

MODERN LOVE


From Humiliation to Appreciation

By ANNIE CHAGNOT

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When I go home to Ohio for the holidays, I spend my time as many 20-somethings do: I sleep like a teenager, wander around my bedroom in my prom dress slightly tipsy, thumb through old yearbooks, and laugh, eat and occasionally bicker with my parents. The only not-typical aspect of my visit is that my parents are two women who are no longer together, one of whom used to be a man.

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When I was 4, my father decided he wanted to become a woman. Decades earlier he realized he wanted to be a woman, but now he actually made the decision to become one, to the great shock of my mother and to the utter bewilderment of my Appalachian farming grandparents.

I was too young to remember what must have been the most difficult time of this process: the initial conversations between my parents, the phone calls made to friends and family, the first doctor consultations, the first time my father wore a skirt in public.

My mother could probably tell you the date, time and emotions that went along with each of these “firsts,” but when I try to remember my father as a man, he appears as an unformed vision, almost a mythological creature, half-man, half-woman.

I have faint recollections of a hard chest and deep voice, stocky shoulders and tight arm muscles underneath silk button-down blouses. I remember that one Sunday he was singing in the men’s tenor section of our Episcopal choir and a month later he joined the altos with the women. To 4-year-old me, who approached the world with wonder and without judgment, this was an organic change. In retrospect, it seems bizarre.

My mother, a hippie rebelling from a family of old Southern wealth, briefly thought she could stay married to my father and make it work. Having been an adolescent during the women’s movement, she asked herself, “What is gender, really?” And maybe she hoped that love trumped all.

But as my father showed more of his truth, the truth of the person he wanted to be and become, my mother realized that in many ways she had fallen in love with the image he

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had constructed to appease the world.

As it became clear that their romantic relationship was more a part of his confusion and the facade he had lived behind than the genuine self he was beginning to unearth, they fought more about the little things and agreed less on the big things until deciding to dissolve their marriage.

But I was thankful they agreed that I tied them together for the rest of their lives. Moreover, they had the foresight to know that their relationship, going forward, would have to be grounded in love and respect. Divorce and all, sex change and all, this would be a loving family of three.

My parents succeeded at raising me together and maintaining a strong friendship, but that doesn't mean our family dynamics have always been smooth. As I grew up, my initial comfort and nonchalance about my dad's sex change soon morphed into embarrassment. On the days when she picked me up from school, I felt a dread in my gut and chest that stifled my breath, made me sweat and blush, and pushed tears to my eyes.

What was I supposed to say when my friends asked who was picking me up? Often I went with "my aunt," too worried to say "my dad" and then have them see a woman sitting in the driver's seat.

Nothing inspired mild panic in me like raising the issue of my father's sexuality. When I confessed to my close group of girlfriends in freshman year of college whom I was really talking about when I said "my dad," I had to write it in a mass e-mail. I couldn't say it out loud and was too anxious at the thought of enduring any silence that might follow. Although their responses were understanding and supportive, my reluctance remained.

Two years later, when it came time to tell my first serious boyfriend, a guy from a conservative family, I was finally able to speak the words. But before I did, I felt almost paralyzed with dread (even with the help of alcohol). When I dated a strict Catholic a couple of years after college, I simply gave him an earlier version of this essay and left the room.

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Brooklyn.

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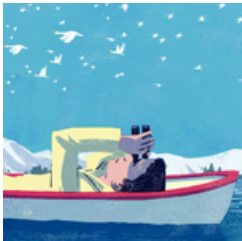
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