CHILD OF MINE Rosenberg with her father in 2012.

THE PROOF

A STRONG-WILLED MOTHER WANTED TO ERASE MEMORIES OF HER EX-HUSBAND, SO THEIR DAUGHTER WAS MADE TO LIVE A LIE.

by Gigi Rosenberg

MY MOTHER DIDN'T want me to love him. She wanted me to be rid of the bad man. "Just think of it as if I'd been artificially inseminated," she told me once when I was a teenager, while wiping down the bright-orange kitchen counter. It was as if pretending my father didn't exist would make him disappear.

What was the matter with my father anyway? The only complaint I remember was he didn't have enough money. Yet if I was ever moody, impatient, or acting in a way my mother didn't like, she would say, "You must have gotten that from Bob." Not "your father" and certainly not "your daddy"—just "Bob."

My parents had met in the early 1950s, although they couldn't agree on how. My mother said it was on Manhattan's Lower East Side at the Henry Street Settlement House, where she taught ceramics. "He walked into the art room one day with a broken sculpture and I helped him repair it," she said. My father insisted they met at a party. Either way, he was good-looking and funny, and she loved his paintings and sculptures. My mother was pretty and independent, and my father liked women who could take care of themselves. A few years after they married, even when my mother knew it wasn't going to last, she decided she wanted a baby.

ERICA BERGER

"Babies are expensive," my father said, shaking his head.

"Don't worry, the baby won't cost you a dime," she said. "I'll pay for everything." After the delivery, the hospital presented her with a $300 bill. She called a friend with a wealthy husband and asked to borrow the cash so she could take me home.

By the time I turned 1 they were divorced, and my mother refused alimony. She would have turned down child support, too, but it was mandatory, so my father sent her $25 every week in a check made out to me. Years later, he told me that when their marriage was on its way to collapse, he had thought about disappearing for good. Then one day, while walking home, he saw my mother shopping at a fruit stand with me in a stroller.

"As soon as you laid eyes on me, your eyes lit up, your arms flailed, and your feet kicked," he recalled. "You seemed so happy to see me. After that, it was over. I couldn't disappear."

My mother got remarried to a man named Marvin with whom she had two children, my brother and sister, and we moved to Little Neck, Queens. On one of the rare occasions when they spoke to my father, my mother and Marvin tried to convince him to "give me up" so Marvin could adopt me. I lay on my bed listening to the muffled sound of their voices shouting into the phone downstairs. When the call ended, my mother told me that my father wouldn't give me up—further proof of his selfishness, she said.

What they couldn't have in reality simply became the lie we all told. The official line was that Marvin was my father. Close family friends knew this was a fiction, yet we never talked about it. "Keep your father a secret" was the code I lived by, fearing that the truth would make me an outcast. In the 1960s, in Queens, nobody I knew had divorced parents.

I traveled between their two worlds like a spy, unable to speak of one to the other. Most Sundays, my father rode the train from Penn Station to Little Neck and I waited on the platform with my mother and a stomachache. My father would snatch my hand as if rescuing me from an evil witch and my mother would snap, "She needs a new winter coat," like it was the least he could do. When friends asked why I couldn't play on the weekend, I told them I was visiting my uncle in the city. On Sunday nights, when my mother picked me up at the station, I felt stiff and icy, and it would take a day for me to melt back into life with my other family.

'KEEP YOUR FATHER A SECRET' WAS THE CODE I LIVED BY.

Sometimes the truth threatened to erupt. My father insisted I use his last name, Shore, instead of Marvin's name, Rosenberg. All the kids I knew had the same last name as their mother. In the third grade, a friend asked: "Why do you have a different last name from your mother?"

"The school made a mistake," I said. "That's my middle name." I didn't want to be different. I begged my mother to let me change my last name to Rosenberg. "We just won't tell him," she said, and directed the secretary at my school to change my records. I buried my secret father deeper.

