

The life you save

BY AMY PATUREL

It was a warm Easter Sunday. Steve and I walked along the boardwalk in our flip-flops, stopping at an outdoor café for mimosas. We breezed through the awkward conversations that usually comprise a first date. He was charming. Smart. Funny. Good-looking. And at eight years my senior, he seemed to have everything going for him. He even owned his own company.

Then, just as I began feeling a buzz from the champagne, he told me about her. He missed her. He wanted to ask her questions. He still felt incomplete.

I found his honesty, vulnerability and sincerity refreshing, especially for a first date. I wanted to trust his warm brown eyes and friendly smile, and when he delivered a compliment, butterflies swarmed in my stomach.

"Do you know where she is?" I asked.

"I hired a private investigator to track her down a few years ago. I have her phone number and address," he said. "But I can't call her. She has a family now, and I don't want to disrupt her life."

I struggled to understand why he would go to such lengths to find her, only to tuck away her phone number and never dial it. Not once. Not even a hang-up call. How can someone so seemingly strong, bright and fun-loving let fear rob him of what

Amy Paturel is a freelance writer who lives in Seal Beach, California.



could be the most important relationship of his life?

I hadn't learned yet how to stifle my savior tendencies, the compulsive behavior that countered my low self-esteem and made me feel worthy of receiving love. So instead of steering the conversation onto less

serious ground, I heard myself say: "What if someone else made the call for you?"

He leaned back in his chair, paused for a moment to consider the idea then muttered, "Hmmm, I never thought about that."

We discussed the benefits. If someone other than Steve reached out to his birth mother, it would be more of a neutral, third-party intervention than a heart-stopping, life-altering intrusion.

Of course, in my Pollyanna mind, I had already made the call, and Steve and I were traveling across the country to meet Ellen for the first time, riding our bicycles to nearby meadows and frolicking in the impossibly green hills like something out of *The Sound of Music*.

I should have seen the gigantic red flags waving vigorously in the sea breeze, but, alas, I was giddy with champagne and the first flush of new romance. I didn't realize I was continuing a pattern of rescuing men who, despite evidence to the

contrary, didn't want to be saved.

My first boyfriend was caught between drugs and the priesthood. The relationship fell apart when he cleaned up and started walking with God. A second gambled away his entire savings. That union ended immediately after he erupted into a rage following a bad losing weekend in Vegas. Then there was the recent divorcé whose wife had cheated on him with a TV star. Once I helped him get over that betrayal, he was over me, too. To an outsider, my pattern was obvious.

Rather than love for love's sake, I needed to give men a reason to love me — and Steve fulfilled the requirements. Like an alcoholic within walking distance to a bar, I was drawn to him. He could numb my feelings of inadequacy by giving me a purpose — to find his mom.

We had a passionate, albeit disconnected relationship. In between romantic weekends at the beach, he'd disappear for days. Playing by the dating "rules," I let him retreat in peace, waiting patiently for him to re-emerge from his cave.

Over time, Steve pieced together his childhood for me — showing me pictures of Ellen, telling me how his biological father's brother and his wife had adopted him and treated him like their birth child. He didn't even know his "parents" were actually his aunt and uncle (and his "brothers" were only cousins) until he stumbled across some legal

papers when he was in his late teens. The discovery made him question everything he knew about his life. And yet he relayed the story in a stoic, matter-of-fact way. No bitterness. No anger. Just detachment.

I knew he didn't allow people to get close — after all, if his "parents" deceived him when he was a child, how could he learn to trust? One night at a party his friend Kevin handed me a drink and sat me down on an easy chair. "Amy, he hasn't been with a girl in years," he said. "This is hard for him, but he's definitely smitten."

Finally, I was pronounced special. At the same time though, Kevin warned me about Steve's regular disappearing act. I learned his nickname — Casper — not an entirely accurate moniker, since he's the one who got spooked. "Be patient with him," Kevin said.

I wanted to heal his wounds, to erase his fears of rejection and abandonment. So when he gave me Ellen's phone number and told me to call her whenever I wished, I knew I had to come through. *He's given me the key to completing his life*, I thought. *I can make him feel whole again.*

About four months into our relationship, I picked up the phone and dialed. My heart was pounding. I pressed the last digit, and the phone began to ring.

