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Family

I Wish I Knew My Father

By Tanya Frank
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Tanya Frank grew up without her father, but her curiosity about him has never gone away.

I was 3 years old when my father left.

I can't remember much about that day, but I do remember that my father's name was Alexander Mordecai, and that mom called him Alec.

I know this because a few years after he had left, when I was old enough to read, I came home from school one afternoon to find my mom in the middle of a mess: the bookcase had been emptied and the sprawl of literature covered the hall carpet.

"I should have gotten rid of these long ago," Mom said, referring to the large texts that were inscribed, "To my darling Alec, with love from Shirl." The covers were creased and the pages dog-eared, as if my father had truly loved them. Dust rose to the nicotine-stained ceiling then fluttered back down again. The room smelled dank with all those old books open at Mom's feet.

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"Put these in the trash for me would you?" she said, kicking a few paperbacks at me, then she was gone, off to tackle another project, leaving me alone.

I leafed through a couple of the larger works, tales of Roman, Greek, and Norse Gods who lived in the heavens or the underworld. One could fly on a winged horse while another controlled the waves. Mom said the subject was called Mythology, but if you ask me that was just a posh way of justifying stories for grown-ups. There was also a set of two hefty volumes, stitch-bound between red cloth covers, entitled "Customs of the World." I gathered that my father must have been an educated man, and a generous one too. Why else would he have left us with such treasures?

As well as being clever, Alec was purported to have been handsome. Mom said he resembled [Gene Pitney](#).

I didn't think about my father for the longest time, but when I reached adulthood and had children of my own, I started thinking about Alexander Mordecai.

On the weekend that I subscribed to the Internet, I looked up this Gene Pitney fella. I put his name in the Google search bar, and studied the image that flickered to life on my screen. Mom was right, the singer—whose first hit was "I Wanna Love My Life Away"—was indeed good-looking. Back in 1965, the year of my birth, he had a thick head of black hair, green eyes flecked with amber, and an expression of confidence.

But that was where the similarity between he and my father differed. In the only two surviving pictures that we had of Alexander Mordecai, the ones that escaped Mom's scissors in the wake of their divorce, he looked nervous, as if he had been forced into fatherhood and its accompanying responsibility. His feet were huge in those photographs and they sat all wrong on the floor, awkward and restless.

I imagined that it was easy for him to leave with his tall stature and those long toes. They would have carried him away quickly.

I tried to look for him over the years, but never with any real hope or purpose.

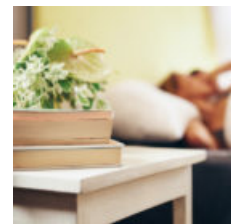
It was with the invention of Facebook, and the realization that it was a place where estranged people found each other, that my thoughts returned once again to my father.

One school night after my boys had fallen asleep, my curiosity grew big and unwieldy. I crept from their bedroom and pattered along the hall, wondering how much my father might have changed over the years. I reached the study and typed his name into the search engine, "Alexander Mordecai Frank." I was alone in the dark, and like a cheating lover my search was clandestine. It made my heart bounce in my chest.

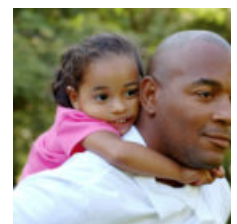
New York. There was an Alexander Mordecai Frank in New York. I dialed the number. A woman with a thick New York accent and nasally voice had recorded a brief message. I inhaled noisily, and hoped I wouldn't ruin a happy marriage.

"Hello, my name is Tanya Frank," I uttered into the quiet nothing of the answering machine. "I am

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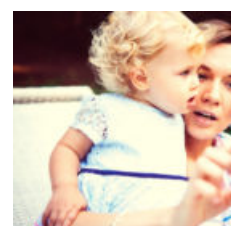
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trying to locate my father. If I have reached the wrong number, please forgive me. But if you lived on Chingford Hall Estate from 1965 to 1968 and had a daughter, it's me, Tanya Frank, I'm her." I rattled off my telephone number, and ended the call, all at once self-conscious.

I climbed into bed and placed the receiver close by just in case he should call.

UK writer, Tanya Frank, came to Los Angeles in 2001 where she lives with her partner, their two sons, and two rescued mongrels. Since 2002, Tanya has taught creative writing to middle school children and facilitated memoir-writing workshops for elders. She received her M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction from the University of California, Riverside. Her work has appeared in Connotation Press, Fiddleback, WriteGirl Anthology, LA Family Magazine, KCET Los Angeles, and Lumina, the Sarah Lawrence College Literary Journal.

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