

A PURELY
BIOLOGICAL
FATHER

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One hot, sunny Father's Day, when I was 47, I met my father for the first time.

As on most Sundays, I visited my mother at her assisted living facility on a lush campus overlooking the Hudson River. Since it was such a lovely day, we agreed to meet on the lawn near the rose garden.

When I got there she was not alone. Sitting on the white-slatted lawn chair next to her was an elderly gentleman about her age (88) in a blue short-sleeved knit shirt and baggy tan chino pants.

He got up as I approached, I thought to offer me the chair, but instead held out his hand.

"I'm your father," he said with a mischievous grin, eyes twinkling, as though telling me the punch line of a particularly nasty joke.

At first the words were hard to decipher. I knew I had heard them and I knew what they meant, but their meaning was so at odds with the context that for a moment I had difficulty putting the two together.

So I just stood there with a pleasant smile still immobile on my face as he progressed from shaking my hand to giving me a kiss on the cheek.

He seemed spry enough, and diminutive in the way of the elderly, with an annoyingly superior glint

in his eyes, as though he were always one punch line ahead of you. Immediately, I disliked him.

"His name is Charley Rothstein," my mother called out from behind him.

Still at sea, I gave him a more focused smile and sailed around him to my mother, upon which he sat down again, leaving me no place to sit.

"Hi, Mom," I said, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

"Hello, dear," she said, offering her cheek.

The two of them gazed at me expectantly as I stood awkwardly next to them.

"Why don't you pull over a chair?" my mother asked.

There being none in the vicinity, I just shrugged. On such a lovely Father's Day, you can imagine how scarce chairs were on the lawn of a campus that included an assisted living apartment complex, a nursing home, and a physical rehabilitation center.

"Charley just moved in on Wednesday," my mother said.

"With you?" I asked, unable to hide my shock.

"Oh, Lord, no!" my mother laughed, sharing the joke with Charley as they exchanged an amused glance. "Into Farkas."

"When was it?" Charley mused. "The fall of '60, no? We hadn't seen each other since."

"It wasn't a one-night stand," my mother explained. "It was more like ... an arrangement."

"An arrangement," I repeated.

"I was already 41, no husband, no even boyfriend, and I wanted a child. There wasn't anything like a sperm bank or artificial insemination back then."

"We had to do it the old-fashioned way," Charley laughed.

"I picked a fertile night, and what do you know? It worked the first time!"

"You told me my father was killed in an auto accident before I was born," I said accusingly. Normally, I would have saved such a reproach till we were alone. But, hey! I thought angrily. He was part of the family.

"I know this is a shock for you, sweetie," my mother said. "Maybe I should have prepared you. But I thought, it being Father's Day, it would be such a delicious surprise ..."

"I'm going to look for a chair," I said, leaving the two of them staring up at me as I turned to stride blindly across the lawn.

With such a cold and self-centered mother, I had survived by investing all of my childhood love and dreams in my father, whom I had always imagined looking down on me from Heaven. For the many years I kept a diary, I began each entry with, "Dear Daddy." I had been furious with my mother for not having even a picture of him, and for refusing to talk about him, telling me she was too upset every time I raised the subject.

Now I was more furious than ever.

Bitch! Bitch! I kept repeating as I staggered around the huge, sloping lawn, not even looking for a chair, until somehow I literally stumbled across a folded-up aluminum one that had somehow managed to wander right into my path.

I picked it up and carried it back to my new parents, who sat like illicit lovers, breaking off suddenly as they saw me approach.

"Here!" Charley said, pointing next to him. "Put it here!"

Obediently, I sat down next to him, at the moment preferring him to my mother as the lesser of two evils, I was so angry at her.

"I don't think I need to apologize for helping to bring you into existence," he began, with that amused, superior little smile permanently scrunching his face. "Nor for disappearing. That was the arrangement. But I guess I should have thought a little more about how to tell you."

"What's the difference," my mother asked, "whether your father was killed in an accident or permanently away? The truth would have been so hard to explain to a little girl, so hard to understand."

"I'm 47 now, Mom," I pointed out.

"Well, once the story was out there, it was just easier to let it go." My mother shrugged with a little smile. "I never dreamed I'd see Charley again."

"I was a neighbor," Charley explained. "Your mother subjected me to quite an interrogation. I'm a Ph.D., by the way. Phi Beta Kappa. Good, intelligent,

long-lived parents and grandparents. No insanity in family, other than me, of course."

"You see, I was looking out for you," my mother put in.

"Thanks," I said.

"Doesn't she look like me?" Charley asked, turning towards my mother and leaning over so that our two faces were in rough alignment. "I think she's got my nose and chin."

"She never looked like me," my mother said. Which was true.

"She must have gotten some of your genes," Charley said, "since like you she never married."

"But unlike me, she never had a child," my mother almost bragged. "And it would have been so much easier for her. Now it's not something you have to do on your own. It's so scientific. Just totally divorced from sex."

"Divorced!" Charley laughed. "That's a good word!"

"Excuse me," I said. "I think I need a ladies room."

And off I went again, blindly again, towards Farkas without even turning around.

I didn't need the ladies room, only room, though I went to the ladies room hoping it would be empty. Which it was.

I went into a stall and sat down with my clothes on, put my head into my hands, and started to cry.

What was I crying about? I was bawling uncontrollably, but for whom?

And then it struck me that I was grieving over the demise (I couldn't call it death) of my real father, who was the fake father that my mother had made up for me.

If that makes any sense.

Because up to now I had actually had a father, albeit a dead one. Whenever I had done something noteworthy, like win an award, or graduate from high school and then college, I imagined that he was proud of me, and I both wept and glowed in the spotlight of that pride. He was someone I could miss, dream about, talk to, love.

So now I was angry, angry and in mourning, because I had been deprived of him not once, but twice.

People should think a little more before they do things, I thought bitterly, not knowing whether I was referring more to the act that had brought me into existence or to the way I had just been told about it.

But at that moment, childless, husbandless, fatherless, I felt so hopelessly alone that I wished my mother had simply decided, as I had, not to subject a child to such a life.