

Prologue

April 1997

My nose was pressed against the glass of the jetliner as it sped over the Atlantic Ocean. After flying over Iceland and France, I later watched the sun rise over Corsica as we neared Leonardo da Vinci Airport in Rome. So much had happened in such a short time, and here I was, literally minutes away from meeting my family in Italy.

Everything had come together so quickly that I hadn't had time to catch my breath. My brother, Paul, was living in Ravenna, Italy, at the time. He had decided that I should meet our father's extended family in Villa Pigna, Italy. As an oil company executive, Paul traveled extensively, and he had used his frequent flier miles to bring our father, Giulio, and me to Italy. We had started the planning process in the summer of 1996, and I was consumed with excitement. I had never been to Europe, and meeting my family was a dream come true.

Nevertheless, I was filled with anxiety. My father and I had always had a tumultuous relationship. Indeed, he had never entirely accepted me from the time we first met in 1978. I was his firstborn son, the one my late mother had given up for adoption, the one he tried desperately to keep, resulting in his incarceration. Yet I was different from the second son she and my father had produced—I had a different identity, a different upbringing, different attitudes and outlooks. Indeed, I even lived in a different country, the United States, while they all resided in Canada.

After the initial headiness of that first meeting in 1978, things immediately took a turn for the worse. He couldn't persuade me, couldn't control me, couldn't influence me like he could Paul and it frustrated him. I was my own man and the foundation for my life, beliefs and attitudes had been laid. The results were abuse, rejection, insults, and, worse yet, a general dismissiveness.

Now, as I approached this first meeting with my extended family, I was concerned. How would they accept me? *Would* they accept me? I was especially worried about my octogenarian grandfather. What would he think about meeting his firstborn grandson for the first time? I had dramatic

images of him swearing at me, demanding to know if I was looking for my birthright.

At one point back home in Oregon I broke down in tears among some friends, frightened that I was setting myself up for an even greater disappointment than the one I had experienced with my father and brother. After all, I had only my father as a point of reference. What if they were all like him? It seemed plausible. Ultimately, I took a deep breath and decided that I would just be myself. If they accepted me, wonderful! If they didn't, well, at least I got a free trip to Italy.

When the plane landed, the Italians onboard applauded—Giulio said it was a tradition for Italians to clap when they arrive in their homeland. At the baggage carousel I watched for our luggage while Giulio went to the gate to greet his brother, my Uncle Luciano, and Luciano's son, Maurizio.

Hesitantly, I walked to the gate where I saw my diminutive uncle smiling and waiting. I approached him and, in my best Italian said, "*Buon giorno, Zio Luciano.*" Tears were in my eyes as wave after wave of emotion swept over me. Uncle Luciano threw his arms around me, pointed at my eyes and then at his, shook his head and I understood— "don't start crying or I will, too." Something told me that perhaps all the rancor, grief, fighting, excitement, and disappointment from the past twenty years were coming together for something positive. At that point, I felt this trip just might be good. I had no idea how good.

Chapter 1

December 1977

I had just returned from a night on the town with some friends. It was Christmas Break in 1977, and I was in Salem, Oregon, home from college. As I walked up the steps to my parents' house, I could see my family sitting around the kitchen table. There was nothing unusual about this since my folks were night owls.

The minute I walked into the house, however, everything went silent. When I entered the kitchen, everyone turned to look at me. I asked what was going on, and my mom got up from the kitchen table, approached me, and broke down.

“Did you know you have a father and a brother in British Columbia?” she wept. I was stunned, speechless. I looked at her with incredulity, unable to respond.

The only word that resonated with me that winter night in 1977 was *brother*. I had always wanted a brother. Being the youngest in my family, with only a sister who was nine years older, I had yearned for a playmate. At one point during my childhood, my parents had actually taken in a foster child so I could have a companion, but it didn't work out. Now, through some sort of miracle, I had the brother I had always wanted.

Mom then went on to tell me that a relative, LaVelle, had threatened to bring my brother and father down to Oregon to sweep me back to British Columbia. LaVelle was an eccentric aunt on my dad's side of the family. She had helped my parents adopt me back in 1959.

