

FATHERING
DAUGHTERS

REFLECTIONS
BY MEN

EDITED BY

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JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON

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Aviva's World

REASON, RACE, AND SOME
DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Fred Viebahn

“BY THE WAY, guys, I’ve joined the BSA.”

“You’ve joined what?”

“The BSA. The Black Student Alliance.”

Why? I’m about to ask, but I bite my tongue. It’s our first phone conversation since she’s left for college, and my wife and I have braced ourselves for a few surprises.

“Great,” I say. “So what do they do—I mean, what do you do there?”

I’m about to begin inquiries into the concept, the mission, the engagement, but I quickly manage to rein in my tendency to probe whatever she says and does, while she excitedly launches into descriptions of her new acquaintances. After all, I think, it’s a predominantly white Southern liberal arts college for women, and she has grown up and acted “white,” whatever that means, all her childhood, with only occasional black friends. Of course, her mother is African American, she has black grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins . . . but most of her life my daughter—biracial (an expression I don’t particularly like to use because it’s fraught with vagueness and simplification), binational, bilingual—has been immersed in environments where race was not an issue, at least not overtly—from her Jewish preschool in Arizona to her public school honors classes stocked with kids of white university professors. (Black professors in our town tend to send their sons and

daughters to an expensive private school.) She was shielded from racism by her parents' social status, and she had never given us indications that race mattered to her in any concrete sense.

Compared to the stereotypes presented in the media and sometimes witnessed secondhand through relatives and friends, we live a rather charmed life. Sure, there were a few racially motivated insults and minor threats in the more than two decades that my wife and I have been together, but they never happened in our daughter's presence. And on both sides of her family she has experienced nothing but acceptance and affection, making her feel as comfortable at Midwestern Thanksgiving dinners where her father is the only white person, as in my tiny home village near Cologne where her mother is the only black. A true story that has met with incredulity when told to Americans: When we took her to Germany for the first time, at half a year of age, one of my aunts pointed to her blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin and said with an undertone of disappointment: "But she looks so German!" Other relatives assembled around the baby also expressed their bafflement.

Instead of desiring similarity and fearing the unknown, these relatives were hoping for the thrill of difference, the excitement of the new; they were happy to allow, acknowledge, and embrace this offspring of one of theirs, no matter how "strange" she might be. My daughter's hair turned dark and frizzy before she was ten, her eyes took on a green tinge, and her skin, now a light golden brown, proved more resistant to sunburn than her mother's much darker complexion. And yet for many years she seemed oblivious to race; only lately, inspired by literature and films and maybe her parents' political dinner chatter, has she begun to relate herself to matters of race in the bipolar black-and-white American sense.

Although in elementary and middle school her close friends were exclusively white, recently my daughter has been finding older friends and role models with whom she can identify—among them an interracial actress who, although more than double her age, at first glance might easily be mistaken for her sister when the two are together: the same skin tone, the same hair, the same height. Another role model is entirely fictional—her favorite character in her favorite TV show, Chief Engineer B'Elanna Torres on the starship *Voyager*, is an "intergalactic"

mix between human and Klingon, a bossy scientist played against all female stereotypes by a "mixed"-looking actress.

We had always impressed upon our daughter that she was special—not just because she's our daughter but because, with her dual citizenship and multiple ethnicity (African, German, Czech, Cherokee, Blackfoot, Jewish, Irish), she is a veritable multicultural human being in a society that purports to pride itself on its "melting pot" capabilities, even while it commits endless crimes of ethnic and class separation.

Maybe we were plain lucky that her genetic makeup supported sweetness and compassion, so that our steady diet of positive reinforcements did not lead her down a path of arrogance and superciliousness; still, she turned out to be extraordinary beyond her ancestry of black and white, American and German—which is why now, at age fourteen, she has left for college and within days joined the BSA.

"It's real cool," she says. "Cool kids, really. They know their stuff."

How does a father write about his relationship to his adolescent daughter without wading too deeply through the mush of proud parental hagiography—especially if this daughter has done everything to make him proud for the fourteen years she's been "the light of his life"? (Here I go, about to sink into a bog of clichés!) Well, a father has bragging rights, no?

