A 25-Year Search for His Family

By William M. Hendryx

he tall, soft-spoken man stared at his hands, fine and uncalloused. They were the hands of a musician, an artist, the palms glistening with perspiration. He glanced toward the phone, peering at it as

though it were a thing of evil, a thing capable of reducing him to something less than whole. Which it was. Forty-six years of secrecy, 46 years of nagging self-doubt, 46 years of feeling disconnected from the human race-it all hung on one phone call.

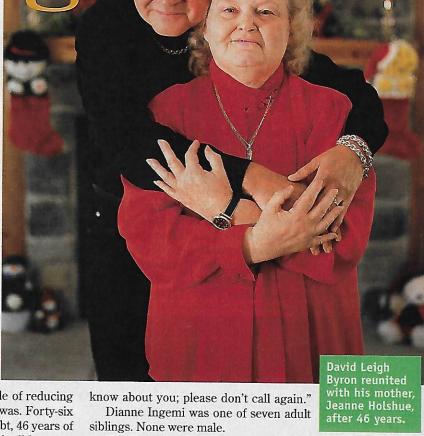
Outside, the lower-Manhattan street bustled as always that April day in 1998. Inside, within the plaster walls of an eclectic, tastefully appointed apartment, a man's life hung in the balance.

He placed a trembling hand on the receiver and dialed a number in southern New Jersey. "Dianne Ingemi, please," he said in an uncertain voice.

"The nature of your call?" asked the law-office receptionist. Unprepared, the man stumbled, but quickly recovered. After a brief exchange, a confident, 30-something attorney came on the line. "This is Dianne Ingemi," she said.

Breathless with anticipation, the man-meticulously prepared-lured this woman he'd never met into a short conversation, all of which was leading to one comment. He had rehearsed the words many times. Once spoken, there would be no turning back. "My name," he said at last, "is D.L. Byron, David Byron, and I have every reason to believe I am your brother."

Icy silence was the only response. Would she hang up? Would she listen? Or would she destroy him, saying, "We



Finally, rather tentatively, Dianne responded. "Tell me more," she said.

David Leigh Byron was not his real name. At least, not the name he'd been given at birth by his adoptive mother 46 years earlier. He'd chosen it as his professional name simply because he "liked the sound of it," making it official just after leaving his southern New Jersey home and moving to Manhattan in hopes of breaking into the music business at age 19.

Leaving home, leaving behind his original name, was a rite of passage, a way of healing.

Adopted at birth, he'd been told at age 5 that his mother died when he was born. He never believed it. Something deep in his heart told him it simply was not true. From that moment on, he fantasized about his real parents. He dreamed they were wealthy and lived in a huge house not far away. He dreamed they would come for him one day. He dreamed of being "rescued."

From his earliest memory, he had wanted

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out. Out of a home that was more like a museum than a place for a child to grow. Out of an environment where he felt like an object on display rather than a little boy who merely wanted to be loved. Out from under the thumb of a nervous, oppressive mother who was quick to anger and who often searched his room, compiling "evidence" she would save up and later use against him.

Theirs was the definition of "dysfunctional family." Everything that went wrong in the household was blamed on D.L. He resembled no one, a constant reminder he did not belong. He developed distinct signs of musical talent at an early age, yet was never encouraged by his parents. (He bought his first guitar at age 12 from a shop owned by his birth grandfather, though of course neither was aware of their connection at the time.) Throughout his childhood, he felt he was walking on eggshells.

Little wonder then that he left home at the first opportunity. Soon after he arrived in New York in 1971, his adoptive mother died of coronary failure, and soon after that, contact with his father dwindled to almost nothing. The void, the emptiness, the sense of belonging to no one, mushroomed inside D.L.

He was struck by the loss he felt with his mother's passing. He regretted things had not been different between them, that he'd felt compelled to leave as he had, that he'd felt driven away. But with that loss also came the freedom to pursue his fantasy. He registered with several agencies who specialized in reuniting birth families with the adopted. Nothing came of it.

As the years passed, D.L. found considerable success in the music industry, both as a songwriter and performer. He signed a two-record contract with a major label. He wrote the now classic rock song "Shadows of the Night," for which Pat Benatar won the 1982 Grammy for Best Female Rock Vocal. He fell in love and married. He was on his way. The money was rolling in.

But not the happiness. The damage to the boy inside

had not been repaired. He didn't feel grounded; he felt unworthy and undeservingboth of his success and the love of his beautiful wife,

Leslie. He felt trapped in an emotional vacuum—he was depressed. He stopped writing music; he stopped playing the guitar; he all but stopped living.

Not once, however, did he stop believing in the fantasy that had haunted him throughout his life. He had real parents. They loved him. They'd given him up for some extra-



ordinary reason. He would never stop looking.

Finally, aided by recent advances in the Internet, he uncovered a link to the Ingemi name, along with a telling pattern of coincidences and oddities. Among them, Dianne Ingemi's middle name was Lynne, her initials, D.L. Two of her sisters had the same initials. The entire clan lived in south Jersey, not far from where he'd grown up. Most of them had a creative bent.

Even at 5, the

boy who would

loved music.

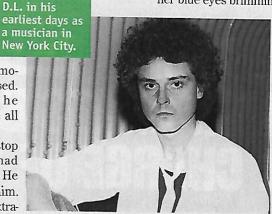
hen he hung up the phone with Dianne that April morning, D.L. was convinced he'd found his family. He had finally knocked on the right door. Would that door be opened or would it be slammed in his face?

