

ORIGIN STORY

Here's a confession: I am the son of a dead '80s bold star. Until, one day, I was not. But, by then, it was too late to take it back.

You see, I'm adopted. It's not hard to tell that I am. One look at my adoptive family and you will see I don't look like them. They have brown skin, I am white; their eyes are brown, mine is probably hazel or green; their hair is black, I have black hair, too, but with a few strands of red.

And perhaps the most telling: my last name is Smith; theirs is not.

So maybe I should have easily figured out that these people—my family—are not actually my biological family. But no. I was seven or eight years old when I found out.

A neighbor's maid asked me if I was the son of the dead '80s bold star.

"*Sino 'yun?*" I asked upon hearing the dead bold star's name. The question evoked a feeling I would experience several times more as an adult—that other people know more about me than I do.

Then I remembered all the reasons my parents gave me and other people about why I do not have their surname: My oldest brother and his American wife wanted to adopt me and being a Smith would make the process easier. I am my mother's illegitimate son with a *Puti*. I am my father's illegitimate son with his *kabit na 'Kana*.

So, one morning, I asked my mother.

"Ampon ba ako?"

"Oo, anak," she answered. There was no hesitation in her voice, as if she was anticipating this question all my life.

I asked if I was the son of the dead '80s bold star.

"Chuck," she said, pausing this time, *"Anak ka ng Diyos."*

Her response, I learned years later, was an assurance, a guarantee that I, with my white skin and American surname belonged to their Filipino-as-a-jeepney family. That I was meant to be here. That this is my fate.

Of course, it also meant that, yes, I am the son of a dead '80s bold star.

We almost never talked about this “issue” at home. My mother—my adoptive mother, the one who raised me—would turn melodramatic every time I asked about my parentage.

“Bakit mo tinanong, ayaw mo na ba sa amin?” she said when I asked who my biological father was. The one written as my mother on my birth certificate is Delia Smith, the dead bold star’s real name. But my father? Blank. My mother claimed she did not know; no one told them and no one knew. And because she had no answer to offer, she chose not to talk about it.

You cannot blame me for wanting to know.

At the very least, I wanted to know what answer to give every time someone asked for the identity of my father. As a kid growing up in downtown Manila, I wanted to have a defense against classmates who teased me that my father left the Philippines when the US bases left the country during the early '90s in a helicopter. Caucasian-looking kids in the Philippines during the '90s were automatically assumed to be children of G.I.s.

“Chuck Chuck helicopter, Chuck Chuck,” they said in singsong unison.

I hated my name; it made insulting me so much easier. I hated that I do not know why I was named this way. My parents have four biological children and their names all start with the letter R; even in this smallest of details, I couldn't be like my siblings. Also, the helicopter joke? I had no idea where that came from. And even I knew it was not true. My oldest brother was part of the U.S. Army; he did not ride a helicopter when he left the Philippines to serve in the Gulf War. But jokes do not need to be factual in order to hurt you. It surely did not hurt less when my classmates started singing "Leaving on a Jet Plane" by John Denver to me.

I did not tell my parents about the teasing. They would only worry about me. But also, they would worry that they wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

Here's what I have learned to accept about being the son of a dead '80s bold star: your past is a myth, and the building blocks of your origin are urban legends.

What I knew for majority of my life is mostly what you know: maybe mentioned to you by your parents while you were watching that TV show; or what your brother told you while you were listening to that song by the Eraserheads; or—and this is a recent phenomenon—what you read on Twitter or Reddit every time that senator would say something stupid.

What I know—what you may already know—is this: Delia Smith’s screen name was Pepsi Paloma. She was 14 years old, according to some reports, when she entered show business and became part of a trio of starlets called the Softdrinks Beauties. She made a few movies—but her most popular was the one that came after she accused two TV show hosts and a comedian of drugging and raping her. She later dropped the rape complaint.

She killed herself at her apartment in Quezon City three years later. She was 18. I was three months old.

According to my mother, the dead '80s bold star left me to her care a few days (a few hours, in other versions of the story) before she died, making her promise to take care of me. They met because of Rey dela Cruz, Pepsi’s manager. She was a small-time project contractor in Manila; he was a barangay chairman in Quiapo and discovered actresses such as Rio Locsin, Olivia O’Hara, Mito del Mundo, and Susan Henson. Rey was murdered years after Pepsi took her life, a case that remains unsolved to this day.

Here's another thing I learned to accept about being the son of a dead '80s bold star: it can consume your life, because everybody knows about a part of your life you do not know a lot about.

