




Climbing the Steps

Conversations with My Stepson About Life, Love and Loss

by GISELLE MINOLI



“Do you want to come to Pennsylvania this weekend and meet my son?” came the question.

“Absolutely!” went my answer.

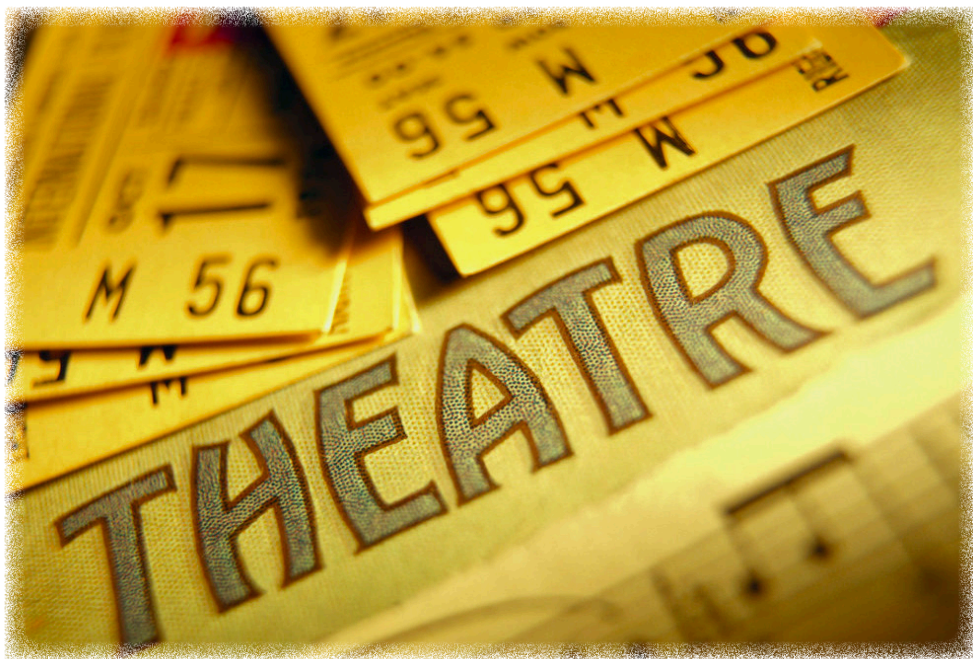
The son in question was the 17-year-old youngest child of the man I’d recently started seeing. A man I’d known many years before in what felt like a previous incarnation, one in which I myself had been 17 years old. But as women well know, a 17-year-old girl is nothing like a 17-year-old boy, and no sooner had the word “absolutely” slipped past my lips than I was swimming in doubt about meeting the progeny of a man for whom I had a serious thing.

For it had been such a long time since I’d come face-to-face with the ChildBoyMan varietal. Sure, I’d seen plenty of them

loose on the streets and subways of New York City. And they regularly appeared in movies, TV shows, commercials, billboards and even the occasional play I attended, so I was fairly certain I could identify one in a lineup if I had to. I had even met women my age who confessed to having given birth to one or two, but the truth was that I myself had hardly had any dealings with such a creature since living in the same house in the aforementioned long-ago incarnation with my older brother when he was 17. (Note: A 17-year-old who is in college is a separate genre entirely from the high school species.)

Our relationship was more like two strange planets orbiting the same Mother Sun than the brother-sister act I thought all families were supposed to have. Our father had died when we were young, and my brother responded to living in a house with a mother and two younger sisters by taking refuge in baseball, basketball, rugby and football, while I preferred dance classes or a solitary horse ride along the Rio Grande River. I rarely saw the mysterious presence known as my older brother during daylight hours; he was prone to slipping into the house late in the day after all the chores had been done, the weight and purpose of a baseball bat far more appealing than the weight and purpose of a broom or a vacuum cleaner. Conversation between us was at an absolute minimum, and I am fairly certain he knew absolutely nothing about me.

Thankfully, by the time my weekend invitation arrived, more than five decades on Planet Earth had taught me that it was irrational to judge a contemporary 17-year-old boy by the memories I had of my own brother.



But I did have the *Playbills* for every play I had ever attended, **A GUARANTEED TOPIC OF CONVERSATION** for a theater buff. Score!

Equally thankfully, the gusto with which my beau had described his son was so disarmingly sweet that it was impossible to say No. So, I set about making a list of things he and I might talk about.

Like sports! His father boasted about what a brilliant golfer his son was, describing how cute he had been at 7 years old trying to swing a driver taller than he was. Only once had I myself picked up a driver, my enthusiasm unfortunately more focused on mangling the grass on the tee box, to anguished winces from my instructor, than on sending the ball smoothly down the fairway.

Like entertainment! How lucky could I get? Not only did the fellow have a naturally beautiful golf swing, but I was told he could sing,

too, on top of having an impressive knowledge of Broadway musicals, to which his father was keen to take him as often as possible. I, on the other hand, was a devotee of unconventional site-specific theatre and documentary films, which more often than not I attended alone in the more downtrodden parts of New York City. But I did have the *Playbills* for every play I had ever attended, a guaranteed topic of conversation for a theater buff. Score!

