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people build and strengthen
their families.*

Some Apples Roll Far From The Trees

About an hour ago, Mona limped home with one of those nasty scraped knees, the kind that's a raw mess of exposed dermis, blood, tiny pebbles and dirt. As a kid, I remember that by the end of August, our knees, elbows and brows were emblems of a well-spent summer. In this age of video games and cable TV, it's refreshing to see a kid with a scraped knee. It was, however, a challenge to treat Mona's injury; she is not the most stoic patient.

Between whining and screaming or pushing my hands away, Mona led me to believe that her injury was the result of a simple bike accident. It could happen to anyone. She assured me that she wasn't doing anything "stupid." After several of my, "Moona, I want the truth," she admitted that she and a neighbor's 13-year-old grandson were racing their bikes in the street. She skidded, fell off of her bike, continued to skid, this time with the bike on top of her and her knee scraping along the blacktop.

So I had this all-too-familiar dilemma. How should I respond? Mona told me the truth, but she was doing something dangerous. This is the first summer that we've allowed Mona to ride her bike in the street without adult supervision. I told her that I wasn't angry about the skinned knee, but that I was concerned about what could have happened, since she was paying more attention to winning a bike race than to being safe. I was immediately reminded of all the what-coulda's that were dumped on me as a kid. By the time I was twelve, my mother had convinced me that I was a walking magnet for every kidnapper, murderer and dangerous driver within the borough of Queens. I would have added child molester to the list, but we didn't talk about such things in the nineteen-fifties and early sixties. Many parents today choose not to burden their children with the same fears that they were burdened with, but I'm not one of those parents. I figure Mona can eventually go through therapy like every other "normal" American. Our prime responsibility, as Mona's parents, is for Jack and me to get our hyper-competitive kinda-butch daughter safely to young adulthood, and then we'll help pay for her therapy, like her grandparents did for me.

As a toddler, Mona would follow the lead of preteens on playgrounds: jumping, climbing and balancing. Using playground equipment for everything, except its intended purpose. Swings were to fly from. Slides were to charge up the wrong way. And hand-over-hand bars were for straddling.

My heart was constantly in my throat. I'd gently direct her to a baby swing, but she'd look at me like *why don't you sit in it*, then run off to conquer some imaginary boot camp-like obstacle course. Her favorite dress-up costumes were (and still are) Robin Hood, Ninja Warriors and anything that hints of camouflage.

When Mona was five-years old, we signed her up for t-ball. It quickly became apparent that her major objective was to convince all the little boys on her team that no matter where a ball landed, they were to pick it up and throw it to her. During the final games we heard high-pitched voices yelling, "Throw it to Mona! Throw it to Mona!"

When she aged out of t-ball, a friendly woman at the registration table advised her that most little girls sign-up for softball. Mona smiled politely, and answered, "But I want to play baseball." This summer, she registered for the children's majors. I guess she felt more pressure to register for softball, so she asked me which I'd prefer her to play. I told her that I'd agree to whatever she decided, since I don't like either sport. She chose baseball. I had lost interest after T-ball, where the kids would pick dandelions, spin around and fall to the ground like they had just been shot. I guess the antics of t-ballers drive diehard baseball fans nuts, but I thought the little kids were using their down time creatively.

At Mona's last baseball game this past summer, while Jack and I pretended to pay attention, Jack leaned toward me and whispered, "Remember tonight is, *Dynasty: The Reunion*." I wondered how many other fathers were concerned that this game might go on too long, causing us to miss the first precious moments of Linda Evans and Joan Collins walking us down *Dynasty's* memory lane. I wondered if any of them even knew who Linda Evans and Joan Collins were. Then I had a horrible thought. Most of these fathers (and mothers) probably were still in diapers during the primetime heydays of *Dynasty*. They might not know or even care that long before Will and Jack, of *Will and Grace*, there was Steven of *Dynasty*.

Of course the creators of *Dynasty* didn't quite know what to do with Steven. I don't recall the exact sequence, but he was gay then he died in an oil rig explosion then he was alive again with a new face and new sexual orientation then he was married and fathered a son then he was gay again.

Regardless, Steven Carrington was our hero, and even though his father, Blake Carrington, killed Steven's lover in the first episode, his mother, superbly performed by Joan Collins, always loved him. She may have been a ruthless megalomaniac, but she was a mother first (well maybe second) and she stood by her gay son. What gay viewer could resist adoring Collins, yearning that our mothers could love us the way she loved her Steven, not to mention dress like her, walk like her and pull off camp as well as she did?

