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My mother left my father a month before I was born. I have never met this man, and I have never known much about him. Referring to him as "my father" has a strange ring to it, because our only connection is biology—and how much is that really worth? My desire to find this man was never an internal need. It was symbolic. I wanted to fill an external void, to become part of the mythical nuclear family that exists on TV, in the movies and in the minds of Dan Quayle and the Christian Coalition. For many years, I let this external pressure overshadow my internal happiness and wholeness. I fantasized a scene in which I was introduced to my father: He, "tall, dark and handsome," would pull up in his Volvo and take me to his country club, where everyone knew his name and admired his prestigious job. I would walk beside him, hold his hand and smile. This idealized man was not necessarily *my* father, but any male who could play the role. My dreams never took me to the possible reality beyond the facade.

The other side of this "no father" stigma was the "single mother." From Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* to Murphy Brown in the TV sitcom, single mothers have been characterized and treated as immoral, a threat to society and essentially outcasts. I bought into this stereotype. I believed that my mother must be an

inadequate parent and that I was predestined to be a junior high school dropout, serving time for shoplifting and pregnant at the age of fourteen after being "knocked up" in the back of someone's pickup truck. If I had only taken the time to look around me, I would have learned that these consequences have nothing to do with whether you have one parent or two, but with the love and care you receive, regardless of who gives it.

Instead of using my experiences to demystify this stereotype, I accepted it for many years and felt ashamed. It was easier to return to my fantasyland than to deal with the pressures of being "different." As a little girl, and well into high school, I covered up my embarrassment by lying—"I don't see my father that often" or "We just aren't that close" were the usual excuses I gave. Sometimes I even amused myself and others by claiming I was the product of an immaculate conception. Not until college was I honest with myself and then others about my situation. By this time I had encountered other "different" families and realized that my situation was more "normal" than I had ever expected. Eventually, several factors, including exposure to different family types, greater self-esteem, the healthy environment of a women's college and a wonderful extended family of friends, allowed me to be proud of my upbringing and to celebrate being raised by a single mother.

Although I never needed my father, every now and then I experienced a certain curiosity about him and his whereabouts. My maternal grandfather was a father figure to me. He filled a void in a way that allowed me to push my father further out of my mind. I was also able to lessen my father's importance in my life because I did not share his last name. When I was in first grade my mother suggested I take her birth name. This wasn't as easy as it sounds. At the time of my birth, every child was automatically given her or his father's birth name. (It was perceived as "normal" to use the name of a man I didn't even know, yet outrageous to take my mother's name.) Because this had never been done in the state of Pennsylvania, we had to meet with several attorneys before finding one who would take my case. My six-year-old self appeared in

court and eventually succeeded in changing my name.

When my grandfather died, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked my mother to tell me everything she knew about my father. She was surprised that it had taken twenty-one years for this conversation to transpire, but as I explained, there was no need for *him*. It was easy to go on with my life without dwelling on his absence. My grandfather's death also came at a time in life when parents begin to play a different role. I was becoming more my mother's friend than her daughter.

My mother began, "We grew up in the same small town, he four years older than I," and before the conversation was over I knew more than I cared to. This conversation squelched my curiosity for the time being. I remembered why I had waited so long for this day of reckoning. I needed to make sure that my desire to track my father down was to find *this man*, not *a father*. This was very important to me since I had had such high hopes. I had to be prepared for anything.

They were married one year before I was born and were living in Philadelphia, where my father was attending medical school and my mother was working in a department store. She had postponed her education so she could earn money to put him through school (a far too common scenario). Some intuition warned my mother that my father was not being straightforward. After playing detective—following him and making several investigative phone calls—she discovered that he was not enrolled in school at all. After confronting him and having him deny her allegations, my mother knew that one of them was crazy. She also knew that for the sake of her and her soon-to-be child she would be better off without him.

She never knew what happened with his time or her money. Since the day my mother left my father, the only contact she has had with him was seeing his signature on their divorce papers. Although he was required to pay child support and alimony, she never saw any of it and was too discouraged (and probably disgusted) to pursue it. She later learned that he was remarried and

had another child.

