

Family Values

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This upcoming family reunion was causing me quite a bit of anxiety. I mean, my husband hadn't seen his brother in twenty-four years. His last memory of his mom wasn't so great. He'd never even met his half-sisters. All I knew were the horror stories I had heard about his childhood before he was adopted.

His mother was absolutely crazy. When he was five years old, she used to leave him at home to watch over his three younger brothers while she went to the bar. She'd married some psycho that beat her kids up, eventually putting Brad in a coma. From what anyone knew, she'd had seven kids and not actually raised any of them.

This was completely opposite from my own childhood. Home life, for me, was the picture of stability. My parents had been married for twenty-five years. There had never been any abuse in my home. I certainly had never been left alone to care for younger siblings at five years old. To me, that just seemed, well, crazy.

Brad was excited to see his brother again, and I couldn't blame him for that. Actually, it was quite the opposite. Family is very important to me, but I guess I have a rather narrow view of what a family should be.

Brad excitedly prepared for the big day, packing all of our things, telling the girls about their new uncle, Anthony. He and his wife, Renee, had been married for six years, just like us, and had a new baby. I'd spoken to him briefly on the phone. He had a loud, booming voice that reminded me of a friendly teddy bear.

I was apprehensive anyway. I worried about whether or not they would like me. I worried about what this experience would do to my husband if it didn't go the way he wanted. Mostly, though, I worried about their values, and if I felt comfortable exposing my kids to them.

Anyway, one fine autumn day, we loaded up the car and started on the long drive to Circleville. The leaves had changed to bright oranges and yellows, and the sun was shining as we drove along. It seemed, though, that the nearer we got to our destination, an evil pall fell over the sky. It steadily darkened, the closer we got. Thick, grey clouds rolled in, piling on top of each other like huge heaps of rubble from an atomic explosion. A cold wind picked up and was buffeting around the car, ever stronger. The temperature seemed to have dropped about twenty degrees.

We checked into a cheap Knights Inn and tried to relax in the dingy room. It had the musty odor of stale cigarettes, and I uncomfortably settled on the cheap bed linens. I half expected a portrait of dogs playing poker hanging on the wall. Brad flicked the TV on, and I waited nervously for the phone call from his brother.

Several hours later, it came. I had almost managed to forget what we were doing there and had started to relax, but I was jarred back to reality with the jangling of the phone. Suddenly, apprehension washed over me like a sickening tidal wave, decimating everything in its path. My head started to throb, and I felt my pulse quicken. I started to flit anxiously around the room, doing anything I could to keep myself busy. I changed the girls' clothes, washed their faces and combed their hair. Their freshness and innocence struck me as I finished.

All too soon, we heard a knock on the door. The knot of nervousness tightened in my stomach. My husband opened the door and stood face to face with his brother, who was at this point a perfect stranger. They stood there, one in the doorway, one out, eyeing each other awkwardly. After a moment, they spoke.

"Hey, man, good to see you!" Half-hugs and handshakes followed.

Anthony and his wife came in, lugging their young baby's carrier. Brad almost had the door shut when in walked his duplicate, only about twenty-five years older. I saw what looked like my husband's blue eyes twinkle at me merrily from above a bushy grey beard, but there were tiny tears glistening just in the corners. This was my husband's father, who he hadn't known since he was about three.

Introductions were made, kids and babies were kissed, and introductions were made to new aunts, uncles, and grandpa. Stories were told about when the boys were little. They'd take off on their bikes for hours at a time. Brad would take his grandparents' hamsters out of their cages and hide them all around the house. Anthony talked about the little fistfights they got into when they were small. The knot that had threatened my ability to hold down my lunch slowly and steadily began to loosen. The girls were playing, enjoying all the attention. Their family seemed not too much different from my own, except for the twenty-four missing years. It felt strange, though, to see my husband in this new light, with this new family that I wasn't yet sure I was a part of.

Soon after, Anthony suggested that his wife and I go get "the girls," meaning their half-sisters. Instantly, the knot in my stomach recoiled, almost knocking the breath out of me. I glanced nervously at Brad, but he seemed unwilling to catch my eyes.

"Yeah, Amie'll go with you. Go get my sisters!"