In April 1997 my daughter Aviva, an eighth grader in public middle school, was accepted into college. There was little forewarning, and therefore not much time to contemplate such a giant step into a world that, only weeks earlier, seemed several high school years away. She had always been at the top of her class; in sixth grade she was identified (more accurately, kind of "certified") as a high achiever by the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University. She took the SAT a couple of times—first in seventh grade, when her scores jumped above the average college-bound twelfth grader, and again in eighth grade, when she scored along with entering freshmen at the nation's most prestigious universities.

Six weeks earlier she had received an invitation through Johns Hopkins to apply to the only formal program in the country that allows students (well, just girls) of her age and accomplishments to skip the last

four years of secondary education while providing them with a social support system: the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, a small, private, all-female liberal arts school in the valley between the Shenandoah and Blue Ridge Mountains. Aviva decided to “check it out for fun,” a rather easy undertaking since Staunton is only fifty minutes’ driving time from her home town of Charlottesville. She did not exhibit much enthusiasm—which American girl voluntarily decides to forgo her prom, that ritual of preening and mating that’s supposed to give her the final push from girlish adolescence into the embrace of womanhood? No matter: She filled out the application form, still “just for fun,” wrote the four required essays, and in early April spent a night in the dorm where the thirty or so early-admission freshmen and sophomores, all of them high achievers, had formed their own support group under social supervision while attending classes alongside “traditional” students who’d fought their way through adolescence and the educational system the old-fashioned way.

The next day when I picked Aviva up after her interview with a program administrator, she was ecstatic. “I love it,” she said. “If they admit me, I wanna go. Now. This fall. Imagine, I could enter graduate school when I’m eighteen and become a veterinarian four years early! All that’s missing is high school geometry so I can take college math, but if you get me a tutor I’ll finish it over the summer.”

And that’s why, for the first time since toddler days, Aviva would not spend the summer with her grandmother in Germany but hunched over a voluminous math book instead. Of course the years when we checked her homework every night were long past; nevertheless, I became painfully aware that we were absolutely helpless when it came to the daunting task of cramming an entire year of honors high school geometry into a few weeks of summer vacation. Having long forgotten concepts like triangle congruence and transformations, we felt worthless—even more so when she made it clear that no help was required on our part, not at all.

She had long passed us by and become her own person, a teenager barreling full steam ahead into an independent future, never to return fully to our triple fold that had once seemed destined to last forever.

For years I had refused to face the fact that the blithe unity of our family nucleus—mother, father, single child—was fated to dissolve one day; recently I had consoled myself that such a day lay somewhere in the foggy future, undefined. The illusions created by happiness threaten to block reason’s path; if, however, the child’s happiness is our fundamental concern, over time reason must prevail, even though we may fight it in our hearts. Life and literature provide too many horrific examples of what happens whenever reason does not assert itself. On one hand, among relatives I had seen what devastation unreasonable authoritarian pressure can cause in families; on the other hand, I and my sister had also experienced how our parents’ love for us and each other had allowed us, with careful offers of guidance and advice, to find our own niche in life. And yet in spite of my parents’ example, and regardless of all the intellectual reflections I can muster, I find myself combating the devil in me who yearns for continued control.

“So what did you do today?” I ask on the phone. “Any tests? Any grades back? Did you eat vegetables for dinner? Did you eat dinner at all? You sound tired—are you getting enough sleep?” After all, except for the actual birth and breastfeeding, I have always shared the responsibilities that tradition has assigned to mothers, which gives me the right to ask “motherly” questions.

“Yes, Fred. Don’t worry. I’m fine. By the way, if you want me to I can probably install the Ethernet card in my computer myself when it arrives . . .”

“No, I don’t want you to. You need a screwdriver to open the case. And you have to watch for static electricity. That’s sensitive stuff. It’s better I do it.”

“Okay.” She sighs. She is a good daughter. She lets me have the crumb.

Charlottesville, August 24, 1997

Hallo, meine liebe Aviva,

I’ve decided to write you a letter from time to time. When you come home you will want to see your friends or tell us about your adventures in PEG-land, and the telephone is mostly good as a conduit for hellos and good-byes, for *wie geht’s* and *ich liebe dich*, quick stories and requests. Paper remains my medium of choice for deeper reflections and lasting tales, even if they are first composed on a computer.