Eight months pregnant with me, my twenty-year-old mother went to her parents for help. Her father was a retired school teacher and her mother a sales clerk at J.C. Penney. They were willing to take in their daughter, but they were not able to be responsible for my mother and her child. They offered to help her arrange an adoption, but my mother was determined to have and care for her child. She turned to her sister, who was a flight attendant living in Virginia, for help.

We lived with my aunt for the first year and a half of my life, and then moved to my grandparents' house so my mother could take care of them and they could help with me. My grandmother was dying of brain cancer and my grandfather was about to undergo open-heart surgery with a ten percent chance of survival; luckily, he beat the odds. Despite my grandparents' earlier suggestion of putting me up for adoption, we became very close. They must have admired my mother for doing what she wanted, despite their apprehension, and for being a success at it. It amazes me that when my mother was my age, twenty-four, she worked full-time, went to school full-time for her B.A., cared for her dying mother and her sick father, and raised a very energetic three-year-old. Now I admire her for all of this, but when I was a girl my admiration was overshadowed by my longing for a "normal" family.

Although my mother fell into the inevitable role of Superwoman, traditional gender roles were minimized in our household. My mother left every morning for work, and my grandfather walked me to and from school. His grandfatherly affection was the way fathers should be, but unfortunately, this care was lacking in some fathers I knew. During these early years my mother worked in a variety of jobs. She was an elementary school teacher, a caseworker for the Pennsylvania Department of Mental Health and an associate director of the local YWCA, and she also attended a local state college, getting the degree she had earlier postponed for my father. My grandfather helped with the grocery shopping

and other household errands. As I remember, cooking and cleaning were always egalitarian efforts. This way of life continued for about ten years until my mother and I went out on our own.

My Pennsylvania town typified the class divisions of the United States. The rich people (all white) dominated the town with their posh houses on top of the hill; the middle and working classes (mostly Italian and Irish immigrants) filled in the middle section; and the poor families (African American and white) were pushed to the bottom. Religious diversity was lacking—Catholics were the overwhelming majority—but this mattered little to my mother and me; we occasionally amused ourselves on Sundays by trying out churches of any denomination. All of these worlds converged in my elementary school.

My grandfather's house was in a middle-class neighborhood. I was surrounded by families with two working parents. In most cases the wives were waitresses and the husbands were police officers, firefighters or other civil servants. I spent my weekends and summers with their kids playing kickball in the streets or, if it rained, trading baseball cards on someone's back porch. If these fathers had ever left their families, the mothers would most likely turn to welfare and be pushed to the bottom of the hill.

I related most closely to my poorer classmates, the majority of whom were also being raised by single mothers. The only reason my mother and I evaded these poorer conditions was that my grandfather had made his home ours. My grandfather's generosity gave my mother an advantage these women had never been afforded. I rarely spent time with these friends after school, because they had to spend their free time caring for their younger siblings or their older sisters' children. In these families, there were few men in sight over the age of eighteen, and the women had barely enough money to put food on the table and clothes on their children's backs.

My mother worked at the YWCA, so I was able to take gymnastics—a privilege usually reserved for the richer children. Every day after school, I escaped my reality and entered a middle-class

world from the fifties. Everyone's parents were married, with two or three children, the family dog, the family station wagon and a membership in the country club. Everyone's father was a professional and everyone's mother a homemaker—probably more out of duty than desire. It was the early seventies and many of these women had not yet been introduced to the women's movement (some still haven't), so they fell into a rut of assuming rather than defining their roles. They were always decked out in the latest styles. Their houses were complete with pools and refrigerators that were stuffed with food. I wanted my family to live like this. In our culture, all classes are taught to idolize the richest. I saw a glimpse of this world through my aunt, my "other mother," who would visit frequently with gifts from around the world and who would occasionally take me on trips. I had also created an extended family. I became a third or fourth child in some of my richer friends' families and I was an "adopted" daughter to older friends who had no children of their own. These families provided me with many opportunities, like going to fancy restaurants and not-so-fancy stock-car races. I also learned the meaning of filet mignon, Waterford crystal, Cadillac and the like. However materialistic it may sound, it gave me a great sense of pride to know these things.

