



“I have a sister?!”

THAT'S WHAT MY NEWLY DISCOVERED 40-YEAR-OLD BROTHER SAID TO ME WHEN I FOUND THE COURAGE TO CONTACT HIM.

BY ANNE BOKMA

PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF ANNE BOKMA

I am nervous when I get off the plane at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. I'm here to greet a man I've never met before. I've seen his picture so, as I scan the crowd, I know who I'm looking for: a tall blond in his 40s with a goatee. I'm not sure what my first words will be or whether I should hug him. And I am worried about just how awkward this whole encounter might be. After all, we are complete strangers; a measly strand of DNA is all that unites us.

Over the past few months, we've talked on the phone a couple of times and exchanged a few emails. Then we decided to meet. We are linked by biology because we share the same father, but there is much that separates us. For starters, he is a card-carrying member of the Republican Party and I'm a bleeding-heart NDP'er. He's a Seventh-day Adventist who keeps a dry house; I'm a Unitarian who has wine every night with dinner. He likes to fish and hunt; I'm a vegetarian who feels guilty about indulging in the occasional egg. There are plenty of reasons to think we might not hit it off.

That's why I've kept the visit to a short three days. Still, I am hopeful for some kind of connection, as well as answers about the mystery man who was our father, a man who sired us but did not raise us, a man who left a hole in both of our hearts.

I spot him in the airport. He is flanked by his wife and fair-haired son. "Tim?" I ask, my heart pounding. We stand there for a brief moment, taking each other in. "You two look so much alike," says his wife, Brannndan, breaking the ice. It's true. There are a lot of familiar features in his face that I recognize from old black-and-white photos of my father. In a flash, I am comforted by the sense that this visit is going to be much easier than I thought. It helps that Tim's grin is wide, and so are his arms, as he stretches them out to embrace the sister he never knew he had.

The backstory: In 1965, my father, Henk, left my mother, baby brother and me. I was three years old. Except for one visit when I was seven, I never saw him again. He died of a heart attack at 45. Years later, I sought out information about him by talking to members of his family and discovered that he suffered from manic depression. He had never held down a job – or a relationship – for very long, and he had another son, Tim, now 44, who lives in Georgia. My father had left him too.

Tim had a son who had been experiencing some health issues and he had gotten in touch with one of my father's siblings to find out if

HE LIKES TO FISH AND HUNT; I'M A VEGETARIAN WHO FEELS GUILTY ABOUT INDULGING IN THE OCCASIONAL EGG. THERE ARE PLENTY OF REASONS TO THINK WE MIGHT NOT HIT IT OFF.



there was a genetic component to his son's illness (there wasn't, and his son's health issues have now been resolved). Word filtered down to me about my brother, who had been a baseball player in the big leagues. (He was a pitcher for the Boston Red Sox before retiring due to an injury. He has now settled into a successful career in sales.) I was also told that Tim didn't want further contact with anyone from Henk's family.

Clearly there was hurt there. I knew that hurt. For years I wondered why my father never made the effort to reach out to me. As children do, I internalized this loss and, in some unspoken part of me, felt there must be something wrong with me. Why else would a father leave his daughter? Finding out about Tim's existence freed me from this kind of thinking. Here was someone else who had been left behind. Our father had made a habit of departures, so it was he who had to take the blame – even if his actions were mitigated by mental illness, drinking and his inability to cope. I didn't know if Tim even knew about me, but I respected his wish to be left alone.

But last summer I turned 50 and considered all the things I still wanted to do in my life. I knew that meeting Tim was one of them. I Googled him, then sent him a long, somewhat apologetic email. I explained that I didn't want to be an intrusion but that, if I had a brother out there, I wanted to meet him. Within five minutes of sending the email, he called me. He sounded shocked and happy. "A sister!" he exclaimed. "I can't believe I have a sister!"

On our first morning together at his home in a small town outside of Atlanta, we spend hours talking in the kitchen over coffee. He asks me to fill in some of the blanks for him about our father, who had met his mom about five years after leaving my family and then left his mom while she was still pregnant. Neither Tim nor his mother ever heard from Henk again. I tell him »



When the author's father, Henk, left, she was only three years old. Years later, she discovered he had another son, Tim.

a building that houses his boat, barbecue and riding lawn mower. I see a cabinet with his hunting gear, and when I reveal that I've never even held a gun, his son Tucker is dumbfounded. Shooting guns is as southern as eating fried chicken. "Why don't I give it a try?" I suggest, attempting to be a good sport. Tim pulls a couple of guns from the cabinet and we walk to the edge of the pond on his property. As he throws a clay disc high into the air, his arm stretches so far back his knuckles practically graze the ground. His windup is impressive, and it gives me a glimpse of the pitcher he once was. Despite many attempts to hit my mark, I never do, but I rather enjoy myself as I try.

about our father's mental illness, his life of restless wandering, his hardscrabble upbringing. We talk about our kids. His two boys, Tate and Tucker, are the same ages as my two girls, Ruby and Lucy, and we share our experiences with the joys and challenges of parenting. "I could never in a million years imagine leaving my children," he says.

Over the next few days, we catch up on the past 40-odd years. Tim drives me by the small country home where he grew up and the high school where he met his wife of 20 years. When we pass a baseball diamond where he used to play, he tells me how his single mom signed him up with a local league, how he felt lucky to get a full baseball scholarship to Jacksonville State University, how the first time he ever saw a major league game he was sitting in the dugout (his mom couldn't afford to buy tickets) and how he shied away from the fame that came with playing in the big leagues. "Once Roger Clemens and I spent two weeks together, recuperating from injuries," he said. "We'd go out for lunch and there would be a huge lineup of people waiting for him to finish so they could get his autograph. I knew that life wasn't for me."

We swim in his pool and go for walks on his 500-acre property. He welcomes me into his man cave –

In our time together, Tim and I go out for sushi; he takes me to a church service where his 15-year-old son, Tate, plays guitar; we catch a Yankees game on TV; and we go shopping in the small town where he lives. Tim introduces me to a couple of store owners he knows. "This is my sister from Canada," he says, with what sounds like pride in his voice.

We spent less than 72 hours together, but an easy familiarity developed. Perhaps it is our common loss that unites us. Perhaps we see proof in each other that, despite such loss, you can still emerge whole and happy and strong, that in spite of a legacy of desertion you can still be a loving and present parent. From the wreckage of our father's failed relationships, some treasure has been found.

When I get home and unzip my luggage, I see a card has been slipped inside. It's a note from Tim. "I'm so glad you reached out to me," he writes. And for once I don't feel sad when I think about what my father left behind, because now it includes this kind and caring man I am proud to call my brother. ■



I MAKE
MANDATORY
PHYS ED
SO GOOD

NOTHING ELSE
TASTES SO GOOD

Welcome to the So Good Life, where chocolate goodness meets a great, dairy-free source of calcium and vitamin D.