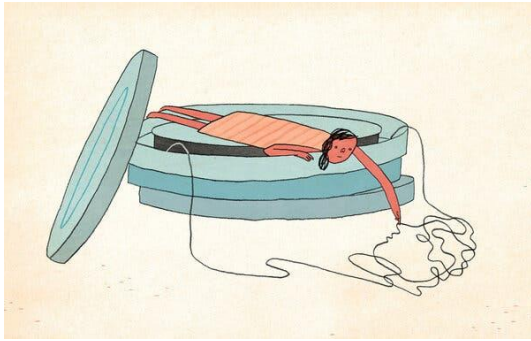


NY Times Modern Love

# Hearing His Voice Changed Everything

I never knew my father. Did he know me?



Credit...Brian Rea

By Michèle Dawson Haber

Sept. 17, 2021, 12:00 a.m. ET

The first time I heard my father’s voice he had been dead for 53 years. It all started when my cousin, who lives in Jerusalem, gave me 25 audio reels in round metal cans. She had found them while cleaning out her parents’ home there.

“They’re of your father singing opera,” my cousin told me on one of my infrequent visits to Israel. “I also found his sheet music, negatives and photos. You and your sister should have them.”

After my father died in Canada in 1965, his family clung to these remaining possessions; the clinging forestalled having to give him up completely.

“Look at this photo of him,” my cousin said, taking out a picture of a gawky young man with deep-set eyes, a bushy unibrow and a tentative smile. “Who does he look like?”

“I guess he looks a bit like me,” I said, feeling uncomfortable.

My father had died by suicide when I was three months old and, unlike my older sister Ruth, I felt little connection to him.

“More than a bit!” she said. “You have the same shy smile. Don’t you see it?”

“A little,” I said.

After returning to Toronto with my father's belongings, I shipped them all to Ruth, who was by then living in another country. I didn't think again about the photo of the young man.

"He's more your father than mine," I said to her as explanation for not keeping any of it.

Two years after our father's suicide, our mother married another struggling artist — this time a poet. But that's where their similarities ended. Our stepfather adopted Ruth and me, resulting in the legal erasure of our last names. Growing up, we never registered this as significant. We didn't think of ourselves as adopted. "Real" adoptees, we ignorantly assumed, were children who had been placed with other families because of desperate circumstances.

Two more children were born and our new family of six coalesced and looked toward the future. Our mother had wiped the slate as clean as she could, intent on overwriting our previous life with new memories.

Yet there remained a feeling of otherness that bound Ruth and me. Ruth was tormented by her inability to remember our father and obsessed with wanting to know more about him. Our mother refused to talk, always countering my teenage sister's questions with tears and deferral. "Some other time," she would say, or "When you're older."

Crushed, Ruth came to me, crying. I took on the role of my sister's comforter from an early age. Even after we were grown and living in different countries, she would call whenever her feelings of loss bubbled up, and I would listen and console her. She never had to worry about reciprocating; I had no similar longing of my own. There was no space for my loss, and so I assumed that it did not exist.

Three years ago, Ruth found a sound engineer to digitize the 25 audio reels of our father. I was curious but also worried that Ruth would be disappointed by their contents. As she listened, she sent me regular updates via WhatsApp. The reels were mostly of him playing piano and singing in a variety of languages.

One day Ruth called me on Skype while I was at work. She was in a room with the sound engineer. "You have to listen to this now," she said. "It's really incredible."

I closed my office door, and Ruth played for me a reel that had been recorded in 1963. Ruth was 3 years old, and she and our father were looking at photos together. The voices were so clear it was as if they were in the room with me.

"Who's this — is it Daddy?" he said.

"No!" Ruth said.

"Is it Mummy?"

“No!”

“Is it Ruthie?”

“Me!”

We heard him laugh in delight and then there was a wet, mouth-on-skin, vibrating sound, as if he was giving her a tummy raspberry, followed by an explosion of giggles. My father’s laugh was high and spirited, but his speaking voice was lower — a mellifluous, accented baritone.