I perceived these families as perfect, because I equated material possessions with love. Now this sounds ridiculous, but as a young naive child, it was conceivable to me that the tangible and the visible were worth more than love, which has no monetary value. Because it was the fathers who financed these outings, paid for these dinners and gave their wives and children allowances, the only way I saw to have this "love" was through a father. Since I did not have one, I belittled myself and my experiences and continued living in denial.

Looking back, this all sounds so silly; my mother has always been there for me. I had all the love, respect and encouragement a child needs and deserves—and more. But this was overshadowed because I was too busy being embarrassed and yearning for the "perfect family." It was not until last summer that I reconciled these

fallacies and rejuvenated my interest in finding my father.

At my high school reunion, I was catching up with friends I hadn't seen in five years. Among the routine questions was always one about my parents. When I spoke of only my mother, others remembered, "That's right, you don't see your father that often." It was interesting to hear my words coming back at me, and silly to think I had felt I needed to lie. When I finally told the truth, I was amazed that my friends were interested in this unknown side of my life. They didn't respond with the contempt I had expected. Buoyed by my friends' encouragement, I returned home eager to meet this man who had helped create me.

I started by calling his parents, with whom I had had no previous contact, though I knew where they lived. I was hesitant about calling these strangers, but I had nothing to lose. After fumbling over different introductions in my head, I finally said, "Hi, this is Amy Richards—your granddaughter." My grandmother wasn't half as surprised as I had expected. We had a great conversation, and she was excited that after all these years we finally had contact. She had thought about meeting me when I was a little girl, but was not sure how my mother and I would react.

After telling her about myself and hearing about her and her husband, I was anxious to get to the point of my call. "I am very eager to meet my father, and I thought you would know how I could get in touch with him." "Actually, I don't," was her response. This shocked me, but nothing like the shock that was to come. "Your grandfather and I haven't spoken to him since he was let out on parole." Parole, I kept repeating in my head. Before I had time to respond, she interrupted my thoughts: "Oh, I am sorry, you probably didn't even know he was in prison." No, I didn't. As our conversation continued, I felt as if I were listening to a TV drama—forgetting this was my father I was hearing about.

About eight years ago, my father kidnapped his son. He took him to New Hampshire (they had been living in Florida), established a successful psychiatric practice—though he was not a licensed psychiatrist—and educated his son at home. He could not

enroll him in the public schools for fear that they would be discovered. They lived this way for three years. He then kidnapped a patient of his, another nine-year-old boy, and attempted to take the two boys to Canada but fortunately was caught at the border. Both boys were returned safely, and my father went to prison for kidnapping. Although kidnapping was the only charge, I can't help wondering if he wanted more from these two nine-year-old boys.

That could have been me, was my first thought. My mother was right—one of them was crazy. Hearing this story scared me, but it also lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. It all seemed so perfect. Here I had spent my life feeling incomplete because I didn't have a father, when all along he was a horrible person. The "perfect family" I had yearned for had been there all along; I just needed this discovery to see it.

I now have a new fantasy for our introduction: I will see him on the street or in a restaurant. I can observe him from a distance and decide whether I want anything more than a glimpse.

Everything had come full circle. Now I could begin celebrating and sharing the unique relationship my mother and I had—and continue to have. I am only beginning to realize the advantages I had because I was raised by a single mother. The term "two-parent family" is often a misnomer, because mothers have always been the primary caregivers, whether they have chosen this role or not. (Have you ever heard a father asked how he combines his career with child rearing?) In fact, single-parent families are far more common than society—especially the media—would like us to believe. According to the Census Bureau, they represent thirty-four percent of all families, and eighty-five percent of these thirty-four percent are families headed by single mothers.

