

I Thought Mum Was Dead Until She Found Me On Facebook!

Adopted as a baby in Iraq, 21-year-old Jessica Lagasse always thought her birth mother had been killed, until a mystery email unveiled shocking secrets and a ghost from her past



Neither of us could speak as we were crying so hard. I had so many questions and she tried to answer them as best she could. 'When's my real birthday?' 'When's my sister's real birthday?' 'Where were we born?' 'How many aunts and uncles do we have?' I wrote everything down so I could tell my sister later.

I found out my real birthday was November 11, 1990. When we were adopted, no one knew our birthdays so a specialist guessed our ages. My birth date as it appears on my licence is January 1 1991, but I am two months older!

Mum told me that she'd had a fight with my father when the Gulf War broke out. My father wanted to flee to Europe, but my mum didn't want to leave her home and her country. They got into an argument which ended with my father taking us to a neighbour's house, before fleeing to a refugee camp, without telling my mum. She said she had looked for us every day since.

I asked her how my father could lie to her like that.

"My dad had given us up for adoption without telling my mum. He had lied about her death. Mum had been looking for my sister and I ever since."

dad's brother, Sorrow. They explained that my dad had given us up for adoption without telling my mum, and that he had lied about her death. She had no idea where we were but she had been looking for my sister and I ever since. All the facts were lining up.

Confirming The Truth

Hoping against hope that it wasn't some cruel joke, I gave Sorrow my phone number. A couple of days later, he called me from his mobile phone and told me he had my mum on his land line. He put the two phones together and I heard my mum's voice for the first time in almost 20 years. The first thing she said was 'Hello my baby,' and I automatically burst into tears. Overcome with emotion, I managed to stammer, 'Hi mum,' before we both broke into huge sobs. She just kept saying over and over, 'I can't believe it's you.'

AS TOLD TO AOFIE STUART-MADGE

"Staring at the Facebook message in disbelief, anger bubbled inside me. I re-read the words: 'I am your cousin from Iraq. We've been looking for you. I don't know what else to tell you, other than: your mum is alive. Call me.'

I was 18 and had just competed in the Miss California USA pageant. In an interview with a local paper, I'd discussed the fact that my sister Shirena and I were adopted as babies in Iraq after our birth mother was killed. When we were later found by two American aid workers, Dan and DeAnna Lagasse, we were so badly malnourished, our hair had fallen out, our stomachs were swollen and we were close to death. After nursing us back to health, Dan and DeAnna adopted us and took us to live with them in California.

After the interview was re-published in an Iraqi newspaper, I was inundated

with emails from strangers in Iraq claiming to know me. I ignored most of them, figuring they were after money or an American visa. But now, as I stared at those four words, 'Your mum is alive,' on the screen, something inside me snapped. Choking back tears of rage, I typed a furious message back: 'Who do you think you are talking about my mother?' I ranted. 'My mother is dead and she has been since I was an infant. What kind of person are you?'

Inside Information

But when the man emailed back, he revealed details about our adoption that didn't appear in the newspaper. He knew my mum's name, Rabab, and that my father's name was Sidar. He knew the town from where we were adopted. He told me I had aunts and uncles who wanted to meet me. 'I know your mother

and I can get her on the phone this week,' he wrote. 'She's been looking for you.'

My heart was beating outside of my chest and I didn't know what to think. Panicked, I called my sister who calmed me down. She'd received a similar message and was sceptical. 'Find out more before you get your hopes up,' she warned.

Growing up, I'd always fantasised about my birth mother. I wished so badly that she was still alive and I'd even pictured what she would look like, with a kind face and long, flowing black hair. Now that that dream could be a reality, I felt a mixture of emotions: anger, hurt, excitement... My mind was whirring and I felt sick with confusion.

Over the next few days, I stayed in touch with the man claiming to be my cousin. He told me his name was Nick, and he also introduced me via email to his father, who told me he was my

with love and told me that they'd had a beautiful life together until that day. My dad was a military man and she blamed his behaviour on a head injury he'd sustained when I was a baby.

Chatting with her, I felt like I'd found the missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. I'd struggled with the adoption a lot growing up. I had a happy childhood, but I missed having that connection that most children do with their birth parents. It was like there was always something missing. I felt so blessed to have found her, and in a strange way, I felt like deep down, I'd always known in my heart she was alive.

Emotional Reunion

A year on, Mum came to visit us in the States. My sister, my parents and I waited nervously at San Francisco airport for her to come through the gate. When she eventually came out, I knew straight away it was her. I could see myself in my mum. I have her face structure and her eyes.

As soon as she saw us, she started crying and my sister and I cried too, and we hugged and we didn't let go of one another for a really long time. Mum kept saying, 'My babies, my babies,' and she was looking at us and kissing us all over our faces. We stayed like that for over an hour.

Over the next month, we had a lot of great conversations, she took me and my sister shopping and we enjoyed a lot of mother-daughter bonding time. My adoptive parents had made her some DVDs of home movies of us growing up and she sat through hours of footage. She was so intrigued, she wanted to watch them all at once! She showed me her diary, logging every single day of the first seven years that she looked for us, which was heartbreaking to see.

It's been almost two years since my world was turned upside down by that one Facebook message. I got my mum back, but I lost the image I had of my dad as a hero. I don't hold any anger or ill-will towards him. I feel like the past is in the past. If he wants to talk to me, I will talk to him, so maybe one day we'll have a conversation and he'll explain himself.

My birth mum and I Skype every week and we email a lot. Eventually, I want to visit Iraq and meet my extended family. I feel like I'm finally at peace, after years of unanswered questions. Now, I have a whole lot of closure and a whole lot of understanding." ■