



Forgiving My Father

He cheated on her mother, left his children, moved to another country. Decades later **KATHERINE B. WEISSMAN** journeyed to Mexico to offer him love and understanding—if not for his sake, then for hers.

HE IS SLEEPING WHEN I COME IN, A reprieve. He's always been thin, but he is bonier now, and very pale. I sit by the bed and watch him breathe. Wearing a red beret, covered with a roughly woven blanket, his beaky, handsome nose more prominent in profile, my 92-year-old father resembles a ruined prince in his last hours. Are these his last hours? I was summoned here, to the house on a Mexican hillside where he's lived for 45 years, after he suffered a series of small strokes. I came to say goodbye. But I also came to forgive him.

The author with her father, summer 1945.

What? It emerges as a squawk, this outraged inner voice. Forgive the man who left when you were 14? Forgive the man who cheated on your mother with the chic French neighbor who had been like a fairy godmother to you, and then married her? Who moved so far away that he couldn't possibly be part of your life? Who didn't even have a phone put in? Who never remembered your birthday?

As the accusations pile up, my old indignation is fired, and the anger and pain are hot and raw again. It is 1959, one ▶

autumn night in the basement of our house: Our tall father, coat on, bending over, is telling my brother and me that he is going to stay with his mother near Chicago, but he will be back. For the next few weeks I write him desperate, loving letters: *When are you coming home?* Then my mother, humiliated and furious, tells us about the affair. Worse even than having been abandoned is having been lied to. It is clear he will never return.

I didn't see him again for three years, which is a lot when you're a teenager. He'd call when he blew in from Mexico and we'd arrange what felt like assignations. I went guiltily, assuring my mother I couldn't care less. I was putting on an act, as adolescents do: Love ends; divorce happens; I'm cool.

That, of course, was pure fiction. I got married at 20, needing urgently to establish a happily-ever-after kingdom where there was no risk of being deserted or alone. This was too much weight for two neophyte adults to sustain (eventually, we divorced). Soon I was in therapy, and *boom!* It turned out that I wasn't so okay about my father after all. I was enraged. If my life were a melodrama—and it sort of was, as I saw it then—he would be the mustache-stroking, black-hatted villain. My role was victim: abandoned, fearful, depressed, full of unrequited longings for a secure masculine presence, but soldiering on gallantly. It was the perfect story because it gave me extra credit for anything I did right while relieving me of blame whenever I screwed up.

MY FATHER IS AWAKE. HE STARES AT the ceiling for a minute, then turns his head. His eyes are blue, sharp; even now he doesn't wear glasses except for reading. "I'm here," I say. "Kathy," and I sit on the bed and take his hand. It is a huge,

veiny old hand, thin wrist, cool verging on cold, and mine is a smaller version of it—one of many resemblances I haven't acknowledged. Half in sleep, he speaks tenderly of my stepmother, how he awoke one morning nearly five years ago to find her dead. The usual "How dare he?" response kicks in; then I catch myself. This isn't a competition between the bereaved and the abandoned. "You must miss her," I say.

His health has rebounded in the last couple



The author's father at home in Mexico, age 90, and (top) the watercolor portrait she painted on her last visit.

of days, neighbors tell me, but he still isn't wholly there. Although he knows I'm his daughter, it is a curiously impersonal recognition. He seems to be regarding me from a remote place, even when he smiles in a boyish way and says, "You're a beautiful woman."

I blush. Despite a familiar accusatory voice instructing me to disregard the compliment, it feels good to accept it. He left, after all, when I was just growing out of baby fat, still unknissed; I had to do without his attentions and make myself forget what a nice father he had been (except when he burned my Wonder Woman

comics, which he regarded as corrupt imitations of real books): smart, humorous, producing satirical scripts for puppet shows, encouraging my poetry, and (unlike most fifties dads) at home a lot. He'd quit his professorial job, teaching Shakespeare, in order to write.

When neighbors and caretakers in Mexico tell me how he corrects the grammar in letters he receives and irritably criticizes people's pronunciation, I recognize the literary gene that I have, apparently, inherited. I sketch him while I'm there, and after I get home I do a small watercolor portrait and show it to a friend. "You're not going to appreciate this," she says, knowing my history, "but you look like him."

That same friend is the one who, several years ago, first spoke to me about forgiveness. Beaten and sexually abused by her own father (and ravaged verbally by a mother who failed to protect her), she had, extraordinarily, forgiven both parents. "But I'd be letting him off the hook!" I shouted, furious. "No," she said. "You'd be letting yourself off the hook. Forgiveness doesn't mean what he did is okay. It's for you, not him."

Intellectually, at least, I could grasp the rewards: I would no longer define myself as an abused or abandoned child and burn myself up in useless rage. But every time I thought of doing as she suggested, I began to shake with anger. *Giving* is the root of the word, and I felt stingy. I didn't want to allow my father one shred of the things he had denied me.

