

No Good Deed | Purple Clover

purpleclover.littlethings.com/relationships/5304-no-good-deed

by Amy Paturel | Sunday, September 20, 2015



Steve and I walked along the boardwalk, stopping at an outdoor café for mimosas. We breezed through the typically awkward first-date conversations. He was charming. Smart. Funny. Handsome. And, at eight years my senior, he even owned his own company. *The perfect catch*, I mused.

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.

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

"I hired a private investigator to track her down a few years ago," he said. "But I can't call her. She has a family now."

I struggled to understand why he would go to such lengths to find his birth mom, only to tuck away her phone number and never call. Not once. Not even a hang-up. How can someone so strong and bright let fear rob him of what could be the most important relationship of his life?

Instead of steering the conversation onto less serious ground, I heard myself say: "What if someone else called her for you?"

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

We discussed the benefits. If someone other than Steve called his birth mom, it would be more of a neutral, third-party intervention than a 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 green hills like something out of "The Sound of Music."

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

My first boyfriend was caught between drugs and priesthood. The relationship fell apart when he cleaned up and started walking with God. A second ex gambled away his life savings. That union ended after he erupted into a rage following a losing streak. Then there was the recent divorcé, whose wife 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 silence my insecurities by giving me a purpose: to find his mom.

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 actually cousins) until he stumbled upon some legal papers when he was a teenager. The discovery made him question everything he knew about his life. Yet he relayed the story in a stoic, matter-of-fact way. No bitterness. No anger. Just detachment.

So when he gave me Ellen's phone number and told me to call her whenever I wished, I had to come through. *He's given me the key to completing his life*, I thought.

About four months into our relationship, my heart pounded as I dialed her number and the phone began to ring.

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

"I'm sorry," she responded. "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 call anytime.

Our secret phone dates began the next day. She explained that her husband was within earshot when I had called. "He doesn't know I had a child before we married," she confessed—and neither did her second son. She asked me not to tell Steve we were in touch until she could come clean with her family about her teenage pregnancy.

Almost immediately after I contacted Ellen, my relationship with Steve began to crumble. While he was canceling plans, cutting calls short and bringing me home from dates at 9 p.m., Ellen was clinging to me like I was a life preserver.

For two months, I coached her on what she could say to Steve and how to explain why she gave him up. During our calls, I told her everything I knew about his upbringing—which wasn't much, considering I had never met 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 helping Ellen forge a relationship with Steve, I tried to banish thoughts of him from my mind. 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. 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 connect the dots—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, Ellen said she was ready.

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

Moments later, I was on his doorstep carrying a large envelope filled with everything I collected during the previous weeks—pictures of Ellen with his biological dad, faded images of his grandmother and a running log of my calls with her, detailing the awkward silences, tearful regrets and heartfelt pain.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I called her, Steve," I replied, handing him the envelope. "She wants to talk to you."

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 moment, I thought he might never let me go. But I knew better. Relationships don't work when I play the hero. Instead, my partners feel weak, vulnerable and indebted—and I feel unfulfilled.

This past spring, 15 years after our first date, Steve found me on Linked In to say thanks. He had plans to meet Ellen the following month. "Because of you," he wrote, "I'm going to accomplish a goal I've waited 47 years to achieve."

Sure, it might seem like I gave Steve the greatest gift by making that call. But he gave me a gift, too: a raw awareness of the pattern that had shaped my life. It took eight years and a few additional rescues, but I finally learned to love someone without needing to save him. In fact, when I met my husband seven years ago, I discovered being vulnerable has a perk. It's the glue that bonds you together.