Growing up, I had no idea how people found out I was Pepsi's son. Later on, I realized that she was sort of famous; years later, I found out that 'famous' and 'infamous' mean two entirely different things. It was probably the fact that I look nothing like my parents; maybe a white boy playing on Dapitan Street is one of the weirdest things you would see in Sampaloc, Manila, during the early '90s. But, mostly, it was the fact that people love *tsismis*. And I am gossip fodder. The neighbor's maid? It was my aunt who told her, and then proceeded to tell my story to anyone willing to listen. The teachers in elementary school? Maybe it was one of my brothers—the ones who took care of my sister and I when my parents decided to go to the United States to work in order to support their sudden, ill-advised adopted son—who told them. No one told us to keep it a secret anyway, and there was no harm in sharing a bit of family trivia.

Then there were those who just had to figure it out on their own. One of my teachers, for instance, was so curious why my sisters looked so Filipino and I looked like the kid on the logo of a can of condensed milk, that she looked at my birth certificate from my school file and somehow pieced it all together.

Manila—and the world, eventually—is small, after all. There is nothing you will not find out if you try hard enough.

I learned that it was easier to volunteer the information myself to anyone who asked. There was no point in resisting.

When you are the son of a dead '80s bold star, people will mostly feel two things towards you: curiosity and pity.

“*Kawawa ka naman,*” a classmate said when a teacher approached me in the middle of the class while we were taking a quiz to ask me why I was a Smith. “*Gusto mo ampunin ka namin?*” He said this sincerely, without a hint of irony.

That’s the thing: People will feel sorry for you even when they do not know why they feel sorry for you. And most of the time, they have no reason to feel sorry for you. Or, sometimes, they feel sorry for you for the wrong reasons.

Admittedly, telling people of my parentage had its perks. In high school, I talked to my History teacher after class because I was failing his subject. I said I was depressed because my parents did not love me — at this point, they had been in the United States for almost a decade, supporting the 16-year-old adopted son they should

not be raising at their age of 65. I said: I feel bad because I am adopted, I feel bad because I am the son of a dead '80s bold star, I feel bad because I do not know who my father is.

“Alam mo, mahal na mahal ka ng mga magulang mo,” my History teacher said while crying. I was crying too—maybe the first time I cried about being adopted, about being the son of Pepsi Paloma, about being an obscure footnote in pop culture. I was crying and I did not know why, even though I knew nothing I told my teacher was true. I was not depressed! I was not sad! I didn’t care if my parents didn’t love me! I had no idea who my father was, but so what?

It did not matter. I got passing grades in History class that year.

“They’re not telling you everything you need to know,” said another teacher, one who requested to talk to me privately inside his room during our high school retreat because he felt I “had problems.” I did not cry this time; I knew what this was about. I told him what he wanted to hear—the adoption, the adoptive parents, the dead bold star. Inside, I was fuming. How dare this person tell me I know nothing! How dare this person tell me I have problems! Sure, I wrote an essay about burning the school down and clobbering my classmates for an entrepreneurship class assignment that asked us

to enumerate what we can do with a log. But what's the big deal? I did not have problems; I was being creative!

No one was surprised when I ended up wanting to become a writer.

No one objected when I ended up becoming a movie reporter. I did a bit of research about Pepsi. She had three siblings; she was most likely forced by her mother to become the breadwinner of her family. Her father was American who left their family. She had a stepfather who did not go to her wake when she died.

She allegedly left a diary that detailed the possible reasons for her suicide: money problems, arguments with her boyfriend, the troubled relationship with her mother. Some reports claimed no investigation was done to verify that the diary was indeed hers.

I realized I was not legally adopted, which explains the surname. They're my family, yes— which is why I never got accustomed to calling them my adoptive family—but my parents said they could not make it official. My mother said it was because my maternal grandmother wanted to have custody of me, wanted to do “bad things” to me. Adoption meant asking for her consent as my next of kin, something she would not give.

There were tabloid reports that claimed I was not the dead '80s bold star's son. According to the reports, I was either the son of Pepsi's best friend or the son of her younger brother. "*Tanga ka ba?*" my mother said in response to this. "*Artista s'ya, di ba? S'yempre tinago n'ya na may anak siya.*" It was easier to believe what I had known since I was seven or eight years old.

And anyway, I was busy becoming an entertainment journalist. An editor asked me during a job interview: "Why showbiz?" It was a good question I had no answer for. If you aspire to be a serious journalist, you will want to cover politics, current events. If you want to write about less serious topics but still exude an aura of importance, you will want to write for a magazine or a publication's lifestyle section. Not showbiz.

"*Mahilig sa showbiz ang pamilya ko,*" I said, out of panic. It was not entirely a lie. "*Ninong ko si Rey dela Cruz!*"

Rey dela Cruz was my dead mother's manager, the one who was murdered.

I got the job.