Like food! I was told that my musically inclined athlete had an incurable fondness for steak and burgers, either of which he apparently could eat at any time of day or night, year in and year out. In contrast, I preferred fish and a more vegetarian diet. In this regard,

we appeared to be on shaky ground, as we were polar opposites.

Like books! I understood that our tuneless carnivorous golfer was a voracious reader and history nut who could apparently recite the dates of the important battles in every war ever fought anywhere in the world. Although I was sadly unable to remember the dates of my close friends' birthdays, I did attend a college well known for its great books program and retained a closet full of them, so I knew we would find much to discuss in the world of literature.

I imagined one of two scenarios: The differences between us would lead to endless hours of curious and animated conversation or we would spend the weekend sitting across from one another at dinner in a miserable and measureable silence. My anxiety was not assuaged by his father's confession on the phone one night that he had presented me to his son as someone who could talk to anyone about anything. Surely I was doomed.

Nonetheless, since our meeting was essentially predestined, on Friday, August 3, 2007, I hopped a train from New York City to mid-Central Pennsylvania, hoping and praying that my spiritual, emotional and intellectual evolution over the years since living with my brother had created enough room for a completely new experience of a 17-year-old ChildBoyMan.

My fears began to dissipate the instant I walked through the garage door into the charming chaos of a country bachelor pad inhabited by a single father and his son, who I knew had been fairly inseparable for over seven years. I was halfway through the kitchen when this tall, good looking skinny kid ambled

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out of the bedroom in shorts and a T-shirt rubbing his belly, an unconscious reflex that over the ensuing months I came to understand as a sign that the bottomless pit known as his stomach was once again empty.

"Hey, I'm Kevin, what's up? How was the trip? Welcome to our house. To Pennsylvania. To no man's land. Dad, when can we eat?" was essentially how it went from the start. Relieved, I thought, 'Great. I don't have to say a word. He's hyperactive and has it covered!' Basically, he had me from *"Hey, I'm Kevin..."*

Over the course of the weekend this father son duo let it all hang out. I discovered their obsession with the TV shows *Two and a Half Men* and *South Park*, was invited into the bedroom of a 17-year-old boy (which could have passed as a Smithsonian Institution set exhibit for *Blade Runner*) for the first time in over 40 years, and witnessed the fabled carnivorous appetite in action in the country club dining room.

All weekend long we talked about sports and entertainment and food and books (Tolstoy, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Mark Twain, to be exact), and pretty

much every other topic under the sun. This kid had been raised on a diet of literature, humor, music, history, sports ... and steak. Not bad.

Hunkered down over pancakes at the Dutch Haven the Sunday morning before I was to catch a train home, Kevin blurted out,

"Dad, are you going to see Giselle in New York next weekend?"

"No, I'm on call, why?"

"Well, can I go?"

"Jeezzzz, Kevin, you can't just ask that. You can't just invite yourself! What if she has plans?"

Ignoring his father, Kevin repeated, *"Well, can I? (turning to me, now) I mean do you? I won't be any trouble."*

Almost as if I had no say in the matter, but also because the possibilities for entertaining a 17-year-old in New York City were virtually endless, and therefore endlessly appealing, I turned to his Dad and said, *"I don't mind. I'm game if you're game."*

"He's 17. You'll have to watch him."

"How hard can that be? It's just two days. He'll come on Friday and leave on Sunday."

"But you'll have to meet him at the train station. And take him

back on Sunday.”

“Right. I think I can handle it. It’s not like I haven’t lived in New York City for 30 years or anything.”

“Jeezzzz, Dad, don’t be a freak. It’ll be fine. What are you so worried about?”

He arrived at Penn Station the following Friday afternoon with only a backpack and a cell phone, and we walked up Sixth Avenue to Waldy’s Pizza to start our weekend, his eyes, like the eyes of any teenager, darting back and forth between the energized street scene and whatever text message made his phone buzz. Occasionally, I would have to grab the back of his jacket and yank him back up onto the sidewalk.

Since we didn’t have much time together, I thought I would show him New York from my perspective. I wanted there to be a sense of balance in whatever relationship we were going to create, and what little I already knew about him indicated that he would appreciate my personal take on the city’s cultural riches. So I began our weekend with tickets to the New York International Fringe Festival’s world premiere of *Hillary Agonistes*, a fantastical play about President Hillary Clinton running the country when 65 million people vanish from the face of the Earth, one of whom is First Husband Bill. By mutual agreement, in spite of its rave reviews and experimentally artistic merit, it was the worst play either of us had ever seen.

Our collective mood was not to be dulled, however, and we walked from the Lower East Side up through Soho to a little Italian trattoria in the Village for dinner, then afterward strolled West across Bleecker Street to Cones for ice



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cream and finally all the way back through the Village to my apartment on the East Side before collapsing into bed.

Saturday began with a walk up Broadway to the legendary Colony Music, where Kevin bought the sheet music for the musicals *Tick Tick Boom* and *A Little Night Music*, then a walk to the Drama Book Shop, where I bought him *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh, one of my favorite playwrights (a cheery Broadway musical *must* be balanced with the dark humor of an Irishman!).

