

## My Husband's Mom Left When He Was 2 — and He's a Better Dad Because of It

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Every night, while putting our boys to bed, my husband Brandon plays a song from his phone and we all try to decode the lyrics, a ritual our 9-year-old twins and 7-year old love. Recently, Brandon selected Everclear's "Father of Mine" as a way to share with our boys information about his childhood.

*Father of mine*

*Tell me where have you been*

*You know I just closed my eyes*

*My whole world disappeared*

"What do you think the song means?" Brandon asked. All three kids thought the dad in the song had died.

"In a sense, I suppose he did," Brandon said. "It's about a guy whose dad gave him a name and then walked away. The song reminds me of my mom, though, not my dad. She chose my name, but she didn't raise me."

Brandon's mom didn't drop her sons off at a fire station, or disown them and move to a different country. She just left. Brandon's dad suddenly found himself a single parent to Brandon, only two years old at the time, and his older brother, who was born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

Maybe she was battling her own mental demons. Maybe two children, one with special needs, was too much for her to manage. Or maybe, she determined that staying would be more harmful to her children than leaving.

She did resurface intermittently over the years, mostly to take her sons on trips—to California, Atlantic City and Hawaii. She may not have realized that reappearing only to leave again was more damaging to their psyches than just being gone for good. Perhaps she was trying to forge a connection with her children. Perhaps she was lonely, bored or filled with regret. These are the things I wonder about, especially now that I'm a mom to sons.

But when I married Brandon 12 years ago, his mom didn't attend the wedding. "I need to be with my dogs and cats," she told him. A few years later, when we visited Brandon's extended family in Michigan with our 9-month-old twins, his mom declined to meet us at a restaurant five minutes from her home. When we had our third child, she never acknowledged the birth announcement.

By now, Brandon's mom has been MIA for nearly a decade. Like the song's lyrics, she had the world inside her hands but didn't seem to know it. But thoughts of her are never far from my mind. I worry about what our children may have inherited from their paternal grandmother. When one of my sons defies me or can't

accept that he lost a board game, or lobs a verbal hand grenade, I wonder, *is this her legacy? Is mental illness, addiction or narcissism part of their shared DNA?*

Yet somehow Brandon's birth mom helped produce a responsible father and loving partner, our family's anchor. Brandon insists that the person he is has nothing to do with her, that it's all from his dad. And he may be right. Brandon's dad picked up the pieces after his mom left. He heaped love upon the boys and kept them happy and entertained. Brandon grew up with a man as a nurturer, and this has shaped him deeply.

I've never met Brandon's mom, but as a mother who can't fathom being separated from my kids for even days at a time, I can't make sense of how she could disappear from her children's lives. And as an investigative reporter, it's difficult for me to concede that I will probably never lock eyes with my children's biological grandmother, even though we suspect she's still alive.

When I ask Brandon what he remembers most about his mom, he talks about movies, music and TV shows; They shared a love of bad horror flicks and good comedy. During their infrequent visits, Brandon and his brother cleaned her house with the Beatles playing on vinyl albums while she gabbed on the phone. At night, they'd watch *Night of the Creeps* and *Tales from the Crypt*. To make his depressed mother laugh, Brandon mastered the art of impersonating her favorite comedians, like Jim Carey's characters on "In Living Color." His people-pleasing tendencies serve him well as a dad, too.

My kids delight in Brandon's at-home standup routines, storytelling prowess, and uncanny knack for recounting Donkey's best lines in *Shrek*. When I call home from a weekend retreat, Brandon's voice is against the backdrop of our giggling children: *We're going to stay up late swapping manly stories, and in the morning, I'm making waffles.*

But occasionally I do see her genetic influence rear its' ugly head in Brandon. He might rely on alcohol as an escape, sulk when things don't go his way, or try to provoke a reaction when he's lacking attention. But the truth is, I do these things, too.

Over the past dozen years, Brandon has proven that when things get rocky with our sons, he stands strong. He bites his tongue during twin meltdowns when he probably wants to scream, "Do you know how much I've sacrificed for you?" He builds our kids up and teaches them by example how to be decent people in the world —paying for the person behind us in the grocery store line, helping an elderly neighbor by pulling out the trash bins (and weeds).

As our boys grow older and become their own people, I'm realizing that it doesn't matter what DNA they may have inherited from Brandon's mom. Our parental contributions — both genetic and otherwise — have a much greater impact. I choose to believe that nurture is more powerful than nature, at least in this instance.

After playing the Everclear song, Brandon and I talked to our children about resilience, love and loss. We explained that even when bad things happen, you have an opportunity to pick yourself up and craft your own happy ending — something their dad has managed to pull off with aplomb.

"I will never be like my mom," Brandon said to our boys on that fall night. "I will always be here for you boys and your mama. That's my song."

