**Family Matters**

**The Awful Truth**

No mother wants to hurt her child and, for one writer, the choice to have a frank discussion with her teenage son was difficult.

By Sasha Tamarkin

For Friday night dinner, I thought up a pie that my neighbor says is the best I ever made. I used a ginger-cookie crust, a layer of instant pudding labeled dulce de leche (one cup milk, one cup cream) and homemade ultrarich dark chocolate mousse. I never got around to the next layer—whipped cream. My oldest came to dinner. He is 40, married to a nursery school teacher I love and admire, and they have two children: a boy, 5, and a girl who is just leaving diapers.

It is good to speak of my son in unremarkable words. I look back to when he was 16, and I felt I had to tell him a difficult truth. It was the hardest thing I ever did.

He had cancer and I broke my word and violated a written agreement in telling him.

When Guy was 16, his father and I separated. This was after my husband went to Rio with another woman. He told me a lucky travel perk had come his way through his job. I was ashamed that I checked on him. My next big move, my decision to divorce, took a couple of years. It was so utterly painful. My problem was that I loved my husband. I counted on him. I trusted many of his opinions.

He was having an affair that went on for years (with supposed stops), and we went to counseling (he lied, again). Being his wife when he was in love with someone else was driving me crazy. I didn’t like choosing between insanity or divorce, but at least the choice seemed clear.

Both Guy’s father and I worked as journalists in Jerusalem. He was the real thing—one of the stars you see on the television screen, one of the reporters on Arab affairs for the state television station. I was a lowly copy editor at The Jerusalem Post. Between work and four children we were perpetually tired and busy.

I come from a St. Louis family and was born in an era in which getting married and having children was one of the major goals in life. I succeeded, but if you had asked me, I would readily have said I was not the best mom. The evidence was plentiful. Housekeeping does not come naturally to me or even much at all.

I didn’t care how my kids dressed or what the neighbors thought. My kids should have had extracurricular activities. They should have had car trips and fun vacations. It would be nice if I could say that nobody yelled or taunted one another or that as a family we worked well on the level of talking things out up front. Nope.

So it was in this messy, tired and in no-way-enchanted existence that Guy told his father that he spotted some blood when he urinated. His father—a typical hypochondriacal male—took Guy to a urologist, who
scheduled a bladder X-ray. Days later, I took Guy for the X-ray. The technician came out afterward looking pale. Go straight to the hospital, he said.

What is it with men? I stuck to my original plan. I had promised Guy we would go out for a hamburger.

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It’s an ordinary thing in the United States. Quite expensive in Jerusalem. We had our hamburgers with all the trimmings and fries and went to the hospital for another test and, subsequently, Guy’s father and I had a sit-down with the hospital’s famous urologist. He happened to be the prime minister’s doctor. He used a word in Hebrew whose meaning I knew but simply refused to take in: malignant.

My precious firstborn had a bladder tumor, stage two cancer.

Guy’s dad and I, still not officially divorced but living apart, had worked out an agreement, via lawyers, that if one of our kids had a medical problem and we disagreed on how to handle it, we would follow the advice of our pediatrician. Guy’s father was born in Petah Tikva, a suburb of Tel Aviv, the son of German Jews. Where I was funny and capricious, he was strait-laced. Guy’s father did not want to tell his son the hard, awful word—cancer. I disagreed. Our pediatrician, like me, was American born and had studied medicine in the United States. I counted on her to say I was right.

“Don’t tell Guy the truth,” said the pediatrician. “It will destroy his confidence in his body.”

We lived on the top floor of an apartment building, a nice middle-class place in the French Hill neighborhood. In Israel, this means that down the hall is a roof that is used to hang laundry to dry in the sun. Guy and I had gone out to hang a wash. We had done this many times. The scene is ugly, if anything. Asphalt black floor. Metallic bars, the height of a tall man, that look like a poor person’s climbing frame with their thin lines for holding laundry. There is a faint smell of wet clothes and detergent,
of cleanliness. I hung a sheet and two shirts. My son was also attacking the laundry basket. It was quiet and cool on the roof with a slight breeze. Noise was minimal, just cars passing eight stories below.

