

**SWEET TREAT:**  
Lesya and her dad  
met — for the  
first time — at  
this Kansas IHOP.



I had one father who hurt me, another I'd never met.  
And I *needed* a dad. **BY LESA PETERSON**

**Steve\* had been in my life since before I could remember.** I always called him "Daddy," because to me, that's what he was.

When I was 7, Mom told me she and Steve were getting a divorce. I was shocked — I'd never even heard the two of them argue! "Don't worry," Steve reassured me. "Just because your mom and I are divorcing doesn't mean you and I won't see each other anymore."

After we moved in with a friend of my mom's in another town, Steve made sure to visit me once a week, even though he lived a couple hours away. He'd pick me up from school, and we'd have dinner or go bowling. Seeing Steve was always the highlight of my week.

It wasn't until I was in second grade that my sister told me, "Steve's not your real dad." I was shocked.

"Who is my real dad?" I asked my mom.

"His name is Dennis," she said. "And he doesn't know where you are. Trust me — it's for the best." Something about the way she said it made me stop asking questions.

Nothing changed between Steve and me until Valentine's Day when I was in fifth grade. I came home from school that day and checked my e-mail. Of course there was a message from Steve — I couldn't wait to see if his Valentine would be sweet or silly. But when I clicked it open, my whole world seemed to end: *Lesya, I don't want anything to do with you. I don't love you anymore. I never want to hear from you again. Steve.*

**What had I done?** Why was he saying these things? Nothing made sense. Later, I found out that Steve had cut off contact with me to please his new girlfriend. But knowing why didn't make me feel any better.

I started feeling tired all the time after this happened. I slept a lot, and I wouldn't talk to anyone. By eighth grade, I had tried

twice to overdose on some over-the-counter medicines, but both times, I still woke up to a world without a father who loved me. My doctor diagnosed me with depression and prescribed medication. But I still felt hopeless. That's when I took up cutting.

It's hard to explain, but spilling my own blood felt relaxing. One day, when I was in my room cutting, I decided to cut the veins in my wrists and end all my pain for good. But just before I lifted the razor again, I started to pray. *God, if you're real, please send my father to me. I need him to love me.* That very moment, my 2-year-old niece appeared at my door. "Lesya! Lesya!" she called. It was the first time she'd ever said my name.

*You can't do this to her,* I told myself. And though I still felt sad about Steve and not knowing my real dad, I applied pressure to my wounds, put on a long-sleeved shirt, and went to hug my precious little niece. *It's weird how she came right at that moment,* I thought. I felt a strange peace wash over me.

**I tried to stop cutting** after that — I mean, I really tried. But I was addicted. I confided in a friend, who told our school counselor what I had been doing. The counselor gave me a choice: Either I'd tell my mom, or he would. When I told my mom, she freaked — and made me an appointment with a therapist for the very next day.

I didn't think anyone could help, but the therapist really seemed to get me. She said I was turning my hurt about my dad and Steve onto myself, and that to deal with it, I would need to express my feelings to them.

I decided to write a letter to Steve and one to my dad, even though I had no idea where he was. The Social Security Administration said that, legally, they couldn't tell me where my dad was, but if they could find him, they'd forward him my letter. So I sat down and wrote a note to the father I'd never met: *I know you may not want to see me, but no matter what, I love you.* Just in case, I included my phone number.

**Two months passed,** and during that time, I slowly started feeling better. My medication had been straightened out, and as far as the cutting, I'd stopped cold turkey. Whenever I got the urge to cut, my therapist let me call her, day or night. I'd told Steve how I felt, and even though I hadn't found my real dad, I felt better just knowing that I'd tried.

Then one day when I was doing homework, the phone rang. "Your dad's on the phone," my mom's friend said. I didn't know if

# MY REAL DAD