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# OF TWO IMPORTANT WOMEN

Schuyler Diess

My parents met in Athens, Georgia, in 1984, and although they lived in the world of disco balls and leg-warmers their hearts were still in the '70s. Not long after they started dating, they decided to hike the Appalachian Trail, a 2,000-mile journey that takes hikers from Georgia all the way to Maine. If that wasn't enough of a relationship test, they thought the trip provided a perfect opportunity for them to both quit smoking. They kept journals from the trip that reflect not only their different experiences, but their personalities. My mother's reads like nervous diary entries: *I'm having fun but my feet really hurt and I'm tired and I really don't know this guy that well.* I've only heard my dad's entries through my mom, who loves to mock his excessive cheeriness: *The sun is shining, everything is beautiful and I LOVE this woman!*

They made it only halfway before they ran out of money and returned to Athens. From there, they headed to Denver, where my mom was accepted to a master's program in ecological restoration. They married at a mountain lodge in Evergreen, Colorado, where they made all the guests (including the relatives from Georgia) hike two miles to a lakeside destination. My mom's parents spent most of the hike bent over their knees, gasping for air. In the post-ceremony pictures my parents are standing on the porch of the lodge, my mom in a long, black, flowered dress, hair loose and down to her elbows. My dad stands next to her smiling and tall, his mass of curly hair giving him a few extra inches of height.

I've worked as a server at dozens of weddings and they all happen in the same, formulaic way. They get ready in different rooms. We set up the bridal room with a cheese platter, champagne and bridal magazines and we stocked the groom's room with a plate of nachos, multiple six packs of beer and video games. I always felt like the bridal party got the short end of the stick. The bride eventually emerges into the room looking like a stiff but beautiful china doll and after the ceremony she and the groom dance in front of a room full of onlookers. I find these moments hard to watch, especially at the more religious ceremonies. I watch

young couples dance, unable to tear my mind away from the ceremonial “virginity loss” that would occur later that night.

As the night progresses, the couple travels around the room to thank people for coming and saying hello to friends and relatives. The DJ’s voice resonates in the background: *Now this one’s for all the lovers out there*. When it comes time for the bouquet toss, each DJ makes the same terrible joke: *Okay no fighting each other out there, ladies*. It’s like you can hear the creepy wink that came with it. At a certain point, the photographer would usher the couple outside to take photos on the golf course bridge at sunset. They all line up perfectly in front of the mountains and the sunset and I’m sure it’s a beautiful photo. However, at these times I am reminded of my parents’ photo and in contrast to white dresses and obligatory tradition it feels like an honest celebration of love. I think specifically of my mother and how in that photo she looks no different than she did most days of my childhood. She looks happy, unfiltered and defiant of all that is expected of her.

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My mother raised me on a healthy diet of tofu, carrot chips and self-love. Junk food was allotted only on my birthday and holidays and as a result, whenever I got my hands on candy or chips, I attempted to consume them all in one sitting. I threw up every Halloween until I was about seven years old. At the age of thirteen, I had sleepovers with my best friend who would smuggle bags of potato chips and Coca-Cola in her sleepover bag so my mom couldn’t find them. To this day, when I come face-to-face with junk food, I feel the need to eat all of it as fast as I can, before someone else takes it.

My mom believes that childhood is a beautiful and unique time where we feel completely comfortable in our own skin. As a result, my sister and I spent the majority of our early years completely nude. Most of our baby photos feature Muriel and me completely naked except for one ostentatious item, like a golden necklace or cowboy boots. We ran around our backyard like wild things, singing and rubbing dirt in each other’s hair. One summer afternoon we filled a metal trough with water and let it sit in the sun, hoping to create a homemade hot tub. When it began to rain, we excitedly hopped in the lukewarm bucket and sat there naked and shivering until she made us come back inside.

Our family’s lack of modesty came as a shock to some of our neighbors, especially the very conservative family that lived two doors down. They had a daughter, Rachel, who was a year older than Peter. Being children, oblivious to the politics of adult friendship, we spent most of our afternoons together running around outside, regardless of the weather. However, playdates came with less frequency after their dad came to drop them off one day and found me hanging upside down and naked from

our swing set. When I saw him I yelled, “Uh-oh Paul, did you see my vagina?” My mom said he turned bright red, mumbled a few things and was out the door.

I was wild and uncontrollable for most of my childhood. My rambunctiousness frightened expecting couples and we left most social events with apologies. When I was three, we went to a wedding that served chocolate fondue as desert and when I finished my serving I turned around and wiped my chocolaty hands on the pants of the man sitting next to me. I then went back for another helping. My parents feared my teen years with every passing day, but when they came, I abruptly mellowed. Like most girls that age, I spun rapidly into a pool of self-doubt. In response, my mom showered me with affection and reassurance, which I pushed away with a newfound disgust.

I began to see her only for her flaws and despised her for them. I hated how she preached self-love and confidence but was always on some sort of diet. I resented her social awkwardness and inability to get along with the mothers of my friends. I knew how much she gossiped, and worried that she was sharing personal details about my sister and me. She confirmed my fear by telling every family friend about my sister’s OCD, a personal fact that Muriel requested we keep a secret at the time. She feared that people would treat her differently, and they did. Without intending to, they treated her as if she was younger and somehow less intelligent. Later, during my sophomore and junior years of high school, we had a teenage foster brother. When we had to kick him out for reasons I begged her not to share, I was met with sympathetic looks and unwelcome comments from her friends.