Don't fear: I'll avoid lambasting you with parental platitudes like:

"By entering college you've taken the first step out from under our umbrella into a world of your own choosing, a world you will eventually be responsible for."

Most likely I'll just ramble along, speak my mind, see what comes to that mind.

It was bittersweet to leave her that day. Of course, we'd left her before—in the summer with her *Oma* in the German village, in Charlottesville when Rita and I went on trips—but it was quite different to leave her in order to go home without her. The realization weighed on me that this was one of those inevitable Major Passages Without Return we have to negotiate in life. My wife and I have been telling ourselves that this is not a real separation and that it should be easy for us, especially in comparison with the parents of the other girls in the program. After all, Aviva is the only freshman PEG student from Virginia, the only one whose *Heimat* lies within short driving distance: It's a snap for her to return home on weekends, or we can cross the Blue Ridge to see her with an hour's notice.

Well, *Heimat*. What does that mean for her, for me? Home? Homeland? Home area? Is *Heimat* just the place where we come from, where we grow up, or where we live a good part of our lives? Is it a place one "belongs" to irrevocably, a place that one can claim and that can claim us? Marlene Dietrich, one of my favorite German-Americans, sang: "*Ich hab noch einen Koffer in Berlin . . .*" even though she had left Germany as a young actress and found her fortune in the United States, even though she hated the mob of former countrymen responsible for bringing the Nazis to power with their unspeakable mayhem and mass murder—she kept that suitcase full of memories. It was her indispensable piece of the sort of *Heimat* we cannot choose but which is given to us whether we want it or not, whose redeeming virtues—holiday rituals, old wives' remedies—we will hold onto and cherish, no matter how far away we have been transplanted. For me, too, that kind of inescapable *Heimat* is in Germany; for my wife it's in Akron, Ohio; and for Aviva? I guess it's in Charlottesville, since the memory of Phoenix, Arizona, the place of her birth and preschool years (which she vowed, at

age five, never ever to leave), has been buried under eight subsequent years of public school bustle in Virginia. Charlottesville became her *Heimat* through her parents' choice. But from now on (although she will come back many times, at least during the next four years) this *Heimat* will begin to shrink until the memories are easily packed away, a suitcase full of images from a carefree past.

Lately I've been thinking incessantly about Aviva's early childhood—often sitting down in front of the tube late at night and playing back the videos I shot then. Of course these years are bound to look different from my perspective than from hers, but both outlooks over the past are happy ones, I trust. Naturally, Aviva's early recollections are vague and sporadic while my memories shine so brightly that calling them up can free me from a sour mood. It helps that I videotaped virtually her every move: playing on the Cookie Monster swing set in our back yard in Tempe; pirouetting in front of the TV while the prima donnas revolved in *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*; storming out the front door into the hot desert rain to stomp through steaming puddles in only her underpants, utterly ecstatic; telling stories to her imaginary friends in the bathtub; sulking because she had been chided for pouring oil and vinegar all over a restaurant table; on the run from me along a canal in Venice. And all those joyous afternoons when I lifted her into her child seat (weight limit forty pounds) and we biked the ten minutes to pick up her mom at the university, where our daughter immediately stormed into the office of the English department chairman to play with his collection of tiny wind-up toys . . .

When we plan to have children we implicitly have to accept a whole range of possibilities, from worst to best. The exciting and frightening thing is that those possibilities remain open for a very long time—essentially "till death do us part." Aviva was a "planned baby" if ever there was one. From our first months together in Iowa City more than two decades ago (which was a couple of years before we tied the knot formally in Oberlin, Ohio), Rita and I planned to have a child as soon as we "settled down." We decided to give ourselves time to "live" and travel and finish a couple of books, so we aimed for the year when Rita turned thirty.

And that's exactly how it happened. As soon as she had settled into her first teaching job at Arizona State University, we set out to create the one child we wanted, and we were immediately "fruitful." Rita wished for a girl, while I pretended not to care—though I secretly also hoped for a girl. The joke in our favor was that we had an easy time agreeing on female names, while we never grew attached to any of the hundreds of boy's names we tested on our tongues and committed to long legal pad columns.

