

Finding Dad again

I LOVE YOU NO MATTER WHAT

By Emily January Petersen

MY DAD'S NOT GAY! YOU'RE A LIAR!" I HAD NEVER spoken to anybody with such violence, but I did so now to Jenny, a childhood friend.

We were settled in her bedroom, and the emptiness of the newly painted room echoed the grief that rang out in my voice. The walls seemed to be closing in on me. It was well past bedtime, and my two younger sisters were sprawled on the carpet snoring in their sleeping bags.

We had arrived in California a few days earlier, just in time to visit our father for Christmas. My mother, stepfather, and baby brother had remained in Utah. We often spent Christmas at my dad's condo in San Jose; however, this year we drove to Fresno. Dad explained that his friend, Dale and his daughter Jenny, had moved there and that's where we would celebrate the holidays. Since my parents divorce, Jenny and Dale had been part of our lives. Spending Christmas with them sounded fun to me.

Jenny and I had spent the last few days bonding over music and boys. But now I was learning the most devastating news of my life at the age of nine.

I had needed a drink a few moments before, so Jenny and I had crept to the kitchen. We had passed the still-lit Christmas tree, then flooded the kitchen with light and raided the refrigerator. But tiptoeing back to bed, I noticed something I hadn't before. As we passed the master bedroom, I realized that both my dad and Dale were sleeping in the same bed. The door was wide open, and the two of them lay snoring on their backs, unaware that Jenny and I were up way past our bedtime. We reached her bedroom and shut the door softly, thrilled that we hadn't been caught.

As we clambered back onto her bed overfull with pillows to talk, I giggled, "Our dads are having a sleepover, too! They're sleeping in the same bed."

Jenny's smile vanished, and she looked at me seriously. "Emily, it isn't a sleep-over."



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"What do you mean?"

"Do you really want to know?" Her brown eyes widened with concern.

I wasn't sure if I did, but I said yes anyway.

"They're gay, Emily. That's why they're in the same bed."

And that's when my world exploded.

IHAVE A few memories of my father before he left. My favorite is the one of going to meet his coworkers. Dad would say, "These are my daughters: Emily, Haley, and Afton." The coworker would inevitably say, "Oh, they're darling, Ron! This one looks just like you!" pointing at me. I'd feel so proud to earn that distinction, the daughter who looked like Dad.

But the most vivid memory is of a Sunday morning, with Dad in still bed while Mom, my two sisters, and I dressed for church. Dad was a San Jose City police officer who often worked graveyard shifts, making this situation unremarkable. He could have been sick. He could have been tired.

But when we returned home, my mom's demeanor seemed to alter. Her hands shook slightly as she fit the silver key into the lock, her palm sweaty and struggling to grip the brass knob. Then, instead of entering the house, she tentatively poked her head in, her hot-rolled waves bouncing as she scanned the living room. She finally stepped over the threshold.

My sisters and I followed, the three of us bumping into her legs and each other, pushing to enter the familiar territory that our mother was suddenly treating as unfamiliar.

"Ron?" she called down the hallway of our rambler. "Ronald? Are you still sleeping?" She paused to listen for a response, one that didn't come.

She lifted her leg, bending it at the knee, and removed one shoe, then the other. Taking them in hand she walked slowly down the brown-carpeted hallway toward the master bedroom. We followed, tiptoeing so we wouldn't wake Dad. We knew the routine. We had to be quiet during the days; he needed to sleep.

We entered the bedroom behind our mother. What jumped out at me was an envelope lying against the pillows on the neatly made and empty bed. I was five years old, so it was just



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at my eye level. But Mom didn't see it because she was staring into the open closet. Half of it was vacant, a stray tie dangling from a wire hanger like an exclamation point. Mom gasped as she stared into this void, not too loudly, but loudly enough. We all looked at up her.

But when she turned around, she wore a tight smile, though her chin trembled slightly. "Let's find Daddy," she chirped. "He must be here somewhere."

She began calling his name, stumbling from room to room, finding the bathroom devoid of his toiletries and the linen closet emptier than it had been that morning. Her act worked on me. My dread subsided and I skipped gaily after her, calling for Dad and thinking that he had devised a new game of hide and seek, removing his possessions to show that he wasn't hiding there.

