

Disappointed

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Hi Walter,

March 3, 1999

I know you have been in touch with my son Mike, and you two have dug enough into our mutual family history to conclude that you and I could be half-siblings. Mike says you're aware your father, Jake, was previously married and had a child. That would be me. I presume he also told you that your father and I didn't have a good relationship (an understatement).

My earliest Jake memory is when he, my mother and I finished our conversation-less dinner. My eyes, however, remained focused on the mountain of dreaded peas on my plate. Did you know, Walter, hot peas have no smell and cold ones are worse?

Jake glared while I shoveled those little green BBs from one side of my plate to the other. He threatened, "Gladys, if it takes all night, she's going to sit there until she finishes her peas."

My mother tossed a fleeting glance my way, but I sensed an intervention wasn't in the works. Perhaps acquiescence outweighed a nasty scene. Disappointed, bedtime arrived when Jake allowed me to slip off my chair and climb into my crib.

Come morning, Mr. Eat-Your-Peas had already left for work when I ambled into the kitchen sucking my thumb and trailing my blanky. My mother, hunched over the sink, stifled gulping sounds. She swung her arm toward the plated peas. "Well, there's your breakfast," she said, backing up my father as a devout Catholic wife should.

Wanna guess what my least favorite veggie is today?

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Walter, I understand from Mike that your childhood wasn't at all like mine. You told him, "Well, we moved around a lot and he was pretty strict with us. But all in all, I think I had a good childhood."

During one conversation your wife let slip to Mike, "Jake sent his kids to camps all Summer to get rid of them." She added, "One time we stopped at a McDonalds and Jake wouldn't come in. He never liked to eat out, wanted his plain home-cooked food. But we convinced him he could order a hamburger without anything on it. Well, it came with the works. He picked up the bun's top and threw the rest against a wall. Our eyes bugged out as we followed the mess slipping down the plaster."

Now, that's the father I knew!

As I grew I thought he probably was disappointed he produced a girl, not a boy. Which perhaps, Walter, is why you didn't see that side of him. Jake was a deer hunter, a sometime soft ball player who hungered for men's conversation. When asked to locate him for supper, I'd spot him in a smoke-filled corner tavern guffawing with his buddies. "Daddy," I squeaked, "Mama said to come home for supper." Mission accomplished, my little legs pumped me home to safety.

Later that year I overheard a conversation between my parents. Jake said, "The kid should take accordion lessons."

My mother challenged, "Isn't she a little young for that?"

Huh? As far as I was concerned, learning to play an instrument foretold another arena for failure and repercussions. The beginner's twelve-bass accordion submerged my entire body. I was transformed into a huge box of bellows with a head, legs and thrashing arms.

I have to share with you, Walter, what happened on my eighth birthday. After supper and

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opening gifts, my father said, “Play something for Grandpa and Grandma. Show what you can do.”

I strapped on my accordion, but missed a few notes. It wasn't a Frankie Yankovic moment. I glanced over my sheet music and met Jake's narrowed, smoldering eyes.

My body shook and the Pennsylvania Polka petered out. Launching from his chair, Jake towered over me and growled, “You can do better than that.”

After the show-gone-wrong, he disappeared. That is, he trailed his horrified parents out the door, enlisted in the Army, and peace descended on our home for three years. Upon his discharge, my parent's marriage survived a few more months before Jake took off for unknown parts. Rumor had it he was living with a woman and her children. I have a hunch you were one of them, Walter.

I was eleven when your father and I crossed paths once more in his parents' home at Christmas. Grandpa reading his paper, Grandma baking cookies, and I hanging their precious hundred-year-old-decorations on the tree were taken aback when their front door flew open. Jake blew in along with a wintry blast of cold air. My hands frantically sought a ladder rung, and one of their prized Polish glass ornaments hit the floor smashing into hundreds of glass shards.

He skimmed a look my way and muttered, “I might have known she was here.” Thrusting a wrapped gift into his father's arms, he stalked into the kitchen, and tossed a few words to his mother. He scuttled out the rear door and I gulped for air, having held my breath throughout the apparition's appearance.

Walter, fifty years was a long time to have never connected. But Mike's insatiable

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interest, ending in discovering a long-lost, half-uncle, was quite a bonus for him.

After hearing about your conversations regarding your growing-up-years, my own curiosity was piqued about why our father had a Jekyll and Hyde personality. I decided to quiz my mother, and even when she began fiddling with her rosary, I wasn't prepared for what followed.

“Honey, I didn't really think you needed to know this, because it doesn't make any difference now, but Jake isn't your father.”

“Who is?”

She sighed. “Jake's brother. He and I were engaged when he was drafted. I wasn't one bit upset when I discovered my pregnancy. We loved each other and planned on marrying during his eave. That all changed when a Vietnam ambush killed him. I was in a panic and told his grieving parents about our baby.

“You, sweetie, would have been their first grandchild, and after their initial shock, they suggested their other son, Jake, marry me. It might seem bizarre now, but Jake and I had a good relationship, and we thought we could work it out. However, it meant breaking up with his girlfriend, and in time Jake resented marrying me and took it out on you.”

That took some time to digest. But wondering what I did to disappoint Jake was significantly eased. I realized the girl Jake broke up with to marry my mother was your mother, Rebecca.

So, Walter, I'm not sure we're related at all or where that leaves you and me.

Your Not-Half-Sister,

Disappointed

Becky (named after your mother)

P.S. Mike will be disappointed he doesn't have a long-lost uncle after all.