"You don't know me," I explained, "and I imagine you've always wondered if you would ever receive this call. I'm a close friend of your son's, and I wanted to let you know he's healthy and happy . . . and he loves you very much. He just wants the opportunity to thank you for giving him life."

Her response: "I'm sorry. We're not able to donate to the alumni association at this time. Can you give me your number, and I'll call you if things change?"

I spouted off my number and told her to feel free to call me anytime, day or night.

She didn't wait long. Our secret phone dates began the next day. She said her husband was within earshot when I called. "He doesn't know about Steve," she confessed — and neither did her second son. After more than two decades of secrecy, she wasn't sure she was ready for them to find out. She asked me not to tell Steve we were in touch until she could come clean with her family about what had happened in her life when she was just a teenager.

Almost immediately after I contacted Ellen, my relationship with Steve began to plummet. He was canceling plans, cutting phone calls short and bringing me home from dates at 9 p.m. Casper was heading into the underworld, and Ellen was clinging to me like I was a life preserver.

For two months I coached Ellen on what she could say to Steve, how she could explain why she wasn't part of his life. I read every book I could get my hands on about the adoptive triad (birth mom, child and adoptive parents), searching for clues about how to navigate this unfamiliar territory. I learned how children of adoption often struggle with forming intimate relationships in their adult lives, and that some never recover.

During our calls, I told her everything I knew about his upbringing, which wasn't much considering I had never met anyone in his family. I sent her books about reuniting with an adoptee and copied pictures of us, so she would know what we both looked like.

When I wasn't trying to construct for Ellen an image of Steve, I fervently tried to banish thoughts of him from my mind. I was helping her make peace with her decision to off-load her son at the same time as he was dumping me.

He couldn't give me the time and attention I deserved, he said. He couldn't add a girlfriend to his already too-busy lifestyle. Me? I was struggling with the role I had carved out for myself that brought me intimately into a world where I didn't belong.

But it was too late. I was caught up in the thrill of the rescue. The reunion was no longer about Steve and Ellen. It was about me. I needed to distinguish myself as unforgettable. So I waited for Ellen to give me clearance to put them in touch with one another — for the day when I could complete my mission, bid them both farewell and start anew.

About a month after Steve and I broke up, she told me she was ready.

I feverishly dialed Steve's number. "I'm coming over."

He hesitated.

"Look, it will only take a few minutes. This isn't about us. I just need to give you something."

Moments later I was standing on Steve's doorstep carrying a gigantic envelope filled with everything I had collected during the previous weeks — pictures of Ellen with his biological dad, faded images of his grandmother, and pages and pages of typewritten text.

I kept a running log of my phone calls with her, detailing every word each of us uttered — awkward silences, tearful regrets and heartfelt pain. And I was finally free to turn it over to him.

I knocked tentatively on the door, visibly shaking. Adrenaline rushed through my bloodstream as I realized I was about to bridge the gap between Steve and his mother. He opened the door with a curious smile.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I called her, Steve. She wants to talk to you."

Weak in the knees, he dropped into his living room chair, holding his head in his hands. A full minute passed before he rose and looked down at me, tears beginning to form in his eyes.

"Thank you," he said. "You amaze me."

He held on so tightly that, for a fleeting moment, I thought he might never let me go. But I knew better. Relationships don't work when I play the savior. Instead, my partners feel weak, vulnerable and indebted — and I feel unfulfilled.

I don't think Steve ever would have called Ellen, and he may have never come across another woman with my neuroses who would have done it for him. To my knowledge they've still never met. Last I heard though, Steve was engaged.

Maybe he has overcome his fears, I think. *Maybe he's finally at peace — even without his mom.*

Some might think I gave Steve the greatest gift. After all, I gave him his mom. But he gave me a gift, too: a raw awareness of the pattern that shaped my life. Sure it took eight years and a few additional episodes of *Rescue 911*, but I'm finally able to love someone without a corresponding desire to save him. I helped Steve find his mother, but I learned there was someone I'd never lose again — myself. □

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