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DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

It was a gorgeous stone with an underlying flaw, and I never understood why my mother wanted me to see the speck instead of the splendor

by Meredith Resnick | Sunday, October 18, 2015

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Mom called it an ice cube, a rock, a door knocker. And with every comment on the size, girth and weight came a solitary complaint: the carbon spot. The flaw was no more than a speck, a minute cluster of pigmented atoms embedded deep in the round stone. But when it came to the 3.5-

karat diamond, it was all she saw.

My parents had been too poor to buy a diamond when they married in 1939. By the time I was born—unexpectedly—22 years later, there was money for a stone, and a big one to boot. Yet my mother always made a big deal about the carbon spot, like no other diamond in the universe had one. Because of her comments, I believed every other stone in the world was crystal clear and grew up wondering why my father bought her a ring so damaged.

Then, in junior high science, I learned that diamonds are composed entirely of carbon, that tiny spots are often seen in otherwise perfect stones. When I showed Mom and Dad the Periodic Table of the Elements in my textbook, my father beamed. He saw only the diamond's size, anyway, and that it sparkled and dazzled and showed all it was worth.

"I see the spot," Mom said flatly.

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"You see the negative," he told her, speaking very slowly, as if attempting to communicate with another species. They were, in fact, completely different breeds: My father always trying not to see the negative, my mother continually pointing it out. And me? I was old enough to know the carbon spot was a kind of metaphor for something I was still too young to understand.

A few years after my father died, Mom and I were sitting at her dining room table when she pulled the pink velvet box out of her sweater pocket and gave it to me. The casing smelled of cedar, like the inside of the drawer where she'd kept it buried with everything else she never wore.

"Because of that carbon spot, the ring was never worth as much as your father thought," my mother said, as she always had.

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But the ring was mine now; as far as I was concerned, it would no longer be about flaws. I slipped it out of the box and onto my finger where it towered protectively over the one-karat stone my husband had given me. For fun, I waved my hand around like I'd seen other women with rings twice the size do, being careful to showcase it so everyone—my mother—could see its real beauty.

My playfulness caused an expansive prism to spray across my mother's face, creating a dance of light and color that momentarily mesmerized her. When I withdrew my hand from the light and the spectrum vanished, she turned back to me, as if awakened from a dream.

"I don't want to focus on the flaw anymore," I said, though, I admit, I knew exactly where to look. Then, maybe a little too sternly, a little too slowly, I asked if she understood. She bit her lip and nodded. Then she started to cry.

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Immediately I regretted, as I always did, trying to make her see the bright side—just like Dad used to. I reached across the table and amid a scattering of amber medicine bottles, took her hands. Her veins were crinkly, her skin delicate like tracing paper. Tears dripped down her cheeks.

Softly, she apologized.

"No, Mom," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK," she said, touching the ring one last time. We never talked about it again.

It was then I fully understood what I had grown up to suspect: Damaged was how my mother saw herself—like the diamond, internally flawed. There was the obvious symbolism: a gorgeous stone, an underlying flaw. But until that moment I didn't understand why Mom wanted me to see the speck, not the splendor. Because it was the flaw alone that represented who my mother thought she was.

Some people thought her aloof, negative, which was a cover for her pain. Some people thought my mother saw herself as the diamond, the gem, but in reality my mother had the habit of construing most things to suggest what was wrong with her, not what was right. Everything was a stain of blood, a puddle of tears, a spot of carbon that could never be erased. She was still ashamed of the child she used to be, the one with the red hair cut like Buster Brown who got picked on, who never graduated high school, who married too young.

By the time I was old enough to know what jewelry was, I'd wanted that ring. I had felt a child's innocent sorrow for the way she put it down. The ring represented what I thought being an adult was, but when I finally received it I saw that being an adult was being able to discern what I did or didn't want to accept of my mother's legacy.

My mother is gone now but the diamond is like a string tied around my finger. It gets heavy at times, but I'm trying, for both of us. It helps that I understand what my mother never could; that carbon spots are not bad, but rather in the nature of diamonds and of life. No matter what shape they take, or how they come to you.

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