In 1977, she was on the outs with my parents over a business deal and she was playing her trump card—me. She was using her connections with my biological family to get back at my parents. She had claimed she knew my father and brother—an empty gesture I later found out—and she used that claim to intimidate my mom and dad.

My mom and dad were unsophisticated people with only eighth grade educations. As a result, it didn't dawn on them that, as an adult and an

American citizen, no one could take me “back” to Canada—unless they beat and drugged me.

Nevertheless, my parents were immobile with fear. I saw the pain and terror in their eyes; I heard it in their voices. I marched to the phone and called LaVelle.

“Aunt LaVelle, I heard what you’re threatening to do, and you’ve got a hell of a nerve upsetting my parents like this. Who do you think you are, you bitch?” I yelled into the phone.

She went ballistic, shrieking that she had done nothing wrong. Another aunt and uncle who were there visiting said she went completely berserk—they were so shaken that they had to leave.

After that rancorous phone call, I had to calm my parents. I reassured them that no one was going to spirit me away to British Columbia; I was their son and I loved them. They relaxed after that, but I couldn’t get that word out of my mind—“brother.” And, to a lesser extent, “father.”

That same night, after this awkward introduction to my history, my mom showed me a picture she had been keeping for twenty years. It was a picture of a man and a woman embracing, and it was dated July 1958. On the back Mom had inscribed “Gwen Mulkey,” writing in “Mulkey” as a surname lest I come across the picture and wondered who the woman was. Gwen was my biological mother, and the man she was embracing was my biological father. I was also in that picture somewhere, since I was born in January of 1959. I stared at the photo.

She also handed me a letter from Gwen that she had kept since 1960. In it Gwen mentioned her “boyfriend” and talked about how she will probably be single until she’s old and gray. At the bottom of the letter she wrote, “Could you send a recent photo of Bobbie? Sure would appreciate it!” I was stunned holding these two items.

Mom then told me the story of my adoption. It was a story that I had never heard. Sure, I had known about my adoption; my parents told me when I was nine. But no details had ever been forthcoming. I had found out about my adoption during a drive to the Oregon Coast. There was nothing unusual,

except that my mom sat in the back seat with me while my sister sat in front with my dad. I remember thinking that was odd.

While we drove, Mom started talking about my cousins, Rick and Terry, who were also adopted. I had always known they were adopted; it was never a secret in our family. And it never made any difference to me. Mom talked about how “special” adopted children are, because parents jump through so many hoops to get the child they want so badly. At one point, I recall saying to her, “Boy, I’m glad I wasn’t adopted.” There was a pregnant pause. Then Mom said, “But you were adopted.”

I remember being shocked, completely astonished. Immediately, I wondered who I was, who these people in the car were. I peppered Mom with questions—“Who are my real parents?” “Where do they live?” I never received any more information after that. Mom remained silent on the issue, which caused me to believe my real mother was possibly someone I knew.

I thought to myself, “Who could my mother be? Mrs. Winkle, perhaps? ” She was always nice to me. She gave me cookies. Such was the thought process of a youngster.

Eventually, I embraced the fact that I was adopted. It made me feel good to know that I was different and set apart from everyone else. I bragged about it to the kids in the neighborhood, but none of them believed me. “You look just like your dad!” they would exclaim.

Ultimately, they marched en masse to my house and asked my mom. She affirmed that I had, indeed, been adopted. My mom took me aside later and told me not to tell everyone. As a matter of fact, I learned never to discuss the subject because it seemed to upset my mom so much. So, I kept quiet. Then, in December of 1977, everything came spilling out.

Gwendolyn Eleanor Bakun was a thirty-year-old single woman living in New Westminster, British Columbia. She had met a dashing Italian named Giulio Rapetti at a local dance. Giulio was a recent immigrant from Italy, having moved to B.C. in 1956. They fell madly and tempestuously in love, and Gwen became pregnant.

Because this was Canada in 1958, being a pregnant, single woman was socially unacceptable. Gwen considered abortion but didn’t want to “kill her

baby,” according to her sister, Maria. Frightened and confused, Gwen had sought Maria’s counsel.

Maria was a quiet, mild-mannered woman. She was bewildered by Gwen’s predicament. On a lark she suggested that they write to a woman who had an astrology column in the local newspaper. This columnist was quite well known in B.C.; she counseled politicians and celebrities on their financial and romantic lives according to the stars.