After five desperate minutes of calling his name, my mother turned on a *Strawberry Shortcake* video and filled our hands with crackers. We sisters grinned at each other; watching cartoons was way cooler than our usual routine of changing clothes and setting the table for dinner. But the change made me wary and the dread returned pooling in the bottom of my stomach.

Mom went to her bedroom and shut the door. Over the cheerful cartoon voices, I heard her talking in a hushed yet frantic voice on the telephone. Haley wanted to pick up the kitchen extension to see if Dad was on the other line, but I wouldn't let her. The dread filling my stomach convinced me that Dad wasn't on the line, that Dad wasn't coming home.

Grandma was probably the one comforting my mother right now, the envelope doubtless lying opened in my mother's lap.

WHILE I YELLED at Jenny for being a liar, her face deepened with concern. She must have realized what she'd driven me, quiet and shy Emily, to do. "Yes they are gay," she explained evenly. "My mom told me."

Jenny then told the story her mom had told her: how our dads had met, fallen in love and decided to leave their wives and children for each other. The news filled me with a sickness because I suddenly knew it was true. My heart knew it so violently that it tried to beat right out of my chest. But I didn't want to accept it.

"No! No! NO!" I cried. "You're lying. You don't know what you're talking about!" Jenny relented. The tears pouring down my cheeks probably warned her against saying anything more.

"When you get home, you can ask your mom about it. Let's go to sleep now," she suggested. She turned out her bedroom light and we crawled into our sleeping bags.

Soon, Jenny's breathing became even and rhythmic, but I lay there with my eyes open, my heart still smarting. Everything Jenny had said made sense. I knew that Dad would never come back to Mom now, never come back to me. I had thought there was still hope. I had thought we would someday return to California to live with him again. Because he hadn't remarried the way my mom had, I imagined that he still pined for her, for his family. But all those illusions now lay shattered



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around me. I felt cold and empty.

Then I realized that Dad's gayness posed an enormous problem for me.

I remembered that I was a carbon copy of him. So far in my life, I'd noticed that I had inherited his picky, perfectionist personality. I liked to organize and keep things clean. He had always been fastidious in everything, his dress, manners, and housekeeping. Fear crept into my heart. Did my similarity to him mean that I would turn out gay, too?

My only knowledge of homosexual orientation was that it was a sin that people could go to hell for. Kids at school constantly teased one boy in our class because he enjoyed gymnastics and spent most of his time playing with girls. I did not want to be teased as he was. Being gay seemed so gross to me, so backward from everything I'd ever been taught. I began to sob because I suddenly felt that my father would be eternally damned. And me right along with him.

DEJECTED AND GUILT-RIDDEN, I returned home to Utah. Already a worrier in my young life, worrying over my parents' divorce, my mother's emotional welfare, my school work, my sisters, my new baby brother, I

added to that list my father's eternal welfare and burning questions about how much of my father was in me. What would I become? It was something so horrible that I couldn't tell anybody, not even my mother. How could I talk to her about something so awful, so personal for us both?

I felt as if I were living at the foot of a smoking volcano with nowhere to run. But I had no choice but to try to live a normal life. So I resumed playing with my sisters, eating dinner with the family, loading the dishwasher, watching my favorite television show, practicing piano, doing homework, and just being. But each night I'd crawl into bed, turn out the light, and cry myself to sleep, my emotional pain seeming to physically rip through my body.

One night my sobbing became uncontrollable, so loud, in fact, that Mom came in to check on me. As she opened the door, I felt acutely embarrassed at having been caught, but I also felt a great sense of relief. I had wanted to tell my mother what I had learned and ask if it were true, but I hadn't dared. Maybe my crying had become loud on purpose. Maybe it was a cry for help.

As my mother stood in the doorway, the light from the hall surrounded her, as if she were an angel of mercy. She asked

what was wrong. Instead of breaking the news gently, as I had been plotting the last several days, I blurted, "Is Dad really gay?" and then sobbed with renewed vengeance.

Mom immediately came to my bed and gently pushed my hair off my forehead. She continued stroking my hair as I sobbed out months of pent-up emotion. When I calmed a little, she took my hand and led me into her room for a talk. I climbed into bed beside her as I had many times before, and snuggled under the quilt. She handed me a box of tissue, then made me start from the beginning.