Hearing his voice, my indifference evaporated. Until that moment, I hadn’t known what my father sounded like. I had gone my entire life without realizing that I didn’t know.

Ruth and the sound engineer were staring at me over the Skype screen, waiting for my reaction. I didn’t want to break down in front of them.

“Well?” Ruth said.

“Wow,” I said.

“Wow, what?”

“Wow, that’s something.”

Realizing I wasn’t ready to talk, she filled in the silence with her reactions of joy and awe. I made an excuse of getting back to work and hung up. In my office, I cried alone, first in anger at him for leaving us, and then out of a long-quashed longing.

I had seen photos of my father and heard a few stories, but none of them brought him nearer to me. But the man I heard, so intimate and close — this was my father! Hearing him speak and laugh startled my soul out of a deep slumber, and it was both scary and revitalizing. There would be no turning away. I needed to know more.

Now I became the obsessed daughter, looking for him everywhere. I read through the hundreds of letters to and from him that my mother had saved in a cardboard box. They painted a portrait of a sensitive man who was always pushing himself to get ahead. In the letters my parents wrote to each other, the struggles of their tumultuous marriage were laid bare.

My next step was to track down and interview elderly friends and family who recalled a noble and friendly man who loved to sing American country songs from his mother’s Jerusalem balcony. Then, although I knew reading it would be painful, I spent a year fighting for the right to see the police report detailing the lurid details of his final moments.

How incongruous to feel gratitude for all these things, and yet I did, as gaps in my family’s timeline were filled in. I discovered more about my parents than most adult children ever find out. Still, I wasn’t satisfied and couldn’t explain why to anyone, not even my sister.

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“What more are you hoping to find?” Ruth asked me.

“I don’t really know, maybe a photo,” I said and choked up, realizing just how badly I wanted exactly that. “Just one photo of him holding me — then I can stop.”

I arrived in my father’s life at the worst possible time, as his life was unraveling, so it wasn’t surprising that there were no photos of me. Yet this slim hope was all I had, so I begged Ruth to scan the thousands of our father’s negatives she had from his years as an amateur photographer. Months later she messaged me a crying-face emoji. “I’ve scanned them all and you’re not there,” she wrote. “Sorry.”

There was nothing left to discover. I had followed every lead, read every letter and studied every memento. I should have been content to have learned as much as I did, but instead I felt bereft.

After I recounted my efforts to a friend one day, she told me about a psychologist she had [interviewed for her podcast](#). “Have a listen,” she said, “I think you’ll find it helpful.”

While exercising in my basement the next day, I did listen, feeling skeptical about the relevance of what Dr. Michael Grand called “[the adoption constellation](#).” Sure, being adopted by my stepfather made me a step-adoptee — so what?

As if in reply, Dr. Grand explained that many step-adoptees wrestle with the same existential questions as traditionally defined adoptees, those I had thought were different from me.

“Without information about her origins, the adoptee has a deficient narrative — she is missing chapter one of her life,” he said.

I not only had been looking for my father, I realized then: I also had been looking for myself. Dr. Grand’s next point stopped me mid-lunge, and I dropped on to my knees, tears running down my face.

Mattering is key, he explained. The adoptee wants to know that she mattered.

There it was. Despite my digging and the extraordinary bounty of written, audio and photographic artifacts I had unearthed, I had never found, nor would I ever find, any evidence that I existed in my father’s world. That I mattered.

It was time to stop searching.

I didn’t know if I mattered to him, and I never would know, but what I realized is that he matters to me. No longer a bystander to loss, I have found my father, and that is not nothing.

I have learned enough to fill my first chapter of life and, although it will remain incomplete, I can write myself into my family's story, entwined in the histories of my parents and sister. And I can resolve to wear my shy smile with pride, grateful to have something he gave only to me.

*If you are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). You can find a list of additional resources at [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources).*

[Michèle Dawson Haber](#) lives in Toronto and is writing a memoir about family secrets, identity and step-adoption