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# A Mother and a Daughter on the Subject of Men

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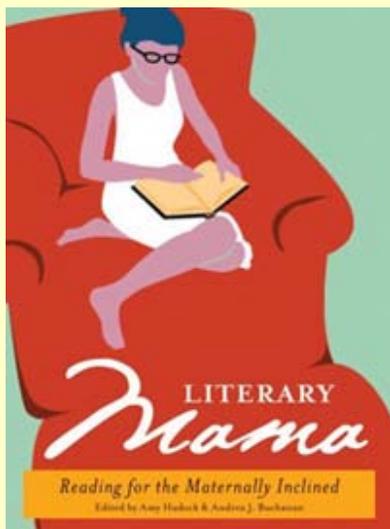
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### A Mother and a Daughter on the Subject of Men

by Deborah Adelman

She storms through the front door, a tempest blasting past me, face consumed by deep, dark anger. It would be foolish to smile pleasantly and ask, "How was your day?" so I just close the door behind her and sigh.

"Hi, Maya," is all I dare.

"I hate that place," she declares. "How can you send me there?"

I shrug. It's the high school we have, is one possible answer. Why are you so picky? There are plenty of other kids who like it, could be another. Because you are 14 years old and ready for ninth grade. But I have parented this child long enough to know what is wrong with each of those answers, so I remain silent.

"I had a horrible day," she says. "Awful. You wouldn't believe what happened in French class."

By nine p.m., the after-school hurricane has turned into clinging affection, and Maya asks me to walk the dog with her. Our Chihuahua in tow, we go out into the November darkness, a magical evening, breezy but unseasonably warm, almost 60 degrees, falling leaves rustling and whirling in the air around us like rain.

"That boy Chris? The one who told me I could be in his group after that mean girl Jessica wouldn't let me in hers?" At the beginning of the semester, Chris, who is Black, told Maya to go take her white punk-ass attitude somewhere, but they have become friendly now. And Jessica, who is white, purportedly smokes, drinks, buys condoms from vending machines, and tells other kids she might be pregnant.

"Yeah?" I say, guardedly.

"He said to his friends, 'If I were thirty, I would totally fuck Ms. Barnes.'" Mrs. Barnes is the French teacher.

Her voice chokes with rage.

"And I was sitting right there. And his friends said, 'Ooh, yeah, man.'"

She tells me this as I am bent over the lawn, wishing I had brought a



flashlight to recover the waste of our five-pound dog, which is hard to spot in the grass in the dark. This buys me a little time. I hesitate, poking around in the grass with a plastic bag.

I'd like to smack those idiot boys in the face is the first thing that comes to mind. But that obviously will not do as a response. Or would it?

"Wow," I say, still stalling.

"And?" Maya insists. I am walking a fine line here, no room for even one misstep. Boys like to brag like that, a lot of hot air, a lot of wishful thinking, crosses my mind. But a general denunciation of men and their tendency toward braggadocio doesn't strike me as a really good direction to steer my fourteen-year-old, as she begins to wonder about what her future with males might hold.

Even so, what comes to my mind is the unguarded way I have heard men talk about women. Once, when I was on a study abroad program, I snuck a peek at a letter, not intended for me, written by a male grad student to a male friend back home, about the female grad student he was involved with. They made quite the couple in our dorm on Lenin Hills in Moscow, but the letter said, "I am drilling one of the girls here, pretty regularly, only she is starting to get too attached."

Or once, as I stood on Broadway in NYC with a group of Italian guys--one of whom was my boyfriend--and a woman in black stockings with mini-skirt passed, I heard one of my group blurt in Italian, "Look at those luscious legs! What a pussy! *Che fica!*"

Or the time in Moscow, when I was walking with a tall German woman down a dorm hall, and a Cuban man behind us, thinking we did not understand Spanish, told a friend, "You take the short one. I like tall women."

