". It MIGHT be enough for her just to have found me, to know I'm doing OK, and that I have a great family. But just in case, I came up with some contingencies to throw in where I thought I could provide some value. The top spot was taken by the Motherless Daughters organization I had come to rely on since a life-changing retreat five years prior. That was it. Maybe I could help her heal too, either by sharing some of my own progress or by introducing her to the group. Or maybe both.

What's my Backstory?

The floodgates were open. She started telling me EVERYTHING - that she was a young undergrad, biodad was a grad student, that they had been dating for a while but raising a child wasn't in his immediate life plan at that time. That he had covered the medical bills but didn't want anything to do with me. That there had been (may be) another one of me out there with some other girl. That there was another boy (man) she dated shortly thereafter, who she went on to marry and have three daughters with. THREE DAUGHTERS!!!! Did that mean I have three half-sisters?

Absolutely not. That meant I have three sisters. None of this "half" bullshit. She knew how important it was to have no qualifiers. She set that stage early and I just followed her lead. Kind of like I would do if she was my mom.

Michigan or Bust!

I learned that the entire family lived within a few miles of each other just outside of Ann Arbor, Michigan. That my sisters all worked for their Dad in the town's insurance company, which doubles as a social hub for all things for the town. That she had split from their Dad, who had married again and produced three more children. I wouldn't have to navigate this half-bio-family thing. They had already figured it out for me.

We quickly discovered another similarity - the typical quiet demeanor of the Finns. For us, in-person conversations are always preferred, followed by texting. Phone calls are reserved for bad news or emergencies, although I had been working to break myself of that conviction. Regardless, I was relieved. The last thing I wanted was a mom who insisted on spending hours on end making small talk about trivial stuff. We spoke a couple more times (or maybe it was only once) when I acknowledged the obvious next step - I had to go meet her.

She welcomed the idea of a visit. This was a good sign, as I didn't hear (read) an ounce of hesitation in her voice (text). She helped find a weekend where my three sisters would all be in town, made easier by the fact that they all lived RIGHT THERE. I might even get a chance to meet their Dad, who had helped her through the pregnancy and giving me up. He must have loved her a whole lot. I would soon find out why.

A few months later, I found myself in an upgraded sleeping pod on a flight from Los Angeles to Detroit. I snacked, I dozed, I self-medicated and I started writing this story. By the time we landed, I was well-rested and a little bit buzzed. My hero husband grabbed the rental car - which itself had a backstory - and off to Ann Arbor we went.

After checking into the guest suite we had rented down the road from "mom's" house and trying to politely extract ourselves from the conversation with our gracious and talkative hostess, we headed west across the railroad tracks and through some farmland, noticed a few new real estate developments, and came across the markings of a small town. A speed limit sign, some fast-food places, a water tower. Of course, a water tower. Which you could see from everywhere in town, including her front yard. This was too perfect. It couldn't be real. But I was determined to enjoy it while it lasted.

“Hi, Mom.”

Going against the advice of the ANC, we took a calculated risk and headed to our agreed-upon meeting spot: her house. I had been told that “the family” would be there, and didn’t know whether that meant two or twenty people. I knew she had been making chili since the day before (slow cooking is ALWAYS the best), so we came hungry.

We rolled up to her simple house in the shadow of the water tower and noticed the details - beautiful tree, American flag, well-kept flowerbed and beautiful lawn. As we got out of the rented Cadillac Escalade and crossed the street, a petite, unassuming woman came slowly out of the open garage. I dropped my purse in the driveway and simply said,

“HI, MOM.”

We wrapped our arms around each other and stood heart to heart in an embrace that was long overdue. She hadn’t held me at the hospital for fear she wouldn’t be able to let me go, so I sure as hell wasn’t going to cut this short. Besides, she felt like home.

Meeting “The Fam”

By the time we looked up, her previously empty garage was filled with a bunch of faces that were oddly familiar. It might have been from our online connections, but also because we are family. The wide eyes and big smiles confirmed it. Four more people in total, including my niece and nephew. But there were only four, not five. I was missing a sister, but couldn’t ask about that yet. There were hugs to give and get, nervous laughter to release, pounding hearts to calm. It was time to really connect with my family I had only seen on social media.

There were pleasant and polite introductions and we were all ushered into the house for family dinner. I laughed when I saw the perpetual “jingle bells” hung on the door between the garage and house - just like my sophisticated “alarm system” at our place in Los Angeles. As we went single file up the short stairs into the house, I exclaimed what I thought others might be feeling: “THIS IS WEIRD”. More nervous laughter, at least from my sisters. Mom seemed cool as a cucumber. Maybe she wasn’t nervous. Or maybe she was just happy.

Let's Eat, Mom!

Heading into the kitchen with our plates, we all did that thing where everyone steps back and insists that others go first. Thankfully, it was chili, so it didn't get cold. My nephew headed back out to the garage for drinks for everyone. I asked for a diet soda, wondering how I possibly missed seeing the "drink fridge" in the garage, a staple of many midwestern homes. This kept getting better. He brought back a diet cola, not my favorite but I truly didn't care - it was so sweet of him to offer and I needed the caffeine. It's a good thing I didn't know at the time that half the fridge was filled with Fresca, one of my favorite drinks. Had I known, I might have lost it right then and there.

As we sat down to eat, I learned that our youngest sister (WHAT? I had always been the baby) had been there earlier, but had to leave to go feed her cats. Crap. Day one and I had already alienated someone. I was told we'd have a chance to meet her the next day. We all dished up our chili and sat down to eat.

The chili was delicious. Just enough spice, a touch of sweetness, and that completely infused flavor that only comes when it's simmered for a couple days.

Some things you just can't rush.

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