IF I WERE YOU, HONEY, I'D RUN, NOT WALK

by

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My father's stock response to every ill was, "If I were you, honey, I'd run, not walk." The destination was understood: to the nearest psychiatrist.

Freud ruled the roost in my family of origin and my father—a liberal Jew—was really a proselytizer in disguise, though it was not religion he was pushing. He wanted us all to lie prostrate like he did and spill our innermost secrets to an impassive stranger—week after week—our own personal Day of Atonement. A day did not go by without my father using the word "psychosomatic" because, according to my father, illness was aggravated by inner turmoil. Physical pain was particularly suspicious. My siblings and I did not have the luxury of contracting a common cold, headache, or virus without having to trace the root cause stemming from our devilish subconscious. We were trained to constantly ask ourselves, *What am I avoiding*? Our father reinforced this with statements like, "Repressed feelings will always come back and bite you in the ass."

The couch my father frequented during our childhood—sometimes as often as five days a week—was not a couch of beer and peanuts and slapping fellow sports aficionados on the back shouting, "Go Team!" My father would lie on his back in an office of sleek Swedish lines (this is how I imagined it) while recounting his miserable childhood, which had all the hallmarks of an Oedipal snare. In a nutshell, he had a smothering Jewish mother who loved him too much and a stern, withholding father that my father subconsciously wanted to replace.

Coached by his psychoanalyst, my father ran with the Freudian ball, casting himself in the role of Sophocles' King Oedipus, the brilliant riddle solver who, upon learning he had slain

his father and taken his mother for a lover, blinded himself. There were sound pathophysiologic reasons for my father's loss of vision in his twenties. Notwithstanding, he personalized the Oedipal drama, accepting his fate as a tragic Greek hero who tried to escape the oracle's decree that he was destined to "be the slayer of the sire who begot him" and "defile his mother's bed." My father's identification with the Oedipal myth was so fervent that, when asked about my childhood, I often claim that I was spoon-fed Freud.

The archetypal incident occurred on a school day when my father was a teenager. He was tasked with driving his mother to the hospital for a hysterectomy because my grandfather refused. My father could not let go of the Freudian undertones of this experience and his resentment about being the inappropriate stand-in for his father. According to him, the pain of being miscast as the husband later manifested itself in crippling arthritis and ultimately blindness. As children, we accepted our father's narrative. It was just one more element of the family culture. *In Freud we trust*.

Berkeley of the 1960s nurtured my father's weapons of introspection and transparency came with the territory. While my friends' parents experimented with a potpourri of street drugs and sexual promiscuity, my father carved his path to self-discovery. Obedient disciples, my siblings and I drank the Kool-Aid. When we got sick, we dug deep into our minds to find the cause. We analyzed other people's actions, chasing down Freudian symbols with fervor. We bought into our father's notion that our mother's debilitating migraine headaches were "all in her head." Our upbringing was rife with terms like "subconscious," "Freudian slip," and "transference." However, when it came to "penis envy," I drew the line, as I never wanted one.

We were trained to dive for the deeper meaning—nothing was ever taken at face value. One day, while parking my father's car du jour (a massive Chrysler Imperial), my older sister accidentally scraped it against the adjacent car in the lot. When she got home, in the spirit of full disclosure, she told Dad about the incident. My father accused her of harboring deep anger toward him.

Even my practical mother, who eschewed magical thinking, morphed into a full-on Freudian. My parents, who each saw their shrink for fifty minutes at least once a week, kept all personal thoughts confidential, never sharing their *aha!*s with each other. Years later, I wondered how that worked for them and thought perhaps a European cruise might have been better than spending boatloads of money on analysis.

Following my parents' lead—despite gnawing doubts—I saw a psychiatrist after my enigmatic college boyfriend and I broke up. A tiny elevator delivered me to the third floor of a Berkeley office building. I entered the waiting room, pressing the button on the wall until it lit up. A woman with enormous blue eyes, full lips, and a giraffe-like neck opened the door and motioned me to enter. I had the option of a rust orange couch against the wall or a beige chair facing her desk. I opted for the chair. For three months I refused to speak. When I opened my mouth, a waterfall of tears garbled out.

Soon after, I took a college course in Freudian psychology. I tried desperately to understand his theories and toyed with the idea of becoming a psychologist, hoping that I could help people. I found Freud problematic and my college counselor insisted that listening to people's problems all day was not my life path. Having observed my fascination with religion, he tried to steer me in the direction of a master's in theology.

Years passed. Freud still niggled at me when I was sick, and my father's words reverberated. One day, I had an epiphany. I was standing in line at the post office with my boyfriend, a doctor. Clutching a small box wrapped in brown paper, I slowly advanced toward the head of the line, where a postal worker in a light blue shirt weighed, stamped, and tossed my box into a large canvas bin. In the back of my nose, I felt a tickle that fluttered and rose into one, two, then three sneezes. My boyfriend—who adhered to scientific truths relative to germs, viruses, and bacteria—said, "You must be getting a cold."

A cold?

I heard my father's voice: "If I were you, honey, I'd run, not walk."

A laundry list of pesky personal issues pushed to the surface.

My father nudged me.

Oh God, here I go making myself sick again. What am I avoiding? I'd better get a grip.

Then it hit me, like someone took that brown box out of my hands and slammed it upside my head. Freud, and by association my father, was the perpetrator of a cock and bull story. I simply had a cold. No need to analyze or break it down into snotty little pieces. All these years I had seen my subconscious as the toxic sorcerer. In that moment the knot that had been so tightly wound—since I was a girl on my father's knee—unraveled. Relief washed over me. The emperor had no clothes. My father lost his vision because of a serious case of iritis, not as a result of a psychosomatic puzzle. A round of cortisone would have cured him.

It took years for me to recognize that Freud was a false friend. After much trail and error, I became the architect of my own psyche, constructing new beliefs about the interconnection between mind and body. Yoga, meditation, dancing, hiking, and writing helped me reject the Freudian slips that ruled my father's life.

That boyfriend who was standing in line with me at the post office is now my husband. When I get the flu, he says, "You must have a Norwalk virus." If I have a headache, he says, "Looks like you're getting a migraine." When my back hurts, he says, "You strained a muscle." Even though Freud has been debunked, I still find myself slipping down the rabbit hole of self-blame. My husband catches me every time.

My personal truth lies somewhere between my father's magical thinking that all illness is caused by repressed feelings and my husband's belief in straight-up science. I see now that my father did the best he could with the tools he had, but what had been a panacea for him was poison to me.

In the words of Freud, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

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