



Mother and Daughter Reunion

Since I didn't get to have a mom, shouldn't I at least get to be a mom?

Anne Irwin Ward

I went to my first appointment in the spring. With nine needles poking out of me, warm air blowing on my feet and the sounds of waves circulating, my mind raced. I couldn't turn off my thoughts. The acupuncturist said I didn't have a great response. Somehow I felt responsible—I'd not had good results related to fertility for a couple of years, so it wasn't new, this weird sense of guilt over something I had absolutely no control over. But I couldn't deny that the lingering sense of shame was there.

Acupuncture was meant to help prepare my body for IVF treatments with donated eggs. It was hard to believe that this was what our efforts to conceive had come to. I was 38 years old and was told that the odds of getting pregnant naturally were virtually nonexistent. I was shocked. I thought, at the very least, I could pursue IVF with my own eggs. However, after trying to coax my body into producing eggs with various injections and medicines, I had a paltry showing of follicles. Ma's out of eggs and needs to borrow some from a neighbor. Honestly, it all felt a bit Frankenstein-ish.

It was so strange, considering that some other woman's eggs would be in my body to produce a child. I wouldn't know much about her—I had to trust the clinic to ask all the right questions and make the best judgment. I wouldn't even know what she looked like.

There are so many people who are infertile, but this was my life and it hurt more than anything I'd experienced other than the death of my mother. My mother died when I was 17, and I hadn't lived with her since I was eight years old. I felt robbed in the Mom department and my infertility felt unfairly punishing. Since I didn't get to have a mom, shouldn't I at least get to be a mom? I was raw, bitter and felt cheated.

For my eighth birthday, my mom took my 11-year-old brother and me to a Gulf coast beach campground. Mom was driving and behaving erratically, and I remember crying to her to please slow down. Once at the campground, I locked the keys in the trunk of our car. My mother was livid, and I was upset and ashamed as only a child can be. I wanted to go back in time to undo my mistake. My mom left with the tow truck to get some help.

She never came back.

My brother and I spent the night in our tent without food, water or a flashlight. The only light we had was a candle that we would burn, then use the melted bits to build the candle again and again to reuse. I remember reading *Cricket* and *Highlights* magazines to distract me from the eerie sounds in the woods. We expected that Mom would eventually return. When she didn't, I was convinced that it was my fault. My father would eventually gain sole custody of us during a time when this was rare.

My mom was mentally ill when treatment wasn't sophisticated. She had been diagnosed over the years with everything from depression to schizophrenia. She attempted suicide by shooting herself when she was 44 years old. Despite this, she survived another 11 years in a "persistent vegetative state." Pneumonia is what

finally killed her body when I was 28, but she was dead when I was 17. The following 11 years were a horrible limbo that made it impossible to fully grieve. There was a sense that she was in a painful existence far worse than if she had been successful with her suicide attempt.

During our efforts to conceive, I kept revisiting my mother's abandonment—the initial time and her final act. I would give anything to have a child and she had two, and it wasn't enough for her to find life worth living. I found myself wishing I remembered happier times with her. As time progressed, my memories of her were increasingly out of focus. It was almost as if she hadn't existed. While visiting family in New Orleans, I tried to get hospital records from one of her inpatient stays. I thought having these records could help me somehow "know" her better.

All of this energy seemed interconnected—trying to become a mother, trying to remember and feel closer to my own mother. When I learned that too much time had passed to get the records, I was disappointed but not surprised. It was actually okay, as I'm not sure what those records would have revealed. I finally and truly closed the door on those attempts.

After returning from New Orleans, I went to my second acupuncture visit. He told me I had a better response this time. I was happy but mystified, as I don't know how or why I did. At this visit, the acupuncturist told me that "western medicine tells you that you can't get pregnant, but I can help you." I thought, "Yeah, okay buddy." I was tired of having hope. It hurt too much. I resented him for presuming to be able to change a negative situation I had worked hard to accept. How dare he try to inspire hope?

A couple of weeks later, I was cleaning the bathroom when I came across some old, dusty pregnancy tests. The tests invariably brought me to tears each time I saw them because I had fruitlessly peed on so many of those sticks. I don't know why I hadn't thrown them out, but since I had them, I thought I might as well use them. Smoke 'em if you got 'em. My period was a little late, but that was more the norm since I ovulated irregularly. I assumed the position and peed on the stick, expecting nothing. But that's not what I got. Unbelievably, incredibly, inexplicably, the stick revealed two lines rather than that damned cross. A warm wave washed over my entire body and I shuddered. I had never felt such joy and didn't realize that it could be so violent. I immediately started sobbing and laughing simultaneously. I couldn't wait, I called Rob. I told him, "Everything's okay" so he wouldn't panic when he heard me crying. I had to tell him three times. "I took the pregnancy test, it says I'm pregnant."

Rob said, "Hold on, I need to sit down."

We beat the odds. We heard our daughter's heartbeat the following week. She was only six weeks old.

Nothing else mattered—not the energy, money and time we spent chasing pregnancy, not the emotional toll and strain it had placed on our marriage, not even that I would never know my mother the way I would like. My story was different than hers—I was going to be a mom, and I was even going to be happy. I got to have a mother/daughter relationship after all. And I was going to stop waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Anne Irwin Ward lives in Charlotte with her husband Rob, four-month old daughter Fiona, and furry family members, Macy and Toonces. She recently left her job to share her daughter's first year with her.