

Story Twenty-One

The Poem

Name: Makenna K.
Occupation: Columnist
Current status: Married
Age: 38
Parents divorced when I was: 13
Sibling(s): 1
Their age(s) when parents divorced: 15

My Story

My father was a geologist who worked as an advisor for oil companies. Because of this, our family moved constantly. By age 9, I had lived in five different countries in various parts of the world. Dad was well compensated for his services, so wherever we went, my sister Tanya and I always went to the best schools. Post-classroom activities included swimming, ballet, piano, horseback riding lessons and etiquette classes that taught us which fork to use and how to be perfect little ladies.

By the time I reached 10, however, we had settled into a very nice upscale community in Massachusetts and began setting down our roots. My parents formed close friendships with four other couples in the neighborhood whose children were equally well-groomed and we all enjoyed a close personal relationship—parents gathered and we played.

In terms of personalities, however, my sister and I were complete opposites. Tanya was the Goody-Two-Shoes, straight-A, parent-pleasing little debutante and I took whatever was left, becoming social, outgoing, a tomboy and a lit-

tle bit of a hell-raiser. We dressed differently, acted differently, had different friends and were at each other's throats constantly.

Living as I did in my sister's shadow, I often felt like I could never please my parents, especially my father. But then, my father was not a very warm person to begin with, certainly not towards us. In all my growing years I don't remember him once saying "I love you" to me, and he showed almost no interest in our schoolwork and other activities. Only once did he come to one of my swim meets and he left before it was over. That was how Dad wanted it, and Mom acquiesced: she raised us while he traveled and brought home the money. For the first ten years of my life, these patterns were as set and predictable as winter following fall.

Around age 11, though, I began to sense that something was wrong in our family. I was used to our father being gone a lot, but he seemed to be coming home even less, and when he did come home, fights often broke out between him and my mother.

Not surprisingly, my sister, who was always my father's favorite, would jump in and begin defending him, which left me no choice but to take my mother's side, although I never really understood what we were arguing about. Only later did I discover that my father was having an affair, but at that pre-adolescent age, you can't even imagine your father sleeping with another woman. The issue was simply too complex for my still-developing mind. All I knew then was that something was wrong.

In my thirteenth year, my father left my mother for a woman who was twenty-six years his junior and barely eight years older than me. I'll never forget the night we went out to a dinner and our parents announced that they were getting divorce. I remember every detail of that evening: the waiter's wine-red vest and his balding head with wisps of

black hair pulled across the top. I can still see his round face with a cookie-duster mustache that covered his upper lip and wiggled when he talked, the ornate silverware, the wicker bread basket with the broken strand that sat next to a candle burning in a small red vase, and the soft floral patterns embossed in the white tablecloth. I remember the people, the restaurant and the food I couldn't eat. Every event and every word spoken that evening was scored into my brain like a copper engraving.

Despite the fact that this was all my father's doing, ironically, it was he, not my mother, who became unruly and hostile after the divorce announcement; when Dad came home, he'd throw absolute fits. Yet Mom never once stooped to retaliate.

Worse than his blow-ups though, was the fact that we never knew when he was coming home. We'd be living our lives, going about doing whatever it was we were doing, when suddenly the door would swing open and there he'd be! Once he arrived to an empty house and began frantically scouring the neighborhood to locate us. Having found us in a neighbor's home, he began pounding on the door and demanding that we return home immediately. When Mom refused, he threw a brick through the picture window. I've never felt more humiliated in my life—another image etched permanently into my brain.

After that incident there was no turning back. Mom took us and moved out, leaving the house and everything in it for my father, and shushing my protests by insisting that we had to let go of the past and start focusing on our future. Even more dumfounding was the fact that Dad allowed it; he took it all—the stocks, the savings accounts, and the house with all the amazing furniture that they had collected from various parts of the world, some of them nearing museum quality.

Mom, Tanya and I said good bye to our friends of many years and relocated to a modest little dwelling in one of the more “turbulent” areas of town. But because of my upbringing and the fact that I was still swimming in dark emotions from the divorce, I had a very difficult time fitting in—not that I really cared.

