

## Don't Wait

*Tuesday, 6 September 2022*

Anne L—W—, 18.

I learned who my birth mother is one week ago, on Tuesday, 30 August 2022. A copy of my original birth record arrived from the — Department of Health. I held it for several minutes before I could open it. It took a few more minutes before I could look at what was in it.

No name or age recorded for the paternal side.

It was supposed to be an academic exercise, an easy way to just satisfy a bit of my curiosity. That was not even close to what it became. I'm writing all of this down to remember what this journey actually turned into. Only one week in, I'm emotionally exhausted and the past several days have already become blurred together. The order of events is almost certainly wrong in a bunch of places, and I probably have some things on the wrong days too. Whatever I write here will probably become the reality of it later on, so I better make it as accurate as I can. I'm even skiving off work to write this before it escapes.

What triggered my desire to submit an request for it now all of a sudden? Only two things come to mind -- having recently watched "The Unforgivable", a not-so-great Sandra Bullock movie involving adoption, and yet another instance of filling out a medical history questionnaire with "unknown" straight down the page. Arbitrary, right? Back to pre-history later.

A teenage mom. I wasn't expecting that. Huh. This makes things feel more ... Significant? Personal? The right words aren't quite coming to me yet, but this has piqued my curiosity about her a bit more than before.

Anne L—W—. First stop, Google, of course.

I'm an idiot. Forgot the all-important quotes. "Anne L—W—".

Too old. Too old. Too Canadian. Not even the right name.

Only three pages of results, none seem useful. It still feels like a straightforward effort in web sleuthing, but the stirrings of something else are starting, although I can't quite put my finger on it. Back to staring at the birth record some more, because surely that will help. 18 years old, no name recorded for the father -- I'm an accident. An end-of-summer fling before going off to college. A darker thought forces its way through the perimeter defenses and bites. Rape? That

stirring just jumped to a new energy level.

An accident? Yeah, I'm ok with that. A child of rape though? This sticks in my head for a while. I'm definitely disturbed by it, but I don't know how to process this possibility. Without an actual person behind the name yet, it's a disembodied concept that I manage to push aside. It retreats and closes its eyes, but it's there.

Back to Google. "Anne W—". "Anne L W—". With quotes, without quotes, with my birth year, with my birth state. Inconclusive -- a broken link to a news article with the right name and middle initial, a bunch of obviously wrong entries, a mention of —town in one, and a birthday in another that's in the right ballpark. But nothing definitive. Image search. Because I'd obviously be able to spot a female version of myself. I can't believe I ever entertained that as a valid strategy. It had the expected outcome.

More Google searches with various terms don't get anywhere. I defect and try Bing.

What am I even expecting to find? Certainly not some random announcement about how a single teenage mother named Anne gave birth in — on — to a baby boy that was subsequently put up for adoption and can be reached at such and such an address and phone number in 2022. I realize I have no idea what I'm doing.

I also realize I'd been lied to for the past 13 years. Bing doesn't completely suck.

The search results suggested that there was an attorney named "Anne L. W—" in —town who was born in — and passed away in —, if indeed these all refer to the same person. This was looking like the most likely candidate, but only because of a lack of anything else. Calling Karl Popper.

Yay! This feels like progress! Within milliseconds, the needle immediately swung the other way.

Although still no definitive results for a positive identification, the search for "Anne L W—" brought me to a point that I feared when I first decided to search for my birth parents. The possibility that they may have already died was already uncomfortable to think about, but that feeling was now ballooning in intensity as it became a very real possibility. And she was only 52. How will I feel if this turns out to be the case? I'm only a few years away from that age and it starts to scare me. She was only 52.

Shit. There's something in my eyes.

No, seriously. Shit. I wasn't expecting this at all. I'm not sure if I'm prepared to handle this.

There's an ancestry.com DNA kit sitting on the counter that I haven't sent in yet. I log in and start a search.

Fuck. Me.

The first entry is for "Anne L— W—". The only entry with the full name, staring right at me, with a birth year listed as "abt —". It's a link to a yearbook. And there's a photo.

Is it? It can't be. Maybe? No, that would be too easy. I'm scrunched up to the screen, desperately trying to find myself in that photo. The mood needle swings back into the green, and I click on the link. It's a senior photo from —, — High School. Off to Google Maps, and lo and behold, it's right by —town. One of the self-blurb entries is "— frat parties". I smile and laugh to myself -- well, that would certainly explain things! The R-word opens its eyes and glares menacingly at me. I'm not smiling any more.