Or one summer, on a Black Sea beach, with a female friend from Moscow, when some men, mistaking us (dark-haired, Jewish and Armenian) as Mexicans, got excited. Thinking we did not understand Russian, one shouted up the hill, "*Seryozha!* They're Mexican! And there's ten more of them up the hill. Wow! I've never fucked a Mexican before!"

A woman is for the taking, that is, just as Chris would take Ms. Barnes, if only she weren't so god-awful old. Wow. But at least I was already a woman when I encountered those remarks, wasn't fourteen, still so open, untested and vulnerable.

At fourteen, I spent the summer at the camp my parents directed, longing for the romantic attention of Ken, an Ojibwa boy from inner-city Milwaukee, who worked in maintenance. Ken was tall, brown, older than I. He had learned how to sail the Sunfish on Lake Nemahbin and took me out in the mornings, before breakfast. While we sailed around the lake, I watched his expertise with awe, watched his naturally tan, lean arms, oddly hairless to a girl from a family of woolly Semitic men, with a deep desire I did not know what to do with. But Ken sent mixed messages.

My mother watched me head to those morning sailing excursions with a smile. She was kind and supportive, watching the scenario unfold but never teasing. She liked Ken -- everybody liked Ken, who was charming, with his shiny black hair, dark, laughing eyes, beautiful smile despite crooked teeth, and his tall, thin frame with just a hint of a potbelly. He was smart and had a sly, teasing sense of humor. I was crazy about him. One night, during a heavy rain, we met under the pine trees in the field near the Girls' Village, laughing, dripping, and ended up in each other's arms. But still no kiss.

But Ken was about the best of what happened between the teenaged me and the boys at Camp. The agency served inner-city families, and every year the camp hired youths, mostly males, to work in the kitchen and maintenance department. Black, white, Latino, known at Camp as the "Kitchen Boys," they came from low-income urban families and needed summer employment. They were too old to be campers but too young, and untrained and probably way too irresponsible to work with the children. Those kitchen and maintenance boys at Camp could be rough, but there they were, all summer, urban boys on the loose, and there was I, all summer, all girl, albeit in jeans, oversized t-shirt, and red bandanna.

There was Phil. One evening, riding in the crowded camp van, I found myself sitting on the vehicle floor in the darkness next to him. Phil moved the full length of his thigh against mine. I was uncertain of his intentions and too embarrassed to say anything. What if I denounced him, and he had intended nothing? I felt his hand touch my leg, warm and heavy against my upper thigh, but still I sat, paralyzed. The hand moved along my leg, until it rested on my inner thigh. I sat, trapped between him and the door. We arrived back at camp, and I fled to my family apartment, never telling my mother, or anyone else, what had happened.

There was Lynneal, originally from the South, who had come to Milwaukee as a boy. He was rough and angry, but one night, after hours, the campers now asleep in their cabins, I sat at one of the tables in the main lodge, a well-lit and open public space, and Lynneal came over, sat next to me and spoke in a quiet, sweet voice, something I felt but didn't quite identify as flirtation. Lynneal was older than I, frightening to me with his gruff manner. But that evening, his voice was sugar-coated. At some point an older program staff member, a social worker and long-time friend of my family, walked into the building and came toward us, interrupting our interaction. Later, to my deep embarrassment, I heard him tell my mother, in a hushed voice that contained anger, resignation, but also humor, that he had noticed Lynneal's excitement, showing through his pants, as he talked to me.

One of those kitchen boys was the first boy I did kiss, finally. I was fifteen. We were in the small library nestled into one corner of the main lodge. A staff party was underway in our small apartment, as there usually was toward the end of the season, and I snuck off with him. The kiss was awkward, both thrilling and disgusting, somebody else's lips against mine, somebody else's tongue searching my mouth, some boy's hands touching my breasts through my clothing. Like Lynneal, that boy also came from the South, from Mississippi, where years earlier, he had seen his father, in a fit of rage, shoot and kill his mother. Some time after the summer of our kiss, I heard he had been arrested for robbing a bus driver. And then, some years later, which was the last time I ran into him, he had found religion and become a storefront preacher. That was the last time I ran into him.