I didn't want to offend anyone, but my husband knew my feelings about this. While I had my apprehensions about these girls, more importantly, they lived with their mother. I didn't see how we were going to go get them without running into her. Once again, I kept my mouth shut, and we piled into the car. Renee started talking to me about her experiences with the girls.

"They're all right, just sort of wild. I really feel sorry for them. The youngest one looks like a slut, and the older one, she's just always trying to get attention, and complaining when she doesn't get it. Their mom, though. . . I never really know how to act around her," she said.

My breath rushed out of me in a gust of relief. "Yeah, I've been worried about that. I've always heard such awful things about her. I just don't know how I'm supposed to react to all that."

"I just pretend to get along with her. I mean, all that stuff she put Anthony through as a kid. . . I pretend it's cool, but it's really not."

We made the all-too-short drive across town to pick up the girls. As we pulled into the parking lot, my stomach clenched in knots and my throat constricted. The air in the car was smoky, obscuring my view of the outside. I looked to my left, at the sister/stranger sitting next to me, and a visceral punch of apprehension flickered across my body. My companion spoke to the woman approaching the car, her voice light. "Hey, Linda, this is Amie, Brad's wife."

The woman pushed her straggly hair out of her blue eyes, "Who? Who's that?"

"Brad's wife."

A grunt for a response, and she shuffled off toward her door. The knot in my stomach wrenched itself even tighter. The door swung open again, and a dark-haired girl walked out, wearing a coat that looked about five times too large for her. She got in the car and started talking, but I was so uncomfortable I didn't notice what was being said. My thoughts were reeling from the sight of the girl's mother, my husband's mother. I looked around, taking in the run-down apartments, the trash on the ground, and the people wandering by with vacant looks on their faces.

A young blond girl bounced out of the opened door. It opened once more, and there was some yelling between mother and daughter, about God knows what. My sense of dread increased, and a feeling of awkwardness pressed upon me like a weight. The girl jumped into the car. Introductions followed, still rather uncomfortable. The girls were excited to meet the brother they'd only just learned about and never met.

The ride back to the hotel was awkward. I spoke little, staring out the window as the unfamiliar, ugly streets slid by. To me, the

sights looked barren and desolate. We moved out toward the shopping center, and the artificial lights seemed to force a gaudy gaiety. As we pulled into the hotel parking lot, I resigned myself to this new phase of the reunion.

We exited the car and walked into the room, which was now full of this new family, this family my husband did not know. I smiled slightly at my new brother-in-law and father-in-law, and hurriedly crossed the room to my kids. I pulled them in a tight, close hug, breathing them in, feeding off their innocence.

The other girls, on the other side of the room, began to talk to their new brother about the life he'd missed out on. They spoke of their mother, of her endless moves and marriages. There was discussion of the other siblings, seven all together. Four of them were in the room together now. Where were the other three? Were there more? No one was sure, but it seemed likely there were. Had she ever married Miller? No, they never actually got married. What about Johnson? Yes, but just for a short time. One of the brothers, supposedly, had died of a drug overdose; he could only have been about 15 or so at the time. But who knows, maybe it didn't happen that way at all. Mom would never acknowledge any of this.

Throughout all this, I retreated further and further into myself and my children. It was all I could do to keep from thinking about what I was hearing. The horror of the girls' stories touched me to the core, and yet I didn't like them. The way they yelled at each other, arguing and cursing, sickened me, and yet I felt sorry for the lives they must have lived. The cigarette smoke filled the room like a poisonous vapor, choking the innocence out of those sweet souls, my daughters that I held close to me.

Finally, the girls started to talk to Brad about meeting his "mother." I was astonished that, after all we had heard, he would even consider this. I was even more amazed when he agreed. Sadly, it seemed like that indefinable dread, that sense of a storm brewing that was so repellant to me was somehow so appealing to my husband. I snuggled up in the smelly double bed with my daughters, wishing for the weekend to be over so we could go back to our cozy little home.

As I lay there, the expanse of dirty carpet between my husband's new family and his old one seemed to expand with each breath I took, separating us ever further. Brad and his sisters stood up and began to put on their coats, and he prepared to walk back into the life of the woman who had caused him so much pain as a child, leaving us behind. Once they had gone, I could almost feel that each passing mile physically separating us was also separating our two hearts. I was left to contemplate the value of what I had lying there with me, my precious little girls, and wondered how what he would find could possibly be worth more.