**Hi, I Think I'm Your Daughter**

By M. Page Jones

That day in early December 2003, my hand was shaking so hard that my wedding ring clanged loudly against the shiny silver knob on the door in front of me. The strong, steady presence of my husband behind me helped keep me somewhat distracted from the dozens of onlookers who lined both sides of the hallway. These strangers seemed to all be holding their breath as I reached once more to open the door.

I don't recall making the conscience decision to bolt for the front lobby but my feet were running that way so I had no choice but to follow. I got as far as the automatic double doors in the lobby. However, when I stepped on the large rubber mat, the doors automatically flung open bringing a gust of cold, winter, Ohio air that slammed into my face causing me to catch my breath. I stood there frozen not from the temperature but from the thousands of thoughts that were pounding in my head. The doors continued to whoosh open and whish shut as the fight between my body and mind continued resulting in an odd backward and forward dance on the mat.

What was wrong with me? This is what I had wanted my whole life. Why couldn't I bring myself to just walk into that room and say, "Hi, I think I’m your daughter, glad to meet you".

A little history is in order. I was taken away from my father when I was almost three years old. Over the years, I had tried on several occasions to find my biological family but to no avail. Every time I would get the courage up to pursue it, it would always end up with the phrase "Ohio is a closed adoption state". I had begged my adopted parents to tell me anything they knew but they insisted they knew nothing. Eventually, technology caught up and my search went from calling or writing various agencies and people to being able to search on the Internet. I stumbled upon the Marion, Ohio newspaper site and was able to email the editor who sent me the birth announcement page for the date of my birth. There it was . . . only one girl born on that day! I had done it! A Martha Pauley born to Robert Kenneth Pauley & Sandra Pauley. I finally knew my birth name!

Unless you're adopted there really are no verbs or adjectives of any kind that can color in the feelings that knowing your birth name brings to you. You say your name over and over and over trying to make it feel and sound familiar. You look in the mirror and wonder if you are a "Martha". Was it a family name or was I named after a friend or maybe a character in a favorite book?

Shaking myself out of this daydream, I went online and searched for anyone named "Robert Pauley" in or around Marion. The list came to 7 names. I figured that I shouldn't gamble on having this kind of luck ever again and picked up the phone to dial the first number. The first one I called politely told me he was not my father but wished me well on my hunt. The second number just kept ringing with no one answering. The third number a woman answered and assured me her husband was not my father. I asked her if she knew any other Robert Pauleys or if they could be related but no such luck.

My nerves were pretty much shot at this moment but I thought "just one more for now". I dialed the number. It rang once, twice, thr—

"Hello?" a gruff voice spoke. "Who is this?"

I felt my tongue get stuck to roof of my mouth and refuse to move. I took a deep breath and said what I had said to Robert Pauley #1, Robert Pauley #2, and Robert Pauley #3. "My name is Melissa Jones. I'm looking for my father. I was born on Oct. 13th in Marion, Ohio and I think my birth name was Martha Pauley. It says that my parents' names were—"

"Damn!" the man exclaimed on the other end. "Marty, I knew you would find me one day. I knew it!"

I heard a ringing in my ears as my blood pumped dramatically in my ears.

"Are you saying that you're—"

"I'm your daddy. Yes, I am. Those bastards took you away from me but I knew you'd find me." His speech was slightly slurred and as he grew angry, it was almost hard to understand him.

All the questions I'd thought about asking at this point in my daydream of finding my birth father completely left me. I just stood in my living room staring down at the phone cradle wondering if this could really be happening. For 24 years I had dreamt of this day.

"So---so---so you're saying that my real name is Martha Pauley?"

"Yep, named you after my momma. Where you at now?" he asked.

I explained that I was living in North Carolina with my husband but had spent most of my life in Ohio.

"Those children home people said you was adopted onto a farm somewhere outside of Marion," he explained.

"No, not a farm. I grew up about 30 minutes from Marion in a small town of about 100 people."

He grew quiet so quiet I could hear his labored breathing for the first time on the other end.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He seemed to take gasp for air before he spoke. "I'm not doing so great. I got lung problems. Look here, give me your address and I'll write to you. That be okay?"

Now, of course all the questions I had had bouncing around in my head for years seemed to line up perfectly behind my tongue but I could tell he was suffering.

"Sure, sure, that would be great!"

He slowly wrote down my address and promised to write soon and just like that I was back standing in my house, holding a now silent phone receiver and wondering what the hell had just happened.

The next day, a dozen red roses arrived at my door with a card signed "Love from your daddy." I had thought that the hours of crying by myself after hanging up followed by the hours of crying on my husband's shoulder would have pretty much dried out all tear reserves. Nope, not even close.

