

How Not to Ruin Your Daughters

by Andria Nacina Cole

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I. How Not to Ruin Your Daughters

Here's how not to ruin your daughters. First, do not stay married long enough for them to see your head thrown against a glass table. And if you must, divorce the man soon after. While divorcing him, say dramatic things like, "I deserve better." Repeat these statements (aloud) for the rest of the girls' lives and couple them with a vow of chastity.

If you can't promise chastity and you find yourself in love again -- this time with a man who only drinks alcohol leisurely--make sure he finds girls useful. If he doesn't, and you can't seem to tear yourself from him, don't make him steak dinners and serve the children bologna--it will send a clear sign of where they stand in the whole scheme of things. It also won't hurt to make their plates as you're making his -- when you so delicately place his turkey wing, boiled potatoes, and green beans on good china and tiptoe to his permanently pushed in place on the couch without so much as hollering, "Dinner's ready," it, somehow, devalues the girls.

If you can't resist serving him steak and turkey wings, don't throw the oldest girl out of the house for cursing him and making fun of his big gut. She hates that since he's moved in, she's not allowed to open your bedroom door without knocking and waiting for a response. That she's banned from laying against you for any reason at all. If it gets to be that you can't contain yourself, and you must throw her out, don't do it four or more times in a year. She'll begin to feel dispensable, as will the others.

Understand that the youngest of the girls will resist him less because her mind is soft and her memory short. She is incapable of knowing that his waiting for everyone to leave before he whips her and calls her "dirty" is atypical. You may want to keep her with you. Even for quick jaunts to the market.

If you can't bring yourself to follow any of these rules, well, this is where things begin to get complicated. The girls have spent one thousand nights in a huddle discussing things, and they're arriving at unsettling conclusions. For the first few years, they've discussed how absolutely scary Daddy is, and how they hope one day you'll leave him. At this point, they've only tasted ruin and can recover easily. For the next chunk of time, they've asked one another if it's really possible for a mother to love a new, balding, stinky-breath man more than her children? Things have turned for the worst here, but therapy will still soothe them. The years following are no safer. The girls walk around in a stupor becoming women, wondering if their childhood happened at all. One thousand nights of questions and no answers leave them numb. They're nearly cold, nearly ruined women.

There are ways to mend near-ruin. They're basic and complicated. Most daughters will settle for "I wasn't always the best, you know..." For those seven words, they will rinse themselves clean, forgive yesterday, and probably only ever mention the hell they survived in passing. They'll make comments like, "You did what you could, Ma," and "I turned out all right." They will not mention the three hundred Tylenol or that choking tube down your throat or feeling like the least important nothings in the world.

They'll trust you with their children if you say these words because now they're women and they realize the idea of perfection is a crock of bullshit, anyway. You could've never won the game in the first place. They'll have also seen a change in you: you've softened a bit and are less militant, and too they're older so you're smaller. They understand what it means to love a man so hard you lie down to cry and can't get back up again.

What they will not understand--and this applies if you still have not opened your mouth wide enough for those seven words to pass--is amnesia. They will not be able to reconcile how a memory so big it silences them in grocery aisles escapes you. They have no idea what distinguishes a spanking from a beating; from what they remember, belts, hands, and hair brushes all felt similar. Nor will they understand how the 90s were such a romantic decade for you when they closed their eyes for entire years at a time to get through them. They will not understand how, now that you've gained thirty or so pounds and know intimately what fat feels like, you still comment on the heaviness of their thighs. How you talk about your second husband in terms of "he and I": their view was always of a war with the sad pronoun, "we." They will not understand any of this.

If you wish to save your daughters at all, you'll need to get moving. Approach this with the same vigor you do good gossip at work. Imagine you're in a rush to play the number before Bellamy's closes. You'll probably need a six-pack all to yourself. Drink it slowly and cry a little, but not so much that you turn a shade deeper and your eyes swell--you want it to appear that your courage is from within. Once you're on drink number four, dial your daughters' numbers in order from Slightly Fucked Up to Basket Case so that they arrive thirty or so minutes apart and can be looked at individually. When they arrive, don't waste any time. Hold them so close they taste the beer on your breath and feel, through their blouses, your heartbeat hum. Then say, "It happened. All of it."

II. How Not to Hate Your Mother

If you want not to hate your mother, you had better memorize all your thoughts of worthlessness. When you're ready to blame her for your stretch marks and bad teeth, think hard about your evenings leaned against the kitchen sink in a shitty two bedroom apartment with enough space only to pivot turn. Study that feeling of unimportance and how it forced you to yell at your children, "I don't give a shit what you do, just don't do it here."

