

MODERN LOVE

Oh No, They Think My Father Is My Husband

We were the only non-couple on the couples cruise.

By Kelsey Abkin

June 13, 2025

Love Letter Real stories that examine the highs, lows and woes of relationships. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The cruise ship's restaurant had wall-to-wall carpet, candles with fake flames and air-conditioning working overtime. I looked down at my \$5 elephant-print pants and then across the table at my 72-year-old traveling companion, at his white hair and big, crooked smile.

I was 19 and on a couples cruise with my father.

Outside, rice paddies stretched into the distance. Inside, people many decades older than me gave our table for two the side-eye.

"Oh no," I thought. "They think he's my husband."

"Dad, dad, dad, *dad!*" I said. I didn't know yet that I would be using this call many more times, across many more continents.

I wasn't my father's first choice for this floating escape. His girlfriend was, but she left him. So I, the daughter he barely knew, filled the vacancy.

A few years earlier, my parents sat me down and told me they were getting divorced. I was relieved — previous months of whispers behind closed doors, and, once, the uncomfortable noise of passion followed by hours of crying had me convinced someone was dying. My mother sighed when she recalled my lack of emotion at the time, saying, “You repress everything.”

But I understood something she apparently didn’t — that not much would change. My father was a workaholic with a big heart and an even bigger need to stay busy. My mother, sister and I once moved to France for a year while he sent checks from home.

See, I was from Family 2.0. His first family started when, at 18 (with a baby on the way), he stopped drinking beer, stopped running cars into trees and applied for night school, then law school.

“I was going to be a policeman,” he told me once with a laugh.

He and his first wife had a big Italian wedding, a big mortgage, three children and a big divorce.

Twenty years later, he met my mother and did it again, eventually landing in a post-divorce apartment I would visit on weekends out of love, guilt and a court order.

My newly divorced father then turned to work, to religion (Buddhism and the Judaism he’d half forgotten), but mostly to women. He dated many, none over 40, always pretty, always gone at the first hard question.

There was the on-again-off-again blonde from Tennessee who didn’t like that I wouldn’t go to church. (Again, we’re Jewish.) And the hot single mother from the gym. And the woman with the infamous lower back tattoo. I once held her hair back at a bar while she threw up.

In his endless chase, my father would make these women his world in an instant. I expected that I would all but disappear in the flurry. Instead, something unexpected happened: I was added to the rotation. Except not as a girlfriend, of

course.

On a hot day, while walking to my college class on Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, my phone rang. My father was irritated, a mood he used to mask sadness.

"I had a trip planned with my girlfriend," he said, "and she's not coming anymore. Want to join me? I'll pay for everything."

I said yes. I don't even remember asking where we were going. Maybe I didn't want to know. Maybe I already knew this was the sort of thing you say yes to in order to assuage any deathbed regrets.

It turned out to be a couples cruise down the Mekong River.

I should have asked.

Two weeks later, we were in Cambodia boarding the ship. The first few days were uneventful. Not from ease but from an awkwardness that prevented the creation of memories. Most afternoons I camped on the sun deck, tweaking my college philosophy draft — sure I'd just outsmarted Descartes — while the retirees watched, quietly amused. My father mostly stayed downstairs on the twin bed, checking his texts.

The early nights felt a little too much like first dates — polite, waiting for something to click. And as with most first dates, it took us a couple of drinks to break the ice. One warm night, we got off the boat to visit Cambodia's Foreign Correspondents' Club, a place that lived on my bucket list. We ordered cocktails and talked politics.

On our way back, en route to the dock in an open-air tuk-tuk, it started pouring. By the time we arrived, the dock gate was locked, and we couldn't get in. I expected my father to panic, to curse the universe, to check his phone. Instead, he threw his head back and howled with laughter. I imagined this as the laugh he had before his first marriage. I joined.

The next morning, taking our sopping jeans up to dry in the sun, there was a new lightness to our interactions. I was young and still trying to figure out if life was serious or not. I decided right now that it didn't have to be. We were having a good time. Wasn't that enough?

I returned home from that trip with poorly staged tourist photos and emails from passengers eager to introduce me to their sons. A week later, my father got back together with the girlfriend, stamping our Cambodian escape as a limited-edition run.

Over the next few years, it became a pattern. Travel was his love language and his therapy. After Cambodia, I started tracking his flings. My job required two months' notice for vacations.

Meanwhile, I was forming my own bad relationship habits. I once forwarded an on-again-off-again boyfriend my father's and my Patagonia itinerary as a way of asking him to join us — as if I, also, could fabricate commitment through future travel plans. He, of course, soon exited my life, and I spent 10 glacier-blue days hoping the cold could numb my heartache.

Over the next few years, my father and I traveled the world together. Patagonia, Nashville, Sicily's "most romantic hotel in the world." Every time, I said "no" in my head and "yes" aloud to his invitations.

A few months after our Cambodia cruise, sitting in a dimly lit Nashville bar, my father said, "Should I text her?"

"Do I have to take your phone?" I asked. "If they love you, they'll show you."

It was advice I needed to follow myself.

By the time we were perched below Mount Etna, asking the spa clerk if we could switch the couple's massage to the hot stone single, we had developed a sort of relationship. It was a fun one, intentionally kept casual.

And yet, despite the casualness, it had shaped itself into something undeniably steady and loving in its own way. A steadiness I needed in my life. And one that, over time, helped me find a love that was anything but casual in my boyfriend (now husband) Zach.

Many times, I tried to feel spiteful at how I was always the second choice for my father, the stand-in when the first choice bailed.

“You know, after the divorce, I’d stay at his place maybe once a month,” I said to Zach, “and he’d be gone, visiting his girlfriend. The one time he had to see me!”

“Hmm. I just don’t get it,” Zach said. “Your relationship *seems* great.”

He was right; my anger was feigned. It was too late. My father expanded my tolerance to absorb the good, the bad and the ugly, and to be OK with it all. Not on purpose, but by the fact that he was all three, and I couldn’t help but to accept him entirely.

With time, I stopped judging his search to feel good and started noticing his effort to do good — birthdays penciled in a year out, volunteer shifts, protests. In loosening those knots in him, I spotted my own: The way I mistake chaos for closeness. So I tried something different. I chose someone steady. I let Zach in.

Without ceremony, time moved forward. Recently Zach and I drove to my father’s house to be there to put down our family dog, Oscar. My parents, sister and I spent the morning bathing in nostalgia, watching home videos, hoping to find Oscar’s puppy appearance.

We found that and much more: Christmas recitals, soccer stints, tantrums.

“Ah, I wasn’t there for any of this,” my father said wistfully.

I looked around his bare-bones kitchen. The only decorations were pixelated photos framed in CVS frames. Us in Patagonia. Us in Sicily. Us in Cambodia, sharing one umbrella, with sopping wet hair.

Zach squeezed my hand. I looked at my father and smiled, feeling an overwhelming mix of love and acceptance. I wanted him to know — not just on the surface, but deeply — that I understood. That he was a father, but first he was a person. That it was OK. That life is complicated, and our stories are never as simple as we want them to be.

Kelsey Abkin is a journalist who lives in Paris.

Modern Love can be reached at modernlove@nytimes.com.

To find previous Modern Love essays, Tiny Love Stories and podcast episodes, visit our [archive](#).

Want more Modern Love? Watch the TV series, sign up for the newsletter and listen to the podcast on iTunes or Spotify. We also have two books, “Modern Love: True Stories of Love, Loss, and Redemption” and “Tiny Love Stories: True Tales of Love in 100 Words or Less.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section ST, Page 5 of the New York edition with the headline: Understanding My Father and Something in Myself