So here Jack and I were, these two impatient *Dynasty* aficionados, enduring our daughter's final baseball game of the season. I glanced around. Were any other parents checking their watches? I especially searched for the dad we had spotted last summer, reading *Martha Stewart Living*, but he wasn't around. He was probably already camped out in front of his television. I imagined him reclining on a tufted chaise lounge, sipping champagne and savoring chocolate covered strawberries, while I sat on a broken beach chair watching baseball.

This past summer, Mona's bent for action and competition lead to a frightening consequence. During basketball camp at Syracuse University, Mona experienced shortness of breath, chest pain and profuse sweating. After an emergency room visit, reoccurring symptoms and a visit to our family doctor, we secured an appointment with a pediatric cardiologist. The intensity of these symptoms was new, but in the past Mona had experienced chest pain and once before we brought her to the emergency room during a late night episode and had several conversations with our doctor about it.

The pediatric cardiologist examined her and then performed an echocardiogram. I watched images of our daughter's little heart beat, flashing intermittent colors as the nurse moved the transducer to various locations on her chest. I hated seeing her heart on a screen, dissociated from Mona, like some tyrannical dictator that held too much governance over her life. Do what I say and I'll keep pumping for you; disobey me and I'll seize.

Fortunately, she was fine. Her heart was off of the screen and back in her chest where it belonged; its only desire was to give Mona a long and healthy life. "Mona has the heart of an athlete," were the doctor's exact words. I wanted to add, "And her father has the nervous ticks and tension headaches of an athlete's parent." But I didn't. Instead, I got teary eyed and exhaled, "Thank God." His opinion was that Mona's symptoms were caused by strained chest muscles. I thought of what the coaches had said when Jack and I picked her up at camp after she had her first spell. They mentioned that she constantly pushed herself, despite the intense heat. They made her take breaks. Later, Mona told me that she didn't want to let her team members down. Mona was one of the youngest girls at the camp, but of course she had to keep up with the older veteran players – reminiscent of the toddler on the playground chasing after the preteens.

Now I can guess what our evangelical friends - excuse me - born-again friends might say about Mona's attraction to action and competition. I recently read a newspaper article stating that evangelical Christians prefer to be called born-again or bible-reading Christians rather than evangelical, kind of like I prefer gay to abomination. Anyway, they'd probably argue that Mona is experiencing a gender identity crisis, since she has two dads and no mother as a role model. But they also think all gay men are effeminate. So which is it? Regarding Mona's dads, I had a pretty good arm as a kid. My parents had a row of plaster poodles in their den and religious statues in their bedroom to prove my athletic prowess. I had won them at our church bazaar by pitching hardballs and knocking stuffed cats with weighted bottoms off of a two-by-four. In my old neighborhood, survival was contingent on being able to throw a ball. As kids, we mostly played stoopball, stickball and handball, and I went along with the crowd. That is, when I wasn't playing with my cousin's Barbie doll, staging plays in my garage or choreographing funerals for my dead goldfish. And Jack, well he was a cute little towhead country boy who repeatedly entered the annual 4H bakeoff. His muffins won honorary mention. After thirty-one years together, I'd still give his muffins a blue ribbon.

While I type this, sitting next to an open window, I hear Mona and Mario, my thirteen-year-old godson, and a few younger boys playing football in an adjoining yard. Mona and Mario are arguing as usual. I hear her yell, "You can't keep changing the rules so you can win!" I guess she's recuperated from her knee injury.

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So how are Mona's two gay dads weathering raising our extremely active and competitive daughter? Well, my mother complains that she always wanted a granddaughter so she could play dolls with her. I don't know what her problem is. She had a son who played with dolls, and now she has a granddaughter who's a jock. Some people are never satisfied. But Jack and I figure, if we can survive the emergency room visits and devise a way to simultaneously read and watch Mona's games, we'll be fine. And there are the Kodak moments: like at last summer's baseball game when the coach shouted at the team, "You're throwing like a bunch of girls." I knew that Mona wanted to sway her shoulders and bop her head and yell back, "Now I know you di-in't just say that," but instead she shot me a glance, and I gave her one of my just-be-polite-when-you-tell-him looks. She walked over to the coach and tapped him on his shoulder. These are the moments that our courageous little girl blows me away, and I hope that the answer to the question, *How are Jack and I doing?* is that we're doing right by our confident and tenacious daughter.