One day, sitting across from me on the train into the city, he asked, "What are you reading?" and extended his hand to see the schoolbook I had brought along. In my bedroom that morning, minutes before we'd left for the station, I had frantically tried to erase my name from the book, penciled below the names of all its previous owners. In that moment on the train, as the trees of Bayside whizzed by, my body froze. My heart pounded in my ears. He opened the book. I watched his face as he scanned the list of names. The last one, poorly erased, was Marjorie Rosenberg.

He said nothing. The trees blurred the windows. I wanted to run like the train, disappear like the trees, forget this man and these visits. Instead, I made myself small and tight inside. After that, the letters he mailed me were addressed to Gigi Shore c/o Rosenberg. He refused to write Gigi Rosenberg.

I wanted to be the fatherless daughter my mother desired. I wanted to hate what she hated. But what if your beloved mother hates the man you came from? It was an unsolvable riddle. Yes, he could be brooding and impatient, but he was also kind and warm. He took me to the Central Park Zoo and we rode the carousel where he always leaned out to try to grab the brass ring. We watched *The Wizard of Oz* together and sang along to "Seventy-Six Trombones" from his recording of *The Music Man*. Once, I brought him an apple pie that I had made from scratch, and when he sliced into it after dinner we discovered that all the fruit had slid to one side of the pie. I was mortified that my pie was half empty. "Oh, it's just a shifting of the fruit," he said as if empty pies happened every day, soothing the sting of my baking mishap.

When I was 14, my mother moved us to Boston and the weekend visits with my father ended. There were years when I didn't see him. As I grew into adulthood, things slowly shifted. He came to Boston for my wedding. He liked my husband and my husband liked him. Then, after my daughter was born, I saw how ferociously he loved her. I appreciated how honestly he talked with me about his life as an artist and how he'd learned to accept both the productive and the fallow times. He was supportive of all my endeavors and believed in me with an unshakable faith.

HUSH-HUSH Rosenberg told friends she was visiting her uncle.

A month after my mother died and my siblings and I had scattered her ashes off the Oregon coast, along with those of Marvin, who had died a year earlier, I received a chilly email from my sister informing me that our mother had decided not to divide her estate equally, but instead to leave the bulk of it to my sister and brother. I called her seconds after reading the email and said that I thought there must have been a typo in it. "No, there isn't a typo," she said, and listed the reasons she thought our mother made this decision. One was: "You have a father. Mom thought you might get something from him."

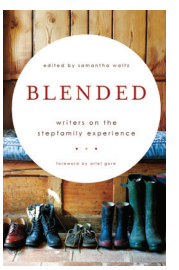
"You have a father."

It was the first time anyone in my family ever uttered those words. Yes, I had a father. One whom my mother wanted me to be rid of. One who, for decades, we all pretended did not exist. It was too late to say any of this. My mother, my accomplice, was dead. I couldn't ask her why after all those years of keeping me in and my father out, she had excluded me too. I had done everything she wanted. I had kept him secret. Or had I?

On my first visit to New York after my mother died, I realized there was something I wanted. I told my father, who was turning 88, that for his birthday we were going to have a photograph taken. I wasn't sure he understood why I wanted to fuss with a professional photographer instead of just taking a snapshot, but he agreed.

When I arrived at his apartment building, he was waiting outside on the sidewalk, clutching his cane. It was a cold, sunny February day. The photographer arrived and we took a cab together to Central Park. My father and I sat on a bench close together, affectionate in a way that I'd never been with my stepfather. I leaned against him; he leaned into me. The three of us—the photographer, my father, and me—fell into a timeless time. If people walked by, we didn't notice them. If taxis honked, we didn't hear them. The photographer posed us and we happily complied, sometimes smiling, sometimes not, a few times laughing hard, and one with tears welling in my eyes as my father and I held each other in our silent bubble in the middle of New York, the city of my sometimes secret visits with him for more than 50 years.

"You have a father," my sister said. Yes, I have a father. That's why I wanted this photograph. Not a snapshot but a formal black-and-white portrait. He existed. I existed. He was my father. Here was the proof.



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