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2 pages -
for you with all the
love I give
This story is free
now to
Lina
Rich

In My Father's Image

By Richard Newman

-for Sheryl

I am three years old watching cartoons on a Saturday morning in 1965. My favorite show is *Space Ghost*. He's a big man with a black hood that masks his face. On his hands he wears special gloves with buttons that send powerful rays through his fingers so he can fight and foil his enemies. I also love *Spider-Man*. I imagine myself climbing walls and swinging through the city hanging from only a thread.

Or maybe these cartoons come later and I'm compressing several memories to one.

Saturday was the day I got to see my father. Each week, he came in the morning to take my brother and me for the day. Most often, we went to Brooklyn where he lived with his parents after he and my mother got divorced. Usually, we watched cartoons in his living room. *Space Ghost* and *Spider Man* were my favorites. Sometimes he'd take us out to dinner before he brought us home.

I am three, sitting in the living room of the apartment in Jackson Heights where I live with my brother and my mother and father. I am watching television on the couch among the big, fluffy cushions and my father is walking towards the door with a suitcase in his hand. He is surprised that I am awake this early and when he talks his tone says he's guilty of something I've caught him at:

"What are you doing up so early?"

"Watchin' TV."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Uh-uh. Daddy where are you goin'?"

"Nowhere. Just away for a few days. Then I'll be back."

But he never came back. Except on Saturdays, and I lived each week for that day because I hoped if I was a really good boy then maybe he'd come back for good. I suppose I was angry that he'd lied to me, but I learned to hide it. My father expected his children to overflow with love and gratitude at his mere presence. Any-

thing less meant we did not appreciate him, did not love him. And everyone knows that children who don't love and appreciate their father deserve to have him taken away.

Three years old was also when I started nursery school. My teacher's name was Miss Muriel, a woman with glasses and longish brown hair. I remember little else about her except that she always seemed to be sitting on a chair much too small for her:

I am watching a circle of children surrounding the teacher. She is reading them a story about a spider named Charlotte and a pig called Wilbur. Her voice has the same warmth for the other boys and girls that it had for me on my first day when she helped me with my coat and showed me my cubby. I am disappointed. I want someone in my life who loves no one better than me.

My father, consciously or not, took delight in contriving ways for my brother and I to perform for him. He always pitted one of us against the other. If we played football, it was me against Paul with Dad as official quarterback. If we flew kites, it was whose kite flew highest with Dad as judge. If we were saying hello or good-bye, it was whose hug and kiss had more love in it. In all of these contests Paul and I were evenly matched. Sometimes I won, sometimes he did, but Paul was always my father's favorite. If I won, my father softened it for my brother with "You did your best. That's all that matters." If Paul won, my father's praise never found time to tell me I was not a failure.

I am twelve years old waiting with my brother on Father's Day for Dad to pick us up. We have already given our stepfather, George, the card we decided should be from both of us. It was a standard one with a picture of a boy holding a baseball bat and saying, "Dad, you're the best."

I am holding the card for my father that took me almost thirty minutes to find. It's a funny card with a picture on the front of a wrinkled and cuddly orange and black cat. On the inside it says "Happy Father's Day to a real tiger!" I am proud of this card that makes an adult joke between us for his constant nagging that my clothes are

always wrinkled.

My brother gives Dad his card and gets back a big smile, a thank you, and a hug and kiss. My father reads my card, is silent for a few seconds and says, "I bet the card you bought George had the word 'Dad' printed on it." He opens the door and tosses my tiger on the front seat.

It wasn't till he discovered I was good at math that I possessed a tool for finding favor in my father's eyes. Whenever he brought us to Brooklyn and we got tired of watching television, and were bored with playing cards, and if we weren't hungry and my father was too broke to take us anywhere, we'd go into his room and flip open a couple of notepads in which he would write math problems—and I always solved mine first. I guess all parents hope at some level that they've given birth to a genius, and my father was no exception. He suddenly noticed I could do something well and began to call me the "smart one." I started doing problems in my head, practicing at home, asking all the time to be tested—all for my father's praise, all in the belief, the hope, that if I were a good enough boy he'd come home. Once, before I could have known what it meant, he said, "Maybe you'll be another Einstein." The approval in his voice told me all I needed to know.