After the divorce, I fell into alternating patterns of rebellion and depression. Day and night swirled together and I stumbled through my high school years in a trance. Many times I thought about ending my life. I kept looking at my Mom and asking myself, how could he do this to her? Mom was the ideal woman; warm, beautiful and gracious, the perfect women’s-magazine blend of devoted mother and loving wife. And for all this she was now working a forty-hour week in an office and living paycheck to paycheck. I was livid.

From the time I was old enough to write until the age of 13, I wrote fairy tales, one after the other, about damsels in distress and handsome princes riding to their rescue and carrying them off to live happily ever after. The day my father left, my writing stopped. The handsome princes all died and the tales of their heroic deeds were banished to my wastebasket, my trust in men along with them. To this day I remember almost nothing of my high school years. It was only after I entered college that the numbness started to dissipate.

Shortly after my twentieth birthday, Mom met a man named William and less than a year later they married. I was so overjoyed at her wedding that I cried. I think I was happier for her than she was. Not long afterwards, I also met a man, Seth, the only man I’ve ever allowed into my life. We dated for almost three years before marrying because I had to make sure Mom was safe and happy before I could even think about my own life.

After ten years of not speaking to my father, I called and invited him to our wedding. Dad walked me down the aisle, but it was not a comfortable situation for either of us—after the ceremony we hardly spoke to one another. At the end of the evening, he shook my hand (not a hug or a kiss), wished me well and once more faded into oblivion. Even when I delivered Gregory two years later, all I received was a phone call and a blanket mailed as a gift—he never once came to visit. At that point though, it no longer bothered me. I was finally able to put the events of the past behind me and move on with my life. I truly believed that if I never saw him again, it would be fine with me—that is, until he had a heart attack.

The moment I heard the news, something inside me snapped. Seth and I were living in New York at the time, but I knew I had to see him. Forty minutes after receiving the call I was flying down the turnpike with a suitcase jammed full of clothes and an eight-month-old son screaming at the top of his lungs in the back seat.

I hovered over my father day and night. Gregory and I ate and slept in his room. The only time we left was when I took my son and went to the chapel to pray. Everything I did was instinctual. I couldn't even imagine acting any differently. Curiously, my sister, who was also married and then living in London, never came to visit. At some point, either before or at the time of my father's heart attack, they emotionally parted ways and have never reunited. In a matter of hours, our entire family dynamic changed.

The man who underwent open heart surgery was not the same as the one who woke up in intensive care afterwards. When he opened his eyes and looked over at me, his eyes welled red with tears. Surrounded by a maze of tubes and monitors, he feebly held out his hand for mine. He was so choked with emotion that he tried over and over again to

speak, but couldn't. Finally, summoning all the strength he could muster, as if they might be his last words on earth, he squeezed my hand in his and whispered, "I'm sorry!" and began to sob uncontrollably.

They were only two words, but they were the most profound two words I have ever heard spoken. Within the space between them came *I'm sorrys* from the time of my birth to the present moment. There were *I'm sorrys* for every swimming meet he missed, *I'm sorrys* for every day he didn't say I love you, and *I'm sorrys* for breaking up our family. They echoed across decades and begged forgiveness for every wrong he had ever done, the pain he had caused us all, and all the moments we could have shared together but didn't. They spoke to all the nights I cried myself to sleep, the times I thought about taking my life, my high school years that passed by in a daze, the lost friendships, my fear of men and my intense anger at the world. And all I could do was forgive him.

The heart attack forced my father into early retirement and ushered him into a world similar to those who have undergone near death experiences. He began calling me the day after he left the hospital and soon afterwards made amends with Mom. And every time he called, he'd finish the conversation with "I love you," adding, "If there's anything I can do for your mother, just let me know." There is no greater treasure in the world for my father now than our two children, his grandsons. He glows each time he sees them and would knock down walls before missing one of their soccer games.