Revisiting the search results, there are far too many other Anne W— variants to be sure, some are also about the right age and location. I don't like this uncertainty. At all. A new emotion enters the arena. A hulking beast, futility circles around the edges, eyeing me, ready to lunge.

The ancestry.com subscription comes with access to a newspaper search site, so I give that a try. There's an estate notice in the result list from — for Anne L— W—. I don't even know if I'm looking at the right person, but I've already convinced myself it is. The name of an attorney who handled the estate is there, as is the name of a sister, J— O. W—. More dots soon get connected as I find an obituary of a J— O. W —, mother to an Anne L. and J— O.

These have to all point to the same person, right? But is this Anne my birth mother? I'm both optimistic and pessimistic simultaneously. And again saddened that I may have waited too long. It's not overwhelming, however. Yet.

Next task -- looking up J— O. W— on Google. And Bing.

I can't even begin remember all the links I follow that night to try to make sense of things. But I conclude that her last known address was in —. It looks like she had a ton of former addresses and phone numbers, but they're all results from super sketchy "find-a-person-for-free" sites that share suspect data back and forth, so I'm skeptical of all of them. And one single email associated with them found on just one of those sites. No way am I sending potentially sensitive personal info to an unknown email address. Once again, no definitive search results and I'm getting annoyed at the older generations without an online presence. I endeavor to call the attorney who handled the estate to see if they may have contact info for Anne's sister J — the next day. Goddammit J—, you're not making this easy.

Then, there's the issue of that article with the broken link I came across earlier. I've been

actively ignoring it as long as I could. The newspaper search site had the entire article, plus other related ones. "—". It's Anne, zero doubt on that front. Self-defense during a domestic abuse assault when she was —. She was acquitted.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm definitely not ready to handle this development. A sudden, sharp feeling of instinctive protection for my mother kicks in, along with rage, regret, guilt, helplessness, and probably a bunch of other emotions I don't have names for. My mom is a victim of domestic abuse. I cry. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there to protect you, mom. I don't even know if you're my mom.

Eventually, this passes -- the fact that I still can't say for certain that this is actually my birth mother saves me. But I'm puzzled at where all of this comes from. I don't know this person, why do I feel so strongly protective of them? Why do I feel responsible? It's probably not even her, I tell myself.

I'm wiped, out of steam, and call it a night.

It's not even Wednesday yet. Good grief.

It's Wednesday. My emotional state seemed stable in the morning, so I rode the motorcycle into work, thinking about Anne at 85 MPH. Once I park, it dawned on me that I had no recollection of actually making driving decisions along the way. I'll take the car tomorrow.

I can't remember doing any actual work that day. I'm already becoming consumed by this search. I call the law firm that was given for the estate attorney, and they forward me to her home number since she no longer works there. I leave a message and get annoyed that I have to wait.

That night, I get back to Google, Bing, and ancestry.com to try to find out more about Anne and J—. I'm back to being in a neutral-to-positive mood, and am fascinated by the amount of interesting data to be found via ancestry.com. I uncovered a few bits that lead me to information about their parents, J— and R—, both deceased. R— also died in his 50's. Uh oh.

I decided to fill out an online request form for Anne's death certificate. It feels like a huge invasion of privacy. Am I poking around somewhere I shouldn't be? Do I have a right to know this?

I also decide to start creating a family tree on ancestry.com. The moment I do, I feel like this is some kind of betrayal of my parents. They can't know that I'm doing this, it would hurt them too much. I don't even want them to know -- I want to keep this journey for myself. This is my blood, my origin, and I begin to realize I have a strong desire, a strong need, to keep them out of it.

There's only half a tree to be filled in. "Unknown father". I think I'm ok with leaving that as is. Even without concrete proof, I'm still convincing myself that Anne is the right person. I haven't thought about the ramifications if I'm wrong. Screw it, I'm taking this road. I hit the accelerator.

A significant amount of time is spent that night trying to make sense of all the various addresses that were found for J—. Were any of them still current? The best conclusion I could come up with was that the address in — was the most recent. I like this. I feel like I'm on a mission with a purpose, and it feels good. Some references to someone who shared the same address in — opened up a possibility that I might be able to get in touch with someone else that could help.

