

Paper Dragons

Nonfiction

I've seen pictures of my parents when they were in high school. I've seen the cheap 8-by-10 photos from their prom. I've thought it almost too cliché to bear. My mom, captain of the cheerleading squad, wore a ruched, dark purple, scoop-neck dress, her hair giving away the era by the depleting ozone layer above her head. My dad, quarterback of the football team, wore a black tux, his hair freshly cut. Teeth gleaming out of glowing, flawless faces, my mom and dad look like the typical happy high school couple. I try not to choke on the bubble gum sweetness of it all. "So cute," I heard myself say. "You guys *look* so cute." I leaned closer to the pictures and squinted, noticing for the first time the scratches on their glossy surfaces.

When I was little, I caught only snippets of my parents' fights—somehow always the most explosive moments—and I was quick to retreat and get out of the way. One night I was in my room concentrating on the outline of a 100-piece cat puzzle. Things weren't fitting right and I had been at it for hours. I didn't want to give up, but I needed a break.

I headed to the kitchen, pausing to admire the red paper dragons hanging from the ceiling in the dining room. I had received an Origami book from my uncle for Christmas and had turned the air above the dinner table into a medieval battle scene.

As I unpeeled a banana in the kitchen I heard stomping feet enter the dining room. I don't remember what words were being said—not said, spat. I pushed open the door to the dining room just as my dad, red-faced, muscles taut, gently bumped his head against one of my low-hanging Origami dragons. *Bink*. I heard the tiny collision in my head, as if it were a pebble causing the entire mountain to crumble unexpectedly and violently. His hand flashed up, and he crunched his fingers around the guilty dragon, whipping it to the

carpet. He gave it, and then my mom, a condemning glance. That was my cue. Before they could look in my direction, I was back in my room squinting at my unfinished puzzle. Breathing hard, I jammed the pieces into place while hot tears fell onto my little hands.

The only times my parents looked ugly to me were during those moments when I caught them in the grips of anger, their beautiful proportions twisted by the hands of rage. I ran from these moments, so foreign and odd. And when I reappeared, my mom had cleaned away her runny mascara and my dad had smoothed out the wrinkles in his brow. Had I imagined the episode completely? I couldn't have; there were always little details that would awaken the unfriendly reality—the missing dragon above the table. Was I supposed to replace it, fill its spot? Or would I just find it torn down again? My troubles were soothed in a whirl of toothy, white smiles and genuine-sounding laughter from my parents, as if to say, *“No it didn't happen. We didn't yell. We love you. We love each other. Look at us. Just look at us.”* And I looked. I looked. What I saw was my parents projecting their happiness just far enough to fool everyone but me.

I used to dress up my Barbie dolls, but I very rarely played with them. I would brush their hair, smooth their brightly patterned clothes, inspect the porcelain-plastic planes of their faces. I would situate the pretty blonde mom in her to-scale kitchen next to the faux wooden dining table that was set for three. The dimple-faced, silky haired daughter would be carefully set in her pink bedroom on her fluffy carpeted floor. The brown and muscled father with clear eyes and big hands had a spot in the garage where he sat with miniscule tools inspecting his daughter's bike.

There they would sit. I never took them through any family dialogue or dramatized fun. The pretty blonde mom never called her daughter to dinner. The daughter never played with her toys in her peaceful bedroom. The dad never did any more than stare at that bike. I was perfectly content to just sit back and marvel at the perfection of it, everyone where they should be, emanating the aura of a happy family. They looked good, so I never attempted to make them functional. Barbie dolls don't shake angry fists or point fingers, but they also don't laugh or give soft, warm hugs. Plastic faces will never wear crinkly smiles or bitten lips. Rubber legs will never jump for joy or get goose bumps. While my parents weren't perfect, I prefer their imperfection to the sterile world of the dollhouse.

When I was fourteen, my mom and dad entered a tattoo parlor hand-in-hand on a glaringly hot summer day. As they slipped in the door, their hands unlaced. Two wedding bands were removed and pocketed.

An hour later, they emerged. Where my mom's small diamond ring had been there was now a swollen blur of letters that read "Aric" in indelible ink. Where my dad's wedding band had been there were now six letters, "Kerrey," in curley-Q writing.

I was horrified. Inked up like members of a biker gang, they were clearly involved in a sickening plot to embarrass me. I figured at this rate they would begin to insist on taking me to school on matching Harleys.

My disgust at this unparentlike display of commitment lasted until one fateful PTA meeting when I saw a well-dressed woman glance at my mom's finger. She craned her neck to get a better look and in a snooty, half-sneering voice asked my mother, "Oh,

and what will happen if you and Aric don't stay together? That's awfully permanent, isn't it?"

My mom calmly gave her a glittery, amused laugh and said, "Awfully permanent, yes. Isn't that the point?" She absent-mindedly ran her fingers over the raised edges of the letters on her ring finger as a smile crept into her eyes.

My parents chaperoned my first Homecoming dance much to my chagrin (and later, their own. "Do you guys always dance like that?"). My mom took longer to get ready than I did and received more dance invitations. I watched her get approached by one of my friends, who knew full well that she was my mom, and as he extended his adolescent hand for her to take, she looked at him in alarm. As she gawked at his audacity, I heard him say, "C'mon, Mrs. Woughter, we'll leave room for Jesus and everything."

My dad whisked in then, a question mark popping up above his head. Tall, muscular, and altogether foreboding, all he had to say was, "Umm?" and that overly confident teenaged boy bolted, head down, hands pocketed. I laughed softly as my parents began to sway to Lady Gaga's beat.

Just a week and a half later, I was lying in my bed at home, my room dark and my eyelids heavy, listening to the low voices of my parents in the room directly across the hall. They sounded angry, their words staccato and rushed. Once more worry clawed at me, its hands reaching up my body making my throat scratchy, my eyes sting, my hands shake. First instinct: out of sight, out of mind. My eyes snapped shut and my parents' bedroom door was no longer in view.

Then I heard it. It was my dad's low, rumbling guffaw at first. My mom joined with a trilling, spontaneous giggle and I found my laughter adding to the melody.

Cacophony to harmony in seconds!

I've seen and felt the up and down swings in my parents' relationship. I've felt the sweet breeze of their sunbeam smiles and the hot burn of their hurled accusations. They can sing and heal in a single breath.

Because of this, I try to edit out the bad moments in the mental scrapbook. In my head, my parents look like they belong in a land of long legs and sandy beaches, soft skin and palm trees—usually. When the other images creep up—images of dark corners, sad sniffles, harsh words, and eyes squeezed shut—I remind myself that if you love someone, you love them even when they look or act ugly.

Years after paper dragons and Barbie dolls, my mom and dad are still the best looking couple around. My mom has soft laugh lines. My dad has pleasant crinkles around his eyes. I no longer believe their bright-eyed façade is the only picture in the scrapbook. We have problems, it's true, but we get through them. And we look damn good doing it.