

Third Daughter

Anyone who doesn't think a four year old has the capacity for deep emotions is wrong. The first time I felt true sadness was in 1977. I was four and my family had recently been ripped apart. Not by death or divorce; I lost a sibling, sort of. It was at that time when major turmoil was going on in Northern Ireland and my parents signed up to be part of a student exchange program. We got pictures of this mystery person who would be living with us for six weeks during the summer. Her name was Jacinta and she looked like she came from another era of time and space. Her clothes were out-dated and she had a funny looking haircut. Nonetheless, she had a friendly face and I decided I liked her then and there.

When we picked Jacinta up from the airport, it was like 'Christmas morning and birthday party and Saturday night' level of excitement. I was squirming with the anticipation and loved the whole notion of a new guest. Even better, she came bearing gifts! The huge bummer was they were knit gloves, scarves and hats....and this was the dead of summer. Jacinta didn't like storms or peanut butter or pizza. She was scared by the roll of thunder yet totally fearless when coming face to face with the bully boys from down the block. I was in a hitting phase at that time. I got a kick out of slapping my sister or the neighbor girls. Jacinta, however, gave it right back to me. That nine year old girl who was three heads taller than I was, and pure muscle, hit me right back! I stood stone cold still. As much as I hated getting hit, there was a sliver of sense in

me that knew I got what I deserved. Two things happened. I officially considered her my sister and my hitting phase stopped.

Over the six weeks, she cemented herself as the 'third daughter' in our family. But the day came when she had to go home. This stoic girl with the heart of gold acclimated herself to this new family and we grew to love her. I was sad in a way I had never been sad before.

I found some comfort in a game I used to play in the days and weeks after Jacinta boarded that plane home for Belfast. I would be outside and hear the distant roar of an airplane. Whatever I was doing, I stopped and started flailing, waving and jumping on the ground thousands of miles below. "Hi Jacinta!!!" I truly believed she was on every one of those planes and could hear me. It was my way of keeping her close. This little ritual actually continued for years.

Truthfully, there are moments today when I'll be jolted out of whatever errand I'm running or place I'm heading. I'll hear a plane high in the sky and think of Jacinta, our third daughter.