That evening, I sat down to pen a letter to my father and thank him for the flowers and try to delicately ask some questions like what happened to my mother, why had they given me away, and did I have any siblings. Suddenly, the phone rang. I answered it.

"Hello, I'm looking for a Melissa Jones," an unfamiliar female voice said on the other end.

"Yes, this is she," I replied.

"Oh, good, your father, Kenny Pauley asked me to call you." She said.

"Kenny Pauley?" I asked.

"Well, his real name is Robert but he goes by his middle name. Any way, he's had a stroke and if you want to meet him, you'd better be heading this way." She stated so matter-of-factly that it didn't register at first.

"He's had a stroke?!? Is he okay?" I sputtered.

"No, they are saying maybe a day or so. Where are you now?" she asked.

"In-in North Carolina," I answered.

"Well, you better hurry. I'm his caretaker and they just took him to the hospital. After that, if he makes it, they'll be putting him in a nursing home in Marion. Here, I'll give you his sister's number and you can meet up with her." She rattled off a number that I quickly jotted down on the letter I had just been writing him.

I called my husband and within 4 hours, we were on the road to Ohio in the dark, cold night. We didn't say much. He seemed to sense I was having trouble handling all this suddenness and the thought that if life was going to be cruel, I would never get to meet my father in person.

We made it by mid-morning and snow was blowing around just as I remembered Ohio winters to be. A portly woman with silver-streaked hair had met us at a local Bob Evans restaurant to lead us the rest of the way to where my father was now resting.

I hadn't told her what I looked like but as soon as I stepped into the dining area, she rushed over and hugged me fiercely to her. It felt odd at first being hugged by a stranger that was in actuality family.

"I knew it was you the moment you stepped inside. You hold yourself and walk just like our momma did, and that blonde hair and blue eyes. I just knew it!" she explained while tears ran down her face.

I caught myself for just a moment filing away that bit of information. Finally I knew why I was so ungraceful and always seemed to stand like I didn't know what to do with my hands . . . it was hereditary!

Soon we were on our way to the nursing home out in the country. Ominously, a graveyard was less than a mile away. Apparently, my Aunt Betty had told the staff the exciting news of our reunion. Somehow it had taken on "talk-show" status and staff, residents, resident's family members and a few random children now stood patiently waiting for me to return back to my father's door and try again.

So, the odd shuffling had finally stopped mostly because I was freezing and felt a little embarrassed at my running away. My husband grabbed my shoulders and leaned in. "You don't have to do this. We can walk right out that door. No one will think less of you. It's all up to you." Ever the supportive man who had had the perfect childhood and grown up to marry the girl with the horrid childhood who often flinched at his touch and screamed in the night from nightmares stood and awaited my decision.

I looked up at him and the tears began to fall followed by a small whimper. My aunt couldn’t take it and once again she grabbed me into a bear hug. This time it didn't feel so odd and I felt myself sinking into her neck. I rested for a bit than stood up straight and smiled at them both.

"Okay, let's do this," I declared.

I marched back towards the hallway. Whispers started at the front of the line and fluttered back towards the exit door. The onlookers seemed to be guessing whether or not I'd make it this time. Even though it was incredibly awkward to have such a personal moment be so public, I could feel that they were cheering me on.

I reached out, shook my hand from the last of the nerves and pushed open the door.

It was not at all what I expected. He looked like a survivor from a concentration camp. He was only in his late 50's but his 5 foot 8 inch frame barely carried 90 lbs. On it's bones. He was asleep so I studied his face for a moment. His cheekbones were sunken in and his eyes were buried deep in their sockets. As my eyes travelled down I saw large bedsores on his legs and ankles. I felt scared and sad and---

I sensed he was looking at me before I glanced up. His hazel eyes stared at me with no expression or recognition. I felt the corners of my mouth go up but it couldn’t really be considered a smile. It was more of an instinct towards meeting a stranger than meeting my father.

"Hello, Marty." He said in a soft yet deep voice.

"Hello," I had planned on saying the word "dad" but it stuck in my throat.

 “You’re so beautiful," he said reaching out his hand with long yellow nails and open wounds. Instinctively, I flinched.

I instantly felt bad and took his hand in mine. I smiled a more sincere version of a smile as I studied his face.

 “I’m Melissa. I guess I’m your daughter.”

 “No,," he insisted vehemently, "you’re my Martha. I don’t care what they named you.”

As we stood their both intently studying the other, I rapidly ran through the questions I had always thought I would ask my parents if I met them. My brain randomly threw one out. “Why did you give me up?”