Through tearful hiccups, I explained to her how Jenny had told me about Dad and Dale. Mom sighed, but answered honestly. Everything Jenny had said was true. This prompted a new wave of tears, but Mom just kept her arms wrapped around me and waited. Which was good, because it gave me the bravery to ask my next question.

Would I be gay like my father? Would I be damned? Would I follow him to hell because I was so much like him?

A little smile crossed her face. "Yes, you look like your dad, but that doesn't mean you are the same person."

"I guess you're right," I said through a sob. I wiped my nose and rubbed my eyes. The salt left my skin red and raw. "It is just so horrible. I can't believe he's gay!"

At this Mom seemed to look far into the distance for a few moments. Then she spoke quietly.

"Your father spends a lot of money to fly you to see him. And he does it every chance he gets. Not all fathers do that, you know."

I nodded, but I wasn't quite listening.

"He knows how to sew and he's an excellent quilter. How many other dads can do that?" She nudged me playfully.

I giggled a little. It was true; none of my friends could say their dads had made them a dress.

I sniffed hard, and said "Dad is good at French-braiding too. You can't even do that!"

My mom threw her hands up in mock exasperation. "It's true. He's always been better at fixing yours and your sisters' hair than I have. But remember the time he ripped out his pants while chasing a suspect?"

I laughed out loud. "I love his police stories!"

"He's also an excellent dancer," she sighed. "And ..." she leaned in close and whispered conspiratorially, "he speaks French!"

We both squealed with delight.

What a man!

My tears were drying, and the dark, heavy feeling of guilt began to lift. After a few more minutes of "mommy-time," I went back to bed and slept soundly.

That experience with my mom was the beginning of my understanding of what true love is. My religion told me that my dad's sexual orientation was wrong, yet he remained my father. He was still a good person, still kind, still loving, still wonderful.

I sometimes think this next experience is too silly and comical to share, but it honestly changed me completely. The actress Sharon Stone, known for making borderline porn movies

(e.g. *Sliver* and *Basic Instinct*), told Oprah about her near death experience following a stroke. She explained that when she had gone to the next life, she had felt an overwhelming presence of love and light.

At that moment, it hit me. God loves everybody. I laughed out loud and cried a little when I realized that even Sharon Stone, a woman who doesn't live the way my religion teaches, had felt the love of God when she'd died for a few minutes. His love is available to all, including my father. From Sharon Stone, of all people, I learned not to judge. I learned that I could just love.

AND THAT IS why, about a year ago, I finally talked to my dad about his orientation. My husband and I had flown to California for my cousin's wedding. There we spent time with my dad eating out, visiting the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and shopping. But nothing really significant happened until we were sitting in the wedding audience, my husband and daughter on one side of me, my dad on the other. All of the guests were dressed fabulously, and the scent of roses filled the air. The wedding had not yet started.

I don't know exactly how I started the conversation, but somehow, I called up the courage to ask my dad, "When did you know that you were gay?"

He cocked his head and bounced his knees nervously. We had never talked about this before. "Well, right after my mission, at BYU, all of my friends were dating girls, and I realized that I didn't really want to date any girls."

"So, what did you do?" I asked, eager to finally get the whole story from him. I had no idea he had known before he got married.

"I went to my bishop. He told me to date anyway and get married. He said once I found the right girl and married her, everything would be okay."

"So sex would cure you, huh?" I laughed.

He chuckled. "Yes, that's what they told us in those days." He paused and stared ahead at nothing. He seemed far away, almost as if he were reliving the stress of his decision years ago. "It doesn't work," He finally said.

"Obviously. But, I think the Church is getting better at dealing with this," I said, hoping to comfort him.

"Yes, it is," my dad agreed.

I could see a longing in his blue-as-Paul-Newman's eyes. He seemed to be thinking that he wished the church he'd joined at fourteen, the one that had offered such love and acceptance to begin with, would accept him once again.

We continued to hold our quiet yet momentous conversation until the wedding procession began. We spent the rest of the evening laughing and talking.

When the dance floor finally opened up, my dad took me in his arms and we floated around the room, waltzing and fox-trotting. It was the nicest dance of my life, because Dad now knew that my religion did not make me hate him and I knew that my dad still loved me despite my belief in a religion that misunderstands him.

We had finally said, "I love you no matter what." 