

THE
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DIVORCE THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

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For you.
Yes, *you*.

PREFACE

I always wanted to write for the young-adult crowd. When I began this work, I thought that's what I was doing. I was wrong. A few pages into it I realized that I wasn't writing this piece for "Gina." I was writing it for her parents, grandparents, teachers and a multitude of other adults who might influence her during such an impressionable time.

For many years, I've held onto the passionate belief that families should evolve and not dissolve through the process of a divorce. For just as many years, I've been saddened by the frequency with which the opposite effect comes to fruition. My intention for this book is to allow those involved in a divorce to regard the situation from different perspectives. My hope is that such consideration will promote more positive interactions, thus encouraging a healthier transition for divorcing families.

I'd like to recognize my parents, for showing me that a good divorce is possible. I'd also like to express gratitude to my ex-husband for helping me attain my own good divorce. To those of you who served, and will serve, as teachers throughout my quest for knowledge, thank you. All interactions provide an opportunity to learn and grow.

Reader, I wish you a peaceful and prosperous evolution...

CHAPTER 1: JUNE

It was five days before my twelfth birthday when it happened, when my whole life changed. It was a Wednesday night in June, just a couple weeks before the end of the school year.

My mom went shopping after dinner, leaving my dad home with me and my brother, Danny. We cleaned up the kitchen together and then set to work on the rest of the house. We had a pillow fight in the living room, and we played catch with a plastic orange from the dining room table. My dad always found a way to make chores seem like fun. Even when he helped us with our homework, he pretended that he was the student and Danny and I were the teachers. He asked us to teach him the lesson, and by the time we were done, we didn't need his help at all!

I was upset when my mom came home and my parents started fighting. It was past bedtime, and I was supposed to be asleep, but they woke me up. It wasn't unusual. The fight was pretty standard: they were arguing about my dad not sweeping behind the toilet and my mom being a drill sergeant and my grandmother being too nosey and my aunt being a showoff ... And then he said it. Actually, he didn't say anything at first. It was oddly quiet for a moment, and

then he said, “Jill, I don’t want to live like this anymore. It’s not fair to the kids, and it’s not fair to us. I think we should get a divorce.”

My mother started shouting again, but I didn’t hear what she was saying because Danny burst into my room. He was crying as he jumped on my bed and clung to me. I put my arms around him and rubbed his back.

“Gina, I’m scared. What’s going to happen now?” he asked me.

I didn’t know what to tell him. I didn’t know *what* was going to happen. The truth was that I was as scared and confused as he was, but I wasn’t crying. I didn’t cry because I had to be strong for Danny. He was only six years old.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “It’s going to be OK. They’re just fighting like usual. You know how they say things they don’t mean.”

The yelling stopped then because my older brother, Kevin, came home. Kevin was a senior in high school and he worked evenings at a pizza shop downtown. Normally I was jealous of the fact that Kevin got to stay out so late on school nights, but that night I was glad he came home when he did. Danny went back to his room. Mom and Dad gave it a rest, and I was finally able to get some sleep.

The next morning everyone acted normal. After school, during dinner and after dinner, there was no fighting. No mention of the D-word. I was relieved! I thought maybe it had all been a bad dream. In fact, Mom and Dad actually seemed to get along pretty well over the next couple weeks.

My birthday came and went. The last day of school came and went. The weekend after school ended, Dad took me to his parents’ house. My grandmother’s birthday is the day before mine, and my cousin Laurie’s birthday is three

days later. She's a year younger than me, and Grandma said that this year she thought we were old enough to go on a cruise to celebrate. I'd found out about it in December and had been looking forward to the trip for months.

We were halfway to their house when Dad turned down the radio and told me the news.

"Gina, we need to talk," he said.

And then I *knew*. I knew that the D-word hadn't been a dream. I knew it was real, and it was all coming true. My throat was dry, and my eyes were wet. I turned and looked out the window. There were horses in a pasture by the side of the road.

"Gina? Can you look at me?"

I shook my head.

"Well, OK..." he began. "There's no easy way to say this. Your mom and I have decided ... Well, I'm ... I'm going to be moving. I found an apartment downtown, and I'm going to move while you're on your cruise next week."

I choked back the tears. How could they do this to me? At the beginning of the summer! The beginning of my vacation! How could Dad leave when I wouldn't be there to say goodbye? And why didn't he ask me if I wanted to go with him?

"Do you have any questions?" he asked after I'd been silent for some time.

