

Family Picture By Gary Rosberg

I was sitting in my favorite chair, studying for the final stages of my doctoral degree, when Sarah announced herself in my presence with a question: "Daddy, do you want to see my family picture?" "Sarah, Daddy's busy. Come back in a little while, Honey." I was busy. A week's worth of work to squeeze into a weekend. Ten minutes later she swept back into the living room. "Daddy, let me show you my picture." "Sarah," I said, "come back later. This is important."

Three minutes later she stormed into the living room, got three inches from my nose and barked with all the power a five-year-old could muster: "Do you want to see it or don't you?" The assertive woman in training. "No," I told her, "I don't."

With that, she zoomed out of the room and left me alone. And somehow, being alone at that moment wasn't as satisfying as I thought it would be. I felt like a jerk. I went to the front door.

"Sarah," I called, "could you come back inside a minute, please? Daddy would like to see your picture." She obliged with no recriminations and popped up on my lap.

It was a great picture. She'd even given it a title. Across the top, in her best printing, she had inscribed: "OUR FAMILY BEST". "Tell me about it," I said.

"Here is Mommy (a stick figure with long, yellow, curly hair), here is me standing by Mommy (with a smiley face), here is our dog Katie, and here is Missy (her little sister was a stick figure lying in the street in front of the house, about three times bigger than anyone else). It was a pretty good insight into how she saw our family. "I love your picture, Honey," I told her. "I'll hang it on the dining room wall, and each night when I come home from work and from class (which was usually around 10:00 P.M.), I'm going to look at it."

She took me at my word, beamed ear to ear and went outside to play. I went back to my books. But for some reason I kept reading the same paragraph over and over. Something was making me uneasy. Something about Sarah's picture. Something was missing.

I went to the front door. "Sarah," I called, "could you come back inside a minute, please? I want to look at your picture again, Honey."

Sarah crawled back into my lap. I can close my eyes right now and see the way she looked. Cheeks rosy from playing outside. Pigtails, Strawberry Shortcake tennis shoes. A Cabbage Patch doll named Nellie tucked limply under her arm. I asked my little girl a question, but I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer "Honey...there's Mommy, and Sarah, and Missy. Katie the dog is in the picture, and the sun, and the house, and squirrels and birdies. But Sarah...where is your daddy?" "You're at the library," she said.

With that simple statement, my little princess stopped time for me. Lifting her gently off my lap, I sent her back to play in the spring sunshine. I slumped back in my chair with a swirling head and blood pumping furiously through my heart. It was a frightening moment. The fog lifted from my preoccupied brain for a moment - and suddenly I could see. But what I saw scared me to death. It was like being in a ship and coming out of the fog in time to see a huge, sharp rock knifing through the surf just off the port bow.

Sarah's simple pronouncement - "You're at the library" - got my attention big-time. I hung the drawing on the dining room wall, just as I promised my girl. And through those long, intense weeks preceding the oral defense of my dissertation, I stared at that revealing portrait. It happened every night in the silence of my sleeping home, as I consumed my late night warmed-over dinners. I didn't have the guts to bring the issue up to Barbara. And she had the incredible insight to let it rest until I had the courage to deal with it. I finally finished my degree program. I was "Dr. Rosberg" now, and I guess it should have been a big deal for me. But frankly there wasn't much joy in my life.

One night after graduation, Barbara and I were lying in bed together and I found myself working up the nerve to ask her a few questions. "Barbara, you've obviously seen Sarah's picture taped on the dining room wall. Why haven't you said anything?" "Because I know how much it wounded you, Gary." I asked the toughest question I've ever asked anyone in my life.

"Barb...I want to come home. Can I do it?" "Gary," Barb said carefully, "the girls and I love you very much. We want you home. But you haven't been here. I've felt like a single parent for years." The words look cold in print, but she said them with restraint and tenderness. It was just plain, unvarnished truth. My little girl had drawn the picture, and now her mom was speaking the words. My life had been out of control, my family was on automatic pilot, and I had a long road ahead of me if I wanted to win them back. But I had to win them back. Now that the fog had lifted, it suddenly became the most important thing in my life.