When his daughter flashes an aptitude for playing the point, the writer begins to miss the point entirely.

THE DAUGHTER YOU HAVE

R. D. Rosen

I think of it as the Parents' Epiphany. It comes to all of us parents sooner or later, but usually later. Almost always a little too late, although we have only ourselves to blame. After all, the Parents' Epiphany is usually preceded by countless Parents' Epiphany Opportunities, any one of which could have become the Parents' Epiphany if only we hadn't been so busy being Pre-Epiphany Parents.

Take me and my younger daughter Isabel. She showed unusual athletic promise, even as a toddler. She walked confidently at nine months, had great hand–eye coordination, and was fearless, occasionally to the

detriment of her physical well-being. As she grew older, and to my delight—since it was a trait that defined me—Isabel had a nose for the ball. She belonged to that minority of children who, in any game involving a ball, felt that they have a special claim on it. She ran after balls, dove for them, and occasionally wrestled them away from other children.

Let me just stop here for a moment to say that while an athletic son will almost surely rekindle a father's expired dreams, a man without a son will cling to a sporting daughter's potential for dear life precisely because he has no son. She is his last chance to shine vicariously before being dragged down by time's undertow. Being invested in a daughter's athletic ability comes easily to us, partly because we are free of sticky, competitive, father–son feelings. Our wishes for our daughters are uncorrupted by jealousy and ambivalence.

I wanted nothing more than for Isabel to use her gifts. The sport that caught her fancy turned out to be basketball. In her Saturday girls' basketball league, which she began at the age of eight, she glided up and down the court, dribbling with either hand, squinting at the tangle of players to find someone open for a pass. Her shots went in with what passes for regularity at that age. On defense, she fastened herself to her opponents, then picked their pockets as deftly as Walt Frazier. I remember her at ten being tailed closely on a breakaway following a steal. Without ever having practiced the move, she pulled up short near the basket and then calmly waited for her opponent to fly by before she swished a short jumper. The icing on the cake was that she never

celebrated her little triumphs; she seemed above being surprised by her skills or needing to embarrass others. During the years I coached her basketball team, I frequently got frustrated with the team, the refs, the athletic limitations of a group of nine-year-old girls far more concerned with their ponytails than their passing lanes, but I was rarely upset with Isabel, who, as sweet-natured as she was, played with that quiet intensity you simply cannot teach.

It's essential to this story that you know that her interest in basketball coincided with my own basketball renaissance. I joined a long-standing basketball game of older men that convened once a week in Sandy Koufax's old high school in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, an hour from my Manhattan home. Not only were most of the participants former players and coaches—the kind of men from whom I could learn skills that had eluded me growing up in a Midwestern town where there was no real basketball tradition—but our game was played according to a strict set of rules designed to prevent injuries and prolong everyone's playing career. Although I was the envy of all my friends with bad backs and knees, I knew I had long since reached the limits of my potential. Inside, I was busy converting my own limitations and feelings of mortality into more expectations for Isabel.

Expectations came easily. Isabel possessed three enviable intangibles. First, she had composure. Second, she could see the floor. Third, she was tough. After being knocked to the basketball court by some ten-year-old giantess, she'd pick herself up without complaint and

proceed to steal the ball from her on the next play, then dribble the length of the court for a layup. Her vengeance had a cool, Clint Eastwood–like quality.

Actually, she had a fourth intangible, and it's interesting that I forgot it, since its absence in my own character cost me athletically. Isabel was eminently coachable—even by her flawed father. While I pontificated about the usefulness of bounce passes or playing defense by adopting the novel approach of placing oneself *between* the opposing player and the basket, most of her teammates looked blankly at me, endlessly resecuring their ponytails with scrunchies. Isabel, bless her heart, not only listened, she did her best to implement my instructions.

Naturally, it wasn't enough to enjoy these moments for what they were. Although it was a psychological disservice to all concerned as well as a cliché, I entertained images of watching Isabel, at some point down the road, play point guard for a small college. But to hide these crimes of parental hubris, around others I affected a pleasant indifference to my daughter's early success on the basketball court. I imagined that I had fooled her too.