The daily lives of my three sisters and I were completely enmeshed with my parents' work. We were from the white, liberal, intellectual east side of Milwaukee, daughters of middle-class educated professionals, but raised alongside the inner-city people that our parents worked with and helped to organize. We grew up marching, protesting, refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance, instead saluting the resisters and demonstrators, and insisting on our right, as girls, to wear pants to school. Summers, we grew up at Camp, first as young children with a babysitter, spending the days running through fields and swimming, and as older girls, riding horses. And then, as teenagers, mixing with those kitchen boys, urban guys spending three months in the country, not sure how to pass their free time.

My mother raised us only into our teens because she died suddenly, at 44. I can't ask her now, but I wonder: Did she worry about her four girls, running with those rough boys all summer? Did she try to protect us? And

from what, exactly?

Maya and I continue our evening walk around the block, and she describes how things got even worse in French class that day.

"They asked me if I have a boyfriend. Then they asked me if I have ever had a boyfriend. And then they wanted to know if I even want to have a boyfriend. And then they said, "Maya, what do you do after school?"

She shakes her head, embarrassed as she recounts her answers: no, not now, not in the past either, and after school I do my homework!

"They told me I need to get a life! I felt so stupid, like some naive geek."

"Ok, but that's how it is," I say. "You haven't gotten interested in boys yet."

"No, that's not true," Maya answers. And I remember the boy in Mexico, in the village she visited on her eighth grade class trip.

But her mind is still on French class. She lowers her head, to avoid eye contact, and reveals the final horror: one boy, probing to see just how innocent she is, said, "Maya, do you know what dirty fingers means?"

"What did you say?" I ask. And then, "I have no idea either." And then we shake our heads, laughing at the absurdity.

I'd like to think that my daughter is in a delicate and beautiful moment, at the beginning of her teen years, so much experience and adventure yet to come. My daughter is lovely--tall, slim--her body filling out in womanly ways. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, the braces off, glasses exchanged for contacts, baggy t-shirts exchanged for body-hugging layers with a peek of camisole at the neck and waist. She's discovering confidence in her academic talents in a high school filled with more than three thousand teenagers, a chaotic mixture of black and white, affluent and low-income, accomplished performing artists and drug users, some headed for Yale, others for trouble.

In her non-Honors section of French, she found herself sitting as a lone white girl in the middle of six or seven Black boys. She has struggled to find her place among these boys, who started out by tossing pencils at her, complaining about her "white punk-ass attitude." But over the past two months, Maya and these boys have started talking to each other, to accept each other. It's been rough for Maya, but she has been determined, resisting any suggestion of changing seats. She tells me her observation--that Black students have support networks, solidarity, and she admires that.

My daughter is out in the world now, almost a young woman. I would like her to find an easy path, and a man who will love her, who will feel passionately about this lovely, tempestuous girl with her dark eyes and wavy hair, her frenetic energy, her emotional highs and lows--a calm, even-keeled man who will respect her, treat her with kindness, gentleness, and devotion.

But in the meantime, there is French class tomorrow, with Chris and his friends, with Jessica. Maya doesn't really want to know what I wish for her future. She wants to know what to do tomorrow.

We continue our walk up the street, and she watches me expectantly. I feel, as I often do as a parent, lost. Maya wants help. I'm her mother. But what can I offer as guidance? How do I help her make sense out of the muddle when so often I do not know how to do that myself?

These are the moments when my own distant memories insist on surfacing. And so I do what I always seem to do in such situations, for better or worse: I tell her the stories. And at least for now, she listens.

When she is not busy teaching, commuting and raising two children (Maya and Jonah), **Deborah Adelman** writes **fiction, non-fiction** and a bit of poetry. Her work includes **The "Children of Perestroika": Moscow Teenagers Talk About Their Lives and the Future**, **The "Children of Perestroika" Come of Age: Young People of Moscow Talk About Life in the New Russia** and an article on the community garden she co-founded and co-directs at College of DuPage, where she is an English faculty member. Deborah lives with her family in Oak Park, IL.