I shook my head again. I still wouldn't look at him. I stared at the cornfields outside the window. I didn't know if I wanted to cry or if I wanted to scream. And I felt empty too, like there was a big hole in me. Right in the center of my chest, or maybe my stomach. I couldn't be sure because on top of everything else, I also felt numb.

Dad started talking again. I guess he didn't like the fact that I didn't have anything to say. "I want you to know that this has nothing to do with you," he said.

Yeah, right, I thought. It has everything to do with me. It's my life. My parents. My family!

"Your mom and I love you very much," Dad kept talking. "It's not your fault, and we're not mad at you. So if you have any questions about anything, you can talk to us. We've been working together on our plans, and we're trying hard to do what's best for you kids."

Not my fault? *Of course it's not my fault!* Why did he think I would think this was because of me? I wasn't the one screaming in the kitchen late at night. I wasn't the one who got mad about the electric bill or the credit cards or whatever else they fought about. No way ... this wasn't my fault. It was *theirs!*

"And I know this might seem odd to say, but I'm doing this for you. I want you and your brothers to be happy and relaxed at home. You shouldn't have to hear me and your mom fighting. I want you to have a better life."

A better life? Was he crazy? I couldn't imagine how things could be any better without my dad around. When the view out the window turned to hotels and warehouses, I wiped my eyes, looked at Dad and asked, "What about Danny? Is he going with you?"

"No," Dad looked relieved. He must've been happy that I finally said something. "Your mom feels very strongly that both you and Danny should stay in the house with her. That's your home, and there's no reason for you to move. Your mom and I decided you will both stay with me every other weekend. But we can still talk on the phone and email. I'll send you some pictures of my apartment as soon as I get settled."

"Are you still going to see Kevin?" I asked. My dad wasn't Kevin's father, but Kevin didn't see his real dad, so he and Dad had always been close.

"I'm not sure," Dad admitted. "I'll discuss that with Kevin. Obviously I love him very much, but he's an adult,

and he's going off to college in the fall ... we'll just have to see how things go."

I turned the radio up again and turned back toward the window. *What a great way to start my vacation*, I thought with a sigh.

When we got to Grandma and Grandpa's house, they didn't say anything about the D-word, but Grandpa looked very serious. He and Grandma spent extra time hugging and then waited for me to run off with Laurie so they could talk to my dad. I wondered if they were mad at him.

Laurie and I escaped to our old tree house where we used to have tea parties. We hadn't done that in a long time. Instead, Laurie had stocked it with magazines and nail polish. I chose a bottle of dark blue. The color was almost black, and it matched my mood.

I didn't say anything about my parents, but I could tell that Laurie knew. Eventually, she looked up from her pink toes and said, "Gina, I am so sorry."

I didn't know what to say. It was all so new to me. And it bothered me that Laurie found out either before or at the same time that I did. Still, it was nice to hear something so simple. I thanked her, and she told me she couldn't imagine how I must feel.

"It's weird," I said. "You see it happen to other people, and you always think it won't happen to you."

Laurie nodded, shook her bottle of polish, and began a second coat on her toes. I was glad because I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I felt a little better, and I hoped my situation wouldn't ruin our vacation.

Our ship was huge. It was big enough to get lost on, but I couldn't lose the feeling in the pit of my stomach. Everywhere I turned, I saw moms and dads swimming, painting, eating, or shopping with their kids. I thought about the vacations I'd been on with my parents and I realized that we'd never take another trip together. I felt sad and alone.

I couldn't stop thinking about what was going to happen when I got home. I wondered if my dad would be there to greet me before going back to his apartment. I wondered if my mom would be in a better mood without him around. I couldn't imagine what my dad was going to take from the house. I had no idea what it would look like when I returned. I dreaded telling my friends.

There were times when I started crying for no reason. I'd be having a great time and then I'd remember the D-word and my eyes would fill up with tears. One night we went to a show in the main theater. I was smiling and laughing until I saw a man walk up the aisle, carrying a little boy who was sleeping. I remembered my dad carrying me and Danny to bed when we fell asleep early. I held my breath in hopes that it would stop the tears, but it didn't work. My eyes watered and my nose ran. I sniffled once, as quietly as possible. Grandma heard me anyway. She reached for my hand and gave it a warm squeeze.

"I don't like this number either," she whispered. Then she winked and nodded toward the stage. "But keep watching. They'll sing a new song soon enough."