The very first press conference I attended was for Andi Eigenmann. Months prior to the press conference, I read a report from an '80s tabloid about Andi's mother Jaclyn Jose talking about Pepsi's death.

"Sino kaya sa atin ang susunod," Jaclyn was quoted as to telling another '80s bold star. *"Ta mo, nawala na sina Claudia at si Stella. Ngayon naman, si Pepsi. Tayo, mga bold star din tayo, 'di ba? Hindi ka ba natatakot? Parang isa-isa na tayong kinukuha."* Was there a version of this world where my mother didn't die—maybe someone else was taken away—and I am the subject of this press conference instead? Andi and I, we're not too different from each other; except her mother chose to live.

I am older; I knew better. I knew what not to tell people. But they still found out, and I no longer had an idea why and how.

"May itatanong ako sa iyo ha, pero h'wag mong sasabihin kahit kanino na tinanong ko," a showbiz publicist asked me after a press conference he organized. *"Totoo ba'ng anak ka ni Pepsi?"*

"Yun ang sabi sa akin ng mga magulang ko," I replied. And it's true. That's what my parents told me. It was a safe answer: it committed to nothing and it admitted nothing.

But what it really said was: I don't know anymore.

"It's good *nga na* you don't say anything about it na. It might open up old wounds," said a popular newspaper editor I wrote for after asking me the question over the phone one weekend.

The questions were harmless. I courted the idea that maybe my work in show business was serendipitous. Maybe I am meant to be here. Maybe I belong here. Despite the industry's old wounds, I am here. Despite being the son of someone so infamous that people talk about her in hushed tones, no one had tried to drive me out of the industry.

I like writing about celebrities. I harbored the fantasy of writing about myself, or maybe turning real life into fiction or poetry, as some journalists always threatened to do. But there's nothing to say. So this was the best alternative: I am helping celebrities dictate to people the preferred narrative of their lives.

I was one of the first reporters to write about Bela Padilla on a mainstream platform, after her much-reported tiff with Marian Rivera. You know, about that time Marian allegedly confronted Bela inside a bathroom? Her home network even made a

press release about this, as if Bela being interviewed by me was an achievement—possibly because her talent management thought I was a foreign reporter writing for a foreign publication, because of my name.

“Ang ganda ng feature mo sa akin! Salamat, ha,” Cristine Reyes said after I did a video interview with her for our website. My editor said the interview made her look jolly and happy—and if you have met Cristine Reyes, you know she is, at least was at the time, never jolly and happy. That was a few months after she slammed Sarah Geronimo on Twitter for allegedly flirting with her boyfriend, Rayver Cruz. “It looked like she was having fun talking to you,” my editor said. “Maybe because you were having fun, too?”

“Ikaw ba si God?” Gretchen Barretto told me and other reporters in an ambush interview during the awarding ceremony of the film festival her partner Tony Boy used to sponsor. We were asking Gretchen about her feud with her mother, Inday and sister, Claudine. She was not pleased—especially when a TV reporter asked her, *“Ano na lang ang prayer mo, sa lahat ng mga tao...”*

“You’re not God. I will not pray to you. I will not share. I mean, stop it,” Gretchen answered. *“Bakit, what for? Para masaya kayo at bahala na ako? Hindi ganun yun, e. Pati prayers ko, pinakikialaman ninyo? Bakit, ‘di ba?”*

“Don’t you ever get tired of doing this over and over again?” asked Benjamin Alves during a product launch. By this, he meant going to events and press conferences, talking to—sometimes downright chasing—celebrities to ask our occasionally rote questions. How did you prepare for your new project? Do you feel pressure about your new movie? *Naging isyu ba ang billing?* Are you in a relationship? *Kumusta na ang love life? Break na ba kayo?* He asked this while my colleagues and I were trying to score an interview with Nikki Gil; rumor had it she just got engaged to her non-showbiz boyfriend.

“Of course not,” I replied. There is no job in the world where we’ll be paid to ask celebrities intrusive questions and write about their personal lives except this. He smiled, conceded that I am right, then walked away.

We did not get to interview Nikki Gil that night; she declined all our attempts to talk to her. At the end of the event, she agreed to have us take a photo of her—our sly tactic to at least have proof of her wearing an engagement ring. She covered her hand with her cue cards when we took her photo.

The very next day, she admitted in a television interview that she got engaged to her non-showbiz boyfriend.

I got tired. A few months later, I fell into depression.

Here's what I have learned about being the son of a dead '80s bold star: every time your family feels you are sad or tired or depressed, they assume it is because you are the son of a dead '80s bold star. Even though it is not—although at some point you won't be able to know where all these feelings are coming from.

So, one morning, they decided to tell me that I was not the son of a dead '80s bold star.

