

Daddy Weirdest

My dad just called. He's going to be in the city tonight and wants me to meet him for dinner. Nice, right? Maybe for a child of a normal parent, which I am not. Here's the scenario: Dad's traveling on business from upstate New York to Washington, D.C. While a lot of people would just hop on a plane, he will take the evening train from Syracuse, arrive in New York at 10:00 P.M., and check into a sleeper car of the D.C.-bound train, which will leave New York at 5:00 A.M. And if you think that means dinner at a swanky late-night bistro, you're wrong. There's really no place my dad would rather be than Penn Station. So if I want to see him, I get to hang out there in the late evening with the heroin addicts until his train pulls in. We'll have chicken sandwiches and a cup of instant hot cocoa at Roy Rogers, after which he will kiss me good-bye and go find his sleeper car.

The man loves trains—riding them, photographing them, even listening to them. When I was little, I thought it was normal to take Amtrak everywhere; I truly believed that only the filthy rich took domestic flights. I also didn't find it odd that if we had to drive—say, to visit

my grandparents—the route was carefully plotted near a railroad track so that somewhere along the way, Dad could stop and take pictures.

By the time I reached middle school, I realized that my dad was a freak. By the eighth grade I was the only kid who had never been on an airplane. And it got worse. No other parents played albums with titles like "Sounds of Steam," live recordings of steam engines that sent the dog and cats running for cover. Other parents also weren't teased by neighbors and friends about having memorized all the train schedules in the northeast corridor. But Dad remained oblivious and blithely continued to entertain company with his uncanny imitation of an oncoming train that made the dog howl.

In ninth grade, the coolest girl in my class, Krista Marshall, decided I was her new best friend, and my father almost ruined my life. Hoping to cement the friendship, I invited Krista on a vacation with my family. In my effort to please, I had forgotten that Dad's definition of vacation is different from most people's. Other families go to Disneyland or to the beach, or at least get to stay in a motel. But Frank Barry believes in self-sufficiency, so we ended up in a tent in the woods in the Adirondacks. As was our luck with camping trips, it rained from the first night on, which wouldn't have been a problem if my father wasn't such a fix-it-yourself type of guy and hadn't duct-taped our old canvas tent together. But he is, and he had, and the tent leaked. After four days of waking up sopping wet, going for 5- to 10-mile hikes (on which we saw lots of endangered plants but not one cute boy) and living off Dinty Moore beef stew, we finally piled back into the car for the four-hour drive home.

Poor Krista, bug-bitten and sneezing, could no longer contain herself when my father pulled off the road in

what seemed like the middle of nowhere, got out of the car, and disappeared into the woods.

"Why are we stopping?" she asked, a note of panic rising in her voice, probably fearing that we were going to set up camp again.

My mother smiled as if everything and everyone were normal, and said, "Frank is just going to take some pictures." To my horror, there was my dad, some 20 feet above the ground, leaning out precariously from a railroad bridge to get just the right angle to photograph the train when it came along. The train was late and we ended up waiting in the car for 45 minutes. Krista tried not to cry, and I miserably wondered how a man who didn't look malevolent could single-handedly destroy his own flesh and blood's chances at ever being hip.

I have to admit that my father never really ruined my life. It turned out that Krista's parents have a piece of paper strategically placed over a hole in their living room that says in bold red letters, "What in the hell are you looking up here for?!" Krista always tried to remove it before friends or boyfriends came over, but somehow it always reappeared in all its defensive glory. With our socially challenged progenitors in common, we became and remain great friends.

I also should admit that when not humiliated by my dad's bizarre behavior, I have to love and admire that he's a free spirit. The truth is, he simply doesn't worry about what other people think. How many other girls have a dad who hitchhiked all over Latin America to photograph trains his first year out of college? Or whose spare time is devoted to the worthy cause of educating the world about the environmental correctness of taking the train? He's a maverick. That's cool because I'm kind of like that, too. I don't care if my socks don't match, or if people laugh at me because I obstinately still believe that life should be

fair. Maybe I got it from him, but I definitely make my own choices, regardless of other people's opinions.

So I guess it's better to have an embarrassing father than one who is busy trying to impress other people. Sometimes I even love my dad all the more for his quirkiness, like his love for Penn Station. And at least now I have some ammunition when he starts to scold me about being careful in Manhattan. I mean, I appreciate his concern and everything, but he's the one sleeping in the train station, not me.

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