



# Search me: why did I go looking for my birth mother online?

One night 14 years ago, bored and on a whim, writer Abby Higgs entered her name into a family reunion website. Would her adoptive parents understand?

*Abby Higgs*

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**F**ourteen years ago, I found my biological mother online. In my most vivid memory of that night, I'm sitting at my friend Ellen's desk, scribbling a name into a notebook: Judy, Judith, Juday, Judea. Ellen tells me to stop, but I can't. A website has just informed me that a woman named Judy is in their archives; she's looking for the baby she'd given up more than 20 years ago - a girl born on 3 September 1980, in Rushville, Indiana.

That's me.

The website was ReunionRegistry.com. All I did was enter my birth date, gender and birth place. A pixelated hourglass popped up and spun around. Then the computer beeped. In the middle of the screen, two words: match found.

I've never been able to identify what prompted me to search for her on that ordinary Friday night. I'd simply acted on impulse, out of boredom, something I did often. I impulse-shopped; I bought lottery tickets on a whim; I got tattoos without pre-planning. I never got rich off the lottery; I never paid much attention to my tattoos, or to the impulse purchases. I never expected Reunion Registry to render actual results.

The next day, I told my parents. My dad was quiet and contemplative, mulling the details of my confession as we sat at the dinner table. My mother was more shocked that I'd gone looking in the first place.

"You've never expressed any sort of desire to find your biological family," she said.

I tried to convince her it had been an accident.

"How does someone accidentally find their biological mother online?" she asked.

She had a point.

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Here I am, more than a decade later, still trying to answer that question. Since then, I've

observed the proliferation of adoption memes on social media: women clasping poster boards scribbled with their relinquished child's birth date, birth place and gender; men holding up pieces of paper asking for help in finding their biological mothers. More and more people are having the kind of reunion I had: swift, barely planned. Is this a good thing?

I wondered what had happened to ReunionRegistry.com (now .org), and got in touch with the site's founder, Susan Friel-Williams. My experience was one of many she had facilitated over the course of 20 years, since the registry first went online in 1995. "That was back when we paid for the internet by the minute," she reminded me. Friel-Williams had been inspired by her own reunion with her biological father in the early 90s, when she was working as a private investigator. Back then, she had to go looking the old-fashioned way: tracing leads and dead ends, sifting through public records at the local library. When she found him, she had a friend who lived in the area approach him on her behalf. He asked Susan's friend what had taken her so long. That made Susan mad: "I suddenly found myself on the phone with him, saying things that would never have normally come out of my mouth. I said, 'Well, you could have come looking for me!'" Her voice registered a notch higher on the phone. "Our first conversation just happened to take place about a week after I was married. And I told my father that if only we'd met a few days earlier, he could have given me away - again."

We both laughed. "What did he say?" I asked.

"He said, 'Well, do you feel better now that you've got that out of your system? Let's meet next week.'" And before she knew it, her father was back in her life. "He'd been prepared for the day I turned up. He'd prepared his second wife, too. They both knew I might come looking one day."

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I grew up knowing I was adopted. I worried about not knowing my biology and entertained extreme "worst possible outcomes", such as discovering one of my biological parents had a serious mental illness, but I never felt alienated within my own family. As a child, my parents assured me that my biological mother had given me up in the hope that I might have a better life. I'd nod and say I understood. Then I'd go back to whatever it was I'd been doing.



Abby Higgs (second right) with her adoptive family. Photograph: courtesy Abby Higgs

When I was older, I tried to make use of the classic “You’re not my real mother” line, but only once or twice. Every time I said it, I felt stupid afterwards. Her response was always something along the lines of, “Well, it’s too bad your real mother didn’t raise you. I’m sure you would have enjoyed plenty of piano lessons, softball games, and three-week family vacations.”

I don’t remember feeling consciously angry about, or even aware of, the fact that I was different from other members of my immediate family, but the random fits of rage I often threw suggested otherwise. My parents had adopted me because they couldn’t conceive. They really wanted a baby. So they got me - a dinky little infant who turned blue when she took a bottle. When a doctor told them my turquoise hue was a sign of congenital heart failure, they were distraught. Welfare offered to take me back, but my parents said no; they’d just get me fixed.

In the meantime, they got pregnant.

To this day, the only time I ever feel conspicuously different is when we’re all standing next to one another, say, huddled for a family photograph. My mom, my little sister, my dad and my little brother range in height from tall to towering. I, on the other hand, stopped growing at the age of 12. I remain comparable in height and girth to a bulldog on its hind legs. The other telltale sign is hair colour. They have brown hair (or, in my dad’s case, no more brown hair); I have thin, blond locks that hang from my head like overcooked angel hair pasta. But these differences never bothered me.

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I found Judy on a Friday night; we made plans to meet the Monday after. I didn’t stop to worry that it might be too much, too fast. My mother was still in shock; I wish I had stopped to check in on her, to ask if she was OK.

It turned out that Judy still lived in the tiny town where I was born - Rushville, Indiana, only 54 miles away. That morning, my parents and I caravanned down; they drove ahead of me in their Ford Windstar, leading the way.