Dianne was less convinced. But she was cautiously curious. Her mother had been ill with a heart condition, so she wanted to tread carefully. After doing some research of her own, she drove to the apartment where her mother lived alone and gently confronted her. "Mom," she said, taking her hand, "something incredible has happened. A man has called claiming to be my brother."

Jeanne Holshue, then 66, felt suddenly flush. Through two marriages, the birth of seven daughters, the still-birth of her only other son, she had shared her secret with only one other, her deceased second husband. It had been her private shame, her private hell, as she worried for 46 years about the child she never knew. Was he well? Was he happy? Had he been killed in Vietnam? Would he some day come looking for her? The entire nightmare had resulted from one brief lapse of judgment when she was age 20.

Jeanne took a deep breath. Thank God, she thought. He's alive, and it's out in the open. "Well," she answered simply, her blue eyes brimming with tears, "he probably is."

The next couple of days were filled with a spate of calls between D.L. and Dianne, confirming their mutual ancestry. They agreed to meet that Saturday at a private home on the south Jersey shorejust D.L., his wife, Jeanne, Dianne and her husband. At Jeanne's request, her other six daughters would not be told just yet. She wished to tell them herself, and she wished to tell them all at once. They would gather on Sunday at Dianne's house for a





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"family announcement." The news of that mysterious meeting created quite a buzz among the six grown sisters.

That Saturday morning, D.L. had to force himself to breathe. He'd just stepped from the shower when Leslie called out, "They're here!" By the time he dressed, everyone was seated in the living room. The moment he spotted Jeanne, he felt he would have known her anywhere-the fine, pale-blond hair, the fair skin, the big, almond-shaped eyes, the smile. That's my mom! he thought. Though she appeared frail, the resemblance was startling.

e sat beside her on the sofa and took her in his arms. The connection was immediate. And strange. It was a feeling he'd sought since his earliest memory, but he was unprepared for it, unsure how to respond. Finally, holding her close, wishing to put them both at ease, he whispered, "I want you to know I'm not angry about any of this."

Once more, Jeanne was awash with relief. Meeting her son was a gift she thought never possible, but she worried he might harbor some resentment. His words were such a blessing. She cradled his face in her hands and looked into his hazel eyes. "I'm so glad," she said. "So very glad,"

The remainder of the day seemed to pass in minutes. They exchanged stories about their lives. They ate lunch. They hugged. They cried. They nuzzled next to one another on the couch. They ate dinner. By late evening, it was time to go before anyone realized it. Dianne promised to call her half-brother the following afternoon and let him know how things went with the other sisters.

As they prepared to leave, Jeanne turned to the son who towered over her and put her arms around his waist, her head against his chest. "I never got to do this when you were a baby," she said. "You know, I've always loved you."

D.L. could hardly contain himself. "And I've always loved you," he said. He presented her with several copies of his latest CD, which had his picture on the cover, to give the next day to the other daughters. He could only hope

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they would take the news well, that they would be as accepting of him as Jeanne and Dianne. Either way, he'd found his mother, and he'd never lose her again. That night, he slept more peacefully than he had in years.

Jeanne, on the other hand, did not. She felt blessed, truly blessed, at finding her son. Such a gift! But what about the girls? Would they be angry with her for keeping this from them all these years? Would they think poorly of her? Would they be ashamed of her youthful indiscretion and her decision to "give away" a child, even though she had no means of supporting him? All those years ago, and still today, Jeanne

knew she had done the right thing. But deep in her heart she carried a sense of guilt. Perhaps her daughters would also lay blame.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. The next day, at the mysterious family meeting, the girls—then ages 30 to 43—reacted

to their mother's announcement with anything but blame. There was a moment of shock. There was a moment of sorrow that their mother had suffered with such a secret for so very long. Then there was elation.

Soon Dianne was on the phone with D.L. "They're all here, and they all want to meet you!" she exclaimed. "Would you mind driving up to Cherry Hill?"

D.L. could not believe his good fortune. "Are you kidding?" he said. "Of course I'll come." Within minutes, he and Leslie were on the road. When they pulled up to Dianne's house, it was surrounded with family vehicles of every sort. Standing alone at the end of the driveway, tears streaming from her eyes, was Donna Lee, the eldest sister. They embraced even before introducing themselves. In the next instant, a half-dozen women rushed from the house, arms flailing, swarming the big brother they'd never met nor knew existed.

D.L. Byron would never feel isolated again. The tall, soft-spoken man with the fine, uncalloused hands had come home. He could drop his bags. And his baggage.

Epilogue

Denise, Jeannie,

D.L., Kim, Toni,

Dianne.

Since their reunion, Jeanne's heart condition has improved, and D.L. has gathered with his new family often, building layer upon layer of loyalty and commitment.

Christmas has been especially meaningful, says D.L., "...with massive gatherings of sisters, husbands, kids, cats and dogs—all swapping gifts and eating rich foods in a setting of controlled pandemonium. Growing up as an only child, I never knew the holidays could be so wondrous, so filled with giving and sharing.

D.L. has also rediscovered his music, writing as before, starting his own record label and performing regularly. "There's so much love in my life now," he says, "so much validation. It's given me new purpose." As for the shortcomings of his adoptive parents, he's moved beyond that. "They did the best they could, and I refuse to be stuck in the past any longer. Forgiveness is the most healing thing of all.