CHAPTER 2: JULY

Grandma and Grandpa drove me home the day after the cruise was over. I was nervous about going back to the house where my dad no longer lived. I could tell they were nervous too. Instead of trying to make conversation in the car, I opened a book and started reading. When I felt sick from staring at the words, I leaned my head against the window and went to sleep.

We pulled into the driveway four hours after leaving my grandparents' house. I got out and stretched while Grandpa retrieved my luggage from the trunk. Grandma and Grandpa each took a bag and helped me carry them inside.

My mom met us in the doorway. She gave me a big hug and told me that she had really, really missed me and she didn't know what she'd do without me for another day. Then she straightened up and turned to my grandparents.

Her smile disappeared and she said sharply, "I didn't expect you'd be coming in."

"Well, we couldn't leave Gina on the curb with all these bags," Grandpa told her with a chuckle.

"And," Grandma began, "We wanted to offer We're heading over to visit Doug and see his new apartment. If you'd like, we can take the kids—"

“Oh, no,” my mother interrupted with a nervous laugh. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea. Do you? The place isn’t fully furnished yet! It’s hardly appropriate to take the kids there.”

I wanted to tell her that it’s not appropriate for my dad to have to live somewhere else just so he could get away from her! But I didn’t say anything. Instead, I grabbed my bags and headed to my room.

The house seemed different. It was quieter, and there were things missing. It didn’t look empty, but there were little holes that made it feel incomplete. It made *me* feel incomplete too. Some pictures were gone from the walls, like the one of my dad with the big fish he caught in a contest the previous summer. There were books missing from the shelves. And his overstuffed recliner wasn’t in the living room anymore. I held my breath so I wouldn’t cry as I hurried down the hall to my bedroom and shut the door.

I dropped my bags, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I looked around my room, hoping to find comfort in familiar things. And that’s when I saw a stuffed bunny and the envelope with my name on it. I sat down on my bed and opened the letter.

Gina,

I know you want a pet bunny, but you’re aware of how your mom feels about that. So this is the best I can do. Maybe someday when I buy a house I can get you the real thing. Until then, please take care of this guy. I’ve been calling him ‘Henry.’ I told him how much I love you and I asked him to keep you company.

I’m sorry this is hard. I wish it didn’t have to be, but I think this is the only way to make things better for all of us. I promise that it won’t always be so difficult and

confusing. I won't be too far away and I'll see you next weekend. I love you. I miss you. I'll see you soon.

*Love,
Dad*

When I slid the envelope under my pillow, my hand found the little book of jokes he'd left for me. It was a nice thought, but I didn't feel like laughing. I looked out the window and saw Danny in the yard. He was sitting at the edge of his sandbox, and he had something in his hands. I decided to go check on him.

When I got outside, I could see that he was playing with the kind of puzzle where you have to shift the pieces around to make a picture. I asked him if he'd seen Grandma and Grandpa.

"That's where I got this," he told me.

"Oh," I said, sitting down next to him. "Have you seen Dad?"

Danny shook his head. "I wasn't here when he left. Mommy sent me to play at Peter's house. When I came back, Daddy was gone." He looked down at the ground and pointed to a remote-control car on the walkway. "He left that for me."

I wasn't in the mood to play, but I thought a distraction might be a good idea for Danny. I forced a smile and asked, "Would you like to play with your car now?"

"OK," he agreed, his face brightening a little.

The next day we had a cookout for the Fourth of July. My Aunt Tamara and cousins, Caleb and Ethan, came over. Mom said I could invite some friends too, so I called Jenny

and Sarah, and they joined us. Kevin had to work that day, but he brought a couple pizzas home in the afternoon.

We ate a red, white and blue cake, ran through the sprinklers, and played various games. There were a few moments when I was having a great time and almost felt normal. Most of the time, I missed my dad. I kept expecting to see him cooking hamburgers on the grill or preparing a big fireworks display. I wondered how he was spending the weekend. At the same time, I was happy because I knew that when the guests went home, I wouldn't have to listen to my parents argue. They usually had their worst fights after big group get-togethers. Immediately, I felt guilty for being glad that he wasn't there.

After a few hours, Sarah asked where my dad was. I hadn't told anyone what was going on because I didn't know how to say it. Was I supposed to send a mass text message to everyone I knew? I asked my mom if Sarah, Jenny and I could take a walk, and she said it was OK as long as we came back in an hour. When we got away from the party, I just blurted it out.