Her late husband had been a very popular evangelical minister, planting churches all over the world. According to her youngest son, Larry, they had visits from celebrated personalities such as Billy Graham, Pierre Trudeau, and Elvis Presley. Maria herself had contacted this columnist several years earlier for help with a medical matter. This columnist’s name was LaVelle Golf.

LaVelle responded to Maria’s letter with a phone call. She wanted Maria’s sister to refrain from making any decisions; LaVelle would get back to her. LaVelle then called her brother, Ernest, in Oregon. Ernest and his wife, Alice, had just returned from visiting LaVelle in British Columbia.

During the visit, Alice had remarked that she wished someone would leave a baby on her doorstep; that very thing had apparently happened to LaVelle, prompting Alice’s comment. Alice already had one child, a daughter, but had been unable to conceive again after suffering three miscarriages. At thirty-eight, she had given up on having more children.

LaVelle asked Ernest and Alice if they would be willing to take in a young woman who was single and pregnant and then adopt the baby. Ernest and Alice would pay all expenses and put this woman up in their home. The baby would then be born an American citizen, thereby facilitating the adoption process. They readily agreed.

LaVelle did make one request of Ernest and Alice—she wanted her name to be in the baby’s name somehow, as thanks for helping them get the child they wanted. Again, they agreed.

From there, LaVelle called Maria and said that her brother and sister-in-law in Oregon would be willing to take in Gwen, care for her, pay her expenses and adopt the baby—if Gwen also agreed. Gwen was scared; what would be

the best thing to do? If she were to give the baby up, Oregon was far enough away so Giulio couldn't find her. Gwen agreed to the proposal before her and made preparations for going to Oregon.

Mom told me that she and Gwen became very close—two mothers of the same child. She could still picture Gwen sitting in the rocking chair cracking buckets of nuts from the big walnut tree outside so Mom could make walnut clusters, Gwen's favorite.

While Gwen lived with Mom and Dad, they talked about her life. Gwen had been a phone operator in B.C. She had two sisters and three brothers. A fourth brother had died years before in a car accident. She was half Polish and half Ukrainian.

Her father, a harsh and abusive man, had immigrated to Canada from Poland during World War I. He sent money for his wife and first two children, and they literally had to run from dropping bombs to get to the ship that would take them to safety in North America. Gwen, the youngest, had been born in 1928 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Ultimately, her family had relocated to British Columbia.

Gwen didn't talk too much about Giulio, the father of her child. Mom told me she had the distinct impression that Gwen was afraid of him. That was all she ever said. Years later I would come to understand more about this turbulent relationship and experience the behavior behind it for myself.

Gwen became part of the family. She fit in nicely. She was warm, friendly and open. She attended family functions, holiday get-togethers and picnics. The whole family knew who she was and why she was there. They were all excited by the prospect of this new baby coming into the family and they accepted Gwen with open arms. She felt comfortable with this family who would take care of the child she carried.

Every week Gwen got bigger and bigger. Occasionally, when Gwen would feel the baby kick or move, she would call Mom over and place her hand on Gwen's belly to feel the movement. Mom told me she began to bond with this baby. She felt like she was carrying me.

As January approached, everyone knew the time was getting close. Late on the evening of January 25, Gwen went into labor. Ernest, Alice and their

daughter, Carla ushered Gwen into the car and took her to the hospital in the small rural community of Silverton.

I was born on January 26, 1959 at 2:55 a.m. and named Robert Alan LaVelle Mulkey. Mom said, “We were all in the waiting room. Back then you couldn’t go into the delivery room. After you were born, they cleaned you up and Gwen held you for a few moments before they handed you over to me. From then on, you were mine.”

Later I was placed in the maternity ward. Carla, my sister, was not quite nine years old at the time and too short to see over the window ledge. The nurse picked me up so she could see her new baby brother. She was jumping with excitement.

After I was born, all the principals went to court so I could be adopted legally. The judge made Mom promise that she would tell me about my adoption as soon as I was old enough to understand, and she agreed.

The judge, according to Mom, asked Gwen if she was certain she wanted to give me up. Gwen stated she was. Nevertheless he still gave Gwen three months to change her mind. But Mom told me that she knew Gwen would never change her mind. Gwen knew how much Mom and Dad wanted me, and she knew that I would be in a good home.

