

My Father's Diamond by Beulah Gross

I realise now that the diamond wasn't really his at all. It was my mother's, the jewel in her engagement ring, but as Father never really relinquished ownership of his gifts, we children regarded the diamond as his. He gave us presents with grandiose largesse, then displayed an active proprietary interest in them, becoming angry and petulant if we didn't use and display them often.

'What's happened to it? Don't you like it? Why aren't you using it?' he would demand thus making us feel guilty and ungrateful. Whatever we had was material evidence of his success as a husband, father, provider, person, and we were morally bound to repay him by constantly exhibiting our beholdenness to him.

He was proud of all his achievements and possessions but most precious of all was the diamond. To him it was a constant, concrete reminder of his ability to provide for his family and loved ones. I think, in some strange way, he saw it as a personification of himself, hard, unbreakable, enduring, a bright star in the universe for all to admire and praise.

Sometimes, quite often now that I think of it, when we were gathered in the lounge in the evening after dinner, Father would suddenly rouse himself. He was usually quiet, staring into space of an evening. Thinking, he called it, thinking of the past.

'Judy, let's have a look at the ring,' he'd demand, and Mom immediately put down her ever-present mending and sit next to him. He would twist and turn her hand (funny how they never removed the ring from her finger), and together they would admire the gem and the myriad colours reflected in its facets. During winter, firelight created its own special glow in the diamond and they were even more entranced then.

I was expected to admire the diamond too and at first I wanted to, but as I grew older the novelty palled. My parents didn't really notice my dwindling interest. Both were totally absorbed in the diamond. To my mother, Father was the universe and what he admired she did too, for she, like the diamond, was an extension of him.

Sitting there, holding her hand with the diamond on it, Father would remind her of how he had bought it, and on cue she would congratulate him on his foresight and wisdom.

It seems that on their engagement Father decided he would give her that eternal symbol of true love and everlasting devotion - a diamond ring. This seemed an impossible ambition for a young, uneducated, very poor working man during the depression, but even then, Father was adamant once he decided on a course of action. They were engaged for a year and had been married for a year before the diamond

was paid for - a shilling or so at a time, plus whatever they could spare. The last instalment was paid on their first anniversary, a week before I was born.

From then on, the diamond became Father's symbol for his sheer tenacity, his strength of purpose, his ability to rise above adversity, his shining strength in completing a self-set goal.

Once the diamond was lost. What a furore there was then!

Father was livid. 'How can you be so careless?' he shouted at Mom, oblivious to her distraught sobbing. I wonder now if he felt that she had lost or discarded a part of him.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't know how it happened!' she wept. But I know. Father forbade her to remove the ring from her hand at any time, except at his request and into his hand. She worked long, hard hours in the home, always busy doing something to please him, to help him, to make ends meet. It's not surprising the claws wore through.

That whole night we hunted for the diamond. All of us, even the smallest child, were kept from our beds to help in the search. No one was allowed to rest, have a drink or even go to the lavatory. The search had to continue.

The wardrobes were emptied, the kitchen became a shambles with flour, sugar and other groceries thrown willy-nilly on the floor. Garbage was minutely examined, the vacuum cleaner bag was sifted through and the house was generally ransacked. Through all this my mother cried and apologised and Father ranted and yelled - while directing operations. As a last resort someone, Mom probably, thought to open the S-bend pipe under the kitchen sink, and there it was, Father's diamond, safe after all!

To punish Mom for her negligence and for causing him such worry and aggravation, Father put the diamond away 'in a safe place'. For many months he refused to have it reset because he didn't trust Mom to take good enough care of it. He often told her this and curiously, she never protested. It was after all Father's diamond.

Eventually of course, he got over his rage and had the diamond reset. I believe now that he couldn't bear not to have it in constant evidence. I can still remember the flourish with which he replaced it on her finger. I can also still hear what he said as he once again entrusted his most prized possession to her for safekeeping.

'There you are, my dear. I've had it fixed for you. Just make sure you take very good care of it this time.'

After this, about once a month, father made a point of examining the claws around his diamond under a magnifying glass. I realise now how ludicrous this was because he didn't know anything about

jewellery. It made him feel he was taking care of his investment I suppose not to mention checking up on Mom.

Several times a year Father would decide the diamond needed cleaning. He made a great production of this procedure, preparing everything for it with the precision of a nurse preparing a surgeon's tray. First a clean towel was placed on the dining-room table at Father's place. On it were put two bowls of water, one warm and sudsy, the other cold and clear. A special soft toothbrush was removed from its little case and carefully positioned between the bowls together with a small torch. To the right of this a clean white handkerchief was laid. Father would seat himself formally at the table and then ceremoniously remove the ring containing his diamond from Mom's finger.

We children, and Mom of course, were expected, encouraged even, to watch Father perform the delicate operation of restoring the light of his life to pristine glory - as long as we didn't cast a shadow or make any noise which might distract him. First, he swirled the ring in the warm soapy water, then he brushed it gently with the toothbrush, and finally he rinsed it in the clear water. He then dried it carefully with the handkerchief and held it out in front of him to see if it glittered satisfactorily, often using the torch for closer examination. Even when we were sure that the diamond was cleaner and brighter than ever before Father would continue to swish, brush and polish it. Finally, even he had to pronounce it perfect again. Then with much ostentation he would replace the sparkling diamond, secure in its claws, on Mom's finger - after first ensuring that her hands were clean enough to receive it. 'I've cleaned it thoroughly again. I don't know how you get it so dirty. You must take better care of it, Judy,' he would say loftily, and leave the mess on the table for her to clear.

Throughout my life I was constantly aware of the special meaning this not very large jewel had for Father, but I didn't really understand it. Nor did I realise its significance to me until recently.

Father died a little while ago and Mom had the diamond valued for insurance purposes. She told me, with tears in her eyes, that it wasn't worth very much after all. You see, Father had been deceived all those years ago and he had scrimped and saved to pay for nothing. The diamond he believed to be perfect and everlasting, which in a way he'd idolised, was a false god.

The diamond has a crack, a deep flaw in it, just as he did.

My Father's Diamond

Written by Beulah Gross

Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories site in April, 2023