It's ridiculous, when you think about it, that we expect our own offspring to be untouched by any of the struggles and anxieties that plagued our own childhoods—and that, in many instances, continue to define our adulthoods. Our children are the *last* people we should expect to escape the enviro-genetic web we've spun for them. Yet, at the first sign that children might surpass us in some even tiny aspect of athleticism, we

can't wait to project onto the kid every stupid, vainglorious, and long-ago-discarded sports fantasy we ever indulged in for ourselves.

As an eighth grader, she started at guard on the junior-varsity squad of a small private school, and as a freshman she started in the varsity backcourt. As quick and aggressive as ever, she added a sweet one-handed set shot. My fantasies proliferated. The ball had beautiful rotation, but the arc was a little flat, hurting her field-goal percentage. I asked her to come to the playground so I could reengineer her release point and follow-through.

When she declined, I felt personally insulted, as though my interest in her basketball playing had been a down payment on some happiness she now refused to deliver.

Just for half an hour, I said.

No, thanks, she said matter-of-factly, as if I had offered her more zucchini instead of a chance to elevate her game. Why in the world wouldn't she want to work on her release and follow-through? Her teammates needed her outside scoring. I said, *But don't you have a responsibility to your teammates?*

That's okay, Dad. I just want to hang out with my friends.

I was like a wounded animal. *Half an hour—c'mon.*

I'll work on it in practice.

Undaunted, I mimed a release, making sure to leave my hand in the gooseneck position for her to appreciate. *If you groove a better release, you'll see—your shot will really start to fall.*

She smelled blood and went in for the kill.

I don't care, Dad. Sorry.

Wait. Had I missed the official notification that Isabel didn't really care about her shot? I knew she wasn't a jock through and through. I had by now seen other girls with "small-college guard" written all over them—a little quicker and a little tougher and a lot hungrier than Isabel. I understood my daughter had a lively social life, a new interest in photography, a passion for rock music, a genius for vintage-clothes shopping. But surely that left time to work on her arc, didn't it?

I felt like that defender four years before, chasing her down the court on a breakaway, only to have her stop on a dime while I sailed past, looking foolish.

It's okay, Dad. Some other time, okay?

C'mon, Isabel. We can work on your crossover dribble. Your reverse-spin move.

Dad!

It's hard for a father not to sound sexist here, but it is highly unlikely that any fourteen-year-old boy in her position would not want to work on his shot on his own. For boys, athletic success is one of the chief currencies of self-esteem, mastery, and popularity. I had played baseball into college before I hit the fork in the road and took the path marked "Writing" instead of the one marked "Caution: Can't Hit the Curve." It was hard for me to accept the fact that she had unilaterally renegotiated the terms of our unspoken agreement.

Okay, sweetie. I said. *That's fine. Don't worry about it.*

I could hear the air hissing as it went out of my little dream for Isabel. Which is to say, my dream about me.

And that was my first real Parents' Epiphany Oppor-

tunity—one of those moments that are the precursors of all the even tougher moments when you will have to understand the difference between the two of you, leave her alone, look the other way, and otherwise watch as she stands on the other side of the heartbreaking abyss between parent and child that is there for a reason. I got it, but I didn't.

As I said earlier, it takes most of us a little while.

So that's me lounging in the bleachers at her high school games. I'm the one who seems to have Tourette's, suddenly erupting with excitement at a good defensive play, spouting praise, or unleashing an epithet at an errant pass or bad call. Then, as I become aware that other parents are looking my way, alarmed at the sound of my voice in the mostly empty gym, I sink low in the bleachers, trying to hide from my own passion.

Before I know it, I'm in the dream again. Sketching plays on restaurant napkins over dinner with her. Chatting about defenses with her coach before the game. Telling Isabel to keep it out of Mindy's rocklike hands.

But the competition has stiffened, and Isabel can no longer prey so easily on unsuspecting ball handlers or get off her shot uncontested. She, too, throws the ball away. Her intensity is not enough to carry the team. She needs more arc on her shot.

I'm only doing this for you, she says chillingly one day.

Doing what?

Playing basketball.

This can't be true. I've never demanded she play basketball. Never berated her, like some fathers. Okay, I've offered my constructive criticism on a few thousand

occasions. But I had put her in a league and she had found some joy there. She couldn't be faking it. What am I not seeing?

Tell me you're kidding, Isabel.