Mom and William and Dad and his wife all get along now. Amazingly, they've become friends—all four! We gather at each other's houses over the holidays and from the time of our arrival to the time we leave, the smile on Dad's face never leaves. Yet despite the bear hugs and

warm words, his pain has never gone away. You can see it in his eyes. It's unmistakable. His regrets are huge.

Surprisingly, Mom ended up with almost no regrets—except, of course, for us. It took her years to stop blaming herself and realize that there was little she could have done, but that doesn't mean we weren't all deeply wounded.

When your father cheats on your mother and you're a girl, you can never trust a man again, not even your husband. Especially your husband!

Seth is a devoted husband and the most trustworthy man imaginable; the living embodiment of the noble prince-rescuers that I wrote about in my childhood. He is strong, compassionate and wonderful with the kids, and the type of man who could never cheat, not in ten thousand years. I have no reason not to trust him, yet I can't. Each time he leaves on a business trip I become hysterical, terrified that when he returns our marriage will be over. It has nothing to do with Seth, but me. I've been to counselors and therapists. Some say it's been 23 years now and that I should get over it; others offer hope, but nothing ever changes. When Seth goes away on business, I tuck the kids in, read them a bedtime story, and go to my room and cry into my pillow.

At least I'm aware of the source of my fears and for that consider myself fortunate. I know of many others who, like programmed robots, lash out at the demons of their childhood, all the while thinking it's their spouses who are creating the problem. Often they end up throwing away perfectly good marriages, and good partners along with them.

Tanya, my sister, was one of them. Her marriage to a very fine man lasted only four years and she now lives alone with her seven-year-old daughter. Tanya is an attorney who has the ability to go and live wherever she pleases, yet she carefully avoids the Northeast, always citing work or what-

ever other reason pops into her head during the conversation. We have little contact with her.

But my story has a final chapter. About two years after Dad's heart attack, I was stricken with cancer. It may not surprise you to know that this time it was my father who hovered over me night and day, along with Seth and my mother. Although the disease terrified me, I think one of the reasons I recovered was because of the strength I found in the love of those three wonderful people—and my son. It's been eight years now and I've been pronounced cured, and have since given birth to another boy.

As a child, all you really want is for your parents to love each other. In my case, the story had a happy ending. I can now see the love they feel for one another in their eyes, but the pain and suffering we went through to get there sent shock waves through all our lives, obliterating entire years and shaking some of us to near extinction.

How I Feel About My Parents Now

I deeply regret having almost no contact with my father for nearly thirteen years. I think that because of the life-threatening situations my father and I went through, we now realize that life is too precious to waste on anger. If there was a benefit in our tumultuous ordeal it was that. He and I treasure each day we have now. I relish every moment with my two amazing children and my wonderful husband, and I treasure each day that we are together as a family, each day that we have our health, and each day we can sit down at the dinner table and laugh and tell stories. I look at my two sons' faces, and my husband's and I see healthy, happy souls smiling back at me. Nothing in this world could replace the joy that that feeling brings me. Each moment is golden.

My Message to Parents

Divorce isn't just about the parents. You don't divorce your spouse. You divorce your family, and the damage it causes your children will last them the rest of their lives. As devoted and wonderful a husband as Seth is, I will never be able to trust him. I've cried, I've apologized, I've begged forgiveness, and he supports me in the most loving and caring way, but it's something I will never get over. If, because of my story, one couple understands this and a child is spared my fate, I would fall on my knees and thank God.

When I was 13, I wrote a poem trying to express my feelings about my parents and gave it to my mother. It's a child's poem, but if you read it with a child's eyes, the feelings still come through. It expresses the hopes, the heartaches and dreams of a small child, and I think it conveys the overwhelming need for children to have their parents love one another.

My mother framed that poem and placed it on her dresser, where it stands to this day. You may read it on the following page.

I love my parents with all my heart
But the decision is made, they're going to part.

It hurts me so, oh how I cry
The time has come for their good-bye.

Forgive and forget is what they say
I may forgive, but forget, no way.

I must accept what I can't undo
I just hope that my parents can too.

They're on their own; they're on their way,
But maybe they'll love each other again... someday.