We headed uptown to the infamous Burger Joint in the Parker Meridien Hotel, a square box in a corner of the lobby hidden by a thick curtain—like in *The Wizard of Oz*—before making our way through Central Park to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to check out a slew of Rembrandts that had been donated to the museum by a great great uncle. Tired and thirsty, we stopped in the mezzanine coffeeshop for Cokes. Speaking freely, he told me about his parents’ divorce, the problems wanting to live with his father had caused, the difficulties of going back and forth when his

mother remarried and moved to another state, how he loved and respected his dad but sometimes wished he were more of a disciplinarian and less of a best buddy, why he no longer wanted to play golf even though he was so good at it, and why he didn't want to follow most of his family into the fields of science and medicine.

We talked about the girl who had broken his heart when she graduated from high school and went off to college a year before he did, what it felt like to be raised by a father instead of his mother and all of the longings for female companionship that created. We tiptoed carefully over and around the subject of sex, but he took care to say that no matter what had happened between his father and mother he believed in love and relationships and wanted some day to meet a great girl. He was certain he would never get divorced.

He didn't mask anything, this kid. He was proud of his strengths, nervous about his weaknesses and straightforward about his confusions, angers, fears, loves, regrets, rages, dreams and desires. I wondered about the differences between orbiting a Father Sun as he had, and a Mother Sun as my brother had. I wondered how any of us learn the lessons we need to learn when there is only one parent. I wondered how any of us manage to heal the wound of a missing parent when it's hard to describe what the wound looks like, let alone where it is located.

We headed down to the theater district to see the revival of *A Chorus Line*, aiming to balance our weird off-off-Broadway foray on Friday evening with more traditional Broadway fare on Saturday night. I thought about my brother



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and how little he knew about me. I thought about how much I had shared with this one young man in less than 30 hours. I thought about how complicated we all are.

By the time I put him on the train on Sunday morning, we were both wiped out. In the short space of a weekend, he had successfully redefined my notions about 17 year-old boys. His father called me on Monday morning and asked,

"What did you do to my son?"

"Nothing. I mean ... Why? What do you mean? What happened?"

"I picked him up at the train station and he said, 'Dad, if you don't marry her, I will.'"

After that, the three of us made several trips to New York for weekends of theater and musicals: We took in Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer*, Tracy Lett's *August: Osage County* and Martin McDonagh's *A Behanding in Spokane*, along with *Rent*, *Spamalot* and *South Pacific*. We always went out to dinner, and Kevin always ordered steak.

A little over a year later, his Dad and I did indeed get married and our adventures together naturally evolved into a three-way episodic dialogue about movies, sports, books, television shows, careers, relationships and who

would become our next President (Hillary Agonistes?). We rambled on endlessly about life, love and loss, much of our talks centered the Italian way around the dinner table.

Difficult events in our lives—Kevin discovering that the college he had entered was wrong for him, his father switching jobs and moving to Virginia, my frequent travel between New York and the Shenandoah Valley—began to test in every conceivable way the wondrous and maddening trust we had begun to develop. Boundaries were crossed, wills were set one against the other, egos flared, feelings were hurt, accusations were made, apologies were offered ... and eventually accepted.

We grew. We stumbled. We got up again. We learned more about one another.

We had become a sort of three-person stage play of our own, sometimes musical, sometimes dramatic, sometimes comedic, sometimes definitely not. Sometimes we performed for one another; sometimes we performed for a crowd. And if there is one thing our mutual love of sports, entertainment and books has taught us, it is that the show must go on no matter the current circumstances of life and you'd better be willing to deal with



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it head on. And one other thing: Get the beginning right. Without that, you don't stand much of a chance.

Of course, it's always nice to talk about it all over a good steak at the

end of the day. But tonight, I think we'll have fish. ■

P.S. I sent Kevin this story to make sure the telling of it was accurate. Below is his email response:

Giselle,

I am incredibly amazed you remembered everything to the last detail. The funniest thing to me is I remember saying those things and it is remarkable how much I have changed from being the 17-year-old boy into being 22. It seems to be a critical issue concerning stepparents. How is one supposed to connect? The dreaded fact, "I am not his mother, I am not a woman where loyalties may lie," is quintessential. I adored your reasoning of how to open conversations because at the time I remember thinking the exact same thing. "Who is this woman and what will we have to talk about?" I remember those initial moments, but I walked in and both our lives were changed. And yes, who could forget New York, where we went all over the largest city in the world in a span of less than 36 hours?! It's all an adventure and I am so happy you wrote this because if nothing else it is a chronicle of our relationship, how it began and where it may go. It is an essay of who I was back then. Those days, which seem so long ago to me, when high school life constrained intellectual dreams and the thought of something greater outside a Pennsylvania reality.

Now in D.C. it seems like forever in the past. It feels as though they are the days I somehow cannot get back. To be 17 again, Lord knows I would find it terrible when I returned there, but for now I hold onto those memories of teenage vulnerability, and "the beginning of a beautiful friendship", between you and me.

Fellow Agonistes-goer, a carnivore feasting on steak, literature, and the hives of actors,
Kevin