

It's quite interesting how one's life shapes an individual into the person they become. So many variables factor into it; each of us is unique and different and no two people are alike. From the time we are infants into adulthood we are being molded, we are raised, the environments we are exposed to; the part of town we grow up in, the schools we attend, the company we keep, and the list is endless. On July 9, 1992, I was born in the Dominican Republic. At this time my mother, who was 30 years younger than my father was unwed. When I was 2 years old, she moved to the United States leaving me behind in care of her sister, Esperanza. As a 2-year-old child one can only imagine my confusion; initially my aunt was my mom. It was not until later in life I realized and understood my biological mother was a different person than the woman raising me as her child. My birth mother was my father's mistress. My father was married, and had been for 30 years, and was living abroad in the United States along with his wife and 3 children. My father would travel to visit me and while I may not remember much, it all comes back to me when I look at the photographs. 'A picture is worth a thousand words' as the saying goes.

Having a heart of gold and being empathetic to my situation, my stepmother decided I needed to live in the United States with my father so they could both raise me, and my siblings could help; take into consideration my father was 61 when I was born. I was about 6 years old when I moved to Pasadena, California; it was then I met my siblings from my paternal side, who were 30 years my senior. Language was a barrier since Spanish was all I spoke, but my father enrolled me in school immediately and soon I was able to master the English language. It was a relief being able to communicate with the other kids in school and although I was shy and timid, I made a fair share of friends.

Relocating to the United States presented many changes and challenges; there I was, a little kid thrown into this whirlwind, this whole new life, a new country, new people, new

language, food, culture, and style of living. Although my biological mother was absent, and my aunt Esperanza who raised me the first few years of my life was in another country, my stepmother, Norma became my 'mom'. Initially we did not have an ideal relationship. She was loving and very giving, and I was a brat, too young to understand much. But under the circumstances, in hindsight, I can imagine how difficult it must have been raising a daughter born from an affair, while my father was married to her. Because my siblings were so much older, I often did not have anyone to play with or interact with, that was my age. This frustrated me and I would act out.

My stepmom raised me like I was her own child; she was very nurturing, kind, and loving. And while we may have had our differences, she was always there for me, and she loved my father very much. As I grew older and began to understand life a little better, I started experiencing feelings of depression. I felt abandoned by my birth mother and that spiraled into a web of trouble. I began sneaking out of the house at night after my parents fell asleep and hung out with the wrong crowd. At this point my oldest sister stepped in and took over because my stepmother could not control me, and my father had gone back to work at 75 years old to be able to provide for me. Often, I would ditch school and disappear for days at a time. My parents were too elderly to raise a teenage daughter. When I was 9 years old my birth mother married and had another child. I did not see my mother until I was 14 years old. Her absence in my life really affected me, I was angry at them for something they had nothing to do with. It is as if I was paying them back for my mother's abandonment.

When I was 14, I traveled to New York to see my mother for the first time since I was 2 years old. I felt resentment towards her for abandoning me. I was angry. I was clueless about life and things were looking quite bleak. I had no direction or discipline. When I turned 17 I had a

rude awakening, a life changing experience that saved me. Everything in life is relative and comparable, and sometimes one must experience the bad to understand and appreciate the good. It was then I started on my new journey. I enrolled in college as soon as I graduated high school. I became a medical assistant at the age of 18 and landed my first job at a doctor's office. As I got my life together the relationship between my parents improved. I guess I was a big part of why they bickered so much; then a couple of years later my stepmother was diagnosed with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more popularly known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. Our world fell apart.

We were all devastated. We all participated in her care, taking turns changing and bathing her, feeding her, taking her outside to sit in the sun. It was heartbreaking watching her decline. It happened so suddenly. It was not long before she was in hospice and had a nurse care for her 24/7. Writing about it fills my eyes with tears. It triggers the memory of what it felt like to lose her.

On February 15, 2015, she passed; this was a very trying time for all of us. It broke me. This was the woman who took me in with open arms when my biological mother abandoned me. If only I knew then what I know now; now I understand we are all here on borrowed time, and in the blink of an eye, anything can happen. Thanks to her and her beautiful heart I know what it feels like to be loved with unconditional love; because of her I experienced motherly love. As I aged, it became clearer to me ... I realized a mother is not a mother simply because they birth you; a mother is one that nurtures you, cares for you and loves you unconditionally; a mother's love is incomparable.

How I miss her; I wish I could go back in time and show her how much I loved and appreciated her. I often wonder what my life would have been like if she had not existed. I'd

probably be stuck in the Dominican Republic, living a very different life; I am forever grateful and when we meet again, I am going to make sure she knows.