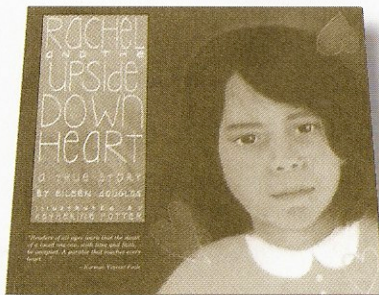


Role model

How one woman lives out the role she was cast in

by Rachel Zients

I grew up thinking everybody had a book written about them. “What’s your book about?” I’d be asked at various show and tells. My fellow fourth-graders would just look back at me curiously. My mother wrote a children’s book about me, *Rachel and the Upside Down Heart*, that has been used in the grief community. Our story was always one to share, not hide behind. I was the girl whose father had died when she



was four and if you had any questions, feel free, go ahead, ask.

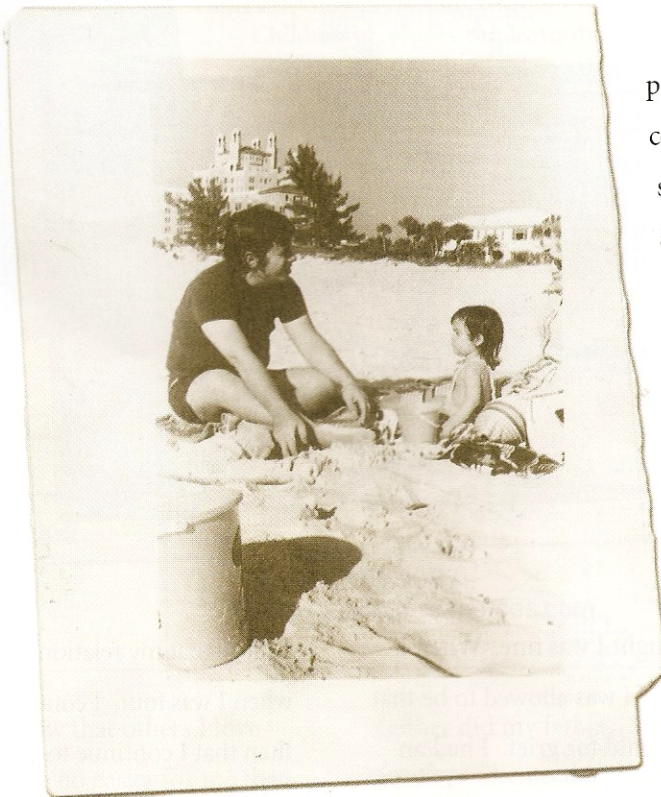
Since my mother was a journalist, writing was her comfort zone. So after my father died, she was sparked by something I did. I don’t remember drawing my hearts upside down or handing her heart cut-outs that way, explaining that’s the way my heart feels. I was only four. But she saw in this little moment a way to express her grief, to place

it on the page in story form. A fairy tale element to a harsh reality. The book was just typed in black lettering on white pages for several years. And for several years it sat in a drawer. But I knew that my story was relevant, worthwhile. There was something different in my experience, for I soon realized not everyone had a book about them, even a simple little one their own mother had written tucked away in a drawer.

Soon enough, my mother found an illustrator. Then, after a while, a publisher. She included me in the process. She asked my opinion and then, like magic, my image, my likeness was floating on the page in drawings of our old home, in the park down the street, running with our dogs we no longer had, playing with my friends, capturing me in that time.

Perhaps it was not her intent, but to be made into a character in a book allowed me a belief in my own special-ness. My father's death had displaced any sense of normalcy. Every little girl wants

to be just like everyone else. Well, I wasn't and if I wasn't going to be like everyone else well then I was going to be extra different. I was going to be an extra version of myself. A cartoon version.



The book was not published until I was entering college. We went on talk shows, told our story. I answered people's letters. I gave advice to young mothers, reassuring them that their young child had a chance.

I remember blowing up the cover, framing it and placing it on my dorm wall. I was proud of my mother, of us. I used to say if I never do anything else this was enough. And



soon, I found that I was not the only girl whose father had died.

On my dorm floor alone, there were three others. I like to think they sought me out or maybe it was I who did the seeking. Regardless, we connected. And I came to believe that I

knew what to say. How to

act. How to grieve. If something bad happened, I would take out the book, hand it over to someone suffering and

think, there you're better. I was the walking embodiment of childhood crisis birthed into capable adult. After all, it was published in a book for all to see. It had to be true.