“Chuck,” my brother began. My mother was already old; she remembered little, probably no longer capable of telling me anything. “Hindi mo talaga nanay si Pepsi.”

I am the son of Pepsi's younger brother and female best friend, he explained. Pepsi decided to adopt me—by claiming on my birth certificate that she was my birth mother; a simulated birth—because my biological parents were too young to raise a child. Pepsi was 18 years old.

My brother said they decided not to tell me the truth because the truth was too complicated for someone who was seven or eight years old.

“And you think growing up believing that my mother was Pepsi is not complicated?” I said.

“We’re sorry,” he said. “We only did what we thought was best for you.”

But by then, it was too late to take it back.

I talked to my biological father for the very first time a few months after I turned 30. My sister found Pepsi’s sister on Facebook, who in turn told her brother—my father—that my family was looking for him.

He called me one morning. I was at the office, looking at the blank word processor, maybe with a hand on my chin, slack-jawed, like a writer in a hackneyed movie about writing. My phone rang; I was told beforehand to expect this phone call that day, although I did not expect it to actually happen. Maybe I did not even want it to happen. What was there to say to the person you have wanted to meet all your life? What was there to say to the person you willed yourself to believe not to exist?

I stepped out of the newsroom. I answered the call.

“Hello. *Kumusta ka na?*” he said, the very first words he said to me. He waited for a response, as if there was a proper way to answer his question. “Okay *naman*,” I said. It was not entirely a lie.

“*Alam mo, noong isang araw lang, iniisip ka namin—*” He pauses. “*Nasaan na kaya ’yung anak ko.*”

The conversation lasted about ten to fifteen minutes, although he did most of the talking while I remained quiet, barely listening. He told me how he left the Philippines during the '90s, how he went to Saudi Arabia, then to Australia, for work. He’s doing well now, he said, although there was something about him punching someone who insulted him inside a comfort room in Sydney just days after he arrived. There was something about his wife, about having other children, about me having a brother somewhere, about how happy he was that I’m still using his last name. There was something about not knowing where my biological mother—Pepsi’s best friend—was.

“*Tinignan ko piktyur mo sa Facebook,*” he said “*Medyo lumalaki ka, ha. Kailagan mag-exercise ka.*” I laughed.

“*Oo nga po, e.*”

“Alam mo ba, ipinangalan kita kay Chuck Norris,” he continued, explaining I was named after his favorite movie actor.

There were questions I wanted to ask but could not. I remained silent.

He said goodbye and promised to keep in touch.

I returned to the newsroom, to my desk. I had work to do. I had celebrities to write about; stories, narratives to tell. Bea Alonzo denies she is pregnant, Gerald Anderson denies breaking up with Maja Salvador, Ina Raymundo lashes back at bashers who said she has dark underarms. But not now. I stared at my laptop, like a cliché.

I turned my laptop off. I grabbed my things and stepped out of the newsroom.

I spent most the day doing anything but work. I sipped coffee at a café while looking at people scurry to their offices, to their homes, to their lives. I went to the cinema; I watched Cinderella.

“Who are you?” Prince Kit asks Cinderella after his long search for the owner of the glass slipper.

“I have no carriage, no parents, and no dowry. I do not even know if that beautiful slipper will fit. But if it does, will you take me as I am?” she replies. I received a text message: my editor was looking for me, where have I been, why was I not at the office? The movie ended. I walked out of the theater. I returned to the office, continued working.

I did not know what life would be like after that first conversation with my biological father. But here’s what I learned: life invariably goes on. Gerald Anderson broke up with Maja Salvador. Bea Alonzo was not pregnant after all. Nikki Gil shunned the limelight after tying the knot with her non-showbiz boyfriend. Gretchen Barretto stopped berating the press, but only because she made herself scarce at media events. People stopped caring about Ina Raymundo’s allegedly dark underarms. My biological father kept his promise. He would occasionally call me, greet me during birthdays and Christmases. He always ended his text messages with: “*Lagi kang mag-iingat at huwag papabayaang ang sarili.*” “*Mag-iingat po kayo d’yan.* God bless,” I would reply.

And anyway, there were other celebrity interviews to look forward to. I interviewed Pia Wurtzbach days after I first talked to my biological father. This was a few weeks after she won the Binibining Pilipinas pageant; she was set to compete in the Miss Universe pageant. Pia was being bashed online; some thought she was not “the right candidate” for the title.

“I see it as motivation to prove them wrong,” she said. “*Basta sa akin, ginagawa ko lahat ng makakaya ko for now. Basta alam ko hindi ako nagkukulang. Kaya ganito pa lang kaaga, naghahanda na ako.*”

We ended the interview. I wished her good luck.

It’s going to be a good year, Pia said.

I had a feeling she was right.

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