It was a beautiful late-summer day: blue sky, slight breeze, bending corn. Once we got to Rushville, we found Judy’s street. Her house was a small blue cottage. On the porch was a girl with long, blond hair who looked a little older than me, but not much.

I pulled up behind my parents and got out. My mom’s face in the passenger window, behind the blue-ish glass, looked worried and sad. She was chewing on her bottom lip. She rolled down the window. “We’ll be waiting at the library,” she said. “Call us on Dad’s cell when you’re ready.”

I started to shake. Mom smiled, and in a quiet voice said, “That girl on the porch has some mighty blond hair. I have a feeling we found the right place.”

Choking back tears at her forced enthusiasm, I nodded, said “OK” and “I love you,” and turned around.

Next to the blond girl was a tall, slightly-balding man in a flame-printed silk shirt. He walked towards me, smiling, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. "I'm Mike," he said, reaching out his hand, "Judy's husband. Nice to meet you." I shook his hand. "Judy's in the backyard with the grandkids. But she'll be right over."

I nodded. The blond girl walked over. "I'm your older sister, Jane" she said. "Well, half-sister. But still." She laughed nervously. "The kids are mine." Just two minutes before, I was the oldest child in a family. Now I had an older sister, now I was an aunt.

"There she is," Mike said. I followed his gaze to a small blond woman walking slowly toward us, as though she were afraid of losing her balance. She wasn't crying, but she was almost crying, as was I. We hugged and I could feel how small her bones were. We went inside and sat on a blue couch. "I can't believe this," Judy said, looking at me, then looking away.

"Me, either," I said.

On the coffee table was a framed photograph of a boy who looked about 14 or 15. He had a leisurely smile; his hair was light brown, crewcut.

"That's Joe," Judy said, picking it up and handing it to me. I stared, studying the bulbous tip at the end of his nose, his front teeth that, like mine, hung just a tad lower than the rest of the top row. I knew who he was before Judy told me.

"He's your brother. This was taken years ago. He's actually a year older than you."

Across the room, her grandchildren were playing with toys on the floor. Jane and Mike sat in recliners, staring at Judy and I. For a moment, I wanted to change places with them, to see myself next to Judy, wide-eyed and amazed at this new present: my new family.

"Something else about Joe," Judy said. "He has the same father as you."

She told me she had been ill when she was pregnant with me, suffering heart failure at the age of 25. She already had Joe to take care of, plus seven-year-old Jane (who was taking care of her), so she decided to put me up for adoption.

"I knew you were going to be sick, too," she said. "I just knew it."

And she had been right.

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If you were to ask me now, "Are you happy you found your biological mother?" I would say, yes, I am. But I wouldn't say it without a twinge of guilt at the damage it caused. It has taken several years for my relationship with my adoptive mother to mend. No matter how many times I've tried to convince her that I found Judy by accident, that I simply looked on the right site at the right time out of sheer boredom, she doesn't buy it. And, I admit, I could have used a bit more tact.

Had I opted to go down the formal, legal route of finding my biological mother, I would have had to petition the state of Indiana to open my birth records. I would have needed to argue “good cause”. The process in the UK is similar: there is a government registry for adoptees and birth parents, but in order to access any information, an adoptee must know her or his biological mother’s name, and sometimes the father’s, too. If she doesn’t know this information, she must apply through an application form online. Birth parents can only make contact with adoptees by adding their names to the registry, in the hope that their child will one day do the same.

If I had taken this slower, formal route, would my mother and I have been spared the fallout that followed my reunion with Judy? Not long afterwards, our relationship fell apart. We were like repelling magnets when in the same room. Sometimes, when I tried to talk to her, she would stare into the ether between us, completely through me as I stood there, talking excitedly about my latest adventure with Judy and her family. It made me uncomfortable and mad. Why wasn’t she listening? I started going to Rushville on holidays and weekends, and my mother became defensive, wondering if I was visiting them too much. I yelled. I didn’t pick up the phone. I drank a lot.

I understand now that she felt she was being replaced. Judy, after all, was my biological mother, and I couldn’t assign her any other role. But my mother was the one who had seen me through open-heart surgery as a young child, through innumerable illnesses and injuries, through a few brushes with the law, through broken hearts and a bruised ego time and again: she was my mother. She could never be replaced, but I didn’t think to tell her that.



Abby Higgs (on right) with her biological family. Photograph: courtesy Abby Higgs

Meanwhile, Judy and I went about our new relationship like two close friends, as did my older sister, Jane, and my brother, Joe. We had about three or four good years before Judy had her first stroke. After that, her health went downhill fast; her ability to communicate went, her energy was gone.

Though my home is far from Indiana these days, I still visit Judy and the family every once in a while. When I do, I like to sit in the chair across the room from where Judy spends most of her time - on that same blue couch, watching TV. As for my mother and I, our relationship is significantly better, though I imagine we will always be a bit on the mend. It’s just part of our

dynamic.

I no longer feel the need to insist that I found Judy by accident. And, in turn, my mother no longer looks sad whenever I talk, frightened of what the next words out of my mouth might be. When I think back on those childhood assurances she gave me - that my biological mother had loved me when she'd given me up, and hoped I might have a better life - I think, "Well, thanks to you, I did."

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