"My parents are getting a divorce," I told them.

Jenny sighed. "Is that it? I was afraid your dad was hurt or sick!" Jenny's mom and dad got divorced when she was two years old. It was all she'd ever known, so she didn't think it was a big deal to have separated parents. And she didn't understand why people thought it was such a bad thing.

Sarah glared at Jenny and then turned to me. "Where did your dad go?" she asked. "And when are you going to see him?"

I told them the whole plan ... about my dad getting an apartment downtown and how I was supposed to see him the next weekend and every other weekend after that. I told them how mad I was that nobody asked me what I wanted and who I wanted to live with. I told them that I felt like

there was a big sign on me that said “divorced kid,” and everyone who knew the situation was looking at me differently.

“How’s your mom?” Jenny asked.

“Fine, I guess,” I answered. “I haven’t been here very much because of the cruise. She seems happy, but I think she’s faking it. I’ve only been home since yesterday, but I think she’s had about eight phone calls with my Aunt Tamara since then. And she used to complain a lot about Aunt Tamara. Now they’re like, best friends. I don’t get it.”

Sarah wanted to help. “Do you need anything? Do you want to come to my house for a few days?”

“No, but thanks,” I told her. “I’ve been away for a week. I really want to sleep in my own bed and see how things go around here.”

Sarah gave me a hug. “Let me know if there is anything I can do for you, OK?” she said. “You don’t have to go through this alone.”

“Thanks,” I told her. It was all I could say.

In the middle of the week, I got an email from my dad. It felt strange to get an email from someone I used to see every day. He told me that he missed me and he couldn’t wait to hear all about the cruise. He said that he would have sent me something sooner, but he wanted to give me some space to get used to things, and he didn’t want to add to my confusion. I liked that he was honest. He also sent me pictures of his apartment. It looked small and empty. He told me it’s near the river, and there’s a nice walking trail and an ice cream shop around the corner. He said he couldn’t wait to see me on Friday night.

I didn't know what to say when I wrote back. My entire life had changed since the last time I saw him. I decided to keep it short:

Hi,

I miss you too. Your apartment looks nice. See you Friday!

I didn't know if I was supposed to tell Mom about the email. I felt like I should tell her, yet I also felt like I shouldn't tell her because I didn't want her to get mad. She didn't want me to go see my dad with my grandparents, so she might be really upset that he wrote to me.

During dinner that night, Mom asked about my day. Since she asked, I decided to tell her about the email from Dad. Immediately, I wished I hadn't said anything.

"Oh?" She seemed curious at first. "Pictures of the apartment, huh? How does it look?"

"Kinda empty right now," I said. "I guess he's just starting out, so there isn't much there."

"I see," Mom said, standing up from the table. "I'm finished eating. Please put your dishes in the sink when you're done."

She went into the kitchen and picked up the phone, then she went outside to the back patio. I guess she thought we wouldn't be able to hear her out there, but the windows were open and we heard everything. She called my dad to talk about the "condition" of his apartment.

"Sleeping bags on the floor?" She sounded like she didn't believe what he'd said.

"No, Doug. Absolutely not! You owe it to your children to provide them with acceptable bedding and the accommodations of a real home. They won't be staying with you until you can give them that. I don't think it's too much to ask, do you? After all they've been through!"

Dad must've suggested that he come to the house to visit because then she really got angry.

"How could you even *think* such a thing?! No! This is *my* house where I live with my children, and you have no business being here since you abandoned us! No."

I looked at Danny. He was pretending not to hear her as he nibbled his dinner roll and finished his grape juice. But I could tell he was listening because he was being very careful not to make any noise while he ate and drank.

So much for things being better, I thought. I learned quickly not to tell Mom when Dad sent me emails.

An hour later, Mom came back in the house. I could tell by her face that she'd been crying. She washed the dishes that were in the sink and then came to the family room where Danny was playing video games and I was on the computer.

"Kids, there's been a change of plans," she told us. "Your dad isn't ready for you to visit this weekend, so we're going to go camping with Aunt Tamara."

"And Caleb and Ethan?" Danny asked.

"No," Mom said. "It's their weekend with their dad."

I wondered why we couldn't sleep in sleeping bags at Dad's apartment, but it was OK to sleep in sleeping bags in a tent. After everything Mom had said about having a nice place to stay, it didn't make any sense. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

The D-Word is currently available in paperback, hardcover and eBook format. It can be purchased online or at your favorite local bookstore.