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MODERN LOVE

From Humiliation to Appreciation

Published: April 18, 2013

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As he read in my bedroom, I stood in the kitchen washing dishes with trembling hands, trying to take deep breaths, wondering how on earth he could not be finished already. When he did finally speak, he also was kind, though he said he felt sorry for me for not having a father.

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What I understand now is that these anxious moments are a small price to pay for a caring, present and wonderful parent. Somehow, through my childhood and adolescence of ducking and shirking from my father and the issues of her sexuality, she and I experienced an incredible life together.

A pilot, a brilliant engineer and the chief executive of an alternative energy company, she was constantly traveling for work. She had lived in South Africa, Switzerland, India and the desolate farmland of Ohio, and as a result was committed to seeing the world and immersing herself in different cultures. It was her goal that I share her passion for travel and exploration. So together we skied the French Alps, picked berries in the Swiss countryside, cantered camels through the streets of Udaipur, ate live octopus in Seoul and walked through marijuana hazes in Amsterdam.

Through all of these adventures, she took photographs, the act of which I often hated. Not only did I have a teenager's heightened sense of self-consciousness, but it also seemed as if that large black camera was always in my face, blocking my view of her, covering her eyes, preventing us from making an intimate connection or simply having a conversation at dinner.

On a trip to the Netherlands when I was 13, I remember standing in line with hundreds of people at Anne Frank's house while my father lay down (on the street! I could have died) in her white blouse and purple skirt to get a picture of me from below, the house towering above me. At that moment my pubescent world was narrowed to a sharp point, my vision tunneled to the spectacle of her lying there. With all eyes on me as she snapped photos and told me to "hold it for just one more," I wanted to melt into those sacred cobblestones.

Seeing the heat creeping into my cheeks, she pulled the camera down and furrowed her brow. "Trust me, Annie, this shot is fantastic," she said. "You'll be grateful to have it."

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The picture did turn out beautifully and now stands in the dining room. The collection of photographs I have of me with a camel about to kiss my face, underwater in a sea of luminescent fish, and sitting with a nearly naked homeless girl in what was then Bombay is a testament to her artistic talent and, more important, to her self-expression. It reminds me not only of her love for me and the wondrous experiences she — my father — has given me, but also of her passion and wonder at the beauty of small things.

She once told me that before her sex change, she had lived in a fog, and after the operation the haze lifted, allowing her to see the real colors in life. Perhaps it’s the bold move she made, the fact that she truly chose her life, that has allowed her to live so deliberately, with such assurance and curiosity in the world.

Last fall she spent six weeks flying rescue missions in Guyana, carrying injured people to hospitals. When I flew home for a friend’s wedding, my mother asked on the drive from the airport if I had talked to my father, if I knew how everything was going.

“I haven’t,” I said. “But I’m sure we’ll hear soon. Check Facebook.”

“I really miss her,” my mother replied.

I put my feet up on the dashboard and looked out the window at the brown flatlands sprawling in all directions. My mother’s affectionate words had come so quickly and naturally; there was nothing grand or sentimental about what she’d said. But at that moment I knew how lucky I was.

After everything they had been through and all the ways our family could have been smothered by the weight of the change, my parents actually made it to a place where they cherish their holiday time together and miss each other when they’re apart. And on my side, having been a child of divorce and never having known my father as a man, I ended up with parents who are friends, artists, role models and plain-old good human beings.

When the picture of your life is being composed, sometimes you just need to bite your trembling lip and smile through the humiliation. The payoff can be precious.

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A version of this article appeared in print on April 21, 2013, on page ST6 of the New York edition with the headline: From Humiliation to Appreciation.

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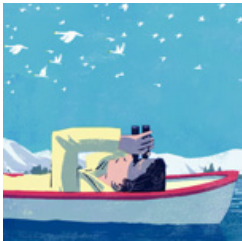
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