Once, during a fight we had my senior year of high school, she looked me in the eye and said, “You know what I think, Schuyler? I think what’s really happening is you see the similarities between us and that terrifies you.” I couldn’t speak because I knew she was right. It took several years before I could recognize some of the good in those similarities.

My mom is the kind of person who dreads a social event for weeks but is the first person on stage, dancing with the band. She never hesitates to share her opinion, even if that means making everyone in the room uncomfortable. She is open and forthcoming about her feelings, always the first to apologize but also the first to cry. She is never quiet in cases of injustice or disrespect and is known to cause a scene if that disrespect is happening to her children. My dad told me once, “I have never doubted your ability to tell someone to fuck off if you need to, and I know you got that from your mother.” I know I did, too, and I thank her.

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In my grandmother’s prime, Doris Diess had the graceful beauty of a 1930s movie star. When I picture her young, I can

imagine her only in the faded black and white of an old movie. She is a glowing vision with porcelain skin and speaks with a German accent thicker and smokier than it ever was in real life. I imagine she was the kind of woman that men tipped their hats to and women turned their backs on. When it came to sex, she certainly held no reserve. When I was fourteen years old, my grandma took one look at my twin bed and said, "Darling, won't you be needing a bigger bed?"

"For what, Nana?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, for all the gentlemen," she said as if I were the insane one. I remember looking at my mom in humiliation, as if to say: Don't worry, I've got this full set of glow-in-the-dark braces to protect me from any sexual encounters. This came from the woman who once described the early years of her relationship with my grandfather as "two little bunnies running off into the forest to do it." I don't know if she had no shame or that she simply didn't understand the concept. She spoke loudly, with a raw, unfiltered honesty. This was true during family gatherings, at the grocery store, or even in a crowded movie theater. The older she got, the more extreme these personality traits became.

For the latter half of her life, my Grandma suffered from an inability to see someone overweight and not mention it. I don't think it was just vanity that turned her into such a raging fatist. Rather, it was this knack she had for saying anything that popped into her head. Unfortunately, Nana had an eye for human imperfection. It turned any public outing into a game of "distract Nana long enough to not ruin somebody's day." One afternoon at the pool, I remember her strutting up to a complete stranger and informing him, "Your grandson would really be a lot handsomer if he lost some weight." The boy, unaware of the ridicule, continued to splash happily in the pool shouting, "Look Grandpa, look what I can do!"

I could only stare at her, mouth hanging open, wishing to dissolve permanently into the sidewalk. Not once, but TWICE, I was stuck in an elevator with her and someone she was sure would break the 4,200 pound cables. I pressed myself into the corner of the four by four box, trying my hardest not to hear her mutterings of, fat, fat, fat, fat, fat.

Her commentary did not stop with the mildly overweight. No one was safe, not even babies. Her favorite dinnertime conversation was recalling what an "absolutely hideous" baby my father was. She claimed that Opa laughed when he emerged from the womb.

"But don't worry," she would console him, "I told your father to just give it a few days." Which was upsettingly similar to her response to my, admittedly hideous, sixth grade school pictures.

“Just give it a few face years, darling,” she said, patting me firmly on the cheek. I loved most how she found a way to say what almost everyone was thinking. Several years ago, in the checkout line at the grocery store, she leaned over an infant child in a stroller and in the most cooing voice said, “MY, what an ugly baby.”

She was tough and at times vicious, claiming to have not cried a day since the years spent separated from her family during the Holocaust. She spoke of the war with brevity, often abruptly ending stories with a wave of the hand as if to quickly brush the memories back into the past. She remembered wearing the embroidered golden Star of David and how it changed the way the other children—even her friends—treated her. She remembered her father pacing back and forth outside of the synagogue, wishing only for a place of worship in a world of turmoil. Most of all, she remembered that when her parents could only flee with one child, they chose her sixteen-year-old brother, leaving her alone at only thirteen, in the reluctant arms of a distant Dutch cousin.

Her family enjoyed freedom in Montreal while she remained in a war-torn country, under the roof of a woman who resented her. She went to school despite the language barrier and was teased for everything from her religion to the way she dressed. In these years of silence, she left her childhood behind and became a person the people in her life did not recognize or appreciate. Yet, despite the multitude of injustices that she faced, my Nana remembered this period of her life with an intense fixation on the wooden shoes she was forced to wear to school. Her family abandoned her for years in a nation torn apart by racism and genocide, and it was the fault of those “Goddamn hideous wooden shoes.”

As a rather rotund child, I should have been offended by her judgements, but—in my mind—her bluntness and even her sexuality were merely forms of resilience. When she was able to escape and meet her family in Montreal, she finally found ways to reclaim a power that was taken from her years ago. It was her unfiltered charm that made her into the captivating woman I remember. Captivating in a way that only the purely honest can be. I used to sit on her apartment balcony for hours, eating schnitzel and listening to the same stories. It was a sense of duty that kept me sitting there, while the temptations of cable television tried to pull me away. However, it was the way she spoke that kept me listening. She was unfiltered, unaware and completely transfixed by moments lost in time.