THE SECOND DAY HE IS well enough to get out of bed and have breakfast in a little patio flowering with birds-of-paradise and scarlet amaryllis. He eats slowly, with concentration, out of small dishes of chopped mango, banana, yogurt, and cereal. "Are you brave?" he asks out of nowhere, chewing. CONTINUED ON PAGE 306

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"In some ways," I answer. "But I'm scared of heights."

"Scared of typewriters?" (He's quite hard of hearing.)

"No, heights," I say, but the idea of a typewriter phobia is pretty funny for a writer. I'm also terrified of public speaking and learning to drive, and 25 years ago I had severe agoraphobia—I couldn't leave the house

by myself. After my 15-year marriage foundered and a boyfriend broke up with me, I felt: *I'm the kind of woman men leave. I'll be alone forever, and I'm scared to death.*

Even now, so many years later, the wary 14-year-old takes up a lot of space inside me. I'm good at sharing responsibility but reluctant to bear it alone; I'm able to travel on my own but enormously anxious about it. So this trip to Mexico is huge for me. It means I trust myself enough to go into the physical and emotional wild blue yonder.

MY FATHER IS NEAR death, and he knows it. "I almost quit," he keeps saying (his euphemism). I realize shamefully that it's easier to be kind now that he is weaker: more humble, less smug. In our four days together, he slips between past



Lunch at a neighbor's house, Oaxaca, 1994.

and present, remembering his life. I practice listening without rancor, even though the moral universe of his version of events is the opposite of mine: He is the hero who, rebuffed by an unloving wife, "courageously" left home to rescue my stepmother from her own unhappy marriage. His fairy tale, my melodrama—it's almost amusing how we, both storytellers, arranged events to make ourselves the good guys.

I'm afraid I still do: While in Mexico, I can't resist presenting myself as the injured party to my father's friends, who, I'm sure, see me as a neglectful daughter. At the same time, I'm trying to be compassionate, to understand and forgive his choices even if I don't condone them. And I'm starting to admit—just barely—that it wasn't all his fault. Once I was older, why didn't I try to get my father back?

Well, actually, for a few years, I did.

Although I'd deleted the memory from my mental history of our very cold war, it rushes back poignantly when I read a folder of old letters my father saved, along with carbons of his replies. "I don't think I ever stopped loving you," I wrote to him in 1983. "I was angry at you, but angry doesn't mean un-

loving." The next year I visited him in Mexico for the first time, and my letters surged with affection and hope. When I sent him my first published short story a few years later, his response was immediate, warm, and serious.

After that, though, we retreated. I wrote less; his letters reverted to travelogues, reading lists, and accounts of his social life. What stopped us? Entrenched defenses, I guess, and for both of us, loyalty: A reconciliation would have made my mother and stepmother feel terribly vulnerable. More important, at heart I still wanted payback—groveling, guilt, regrets. I was his daughter! He owed me!

That's the 14-year-old talking. Most of us, as children, view parents as extensions of our own needs, not as frail, passionate individuals. Parents themselves are usually complicit in this deception, concealing grief or desire in order to reassure us. As we grow up, it

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Have Mercy—on Your Health: it turns out that forgiveness is (literally) good for the heart.

We used to think the expression of anger was healthy and empowering, right up there with sprouts and regular exercise. That's true up to a point. Over time, however, resentment "can dominate our thoughts and create an ongoing strain on the body," says psychologist Kathleen Lawler-Row, PhD, professor emerita at the University of Tennessee. Her research—cleverly titled "A Change of Heart"—suggests strongly that there are concrete cardiac benefits to letting go of bitterness and rage. Participants in the 2003 study were classified (via a 45-part questionnaire) as "more forgiving" or "less forgiving" in relation to a

betrayal. Both groups reacted with increased blood pressure and heart rate while actually talking about the event, but after the interview was over, the "more forgiving" group recovered its equilibrium quickly, and the "less forgiving" remained in a state of arousal longer. The self-reported health profile of the two groups reinforces the conclusion that, as Lawler-Row says, "those who have moved further toward forgiveness have fewer symptoms of illness, take fewer medications, have less stress, less depression, and better quality of sleep."

More health-related reasons to forgive come from research by

Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, PhD, at Hope College in Michigan: When her subjects ruminated on an old transgression, their blood pressure, heart rate, facial muscle tension, and skin conductance (which measures sympathetic nervous system arousal) indicated stress. When they thought of the transgression as forgiven, however, stress markers eased.

Forgiveness, it seems, can even be taught: Stanford University researchers saw a 27 percent decline in physical symptoms of stress in adults from the San Francisco Bay Area who had been given six weeks of forgiveness training; and in a striking study of

people from Northern Ireland who'd had a family member murdered, physical stress dropped by 35 percent after participants spent a week at Stanford learning to forgive. According to Frederic Luskin, PhD, director of both projects and author of *Forgive for Good* and *Stress Free for Good*, classes consist of stress-management sessions, group practice in talking positively and gratefully about one's life instead of airing grievances, and guidance in countering angry or self-pitying thoughts. "It's important," he says, "to change your 'victim' story to one of overcoming adversity or learning about yourself." —K.B.W.