Still, he never came back, and in some sense the motivation for a good part of my life has been the need to search for him, for the idea (if not the concrete reality) of a father I could hold onto, for whom I could be good enough that he would never leave me.

As a man, of course, I am to a large degree the product of my relationship with him. I spent most of my so-called "formative years" afraid that I would never deserve his love. I learned from him that love is power, that power breeds fear, that fear maintains loyalty and that loyalty is more important than love. It was the trying that mattered most to him, the outward show, on his terms, of my devotion, not the honest saying of what I really felt. I came to, I had to, see a split in him: he became both the powerful patriarch, who at a whim could withhold the love I needed, and the benevolent father who beamed

approval, his love, when I performed in a manner he found pleasing.

I try to remember the good things about my father: that he could be very funny, that he taught me to throw a football and to play first base, that he showed me not to be afraid of new and different things by introducing me to the foods of many cultures. A part of me *still* wants, *still* needs, to keep these good memories separate from the others, to see my father as two men: the one who left, who lied, who manipulated me against my brother, and the one who loved me by sharing the parts of his life that he cared about and was able to share. But I can't. He taught me to play football instead of taking a real interest and joy in my living of my life. He bought me presents instead of crying with me that we couldn't be together more often. He made me promises he couldn't keep because he couldn't face the fact they were unkeepable. And he always, always, preferred my brother to me. Nothing I could do was good enough for my father because I wasn't.

I am twenty-three years old working on a poem for a good friend, a woman I met when she was a 14-year-old girl in a youth group I was working for. I am trying to shape with language my love for her. I am trying to be honest with my fear.

I'm not sure when I started really to love her, but from the beginning she filled a gap in my life. I met her when I was nineteen, fresh from the hurt of realizing that my father and I had nothing left to give each other. She was fourteen, a happy, bouncy kid absolutely amazed to find a fellow teenager, even one in his last year as a teen, as her youth advisor. I became her favorite, as she became mine, very quickly, and we spent much of our time at meetings together. We talked about my life as much as hers, and I think it made her feel more special than I knew then that I would trust her as an equal with my problems, my successes and failures.

I was for her a father-figure: someone to ask advice from, to flirt with, to cry to. Someone to grow up against. At youth group meetings she'd hug me, press her newly grown and growing breasts against me and look to see if I noticed. She'd call me when her life was sad to say a teenager's "I-love-you-will-you-marry-me" and we'd indulge for awhile in a fantasy of where we'd live, what we'd

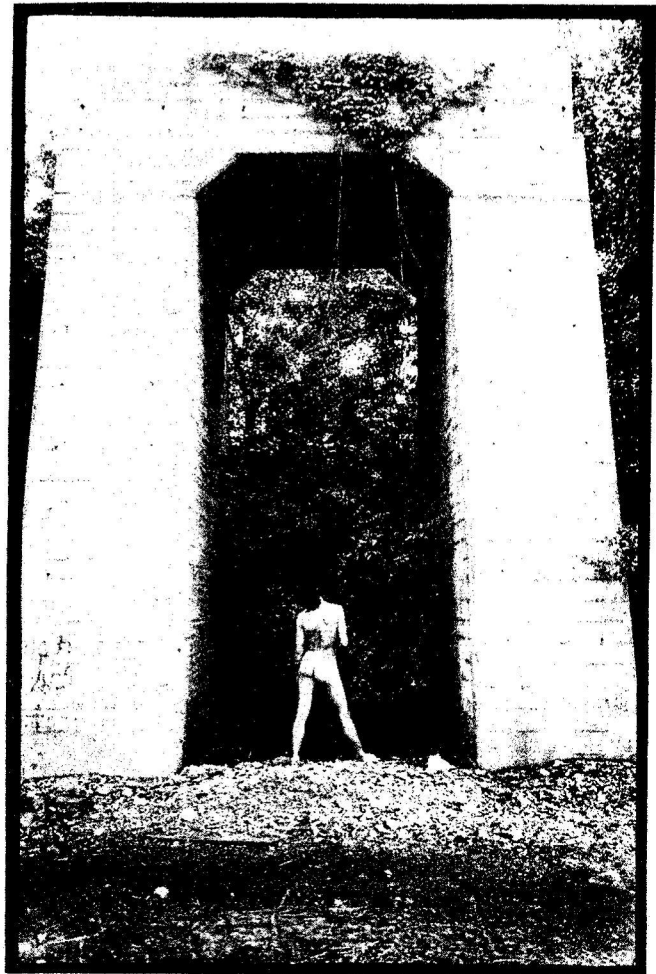
do to make our lives idyllic.

