

A chance encounter brought Kari Maracic face-to-face with the other she'd spent years trying to track down.



'I Always Knew I'd Find Him'

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WHEN, EXACTLY, does the border between coincidence and fate begin to blur? For Kari Maracic and

Ben Davis, the answer is Aug. 11, 2002. That evening, over dinner at a Mediterranean restaurant in San Francisco, Kari and Ben discovered that the stranger sharing a meal on the other side of the table was actually a long-lost sibling.

"In a country of nearly 300 million people, the chances of that happening are, well, none," Ben says. "If someone else told me this story, I definitely wouldn't believe it!"

But Kari isn't as

Top: Ben at 3. He never knew he had a biological sister. "But," he says, "I felt part of me was missing."
Right: Kari at 2. She was not told she had a brother until she was 17.

startled by the reunion as her brother. "As strange as it may sound, I always knew I would find him," she says. "I never stopped believing."

Ben and Kari's unlikely path, apart and together, began in Miami when their mother, Ila Fox, was 16 and pregnant. Her boyfriend, Chris Maracic, was only 18. Judging that they weren't ready to raise a child, Ben's parents made the agonizing decision to give him up for adoption. Six years later, after Chris had served in Vietnam and returned, they married, had Kari and

then divorced when she was only 3. Kari was raised by her mother and by her stepfather, who married Ila when Kari was 11. From the day at age 17 when Kari learned that she had a brother—somewhere—she began to obsess about tracking him down.

"I grew up in Miami, where everyone is tan," Kari says. "I was this pale, dark-haired girl who always felt like an outsider. I thought, 'Somewhere out there is this person whose brain works like mine, who might make sense of me.'"

When she turned 21, Kari persuaded her grandmother to lend her \$500 so she could pay for an international locator service. Meanwhile, her mother—who never had been able to get giving up Ben out of her mind—hired a private detective. But with adoption records in Florida sealed by law, find-

ing a needle named Ben in the vast American haystack proved impossible.

Meanwhile, Ben grew up happily in North Carolina, part of a loving family. "I had awesome parents who told me I was adopted

from the get-go," Ben says. "I never felt abandoned. My parents always stressed how hard they had to fight to get me."

Even so, he reflects, "I always marched to my own drummer and felt like I was out of step. I felt like some part of me was missing." When Ben was in his 20s, he tried to find his birth parents. "It wasn't that I was unhappy with my family," he says. "It was more that, being a scientific



Photo: by Stephanie Rausser for PARADE; styling: Tiffen Fischer/Kari and Ben standing on left

type, I wanted to know who'd produced me and what qualities I'd inherited from them." But by the time Ben contacted the agency that had handled his adoption, the trail back to his birth parents had long gone cold.

Even though they lived in separate states, Ben and Kari grew up linked—by genetics or coincidence or an unseen hand. From an early age, both were budding artists and animal lovers. At different summer camps, each ran a "nature hut," collecting snakes, birds and insects. At home, Ben kept a monitor lizard named "Asparagus." Kari raised a pet duck she called "Broccoli." Then she also got a monitor lizard.

When it came time to chart their lives' course, both Ben and Kari applied to the same small animation program at the California Institute of the Arts. And both instead chose to attend art schools in the Northeast. Finally, both moved to San Francisco. And last year, with the remarkable symmetry their lives have exhibited, Ben and Kari found themselves living only 2 miles apart when they both hit hard times.

Ben was laid off from his dot-com job. Kari lost her stepfather. "We had worked hard on our relationship, and he had become my best friend," Kari says. "I came back after the funeral and felt a huge void in my life. I thought, 'You can't just find a new family member, can you?'"

Then she did just that.



Top: Kari with her parents before their split. They had put up Ben for adoption more than six years earlier. Right: Ben, 5, grew up happily in a loving family in North Carolina.



