

Winner: Mani Lit Fest Short Story Competition 2023

**Inheritance**  
by Liam Smith

The birth of my own son led me to find my father, the birth of my own son led to me abandoning my own father.

I didn't even know I had another father, you sort of guess these things are going to happen to some stranger on TV, you never think it would happen to you. The sort of wishful thinking teenage angst makes happen whilst a door clatters off its hinges and you find the words escaping your mouth like a man just popping down the shop for milk.

*'I hate this family, I wish you weren't my parents'*. It's strange when half of a wish comes true ten years later.

The disparities become apparent, the physical differences between yourself and the man calling himself your father. Passing comments from other family members, friends of the family, work colleagues saying 'he must be the milk man's', you watch as the man calling himself your father squirms and laughs it off. Turns out they're sort of right.

I sit in the waiting room, it's a 4-month scan. The doctors ask questions.

'Are there any illnesses that run in the family?'

*'Not that I'm aware of, but I do have a suspicion my dad may not actually be my dad...'* The door is finally off its hinges and now it's out there in the world.

I wish I could have bottled the look from the nurses and doctors in the room, my wife's head swivels as she checks this is indeed a maternity ward and we hadn't just taken a wrong turn into a psychiatric ward.

'Well it may be best you find out...' the doctor says as he turns to face the monitor.

'Baby is fine though' he says, still processing why I put that out into the room.

It's strange, the dial tone when you're waiting for a conversation to begin. It feels like the heartbeat on the baby scan, you're waiting for the words to come out that everything is fine. The beat goes and goes and rides up your heart, into your head and reverbs in your mind.

"Hiya son"

*'Is dad my dad? I need to know'* there's no time for pleasantries, the door is off the hinges.

Turns out he wasn't, everyone had known for years, it was never a secret as far as the family were concerned. It was, however, a secret to me, so you ask yourself the question 'Am I not part of this family?'

Thankfully I didn't need a TV show, no DNA tests, no beration from Jezza, no nail-biting

conclusion. I just needed social media and within two minutes of the conversation ending, I could see the man that was my dad.

*Well biologically.*

I didn't feel anything, it was a shame he was bald, I had held hopes he had the mane of Samson. I didn't read the bible, but I doubt Samson dipped when the test turned blue.

I showed my wife, her face showed me how I was supposed to feel. I was supposed to feel emotional. Yet in my mind, I wanted answers for my own unborn son. There was no concern for myself, no curiosity towards who he was, why he nipped out for a 28 year cigarette. Nothing. Perhaps that's how he felt when he saw me on the scans.

"At least he looks normal, he's sort of handsome too" she says as my finger hovered over the friend request button.

By definition, a friend request is asking someone to be your friend online, right? I've never sent a 'dad request'. I mean sure, we looked similar, I wasn't going to deny that, especially when my wife had already called him sort of handsome, it wasn't one for the vows, but a compliment is a compliment.

He accepted and within seconds a message was sent.

*"Are you the man that walked out on my mam 28 years ago? I need some important information and I need it quickly".*

In my own mind, the thought of my unborn son lay nestled in my brain. I could feel him kicking, his heart beat in sync with mine. This was never about me, it was never about the man who wears my face. It was about my son. What he was to inherit when he arrived in this world. I never considered how my biological father felt at that moment, he didn't deserve my empathy. I had my own door to close and it needed to be fixed quickly.

He replies.

...

The text seems to hover in the ether before popping up with a joyful little ringtone.

It wasn't quite the 'YOU ARE THE FATHER' moment, no drama, no studio clapping as we embraced across a stage, no tears were shed, nothing.

Just confirmation. At that moment, everything I knew changed. It doesn't just confirm some guy shares some DNA with you. It explains all the faults I had growing up, it confirms all the hushed conversations, the apparent gap in love between my brothers and myself, the height differences, the unshared likes and dislikes we had. The mask I wear on my face doesn't belong to another, it's shared with a stranger. We could have passed in the street, we may never know, I could have served him, he could have walked away from me unknowingly in a disagreement. Maybe he knew who I was and spent 27 years carefully avoiding me. That I

could respect more. He wasn't the milkman thankfully, just an architect that couldn't build a home for himself.

I try to kick the door shut, but it starts to move. The mirror on the wall nearby shakes and shows a strange reflection. In that moment, you question who you are and where you get parts of your appearance. You run your fingers through your hair and realise it's on borrowed time.