I'm only now starting to think about whether or not I'd try to get in contact with my biological mother if I were to find out that she's alive. The questions start to come quickly. Do I even want to? What would I ask? What am I even really looking for at this point? How is this going to affect my relationship with my family? We are well beyond the point of academic curiosity. I waver between wanting a connection and just wanting the option of one even if it doesn't happen. I didn't do my homework beforehand, the teacher just called me up to the chalkboard, and I don't have satisfactory answers to any of these.

Things aren't hopeless yet, but I haven't found any other close relatives to Anne aside from J—. If so, she's the only chance I have of making a connection that feels meaningful. Sure, there might be some distant cousins that are around, but if I'd missed my chance at getting in touch with Anne herself, then finding her sister might satisfy this need I'm feeling.

If her sister's not still alive ... Ok, deep breaths, don't think about this yet.

I think about it, and it hurts.

I decide to try a slightly desperate approach and write a letter to J— at the — address. And the one in —. And the one in —. And different one in —. And a few others. Eight in total. What am I even thinking? I feel ridiculous spamming all these letters as I drop them in the mailbox. But it's done and I'm holding on to hope for at least one hit.

A little more research still reveals no further viable alternatives to Anne and my confidence level goes up. We're at 99% but that 1% uncertainty stings. I'm starting to get worried that I might forever be left with an almost-but-not-quite-certain discovery of my birth mom. I would rather have had it end in a complete dead end.

I end up falling asleep while tearing up, angry at my past self for not having tried to find her sooner. I don't get much rest.

Thursday.

I sent a message to the team chat saying I'll be in late due to some family affairs I need to take care of. Not strictly a lie, at least.

The attorney who handled the estate in — called back. This is the first human contact that might result in a solid lead and I'm nervously excited when I answer. Somehow, I managed to keep myself together during our conversation. She confirmed that the J— I was looking for resided at the time at one of the addresses I had found but had no other contact info for her. The trail wasn't entirely cold yet, there was at least some truth in previously found search results.

I'm sorry I doubted you, suspicious web sites.

I was also given the name of the funeral home that handled the service. Maybe they had a current address? Something to explore tomorrow.

Once more, I can't remember anything but staring at a screen of code for the rest of the work day. I think it was code. I haven't been fired, so it must have at least looked like I was working. My phone tells me I called a bunch of numbers that day. I honestly have no recollection of these, and it seems they were all potential phone numbers I had collected on Wednesday that may have been J—'s. None panned out.

I gave serious thought to flying down to — over the weekend to ask around town. I was becoming irrational, I recognized this and I didn't care. A sense of urgency was building up, if I'd already waited too long to find Anne, I was not going to make that same mistake with her sister J—. I got so far as looking up hotels and car rental options and coming up with a flight route.

Once home, it's back to more digging around on ancestry.com to dig around records some more. Trying to find potential cousins or aunts of theirs that might be around as a way to get to J—. Marriage records, death records, census records, news articles. A bit more of the tree gets filled in. Other possible Annes get filtered out. We're in the 99.999% confidence territory now. Dates line up, locations line up. Unless the real Anne is somehow completely invisible to every online database out there, this is her. I start pouring through the rest of the yearbooks from their high school and find more photos of her, plus photos of J—. But it's still not at 100% confidence. I can't deal with the thought of this being the closest I'll get to knowing. I download every yearbook photo that has her in it.

The tachometer is redlined.

The engine blows up that night. Every emotion I've felt so far decides to make an appearance all at once.

I'm in tears all night. I can't sort any of it out.

Friday.

I didn't even make an attempt to work. I spend the morning just trying to recover from last night. I still end up crying randomly throughout the day.

The woman who answered the — Funeral Home phone sounded exactly how I imagined someone from a funeral home would answer the phone. Again, a dead end, but learned that Anne had been cremated, and the ashes were sent to J—.

Not even a grave to visit. I'm devastated. Not even a chance for that. I still can't figure out why I have this need for it.

On Wednesday, I had come across the name of a woman who lived at the same address as J— in — as a potential lead. An artist, whose name came up associated with a small art gallery. I called the gallery, on the off chance they may know how to get a hold of her. An older woman answered, saying she did, in fact, know her, but had no contact information, and spent several minutes trying to find the phone number of the gallery owner. Then several more minutes trying to find a pen and paper to write my number down.

"LET'S GO PEOPLE! WE'RE NOT GETTING ANY YOUNGER HERE!"

I hope the mute button worked.

I get a hold of the — city clerk who was able to confirm that J— no longer lives there. I'm still tempted to go, but am starting to accept the fact that it's probably a dead end.