In my observation, single-parent families are more egalitarian. Most two-parent families I know are based on hierarchies—with the father reigning from above, the mother acting as the mediator and then the children, who are usually relegated to the lowest level. On the other hand, my family has always been a partnership between my mother and me. *We* make the decisions

about where to live, how to spend *our* money and how *we* spend our time. In other words, I am her "better half" and she is mine. This respect has afforded me greater independence and self-esteem. Sometimes this freedom did not work to my advantage—for example, when I picked out my own wardrobe or when I developed the habit of parading around with long pants on my head, sometimes even pulled back with ribbons for special occasions. This was my way of having long hair, since I didn't have the patience for my short hair to grow. This strange sight might well have been an embarrassment to my mother, but if so, she never let on. Maybe she just found other ways to get back at me, like when she taught me that "I Am Woman" was the national anthem. When my teacher asked my first-grade class, "Does anyone know the national anthem?" I proudly responded "yes" and proceeded to sing "I Am Woman" to my class. Their laughter was an indication that not everyone used this song to express their feelings of patriotism. Although I can now tell this story and laugh, at the time I was humiliated.

At a young age, I discovered that my equal household, unfortunately, was not standard. In the classroom and in other households, I learned that most adults were not willing to listen to me and my opinions in the way I was accustomed to. At friends' houses for dinner I was always relegated to the kids' table. Adults called me "Amy" and I expected to use their first names in return. I also assumed that I could talk with adults as I talked with my friends. This, I was quick to learn, was not acceptable. For a long time I viewed this confusion as my fault, never realizing that although what I expected was not the norm, it was better than the hierarchal option.

I also had the advantage of having a "working mother." Although I lived in a neighborhood where most of the mothers were in the paid workforce, my rich friends' mothers occupied their days by carpooling, playing tennis or volunteering at the Junior League. This I, of course, envied. My rich girl friends had fantasies of being actresses, ballerinas or professional tennis players, careers where

there were female role models. My goal was to become the first woman president of the United States. Other friends raised by single mothers shared my ambition and dreamed of being politicians, pilots or news anchorwomen. We were determined to be pioneers.

My mother's various occupations, which went on to include working with displaced homemakers and being a consultant to AT&T, taught me that I did not need to choose only one career path. So when I am asked, "What do you want to do?" it is no wonder I frequently can't stop with one answer. These frequent job changes, combined with waiting in a few unemployment and welfare lines, also took us to various cities. This exposure taught me a lot about diversity and about the United States, and even boosted my self-esteem, as I frequently had to make new friends.

Probably the greatest benefit to having a "working mother" was that since my mother was the breadwinner, I grew up seeing women have control of money and therefore knew that money was not a "male thing." I am always amused when people ask, "How did you pay for college [or anything else for that matter]?" I always proudly respond, "My mother." This response never seems odd to me, but others always question, "How did *she* afford it?" If you replace "mother" with "father" it would never be questioned.

While I had previously assumed that the only passport to opportunity was a father, I later learned through my own experiences that mothers were just as capable of providing these benefits. In my family, it was my mother who paid the rent, who treated us to dinner and whom I asked for money. Unfortunately, my mother's financial stability is uncommon for women. Most women are thwarted financially by limited access to higher paying jobs and by the lack of equal pay for equal work.

I also wasn't exposed to family violence or incest, which are more likely to occur with males in the house. And I was able to have a great relationship with my mother, a friendship, which I can't imagine would have been as true had someone else been a part of our lives. My list could go on and on. I know my experi-

ence is unique, but I hope other children of single parents do not live in the denial that I did and that they too have learned to celebrate these relationships.

Reflecting on my mother and her life, I realize that we all come to feminism in our own way and under our own terms, whether it's because of opinions, visions or personal experiences. It was my mother's experiences that made her a feminist and planted the seeds for my own feminism. She is a role model to me, to other single mothers and to all women. She did what was right for herself and me, even though it defied a tradition embedded in our culture—the nuclear family. I knew that my feminism had sprouted when I began to appreciate my mother for taking this giant leap into what was then the unknown.