No drama. I knew what I was going to do. I hate lies; they make me uncomfortable. I told Guy the real reason for the flutter with the doctors—that he had cancer and would have an operation to cut it away. Guy looked stunned like I had struck him. He didn’t ask questions.

I told him on the rooftop that it was my decision to tell him the truth. Black mark against his father. Or was I just taking responsibility? Guy didn’t look like someone who wanted to know more. He sounded angry and like a teenager. It was most certainly his right to know, he said. We finished the laundry, he went back to his room, probably to go on the computer or break out the school books. I don’t know.

I had tried to put him first. To think about what this would mean for him. But I couldn’t believe the pediatrician and did believe that not letting him know the facts was wrong, wrong, wrong.

It is too easy to judge a situation with hindsight. Guy is bright. He went on to study computers at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and graduated with distinction, a fact he failed to tell his parents, so it was lucky we both showed up for the diploma ceremony. And lucky we brought along his younger brothers. They honored their big brother with the bowing and flourishing of arms from the movie Wayne’s World.

Before that, Guy did what most Israeli boys did. He served in the Israel Defense Forces, but not the regulation three years and not as an ordinary conscript. He volunteered. The army would not take him as a regular soldier because of his medical history. A possible repeat or similar problem with the government footing the bill? No thanks, said the army.

So it was likely Guy would, in time, have figured things out for himself. Did he lose confidence in his body? I never talked to him about it. Guy had the operation and no radiation or chemotherapy. We were told that the prognosis was hard to predict, that it was rare for a boy to develop bladder cancer. It did not come back.

Guy never brought up the subject of his cancer again. I did when I wrote this. I showed him the story and he did not ask me to change anything. We speak often on the phone and talk about ordinary things. Which bathroom tile to buy, how his carpenter borrowed Guy’s mobile phone and dropped it in the toilet. I babysit his two kids a couple of times a month. Guy did give me a piece of advice I treasure. He said: When you want to do something, get help.

Life is a messy business. I am closing in on 70 and wish I could be a much better human being. To become considerate, thoughtful, wise. I make a cake or a pie almost every two weeks when my kids come for dinner and I am often late with the meal and do not take care of loads of things like phoning people I mean to phone.

Regrets? I have plenty, especially because I am way too self-critical. I think all of my kids do that, too. I failed. Or maybe I succeeded. Poet and novelist Philip Larkin said it for all of us: “They f----k you up, your mum and dad.”

I still cannot resist throwing into conversation a put-down of my ex.

What does my son Guy say?
He says that both his parents are immature. I love that.

Over the years, I have tried to think of what I might have said to my son after that dramatic moment on the roof when he must have been hurting so bad:

It’s O.K. to feel bad.
Son, we will beat this.
You’ll see. Everything will work out O.K.

I didn’t say a word. A mother should be comforting. My pain made me tongue-tied. But I wonder. In not saying anything, maybe I let my son help himself.

When Guy was in his early twenties, he developed stomach upsets that wouldn’t go away. By then we had a different family doctor, a French physician who checked for everything (he knew about the cancer, of course) and more or less said: It’s in your head.

Guy wanted help. He tried a round of alternative medical people. I could not believe the Russian who named so many foods as forbidden. It would have been easier to list what my son was allowed to eat. Guy kept to the regimen. Nothing helped. The older woman I hated, my ex’s lover who would become his second wife, recommended a practitioner of Chinese medicine she had tried.

That doctor, Guan, who came to Israel from China, helped. He also became a father figure to Guy. My son worked in computers but studied for three years at night and became a practitioner of Chinese medicine. My son, the doctor.

Did my son’s bout with cancer steer him into alternative medicine? We have never really talked about it. I don’t think he’s a rebel like me. Guy is the oldest child; I was the youngest of five. I think that the way we do things grows from many, many strands. I hesitate to say that one thing causes another.

But having the truth, as much as you can, is a good way to begin figuring things out.

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