But then I looked around and realized I did not know how to have a boyfriend. I cried way too easily. Who was I to tell someone it would all be alright? I would hide away in my apartment afraid to mention to anyone that the world seemed to heave and sigh daily and take me with it on its ins and outs. I was not as secure as I had come to believe. I thought I was fine. When I realized I wasn't, I didn't know if I was allowed to be that way. After all, I was the poster child for grief. I had an image to uphold.

There came a point when I did not want this role. I did not want to be Rachel from *Rachel and the Upside Down Heart*. I needed to be more than her, more than someone else's creation, more than the result of my father's actions and my mother's imagination.

After all she had written it. Any praise and glory was for my mother. What had I done, except to have had this

happen to me? And yet I still felt bound to it.

It took me a long time to realize that my role is the role I have been cast in by my parents, just like we all are products of our parents' actions. But it was up to me to

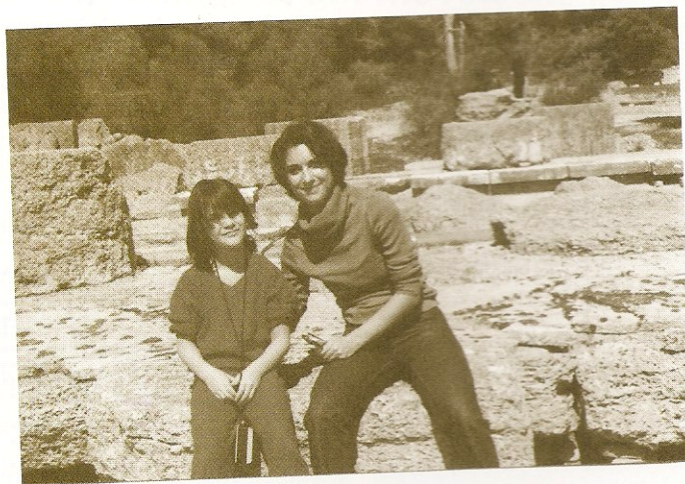
make my role and experience my own. It is a role with much opportunity. I just needed to establish other roles for myself first. And so I have become involved in grief organizations, am training to be a grief counselor, write when I feel it is needed to continue to express myself. And I have come to recognize and truly

believe that my relationship with my father did not end when I was four. I continue to get to know him, but more than that I continue to get to know myself as his daughter,

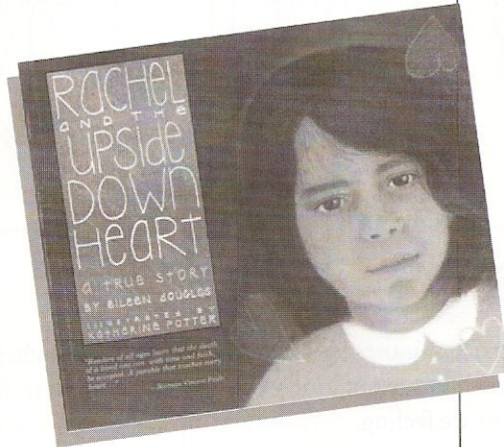
even though the concept often feels foreign.

With my mom's book and my own writing it feels at times as if I am a grief expert, but then when grief occurs, for a friend or even for me as when my grandfather died, it takes me by surprise, slaps me in

the face and renders me speechless. And this is how it should be. Grief should not be casual. It is not something to get used to. And so I keep up with my



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education, for unfortunately I know that others I love will die. That is life. And it will be no easier for me than for anyone else. And that is okay. The only thing I do differently now is I may tell people I love them just a little too much.

And while I get sad at times, I know that sad is okay. My goal is to not be burdened, to do what I can. And if that means being the best Rachel from *Rachel and the Upside Down Heart*, than that is what I will do. The book sometimes serves as a reminder that I am supposed to know what to say, be all better, able to answer other little girls' questions. Sometimes I have answers, often I do not. But I am learning that answers are not what are needed. No one has the answers. We are just figuring it out as we go. Some at different stages. All we can do is listen. And that gives me comfort.

My mother did not intend to cast me in this role,

neither did my father. She needed to do something positive. She needed a tangible expression of her feelings. We are all just doing what we need to do to get through. That is all that can be asked. The book is just a book, a simple little beautiful tale that people can turn to, to see themselves in. Possibly I saw too much of myself in it, placing too much of my life in this one journey. Now that I am older, have done more things, claimed experiences to be my own, gotten married, I am glad the book is being republished, that people want more of it. I am glad that people find comfort in it.

I recently sat in a grief training session and a young woman, no more than 20 who had lost her own father some years earlier, heard my story and said, "Oh I know your book. My sister and I used to read it. We really liked it." I started to cry, surprising myself completely, because I couldn't have been more proud.