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Relationships

My mother and I were best friends. But there's one thing we never talked about.

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By Scott Gerace

Little Orphan Annie killed Santa Claus when I was 7 years old. It was the same time my mother and I began to share a secret that lasted the rest of her life.

That year I fell in love with the Broadway musical featuring the red-headed songstress. While other boys waited impatiently for their G.I. Joe action figure to arrive under the tree, I counted down the days until Santa would bring me the "Annie" cast album.

"Stop dancing and prancing around," my mother shouted from the kitchen, as I twirled around the dining room table.

"I'm tap-dancing like Little Orphan Annie," I insisted. "I'm a star."

"You're too heavy and awkward," she replied.

While my mother discouraged my theatrics, a tactic she deployed throughout my life when I reached too high or dreamed too big — the lead in the school play, a college application to New York University — she also watched. She never asked if I was gay, but she knew. For more than 30 years, it was our unspoken secret.

“There is no Santa Claus,” my brother Mark announced one afternoon when my “Annie” antics had reached new levels of annoyance. “Mom and Dad hide everything up in the attic, and your album is up there, too!”

I refused to believe it.

“I’ll prove it to you,” he said and marched me to the doorway on the second floor of our row home leading to the attic.

At the top of the attic steps, my brother pointed down the small hallway to a little door. Behind it was a crawl space filled with presents. He reached deep into the crawl space, re-emerging with a 12-by-12-inch red square and a satisfied look in his eye. I ran my hands over the bright red cover and imagined myself on a stage wearing a red fright wig and a red and white dress, belting out “Tomorrow.”

“I’m getting Annie for Christmas,” I said with a mix of surprise and disappointment. There was no Santa Claus.

“You boys better not be up in the attic,” our mother yelled from two stories down.

Mark snatched the album out of my hand and placed it back in the crawl space.

Come Christmas morning, Annie finally made her debut. That Christmas killed Santa Claus. It also fractured something in the bond between my mother and me. On the outside we were extremely close, a mother and son envied by others. To hear us laughing and talking on the phone, you’d swear it was the chatter of two BFFs. But as close as we were, and as obvious as it was, I never revealed that I was gay.

Over other Christmases, she presented me with gifts seemingly out of the Sears catalog for gay stereotypes – more Broadway soundtracks, a collection of “Wizard of Oz” dolls — my favorite movie to this day. As an adult, she proudly presented me each year with another ornament in Hallmark’s Wizard of Oz collection.

Only once did I attempt to talk about our not-so-secret secret, even as everyone else in my public life had already embraced it. It was right after Christmas more than 20 years ago, when I was 23**.** My mother had traveled by bus from Pennsylvania to Washington, where I had landed after college. At the urging of a therapist, I chose this visit to leap out of the

closet. I made a crucial miscalculation of taking her to see the movie “Philadelphia” as my way into the conversation.

“Weren’t those gay people in the movie nice?” she said as we left the theater.

“Mom, I want to tell you something,” I began.

“Oh Scott, please don’t say anything that will ruin my day.”

When I had pictured the moment ahead of time, I had expected a different response. I imagined her saying something like: “I still love you, but please don’t catch AIDS or anything.”

She refused to allow anything to “ruin the weekend.” But for me, the visit and my attempts to break our secret were a disaster. When it came time for her to board the bus back to Pennsylvania, it started to snow heavily.

“Should I stay?” she asked, picturing herself trapped on some highway after the bus driver informed us he might not make it all the way.

“Oh you’ll be fine,” I said, letting my anger outweigh any concern for her well-being.

When she got stranded halfway home in a packed bus station in Harrisburg, Pa., I felt oddly satisfied.

But my mother, like Annie, was the spunky heroine of her own destiny. She made friends at that bus station with a lovely family who, well, adopted her. They whisked her off to their “beautiful home in the woods,” as my mother put it, where she spent days watching movies, devouring delicious meals and soaking in a hot tub. My father recounted these tales in numerous phone call updates. He seemed somewhat relieved he didn’t have to drive in a blizzard to retrieve his stranded wife.

“I knew I should’ve never gotten on that bus,” she said over the phone to me after returning home safely. “But these people. They took me home with them and were so wonderful. I could’ve stayed there forever.”

For a few years afterward, she received letters and cards from that “wonderful” family until the correspondence died off.

“Have you heard from your snow family?” I once asked my mother.

“No. Not in a long time. Oh they were wonderful. It was like a dream.”

For the rest of my mother’s life, I felt the tension between loving her and being frustrated that she didn’t embrace me for who I was. Her silence didn’t stop me from being out, but it

did force me to hide many important moments of my life from the woman who otherwise seemed like my best friend.

Cancer claimed my mother cruelly and quickly. She complained of back pain, and three months later she was gone. Our last real time together was at one of the many Broadway shows we attended over the years. As we waited for the curtain to go up, we shared an uncommon silence.

When I looked over, she was staring at me.

“I’m so lucky to be here with you at a show,” she said, smiling.

No tap-dancing orphan in a red dress or a fat man in a red suit could deliver a better gift.

By Scott Gerace

Scott Gerace is a writer living in New York City.