There was a bit of humor to my birth. LaVelle, as an astrologer, had apparently predicted that I would be born a redheaded girl, according to my parents. She was close: I was born a honey-blond boy.

Mom never said much about Gwen’s behavior or attitude toward me after I was born. When I was initially placed in Gwen’s arms, red-faced and wailing, she couldn’t wait to hand me over to Mom.

Back at the house after release from the hospital, she nursed me and held me, but Mom did most of the caregiving. Mom said that whenever I would cry or make a fuss, Gwen would become agitated. She used to say to Mom, “How can you stand it?”

My folks obviously knew of my Italian heritage. Mom smilingly spoke about how, as a child, I would always dump more salt and pepper onto all my food because I “couldn’t taste it.”

“Your dad and I would look at each other and say, ‘Yep, he’s Italian all right,’” she said.

Gwen stayed with my parents for several more weeks while the adoption went through its normal channels. After the adoption process was completed, Gwen returned to British Columbia. She and Mom continued to write. As a family, we often visited B.C. since my dad and LaVelle were very close at the time.

During one visit, LaVelle called Gwen to ask if she wanted to see me. Gwen begged off, yet relented. She *had* to see me, *had* to see how I was doing. She never told Giulio or her sister, Maria. It would remain her secret.

After a second visit a few months later, Gwen pulled Mom aside and said, “This is the last time you’ll ever see or hear from me. I have to move on with my life, and you have to move on with yours.” Before she got in her car to drive away, she hugged Mom one last time. “Please take good care of Bobby”, she said. Mom told Gwen she would always be in her prayers. Gwen waved goodbye as she drove off.

Mom never heard anything from or about Gwen again until LaVelle called in August of 1972 to tell her that Gwen had succumbed to colon cancer at the age of forty-four. Mom told me that Gwen had had trouble during the birth and that the doctor had noticed some “issues,” telling Gwen to make certain she saw her physician when she returned to B.C. Gwen never did. Mom said that Gwen was deathly afraid of doctors.

Upon hearing the news of Gwen’s death, Mom was deeply saddened by the loss of a very sweet and special woman who selflessly placed her child in the arms of another mother so he could have a better life. Mom said to me, “So you see, Honey, you’ve got quite an interesting background.”

After all that, I was spent. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. How does anyone, let alone an eighteen-year-old, accommodate so much information in one sitting? In one night, I found out I had a father and a brother, and I learned the details surrounding my existence. Plus, I now had a picture of my biological parents and a letter from my late biological mother. It was a lot to fathom.

What I never told my parents was that I had done a little sleuthing a few months prior to this revelation.

It was a hot August day four months earlier, and I was lying on my bed. The house was empty. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I started thinking about my adoption. I wondered who my parents were, especially my mother. As I pondered, I decided to do some checking. Going to the front door, I locked it tight, lest anyone come home while I snooped.

I then went into my parents' bedroom and found a metal box that they used to keep important papers. I had remembered the name of their attorney, and I looked through the box for an envelope with his name as the return address and dated somewhere around 1959 or 1960. It took me perhaps two minutes to find an envelope and *voila!* It was the correct one.

Opening the envelope with trembling hands, I found my adoption decree. The only name, Gwendolyn Eleanor Bakun jumped out at me. I looked at the document for a few moments and then nervously placed everything back where I had found it. I returned to my bedroom and lay on my bed, heart pounding.

I had done nothing wrong, yet I felt as though I had. Shouldn't I have talked to my parents first? Didn't they deserve to know that I was interested? As I lay on the bed, I began to fathom the enormity of the path I had started to follow.

Where was Gwendolyn Eleanor Bakun? Who was Gwendolyn Eleanor Bakun? Was she from the immediate area? I did the only thing I could think of: I perused all the local phone books for a "Bakun," but I found none. I quit right then, feeling that I was a little too close to the light of awareness. I had found out some important information, and now I had to chew on it for a while. I was sated for the time being.

The rapid escalation of these two experiences in succession echoed in my heart. I told no one, keeping my thoughts and feelings to myself. The more I contemplated the situation, the more I wanted to know about my heritage, my family, my background, my...*brother*. I knew I was going to have to patch things up with LaVelle if I were ever to get the information I needed to meet my biological family. I decided I would have to visit her house, apologize, and ask about them.