Last August, Ben and Kari went to dinner with a mutual friend named Erin. During the meal, conversation turned to Kari's long search for her lost brother. She explained how hard it was to obtain information because adoption records in Florida were sealed. Ben said he knew what she meant, since he'd been adopted in Florida himself and had had little luck tracking down his birth family.

"My brother was older than you," Kari said. "He'd be 34 now."

"I'm 34," Ben said.

"My brother is Jewish," Kari said,

excitement rising. Ben felt the hair on his neck standing up.

"I'm Jewish," he said.

"Omigod!" Erin screamed, starting the other diners. "You guys even look alike. This can't be happening."

But it was.

"Meeting Kari makes me believe in destiny," her newfound brother says.

To be absolutely sure, Ben sought out a DNA testing firm called GeneTree. Two weeks later, the company delivered the news that they were certainly brother and sister.

"But we knew right away," Ben says. Kari called their mother with the news, and Ila caught the first flight west from her home in New York City. "At the airport, our mom held her hands out. They were shaking," says Kari. "Then, finally, she touched Ben's face."

"She told me she had begged the nurses to let her hold me, but they wouldn't allow it," Ben says. "She said, 'Now I can finally hold my baby.'"

"I'm not really an emotional guy," Ben adds, "but after that, I kind of lost it. Even strangers in the airport who saw what was happening started crying."

Now that they've found each other, Ben and Kari are making up for lost time. They have seen each other almost every day since last August, and they talk for hours, tracing the trajectories of each other's life. Every day, it seems, they discover an-


other similarity—powerful proof, in their case, of the triumph of nature over nurture. Both dyed their hair rainbow hues in high school. Both now drive 1970s muscle cars. Ben owns motorcycles; Kari has an Italian scooter. And both are equally amazed by the forces they be-

lieve guided them together.

"I'm a pretty skeptical person," Ben says. "But meeting Kari makes me believe in destiny."

Whether you call it destiny or dumb luck, Kari and Ben's lives have done nothing but improve since they discovered each other. Last fall, Ben got a new job and Kari began work on a degree in biology. But most of all, Ben and Kari feel that life has become richer since that August evening.

"I always felt there was a vacant spot inside me," Ben says. "And Kari fills that. It's like she is my identical twin—separated by six years."

"I searched and believed and never stopped waiting for him," Kari says happily. "I'm living proof that there's a force behind everything. I found my brother." 



Ila (l) and her children, Ben and Kari, were finally reunited last August.

How To Look For Someone

If you're an adopted child searching for your birth parents or a parent trying to find a child you've given up for adoption, it may be possible to locate your loved one. Remember, though, not all reunions turn out as happily as this one did. And, as both Ben and Kari discovered before finding each other accidentally, a search can consume lots of time and money without producing results. If you're determined to proceed, here are some tips to get you started:

1. BE WAR Y of firms that promise to find your relatives for a fee. There are a lot of shady operations on the Internet that prey on people's desire to be reunited. Before you pay a large fee to anyone, try taking the following simple steps.

2. KEEP A JOURNAL. Adoptees should write down facts as they gather them, like their date of birth, the hospital where they were born and the name of the agency that handled the adoption. Birth parents should write down everything they can remember about the adoption process.

3. LEARN THE LAW in the state where the adoption occurred. Four states—Alabama, Alaska, Kansas and Oregon—have open adoption records. Finding your family member can be as simple as contacting the agency that handled the adoption. All other states have restrictions on who is allowed to view adoption records and when. Usually, records aren't available to adoptees until they become adults.

4. PLACE A LETTER ON FILE about the person you're looking for in the state where the adoption occurred. Putting a record of your search on file means you can be contacted if someone also is searching for you.

5. REGISTER with the International Soundex Reunion Registry. The ISRR is the world's largest free database for relatives trying to locate each other. Visit www.isrr.net on the Web.

For links to more adoption resources, including a step-by-step guide to starting a search, visit www.parade.com on the Web.

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