

Ripple



You know what's funny? My dad says my mom asked him to marry her. She says she doesn't remember that. I don't know who's telling the truth.

Three months shy of their 34th wedding anniversary, they both, on separate occasions and privately to me, threatened divorce. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry really hard. I ended up doing more mediation than anything, especially because their divorce-inducing drama occurred at a Labor Day weekend family reunion. The first one we'd had in 10 years. Timing almost as good as when my homecoming date junior year of high school got ready to kiss me at the front door. Just as I squeezed my eyes shut and leaned in, we heard a commotion and looked up to find my dad standing bleary-eyed in the open doorway in nothing but his underwear.

It felt like they were already divorced, me forcing conversation over hot dogs and bad pasta salad in a picnic shelter. At one point, I leaned in close, enticing and half covering my mouth, to whisper about who had gotten the fattest. And who showed up already drunk. And fat. Got me nowhere. At one point, my mom actually bypassed my dad to tell me to tell him he'd better wipe the coleslaw off his mustache.

It was one of the scariest days of my life. He's 67, she's 59, and I felt like I was the parent. Not even: I was more like a daycare worker, and the parents were late picking up their kids. And after the parent is 30 minutes late, you have to call the police. I was waiting on the police to come.

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And all the while I'm thinking, overwhelmingly: You sillies, you really don't have time to be acting like this.

Crisis management skills kicking in, my mind expertly fast-forwarded to an ugly separation, full of passive-aggressive silence, hoarding of food in the kitchen cabinets, and custody battles over the hidden stashes of toilet paper all over the house. I decided then and there, without a second thought, that my sister, who is two years older than me and developmentally disabled, would come live with me. She wouldn't be exposed to their immaturity. I already had it all worked out, even down to how I'd probably start smoking again.

When we're kids, we think our parents are princes and princesses, created solely to satisfy our needs and ecstatic just to do it. As teenagers, we don't give a shit, which is probably beneficial in the long-term for everyone.

Our early 20s find us paying a bit more attention, mostly to scoff at things.

Then we hit our late 20s, early 30s. We've seen a few things, been a few places. And you become a dumping ground for secrets and personal confidences from the aging prince and princess you could very much live without.

Previous marriages, love affairs with a go-go dancer, booze issues, impotence: four topics a daughter should never hear about involving her parents. From her parents. All this sharing in my mid-20s led to over-sharing in my late-20s, with them both confessing on Labor Day weekend their marital unhappiness to me, the one person they shouldn't have told and the only person they each felt they could.

It's hard to balance giving your parents the attention and space they need to get burdens off their chest while you self-protect against the possible ruination of every pleasant and innocent memory you've ever had. Crossing that tightrope is a rite of passage for any adult woman's relationship with her at times very un-adult parents.

The next day was Sunday, and I couldn't wait to drive away. They bickered all that morning. I decided not to talk to them for a few days. That night my dad called.

"Honey, I just wanted you to know your mom and I are back together. We love each other again!"

I wanted to punch them both in the face.

As I hung up the phone, I shook my head. They had no idea the manic, over-planning state they put me in. And they'll never know, because I'll let this one slide. Really, though, Mom and Dad, let's agree that just because I get older and wiser doesn't mean you need to do anything more serious than open the front door in just your underwear.

Public relations and grassroots marketing are Abby Malik's passion, hobby and career. As a media relations coordinator for a private liberal arts college in Kentucky, she has worked at Thirteen/WNET, the flagship public television station of the New York City tri-state area, as internal newsletter editor; Beliefnet.com as an editorial assistant; and Morehead State and Pace universities, as campus newspaper editor and graduate assistant, respectively.