Early in 1978 I quietly called LaVelle and asked if I could stop by her house someday to find out more about my biological family. LaVelle had been retired for several years by this time and was living in a small community north of Salem. I didn't tell my parents what I was doing. They were still reeling from the events of the prior month. I felt somewhat guilty for keeping them in the dark, but I just *had* to know my history.

LaVelle was seen as the unconventional member of the family. She lived life on her own terms and was unconcerned with others' opinions. According to family scuttlebutt, she had apparently had a number of husbands and lovers. She had run away as a teenager in the 1920's to make it on her own, traveling around the country, never staying in one place for long, thus sealing her image as a wild child. She wore clunky jewelry, roomy blouses and wigs of red hair, always slightly askew. Lipstick seemed to be recklessly applied.

She had a heart of gold and always fed her guests like kings. I used to love visiting her rambling home in the Vancouver suburb of Newton with its French doors leading to the expansive living room and the large, soft beds we slept in. I loved waking up to her breakfasts of frying-pan-sized pancakes.

LaVelle had always spoiled me. Many years later I learned that LaVelle had actually had a biological child of her own that she named "Bobby." This child had died as a youngster—no one ever knew the circumstances.

Upon learning this, I felt there had always been a psychological component to her sumptuous treatment of me—buying me whatever my heart desired, such as toy cars and candy, or giving me her Bingo cards so I could win and claim a prize. Now her extravagance reached a zenith. She would put me in touch with my biological family.

I made a date to visit LaVelle in late January of 1978. She was happy to see me. She had pretty much forgotten the flare-up over the phone. She told me that she knew it was part of my Italian heritage—passion. She didn't take it too seriously.

After I arrived at her home, she handed me a sheet of paper with the name, address and phone number of my aunt and uncle, as well as that of my father and brother. I stared at the sheet. My brother's name, Paul Vincent Rapetti,

swirled through my brain. My father, Giulio Rapetti, I had already heard about. My uncle and aunt, Herman and Maria Schmidt, were the other names.

LaVelle told me she had been harping on my parents for some time to tell me the truth about my background. “It’s his life and he deserves to know!” she had exclaimed to them. I never did ask my folks why they hadn’t told me. What mattered now was that I had the information.

As I considered these names my heart was beating out of my chest. So much had happened in such a short time, and things seemed to be moving faster. I never once stopped to contemplate the ramifications of everything happening. Was this a good idea? Should I wait? Was I too young? Was Paul?

All I could think of was meeting my family, knowing my heritage, having a brother. I was convinced of the rightness of my pursuit when I considered how everything had fallen into place so quickly—my initial search for the adoption records, the sudden burst of information about my genesis. The seeds of another idea were also starting to germinate—perhaps I could have a real father-son relationship with my biological father.

Even though my brother was the most important aspect of this situation, I was excited at the prospect of having a relationship with my biological father. My adoptive dad and I had never had a relationship. He had come from a family of ten children—and his father chose him to be the whipping boy. From that he became a very insecure, self-doubting man.

Mom told me that, during Gwen’s pregnancy, Dad fretted that the baby would be a boy. He would remark, “I won’t be able to help him with his homework. I won’t be able to fix his bicycle.” His lack of self-confidence metastasized into complete avoidance. Afraid that he might fail or look stupid in anything involving a father-son relationship, he didn’t try.

Things hadn’t started out that way. As a small child, I always waited with anticipation for my daddy to come home. The first thing I’d do was ask him for a piece of Juicy Fruit gum, which he always carried for a dry mouth from working in a cold storage warehouse. For a preschooler, this was a huge treat.

Almost immediately I would badger him for piggyback rides. A smoker, Dad's scent was always that of cigarettes mixed with Old Spice, and I could smell both as he carried me around the living room.

As a child he and my mom took me outside and taught me how to ride my teenage sister's seemingly enormous bicycle—something I took to and mastered quite naturally. And one day prior to grade school, he taught me how to hit a ball.

I was probably five years old, and he kept pitching the softball to me as I attempted to maneuver the unwieldy bat. Eventually I connected perfectly with a powerful hit right to his crotch. That was the only time in my life I saw my dad's eyes bug out of his head. The lesson ended early.