It would be wise, before you let anger blister your tongue and make it so you can't stop from saying, "She's the reason...", to take twenty dollars to the grocery store and plan dinner for four children. For two weeks. Better yet, practice falling in love with bastards who consistently pay half the mortgage and make it difficult to leave them. See if it's easy to choose between hunger and safety. Or here's one better -- find a man who loves you down to the callus on the side of your big toe, who says I love you just to watch your eyes glisten, and then introduce him to your girls who hate him just for walking through the door. Watch your happiness tumble out of their mouths to the ground and dissolve there, easy as sugar in water. Then -- and this is if you're truly interested in not hating her -- tell the beautiful man goodbye and come home every night (smiling) to the children who lost you your life.

Not to hate your mother you must (and this is the only way to do it) have your shirt yoked up around your neck, gathered good in your ex-husband's fist, in front of all four of your girls. Let them watch him spit in your face and tell you, "You only living 'cause I let you." Then, when you can, get free, and call the police. Pace the living room waiting for the officers and while you're pirouetting around yourself, say, inside your head, "If they've got to see him touch me, they should see him punished." Then watch the police stomp through the living room without a leash for their judgment, and the girls huddle around their father to say, "He didn't do nothing." Sit your hoity-toity self across from them, on the opposite side of the room, and know betrayal well.

Before you call your mother and question all she isn't, you had better have a glass of wine and see how good motherhood is then. When your daughter writes the alphabet in toothpaste across the bathroom floor and you say, "How smart you are!" you'll see why wine coolers match so well with breakfast.

Before you call her and question all she isn't, you had better be ready for the answer. She's going to wail and curse, but more importantly, she's going to tell you to look at your own ugly face in the mirror. And there you will see a younger her -- with longer hair and thicker, particular eyebrows, but her nonetheless.

If you want not to hate the woman, you had better take a moment and sit on a stool in your living room. Make sure it's pulled close to the patio door so you don't have any trouble seeing the moon (it's best if you do this when the house is asleep. Be sure your husband is well into his apnea and that the children have water on their nightstands. And if you don't have that kind of life, make sure your live-in boyfriend who is or isn't the father of your children is passed out from an afternoon of working for pocket change and you've told your kids, "Just let me be"; and if things are tougher for you still and no man stuck around to see the kids lose their teeth or virginity, steal a moment when you can). Look out that patio door and want worse than anything to leap off the landing. Not to kill yourself -- it's only a story up -- but to get free and go be the writer you said you would be, before the abortion and the many live births, and the job you cry to work.

You can accomplish a lot inside your head, but not to hate your mother (truly), you'll need to do. To prevent yourself from involuntarily burping up memories at dinner, from catching your own daughter with a look that says, "I'm scared of you," from being unfeeling, from being too feeling, from boring the people around you to bits over your melodramatic childhood, you had better talk to her. You had better talk to your mother. But not in the "How come you never got out of bed on weekends?" way. Don't say that because she's as fussy as you about the way she hears things. She's not going to listen to words at all, rather she's going to put her ear up against all the hot mush beneath them -- your tone, the inflection; she's going to watch your eyebrows bend. You had better make a beautiful bead necklace of your questions. You had better lay those remarks at her neck delicately. Like she is a bird, sick with the rain. Say, "I love you all the way down past my ankles." Give her something to smile for. "But" -- and you can decide when she'll tolerate a "but" -- "I need to know what the 90's were about." Then spill it. Not how a faucet might -- unable to help itself and vomiting a gallon with one twist of its knob. Spill it like rice being measured. Like salt tickled over eggs. You are the scab, but Oh God she is the wound.

ABOUT ANDRIA NACINA COLE

Andria Nacina Cole is in love with writing except when she's writing. She can't understand such a painful gift, but recognizes it as such, and says thank you for absolutely every struggling metaphor, simile, attempt at personification, and bit of supposed-to-be imagery. Not too long ago she received Maryland State Arts Council's top grant prize for fiction and used the funds to launch a women's writers conference that is aching to be reborn (www.flanked.org). She has published work in [Urbanite Magazine](#), [Sensations Magazine](#), and [Mary Elise Magazine](#). Long ago, before she should have ever called herself a writer she published a collection of poetry titled *Anthem: For Colored Women Only*. Thank goodness it's out of print. If she does not go crazy revising, she will soon be finished with a short story collection tentatively titled *Clean Piles of Daughter*.