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Mother's Day

May 6, 2009

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The Gift

My Mother's Day Gift

BY EILEEN DOUGLAS

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We stood beneath a big tree, me holding her in my arms.

Many hours had gone by, and still I had not told her.

I did not tell her when I found him, ashy gray, on the bedroom floor the day before, when she called out, "Mommy, why are you screaming?"

I had not told her that first night as I stared at the ceiling in the spare bedroom of the neighbor who had taken me in, while she, in all innocence, had a "sleepover" at the neighbor's across the way.

I had not told her in the morning, when we settled into our seats on the plane taking us home for his funeral, when she turned to me and asked, "Where's Daddy?"

"Daddy's with himself," I answered, astonished I could think of any answer at all, let alone one that came so quickly, and without exactly being untrue.

Now, however, as we headed from the airport to his parents' house, which I knew would be crowded with family and mourners, I had run out of time.

So I held her in my arms, my 4-year-old daughter Rachel, and put it the best way I knew how. "Daddy got broken. And he can't come home anymore." I think I said something about heaven. And how that was where he had to stay now. He couldn't come back or he'd be broken again. And how it wasn't her fault, knowing 4-year-olds think everything is their fault. And I know I made it clear Daddy was gone for good. That this was final.

While a team of boys kicked a soccer ball around us, and my brother-in-law waited patiently by the car, I shattered her world. Now the deed was done.

Late that night as we lay in the dark in a bedroom at his sister's house, awake at midnight, she turned to me and asked — again — in her sweet, questioning voice, "Where's Daddy?"

And so — knowing 4-year-olds need to hear things more than once — once again, I explained it.

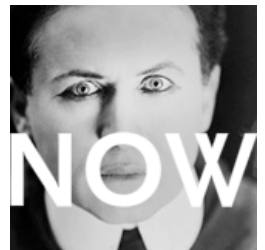
Thus began our life together. Just the two of us.

This was not the way things were supposed to be. This was not the life I expected. For myself. Or my daughter. A widow at 29. A girl without a father.

I wanted her to have family the way I had had family. To have a childhood like the childhood I had known. Where my grandfather never went home from work at his kosher butcher shop without stopping



Eileen Douglas with her daughter, Rachel.



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first at our house to see the children. Where 6 o'clock sharp at the kitchen table the four of us — mother, father, my brother and I — gathered for family supper. Friday nights were always Shabbos dinner a few blocks away at grandma and grandpa's. Then my brother and I stayed the weekend. For a school play or your Bas Mitzvah, the seats would be packed with people you knew and who you knew loved you. We even had a cousins' club.

But for us, my daughter and me, that was not meant to be. For the job I had always wanted, we lived in a city miles away, far from the family who had raised me. We would have a different life.

The first challenge is psychological, the one inside your head. Realizing you are not "normal," that you and your child are not like everybody else. There is, in truth, a touch of a stigma to it. You pray, given the trauma, that your child will turn out right. That she won't need years of therapy when she turns 20.

The next challenge is practical. Without family near, there is no one person you can always rely on, no one who will absolutely always help you no matter what. Hardest of all for a single mother, who is also a working mother, is always, always needing to make arrangements. Always needing to ask for favors. Many more favors than you would like to need. Not just the usual babysitting. Snow days you hadn't expected. Medical emergencies. Hodgepodge plans cobbled together and always changing. Double the work with half the help. Especially since, more than just any working mom, I'd made life extra difficult working ever-changing, crazy hours in a 24/7 "all news all the time" big city newsroom. Or the times when you're deathly ill with the flu, home alone together, too sick to lift your head, and she needs dinner, or a cookie from an upper shelf. Of course, you drag yourself out of bed.

Of course, you cope.

I yearned to be like the families I would see doing the simplest of things when I left off my child for a sleepover before heading in for the night shift or picking her up from a play date. Mother in the kitchen pattering around, father reading a book on the sofa, one kid watching TV, another doing a puzzle on the floor. Quietly being all together.

For years I felt as if I had fallen "outside the circle." As if I were watching from the outside looking in.

But we have the family we make.

Little by little, from the bits and pieces of other tattered families, we put together our own. Divorced mothers like Judith and her son Patrick in the apartment upstairs. How many discussions on life did we have in her kitchen or mine while putting dinner together as the kids played. Grandmothers like Anita, raising her unwed daughter's daughter and taking both our girls home after school. I learned to borrow kids. Please, let me take your child for the weekend, so we'd have company around, so I'd feel I'd done something in return. Free tickets to the circus they would give away in the newsroom, when I couldn't go. I would grab an extra pair. Take my kid, yourself, and your kid, too.

You make it work. You do what you have to do.

I learned not everyone has dinner at 6 with their family of four, weekends with grandparents who live minutes away. I saw I was far from the only one, once I fell into this universe of women, and men, raising children alone, coping as best they can. I expanded my definition of "normal."

I realized things don't always work out as planned. If I wanted life to zig, but it zagged, or to zag, but it zigged, it took a while, after much frustration, but eventually I learned, as the saying goes, that "you can't push the river."

One day, in a rare moment of quiet in the newsroom, I took out a piece of paper and began to type. In time, the lines became a children's book, "Rachel and the Upside Down Heart," about a little girl whose father dies. The book went out into the world and touched other lives. And I learned another lesson. To share your story can, in its small way, repair a tear ripped in the world's hurting heart. And in your own.

I am grateful to know the good work it has done every time I hear from someone who has discovered it. The mother of another Rachel who found it in a bookstore and gave it to her daughter who read it until it fell apart. The child therapists who use it with their clients. Grief agencies that keep a copy in their library. The friends or relatives of a child whose parent has died who seek out the book so they can give it as a way to help. See, the book is saying, you are not alone.

We are no longer alone, either. At 14, Rachel gained a father and two sisters when I remarried. Now she is 38, married herself, and the mother of a beautiful boy. And I find myself counting my gifts. Just as I never expected the rough punch at the start, I never imagined what I now see I have at this bend in life's road.

I love the woman my daughter has become.

I love the circle of family she's made and seeing her living inside it. And knowing I have a place there. And I love this little boy. He is my "every day is Mother's Day" gift. I feel he is my child, too. My second chance.

For his naming ceremony, the crowd filled the living room and spilled out the front door. A measure of how many friends and family we have drawn into our lives since the days when it was "just the two of us."

I love having time for the fun parts I missed first time around. Watching the excitement he could not contain on the first ride I took with him on the Santa Monica Big Blue Bus. The glee with which he splashes me from the bathtub. The way he strums the red guitar I gave him while singing "Twinkle, Twinkle" as if he were starring on "American Idol."

For his second birthday, Rachel held his party in a park. At party's end, she posed him, dressed in white, under a tree, his gifts spread around him, like a prince with his loot.

As I look at that photo, I know the real gift is the boy in the center ... and remembering how I once stood under a tree in a park with a little girl who grew up to know a happier day.

A version of this article appeared in print.

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