

Sisters shared same birthday

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"I feel like I have a piece of my mother back and that means the world to me. It must have been difficult for her to celebrate my birthday every year knowing she had another daughter who shared the same date and never knew where she was. She never wanted to give up (Claire), but for whatever reason, she did."

Not long after Claire (nee Andrea Mitchell) was born, Diane and husband Michael were in the process of separating and decided to put their daughter up for adoption. Then six-year-old Sam did her best to prevent her sister from leaving, scooping the baby from the crib and hiding behind a chair on the day Claire was

taken away for adoption, to no avail. They wouldn't see each other again for more than 40 years.

Diane and Sam moved to Canada shortly afterward and in a romantic twist to the story, Michael followed them here a year later to court and then marry Diane, with Victoria subsequently entering the world.

Michael died on Aug. 7, 2003.

Due to the genetic nature of the kidney disease, all three daughters acquired the disorder. Sam and Victoria both have fully functioning kidneys and didn't know they had a potential problem until their mother died, while unknowingly, Claire grew up in England before discovering at age 19 that she would need a transplant, around the same time that adoptive mother Margaret told her she had another family.

"I thought there was something else I might need to look out for connected to the kidney disease, which prompted my initial search," said 42-year-old Claire, now a legal secretary in Ayr, Scotland.

She made a couple of attempts using a website called Birthlink that came up fruitless, while Victoria and Sam also tried unsuccessfully from this side of the Atlantic.

Last September, with her kidneys functioning at only a small fraction of their

capacity, Claire underwent organ donor transplant surgery, which returned her health to nearly normal with a few limitations. Then a breakthrough came on the trail of her long-lost family as a Scottish charitable group called Search Angels discovered that her birth mother had registered Claire in 1994 as being adopted, linking her to contact info for Victoria and Sam.

This past December, while at a sales meeting in Montreal, Victoria got an email while sitting in a hotel lobby from a stranger "with a funky address" that had the familiar name Andrea Mitchell in the subject line.

"My name is Claire Heathcote. I was born Andrea Kate Mitchell and I believe you are my birth sister," read the email.

After exchanging several messages, the sisters were face to face on Skype within a couple hours, and besides their striking resemblance, they exchanged information about each other that nobody else could have known.

Claire has been a dedicated viewer of a Scottish TV program called *Long Lost Family* and always ends up in teary shambles at its conclusion. Her husband Ian initially questioned whether reaching out to the unknown might result in some findings she wouldn't want to see or hear about.

"I said to him, you don't know what it's like not to know who these people are and who you look like. I don't think that's something I could die never having known."

In the meantime, there's a few things the sisters would like to do together, that they never got to experience as kids, like watching movies such as *Dirty Dancing* and *Pretty Woman*, or just walking down to the park and push each other on the swings.

"It just doesn't seem real," added Victoria. "You wouldn't think one of those amazing real-life stories would happen to us, where you couldn't wish for anything more."

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—Victoria Guzzo



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