As I got older and entered school and it became obvious that I was an exceptional student, he seemed to fade into the background. He tried to interest me in fishing, but I held creative and thinking-type pursuits in higher regard. Even though our relationship weakened to practically nothing, he remained my biggest fan (after my mom), routinely spouting in his mild-mannered way about my 4.0 grade average or other educational triumphs.

By nineteen, I recognized the lack of a relationship, but I didn't know how to pursue it with him. And frankly, I had lost interest. Now, with a biological father, I felt I had a second chance at real father-son bonding—with my real father. Immediately, I began to nurture fantasies of a father-son relationship consisting of all the experiences I had missed in my life.

I obviously didn't tell LaVelle this. She decided that she should contact my aunt and uncle first. I felt I was in no position to argue. It also made sense. I had no idea whether or not my brother even knew I existed. I didn't want him to receive a letter and a picture from his long-lost older brother out of the blue. LaVelle took a couple of snapshots of me and said she would send them in a letter. She suggested I write a few days after her to follow up.

My Aunt Maria later said:

“When the letters and pictures arrived, we immediately rushed over to Giulio's. We showed Paul the picture of you and asked him when he thought he had had that picture taken. He said, ‘I don't know. Maybe when I was in Hawaii.’ He didn't know he was looking at his brother.

“We then showed the picture to Giulio and said ‘Do you know who this is?’ He looked at it and said, ‘Yeah, it’s Bob, isn’t it?’

“We said yes and showed him the letters saying you wanted to come up and meet us. Giulio got up from his chair and went into his bedroom and cried.”

After writing to my aunt and uncle, I waited a few days and called British Columbia. I was sitting in my bedroom, heart palpitating, listening for anyone who might be coming down the hallway.

I first called my aunt and uncle. I was unprepared for the accents that were about to be unleashed upon me. Aunt Maria had a very thick Polish accent. Uncle Herman had a very thick German accent. Just talking to them was so refreshing; I already felt like parts of me were being pieced together. A fresh wind swept through my soul.

We didn’t talk for very long. They thanked me for my “sweet” letter and asked if I had spoken to Paul. I told them I hadn’t because I didn’t want to overwhelm him. They encouraged me to call. I asked them to call first to pave the way, and they agreed.

When I called my brother for the first time a few minutes later, I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. I was actually talking to my brother! I actually had a brother! The conversation was very stilted—what do you say to the brother you never knew you had? We would ask each other a question: “Do you have a girlfriend?” “What is your favorite subject in school?”

Each time one of us would answer a question there would be a pause, an uncomfortable pause. We didn’t know what to say. I had a million things to ask, but my mind suddenly went blank. I heard a disembodied voice that was supposedly my brother’s coming out of the darkness over the phone; it just didn’t ring true.

I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. It seemed too impossible. This was the brother I had always wanted as a child, the one I had dreamed of and prayed to God for. I had given up on such a desire years earlier. I had even forgotten about my childhood yearning for a brother. Now he was on the phone with me.

I didn't know what he looked like, so I babbled a question about whether or not we resembled each other. He said we both had the same bushy eyebrows and the same hair color. He promised to send me a picture of himself.

At the time this happened, I was nineteen and Paul was almost sixteen. I was a freshman in college and he was a sophomore in high school. It never occurred to me what the results would be from seeking my family. We were so young, not yet dry behind the ears, and yet we were thrust into this cataclysmic situation.

Paul put Giulio on the phone, and I was hit with my third heavy accent that evening. His Italian accent had remained. It was becoming obvious to me that my family resembled the United Nations. I was so proud to start down this road toward my heritage.

I had been planning on visiting them over spring break and asked them if that was okay, assuming that Paul's spring break was at the same time. They said it would be fine. After a few more stiff questions, we hung up. Once again, my mind was whirling, my heart racing. I had just spoken to my brother! I didn't know what to think or feel. All I knew was that I wanted to leap for joy and tell the world.

I went out and told my parents what I had done. They were completely supportive which surprised me. I had thought there would be some sort of discomfort, but there wasn't—at least none that they evidenced. And I was thankful. But I still knew this was a journey that I would travel alone.