Turns out he was just a young idiot, there was no drama involved in my birth. They just agreed my mother would do the lion's share, Samson was off to lose his hair alone. That helps heal the cracks that quickly formed in my mind. Weeks pass, we talk, the conversation moves on from my unborn son and to his living son, sitting behind a computer miles away. He wants to know all about me and I oblige, sharing everything, he in return shares some information back. My family understands why I chose to open the door in the first place, parenthood transcends you.

January. My son arrives. I look at him and my heart hurts. I cannot physically love something more. He looks just like me. When the cry fills the room, nothing else matters. Yet him lying in my arms I start to feel.

*'How could he have missed all this?'*

Without a mirror to look at, it's easy to miss what you inherit. The traits you picked up from those who raised you, the embedded traits from those connected to your DNA. When that mirror takes a physical form and grows in front of you it is hard to avoid. I look at him, he's where the secrets stop, the family may not have wanted me to know, but he was going to know it all. When he grows up, his door is going to be open. Whatever he inherits from me, be it my personality, my loves, my hates, my face, my height, my hair or soon lack of, we were going to inherit these together and I was going to watch it all.

With each passing cuddle, each late night, each tear he bawls in a rage, each milestone we hit, we inherit those shared experiences. Yet a cloud hovers over me.

*'How could he have missed all this?'*

December rolls in. My son says his first word. 'Dada' he points to me. As the chubby little finger raises and aims like a crossbow, the words hit me directly in the chest. I drop to my knees in disbelief. I cuddle him. He obliges against his will to cuddle me back. Cold water runs down my face into his beautiful hair. 'Yes, I am your dada' I mumbled into his oblivious little head.

*'How could he have missed all this?'* the thought bounces around in my oblivious big head.

I remember the night clearly. I sat at my PC. Snow pelted the windows and a storm forced everyone in. Yet, I was about to make my escape. I opened up our conversation. We hadn't spoken in some weeks. He had stopped checking in with the baby, perhaps he was sitting miles away from me wondering how he could have missed all this. Perhaps he didn't just

care. I had to remove this cloud from above my head.

This time, there were no urgent questions, no emotional heartfelt goodbye. Just as he did 28 years ago now, I was going to do the same to him. My mouse moved of its own accord. I didn't talk it through with anyone. This was my decision. It moved with purpose. Clicked his username. **Block**. Just like the umbilical cord I cut almost a year to the day, the connection was severed. He had no discernible way to contact me anymore. I vanished into the night.

At that moment, I was more like him than he could have ever imagined. The mask I wear may belong to a stranger, but at least the door was firmly back on the hinges now. The similarities ended there. Although snow was blocking every exit in the house that night, I felt free. He deserved no goodbye. No emotional explanation, no virtual hug and we both go our ways. I just went dark. Off for milk in a virtual world. I was a living paradox, the most I'll ever be like him, in order to be the most I'll ever be for my own son. A boy who doesn't deserve to inherit this cloud.

I sometimes wonder how he is from time to time, so I go and check his profile. It hasn't changed much since the night I blocked him. He unfollowed everyone. Maybe that's some sort of hidden message to me. Maybe it's a sign he's lost and is waiting for me to find him again, to be the only one he follows. I don't know, I don't know him well enough to figure out what that means. Mysteries transcend DNA. Or maybe not, he's never made an attempt to reconnect. Maybe he's wondering 'How am I missing it all? Maybe he never really cared.

It's been some time since I abandoned my own biological father. The love of my son has inadvertently healed those questions. I don't feel hatred towards my biological father. I just feel pity. He missed it all with me. My son will inherit the traits of his biological grandparents, he'll inherit the good and the bad. He'll inherit the traits I was nurtured with by the man I deservedly call dad. There will be the love he has from his own parents. Love that transcends inheritance. Experiences that shape us beyond the shared DNA. Experiences I'll appreciate more knowing what I could be missing. Maybe that's my dad's inheritance to me, the gift of knowing what I might not have had. Regardless, he'll grow to be his own person and perhaps he'll sit in a chair in a ward in the distant future, look at his own child and wonder how my father could do that to me. Maybe he won't even think about it. Maybe that door doesn't exist to him.

All I know is if I'm to prove inheritance is just a gift when someone leaves, I have to do better when I'm present.

All I know is my door is open.

Should he wish to come knocking?

*The thing is 'He' probably doesn't even know - he doesn't have to miss it all.*

Word count: 1990 - The year I was born.