I remember once, with pride in her voice, she told me she'd "taken back" a boy she'd broken up with on the condition that he promised to behave exactly the way she told him to. I told her that she was using him, that the relationship wasn't real because it was on her terms only, because she held all the power. I told her I would never go out with someone as manipulative and self-centered as that. She got scared, worried that I'd lost all respect for her. She even asked me, and she meant it, if I was still her friend.

But I remember imagining myself as the boyfriend she'd taken back, planning what I would do to teach her that people are not machines, that you fully love someone only when you give up all claims to who they are. I pictured her face when she would realize that I was right, the widened eyes, puffy cheeks, the tears. I counted the other boys in her life as they paled next to my wisdom and, one by one, she let them drop.

When I think about this now, what disturbs me is not the fantasy which—considering I had a tremendous crush on the girl—was perfectly normal. What disturbs me is that I really believed I had the right, without any concern for what she might want, to make the fantasy a reality. I thought, in other words, that if I so chose, there was nothing wrong with trying to *make her* love me. I couldn't see that the split I'd created in my father so I could love in him what I also feared in him was becoming a split in *me*.

We are in my car down by the pier and I am telling her of a sorrow in my life. She is crying for me. She says, "I



"Lucid Dream State Series" by Mark Skinner © 1988

am proud that you consider me a friend close enough to tell me this."

She puts her arms around me and we stay like that. She is waiting but I cannot bring myself to say it. She is waiting but I am afraid of what I will lose if I tell her. I know I should say nothing, that this moment will come again. But I cannot, not even to myself, admit my fear. I cup her face in my hands. I tell her instead, "I like you so much..."

This is what I wrote in my journal as I worked on a poem for her: "At least now I realize what these lines about Sheryl need to deal with: How I have tried to mold her so that with no visible effort on my part, "naturally," she would turn to me...I have been trying to grow the me I see in her, have been for her *my father* who accepted from others only the kind of love he could control because he lacked the courage honestly to return it...and, what is most damning, she seems blissfully unaware of all this. I've been living completely in my own fantasy world."

continued on p.45

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Father

continued from p. 3

I am depressed and on the phone with Sheryl. She suggests that I do something to lift my spirits, "Go to a bar. Find yourself a woman...."

We have had this discussion before. It is a joke, a symbol of something between us we have never managed to say. But this time is different. I want her to say it, to tell me, "I will be that woman. I will come to you."

I offer her the chance, "But I'm too shy...."

"Listen," she says, "I have to go. My boyfriend is picking me up in a few hours and I still have half of a paper to write. Hope you feel better. Bye."

No more games. I walk into my room, pick up her poem and write these lines:

We say good-bye, hang up our phones.

Between my lungs the weight of missing you begins to make itself at home.

Richard Newman is a writer who makes his living teaching English and English as a Second Language composition at Nassau Community College, New York.

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