Okay, I am. But stop annoying me, Dad. Okay? And taking it so seriously.

One night—she's a junior now—I finally convince her to go to the Y with me to work on her shot. I am at once delighted and cringing at my own persistence. She listens to my suggestions, then shoots without enthusiasm. I long for an experience she will not provide.

After another shot with not enough arc hits the front of the rim, Isabel looks at me with ennui. Like I've dragged her to the museum, not a basketball court.

But I keep dreaming. During a playoff game not long after, I see her do something that astounds me. Trapped on the sideline with the ball, she wisely calls time-out. The referee blows his whistle and, as Isabel starts for the huddle, she coolly bounce-passes the ball behind her, *without looking,* right into the ref's hands. It's the confident, almost too cocky gesture of an experienced player—like flipping the bellboy a silver dollar—and I smile at her mastery of the game's nuances. Also, she's now referring to herself as a "baller."

A *baller*! It's a sign! There's still hope!

Except that when I look up "baller" on urban dictionary.com, I find that, although it originally described a thug who made it out of the ghetto to make millions playing professional basketball, it now refers to "any thug who is living large."

I, however, am living the small life of a parent who, to quote one of my favorite Zen aphorisms, is not riding

the horse in the direction that it's going. Around this time, I turn to one of those books I keep near the bed to console and enlighten me, *The Parent's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parents.* Nearly everything in it makes me weep with a mixture of regret and hope.

> A pot has beautiful sides.
> The emptiness
> makes it useful.
> Empty yourself of agenda
> and you will be available
> for your children.

I do my best to unload agenda during the summer before her senior year. I bend over backward to prove I'm not holding agenda.

Isabel, I tell her in September, when she seems ambivalent about playing another season, *it's fine with me if you don't play.* I wonder how convincing I am.

I like playing on the team, Dad. And I work really hard in practice. I just don't like working on my shot when I don't have to.

I'm now ready to let this sink in. Basketball is an important social experience for Isabel; it's being part of the group that has meaning. For boys, the camaraderie is also crucial but not entirely divorced from the team's success. In fact, they have a synergistic relationship. It wasn't true for Isabel anymore—and, in fact, I don't think it had ever been true. For her, it wasn't who won or lost, or whether she put any more arc on her shot, but *that* she played the game.

I stopped asking her to work on her shot, and a cer-

tain sadness settled in during her last season. I was ending a relationship, the one I'd had for ten years, not with Isabel, but with her basketball playing.

Look at your children closely.
You will never know the mystery of their being.
Can you love them still?

I'm the son you never had, Isabel tells me one day when, against my better judgment, and because it is a long road to the Epiphany, I'm diagramming on a napkin a move she might try making. I cannot let go, and I know it.

Realizing that I've just diagrammed my last play for her, I put the pen down and say, *No, you're the daughter I have.*

Live your own life. . . .
There is no need to live theirs.
They will do that wonderfully
by themselves.

These are beautiful words, but if you don't have a child you love, you can't know how hard it is to live your own life while letting your children live theirs. It's harder than hitting two free throws with time running out and the other team's fans waving those plastic noodles to distract you. Someday, perhaps, Isabel will be a parent herself and discover that one of the things parents of teenagers talk about all the time is how hard it is, this insidious confusion about where your life ends and theirs begins.

Isabel goes out the way she started. In her last game (she'll be going to a college that doesn't even *have* a basketball team), she slaps the ball out of an opponent's hands, grabs it, and starts downcourt for a layup. But she's older now, and the players are tougher, and the other girl's on her ass all the way down the floor. Under pressure, Isabel throws up an errant shot.

Isabel barely changes her expression, puts her head down, and runs back on defense.

Toward the end of the season, some New York Knicks tickets fall into my hands and I get to take Isabel to three games. We've seen the Knicks once or twice before, but now it feels different. Although I keep pretentiously pointing out some of the little things players are doing that she might have missed, I've pretty much emptied myself of agenda. I'm not trying to teach her things that I think she needs to know in order to be a better basketball player. I'm not secretly wondering how much she really cares about the game. I'm not even concerned that she's missed some life lesson that, in my view, basketball is particularly well equipped to provide. When she has romantic fantasies about two of the Knicks, I take them seriously.

It's a new experience.

For the first time we're on the same team.

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