Ring Around the Rosie

(resung by math)

Ring around the radius.

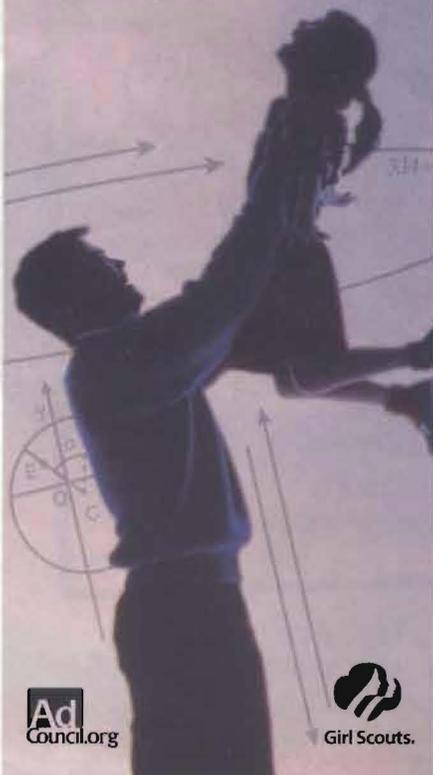
Let's find the circumference.

Diameter, diameter...

Times it by pi!

By the 6th grade,
many girls lose interest in math
and science, which they may
need for future jobs. So next time
your daughter wants to play,
math is always a great addition.

For some simple ideas,
go to girlsgotech.org.



Ad
Council.org


Girl Scouts.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 306 becomes possible to empathize with our mother and father and stop blaming them for everything. But sometimes this process gets disrupted by abuse or trauma. I learned overnight to see my mother as a suffering person and to console her; my father I merely transformed from a benign symbol to a selfish one. Because there was little real contact, he became frozen in my mind, a child's-eye vision in which the parent is both very powerful and not fully human.

THE DAY BEFORE I LEAVE, my father is more alert, managing a brief tirade against Bush and looking at an essay about a new Shakespeare biography. But he can't focus for long. Writing and reading, among his chief joys, are gone. He has been sick of living for months; since last spring, my brother and I had been getting sad e-mails about wanting to see us one last time. I scoffed

easier. Perhaps caring for him in this way helped lead me to another sort of caring.

Still, I had resisted the visit for six months. Fate handed me exquisitely legitimate excuses (surgery, work), and I took advantage—revenge by procrastination. Forgiveness isn't an act; it's a process. No, it's a struggle.

MY FATHER IS DEAD. LAST WEEK, three months after my visit, he had another stroke. I had enough warning to rush to his bedside or attend his memorial, but I didn't go. I didn't do any of the usual daughterly things. I stayed where I was and felt, by turns, relieved, shaky, indifferent, and bereft.

"Full fathom five thy father lies / Of his bones are coral made / Those are pearls that were his eyes..." Lines from *The Tempest* that he taught me as a child drift into my head; it's as if they were written for this moment. But the habit of nonfeeling is reasserting itself. I start to cry, then stop; the tears are dammed up,

At heart I still wanted payback— groveling, guilt, regrets. I was his daughter! He owed me!

at his appeal—self-pitying, manipulative—but secretly I was moved. *How would you feel if he died?* I wondered. *Would the sky fall if you tried to forgive him?* I began to see that hoarding my sense of injury—treasuring it, almost—didn't punish my father. It crippled me.

It helped that I no longer had to defend my mother—she died in 1996—or compete with my stepmother. For the first time, there was nobody between me and him. In the beginning, this seemed to bring only unwanted responsibility: When my stepmother's retirement income ended with her death in 2000, I began making a yearly contribution to my father's support. The irony killed me (after he left, he hadn't contributed a cent to our upbringing). The first time I wrote a check, I felt physically sick. And yet, that, too, was a step. Every year it got

filling some inner lake. Although my father is no longer my favorite scapegoat, losing him won't shatter me as my mother's death did.

Or will it? I might be ambushed by sorrow later on. Mourning a "problem" parent is supposed to be more difficult, not less. We'll see. But my wobbly progress toward forgiveness doesn't depend on having a place to go or a person to see. It's a matter of my own survival, because in casting my father out, I demonized a part of my soul. Unless I honor him, I can't have faith in myself.

On my wall there is now a photograph of my father at 90, wearing his red beret and looking lordly, even in bed; on my bookshelf, in a blue frame, is the portrait I painted of him. These join the many framed photographs of my mother. *This is who I came from, I'm saying. Him, too.* ●