What else is there to do? I keep searching Google over and over again with the same terms I'd already used. I'm on autopilot at this point, hoping that maybe I'd just missed something and that a new address or phone number will suddenly pop up. I'm not hopeful about the letters now.

As far as I can tell at this point, neither Anne nor J— got married or had children. I'm last in line.

By the middle of the afternoon, I'm numb. I spend the day looking at yearbook photos and trying to understand how I got to be buried under a giant mess of emotions in just three days. Things are too tangled to tease out any one thread for examination yet and I get nowhere.

Things get better as the day goes on. Acceptance that this entire search may go nowhere creeps

in, and I start to work my way out from under everything. I end up looking up more of their parent's histories and digging around for more relatives there might be. I found that their parent's grave is located in a cemetery not far from the house where they grew up. I want to go. I wonder if their old house is for sale. Should I buy it and return to my roots? The lack of sleep the past few nights has given me nonsensical ideas.

The thought of being too late still grips me. This is the big one that I can't escape from.

I return to trying to understand what this is all about. I was adopted at birth and have a loving family, so why am I so intent on establishing some kind of connection here? I have some ideas, mostly around my relationship with my parents and the various disconnects between us. It begins to make some sense to me.

What I don't comprehend, is the intensity of it all. Why do I feel so much grief over her death? Why do I have such an overwhelming emotional response to her domestic abuse? I tell myself there doesn't need to be a reason. I can let myself feel these things without needing a justification.

More questions bubble up.

I'd always thought that my adoption never really had any effect on me. I rarely thought about it growing up. But now I'm rethinking that. Could it have had more of an influence on me than I realized? Were my jokes about disclaiming any responsibility from family drama an indication that it really was at the back of my mind? Was my idle wondering about siblings something I should have paid more attention to?

What is the effect will this have on how I view my family going forward? I don't know. It will have to be something I think I'll just have to find out.

I need to get to sleep. The frustration of not being able to do anything else gets to me and it's another night of falling asleep while crying.

Saturday.

There's nothing else to try, no new leads follow, and I finally realize I've barely eaten in two days. I'm going to use today to take care of myself. Detach and watch some movies, maybe.

Over breakfast, of course, I revert back to web searching. I'm just idling while I eat something.

Then I see it again. It's been nagging at me, but hidden behind everything else and ignored.

That one email address I had come across early on.



It's still just one single reference on a pretty scammy-looking site.

Fuck it. Why not. I let my better judgment regarding online privacy lapse. I copy the text of the letter I mailed, hit send, and await the "message undeliverable" reply.

Two and a half hours later ...

"New message from J—"

No. That did not just happen. I'm literally shaking right now.

It is THE J—.

I almost didn't even care about what she wrote. The fact that I got to say hello to the closest person to Anne there is was enough. The huge burden of believing I'd lost all my chances was lifted. It just vanished. I was ecstatic. There was a real person behind the name. Anne existed. The yearbook photos really were her.

It took me almost an hour before I could bring myself to reply.

There was still a slight hitch. It was J—'s belief that Anne had given birth to a girl, not a boy, based on what she said her mother had told her. But everything else checked out.

Oof.

I swear to god, when I get the chance, I'm going to give the universe a swift kick in the balls.

This sucks. Could the hospital have screwed up? Clerical error somewhere? Switched at birth?

I did my best to look at it analytically. If it was a paperwork error, or a switched at birth error, there's nothing I can do. I'm still waiting for the ancestry.com DNA results. Maybe it will end up connecting me with someone else on a tree far from Anne. I have no control over that. If it tells me I'm unrelated to Anne without leading anywhere else, well, that'd be a impenetrable dead end. Out of my hands.

I realize that missing the chance to get in touch with mom before she died was only half of what was weighing most on me. The other half was the fear of not acting in time to take advantage of the chance that remained to get in touch with her sister.

I've got a sheet of paper that says Anne is my mother. Maybe it's false, but I've done all I can do to find out.

I've got a lot to think about and explore now that I didn't have before. This is a life changing experience for me for better or worse, and I don't want to waste it. I still really wish I had a chance to reach out to Anne herself, even if it didn't result in a relationship. This will always be a source of significant pain for me going forward. I can't escape the fact that I was more than 10 years too late in trying.

For the rest of my life, my answer to the question of "what advice would you give to your younger self" will now always be simply:

Don't wait.