He gave out a small growl and began to tell me about the day Social Services arrived.

“They just showed up and took you. You cried like no little girl should ever. Cried more thanwhen your whore mother left us.”

He began to cough and a nurse rushed in but he waved her off. “I got me a job on a railroad. Those bastards told me I could have my own kid back if for a year I had a job and sent money to take care of you. But I got sick. I lost my job. Showed up when I was better and they said I had to give you up. Told them to go to hell.”

He spoke of the day he had to go to court and sign the papers.

“I cursed them all. Forcing me to give away my own flesh and blood. What kind of country is this?”

My aunt leaned in and whispered that after he had signed the papers and cursed them all, he had walked out onto the courthouse stairs, and promptly had a heart attack.

“My heart broke.” He curled his hands into paper-thin fists. A tear began to form deep inside his sunken eyes.

“Marty, I never moved off that street where you were born. Never. If you ever came looking, you’d come to that street and I’d be there. I’d go every day for 20 odd years just walking down the street looking for you. Never stopped.”

I knew exactly what he meant, because I too had done that my entire life looking into the faces of people going by. Do I look like them? Or maybe her? Every time we went to a supermarket or a mall or a restaurant, I'd look at the people around me and wonder if that was my parent. Even if a car drove by our house a little slow or someone would stare at me a little too long I'd wonder if it was my mom or dad looking for me.

Again my aunt leaned towards me and whispered how he used to walk around the malls and streets doing exactly the same thing. Hoping against hope that he would see me again.

He began to cough again and I watched as his slight body shook. I saw the pulse in his emaciated neck slowly beat and sadly thought that his heart attacked him the day he gave me up but he had to carry it inside his chest for a lifetime.

I leaned in so that no one but him could hear.“We fought our way back to each other. I know you're sick, really sick, but I need you to fight so that we can have time to get to know each other again. Okay?"

He smiled a smile that showed a kind of peace. Revealing a decision that had been made even before I arrived.

“Baby girl, take care. I just wanted to see youbefore I died.”

I jerked back. I felt my body fill with rage at his selfishness. I knew he was ill. I knew he was near death with this stroke. But the little girl inside of me wanted to scream and throw a tantrum that my daddy was so willing to go away again. Wasn't the whole point of me coming was for us to find each other again and be in each other's lives? “You owe me to fight. You fight, god damn it! I didn't come all this way to say hello and goodbye at the same time! You fight! You fight!"

I didn’t realize I was screaming until I stopped and heard sniffles in the hallway. I turned and saw tears flowing down my aunt's face and my husband's face and everyone I could see from the doorway. I felt my face grow warm and I felt ashamed.

My father adjusted his pillow and rearranged the IV in his small, deeply bruised hand. He let out a loud sigh and then softly said, “Before they took you, I gave you a present. Remember?”

Having gone through five foster homes and a time at the children's home, personal belongings were not a luxury I had as a child. Ever time I was sent somewhere new, they would pack up a brown paper bag with clothes and hand me a pair of shoes. I had only one item that seemed to survive every trip and to this day was sitting in a large wooden box along with all of my journals over the years. Never knowing why, I had kept it safe for almost 25 years.. Now, I knew why.

“A small pink stuffed kitten with green eyes.”

His shoulders began to shake with quiet sobs and I began to cry with him. I leaned over the bed and we grabbed onto each other and I knew that he held onto me now as fiercely as the day they took me away.

Then, I knew in that moment, this meeting wasn't about finding each other and building a life-long relationship. This was about what he really needed from me. He didn’t need forgiveness for losing me or hope that we could become father and daughter again. What he needed was . . . peace.

I leaned in and whispered, "If there’s a heaven, you better be there making sure I’m okay down here. It's okay, you can go now. Just know I'll be here loving you and know that I found you, dad. I found you.”

He grabbed my neck and we cried and knew that this was the last time we would ever see each other again.

This time, I made it to the car before I felt my body convulse into loud sobs.

For the next few days, he told everyone about his beautiful daughter. He was sohappy that I came all that way to see him. And now, he declared, he could die.

And three days later, he did.

As news spread to his 14 bothers and sisters of my meeting with him, I began to receive what every adopted child wants . . . pictures of them as a baby and with their birth parents. I couldn’t believe how much I looked like my mother! One of my aunts sent me a picture that gave me the answer to the biggest question of all . . . did he truly love me?

 The photo was taken at a family reunion when I was around 11 months old. The picture is of him holding me. He is lifting me up high as if showing a prized possession, and the look of fatherly pride in his face said all that I ever really needed to know . . . he had truly, truly loved me.