

PROGENY



A Mother's Legacy

BY HUGH COYLE

My mother prepped me for a family dinner many years ago.

"Whatever you do," she told me, "you are not to talk about environmentalism, nuclear war, religion, or politics at the dinner table."

Instead, I suffered through my father's and sister's conservative commentaries in silence. Dad would declare over the dinner table that gay people should be rounded up, taken into a field, and shot. My sister, a few years out of medical school, informed us that she wouldn't treat people with AIDS because she felt they deserved to die. My grandmother, bless her soul, would always try to swing the conversation back to the food or weather; I distracted myself by feeding the dog under the table or helping out in the kitchen.

That all changed when I started bringing my boyfriend home for the holidays. By then, my family had given up sit-down dinners in favor of buffet-style meals. We would often gather at my sister's home, where I'd again play with the dog or my nieces rather than risk entanglement in political argument. More often than not, my sister's two little girls would gawk at their uncle and his boyfriend in stunned fear. Within hours, however, they'd warm up to us, and even begin to share their secrets. I'll never forget the glee in my niece's voice when she confided that her mother thought my partner and I were "weird."

"Queer," I corrected her. "Your mommy probably called us 'queer.'"

Weird, queer, whatever. The family dynamic remained unchanged for some time. In many ways, Thanksgiving and Christmas seemed extensions of Halloween, when I'd pull my see-through 'straight' costume out of the closet for a few encore showings. Even as my partner and I talked about the house we were building together back in Vermont, relatives would ask about our prospects for girlfriends or marriage.

It became more difficult to keep secrets, at least for family members 'in the know.' Before a visit to my grandmother, my mother prepped my partner and I again, warning us not to reveal we were gay. She then proceeded to pass the afternoon talking about all the things 'the boys' planned to do together. My grandmother nervously eyed us from across the room. As we pulled out of the driveway a few hours later, my mother commented on how difficult it had been to keep 'the secret.' That evening, after my grandmother called to ask my mother if 'the boys' were gay, she understood more fully the difficulty of hiding feelings — not just her son's love for his partner, but

also her own pride and joy in that relationship.

My mother successfully kept one secret from my grandmother that afternoon. More than a year earlier, she had been diagnosed with brain and lung cancer; after two operations, the tumors returned, bringing occasional seizures and diminishing her physical abilities. After a third, experimental treatment failed to check the cancer, she returned home to live out the last of her days.

My partner and I had returned to New England just in time for the holidays. Before we arrived at my parents' Massachusetts home, my father discussed the visit with my mother's favorite nurse, Eileen. He tried to explain that I would be arriving with 'a close friend,' and began to fumble for words. Finally, Eileen grabbed his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "You don't have to tell me that your son is gay," she told him. "Your wife already told me. Besides, what's the big deal? It makes no difference to her or to me. Her son is coming home to see her. That's all that matters."

Eileen told me this story shortly after my partner and I arrived. By that time, my mother was confined to a hospital bed in the center of the open living/dining room. Her meals consisted of high-protein shakes and ice cream, the latter often laced with medication to prevent seizures. When she couldn't swallow ice cream, we slid jello down her throat, hoping the medicine would find its way. Home health aides came to the house regularly, along with a daily parade of friends and relatives. Amidst the commotion, there was little privacy, even as we entered one of the most intimate periods any family could face: the prolonged death of a loved one.

Quite often, my mother lay still in her bed, silent but not asleep. Her lucid periods had become less frequent; her thoughts twisted into tangles she couldn't unravel. She had difficulties distinguishing between hot and cold, past and present, the real and the imagined. When she overheard a *Star Trek* episode in which the Enterprise was about to explode, she began to panic and demanded that we abandon ship. When the TV news aired a story about Jehovah's Witnesses, she begged me to watch the door and not let them in, and to burn any copies of the *WatchTower* they might leave behind.

On Christmas Day, however, she rallied almost miraculously. She greeted us cheerfully, and managed to eat some of the turkey her own mother had brought for our holiday meal — her first solid food in weeks. The next day, after my grandmother had left, I asked my mother if she wanted some leftovers for lunch. She said no — all her life she had hated turkey, and that she had only eaten it the day

before to make her own mother feel good.

For years, my mother had lived in a relationship in which her own desires and interests were subservient to those of her husband and family. She was, as many women are, a domestic martyr. I didn't understand the depth of her sacrifices until a month later, when the cancer finally claimed her.

As my partner and I sat at her wake, my aunt and uncle approached the two of us. My aunt greeted us, and when I introduced her to my partner, she commented that it was nice to finally meet him, especially after hearing so many good things about him from my mother. "It's wonderful that you can be here for Hugh today," my aunt told him. "I'm happy that the two of you are together."

We were dumbfounded. My father had always insisted that I hide my sexual orientation, particularly from my uncle and aunt. It became apparent that in the months preceding my return home, my mother had prepared the way. She was aware that the time for lies and secrecy had passed, and that my sexual orientation should no longer be treated as an 'issue' within the family. It was fact, and as such, deserved acceptance and understanding. Without such acceptance, her long illness and funeral would have been far worse as we tiptoed around the topic. For me, it would have been unbearable if I had to give up the greatest comfort I could hope for — the man I loved — in a time of such great distress.

In the days before and after her death, my mother taught me the importance and value of truth. This was a lesson she had struggled with herself over many years, but when faced with the ultimate truth of her own mortality, she realized how all else fell away where love was concerned, no matter its nature or object.

With her final gesture, my mother reawakened my faith in the human spirit. Though the lesson involved great sadness and loss, it has strengthened my love and admiration for her. In the years since her death, my partner and I have parted, but we continue to pay tribute to her by recounting the story of her death, and by marveling at the love she showed both of 'her boys.' She showed us that we should not need to hide our love for one another, particularly within our own families.

As many of us know, we are often fear losing our families when we come out of the closet. On her deathbed, my mother decided that this should not be so. To know that one of my mother's final wishes was to make it easier for my partner and I to attend her funeral is a remarkable legacy.

To my mother, then, I am eternally grateful. On this Mother's Day, may her spirit of love and understanding light the way for all of us. ▼

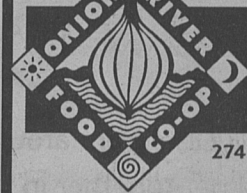
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