Our daughter was born in Phoenix, Arizona, on January 25, 1983. We named her Aviva Chantal Tamu, meaning "sweet song of spring" in our personal Esperanto of Hebrew, French, and Swahili—none of them languages either of us was familiar with; but in the combination we heard the hopeful music we intended as the clarion call for her life. I cut the umbilical cord and stayed by her incubator the first two hours while Rita was "stitched up"; I placed her on her mother's breast the first time; I slept on a hospital bed beside her acrylic see-through bassinet; and the next morning I learned from a midwife how to bathe her, then bundle her in swaddling the Navajo way—so tightly she would believe she was back in the womb. Oh, those tiny toes!

It's hard to remember why I preferred a daughter over a son, and I would never allow a psycho-plumber to snake through my subconscious only to misinterpret the complexities of that wish. I think I was a pretty good son to my parents, so there was no denial and projecting going on, no fear of my own bad example. I can only speculate: as a boy, I often preferred the company of women. During family gatherings, when my father and my grandfathers and uncles played cards in the living room, my boy cousins had to drag me away from the women folk trading stories in the kitchen so that I would play soccer with them. Even now, half a century old, I frequently feel more comfortable chatting with women at social gatherings. End of speculation.

One question I preferred to skirt for years deals with something that has baffled many of my friends: How is it that someone who had published four novels by his early thirties hasn't finished a single book in the nearly twenty years since? Oh, I can pull a multitude of rational-

izations for my procrastination out of my back pocket—from the radical changes in my surroundings caused by emigration and the switch to a "foreign" language as my new everyday idiom, to the distractions afforded by Rita's prominence and my easygoing, self-absorbed, natural laziness. But the main reason (excuse?) is probably the joy of coddling our human oeuvre day after day, prodding and nudging her on the path to exploring the world.

All that time spent with her at the stable when she had a horse of her own—would I trade it for the writing of another novel? I used to take her out to the stable four, five, six times a week and watch her valiant attempts to train a tricky, neurotic thoroughbred (renamed "Starfire's Mystery" by Aviva), a victim of mistreatment at its former racing stable. Although the mare never came around and eventually had to be sold, I enjoyed the afternoons serving as my daughter's stable boy and dilettante coach, schlepping buckets full of feed, holding the reins, stroking the horse's baby-soft nostrils. "On the range" all by themselves, daughter and father trudged through pasture and mud dragging bales of hay, exchanging horse stories.

"When I was a boy we had a lot of snow in the winter," I would say. "It was great for skiing and sledding. Once I sledded down the path from Oma's house . . ."

"Was that when you ended up in the road between the horse's hooves?"

"Mmmh."

"I love that story! Tell me!"

"But you already know what happened!"

"Who cares? Tell me again!"

And what about the frequent drives to pick Aviva up from school so that she made it home before the school bus? Whenever I saw her skipping out of the school building and across the lawn, past the flagpole and towards the car, always chipper, my mood lifted.

"Please take me to school half an hour early tomorrow morning," she would exclaim. "Mrs. Farmer lets me help her collate papers."

At home I played librarian for her, searching among our books for material she could draw on for her homework projects, and I was her

technician of choice for various construction projects: geography presentations, French village, science fair.

Ah, forget that unfinished novel, already transferred to its fourth computer and mauled by as many different word processing programs! Who cared? I would read the *Washington Post* or *Kunst und Kultur* while she practiced piano, and then the three of us piled on the couch to watch *Star Trek*.

Do I have regrets about my lapsed literary career? Not really. But now that my daughter is no longer a constant presence in my life, I am a little anxious about having to prove to myself that I can return to the enthusiasms of my younger years and concentrate once again on the grand schemes of longer fiction.

"You may have my cottage if you promise to use it only for your novel," Aviva offered; it was the day before my fiftieth birthday. So that's exactly what I'm doing now—leaving behind my spacious study with its four desks and surround sound, fax and phone, the Internet connection and scanner, video grabber and TV monitor. I move my laptop into my daughter's playhouse and wedge myself between fantasy constellations of Playmobile figures and an extensive trove of trolls who have a choice view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Yes, I'm getting around to myself again.

Charlottesville, Sunday, September 7, 1997

Meine liebe Aviva,

It's me again, your "old man." Have you digested your daily dose of German reading? Just kidding. A little bit. Please try to find the time. You did it at home for years, you can do it in college for years to come. Sorry, I can't help it; I have to meddle. "Father knows best." Seriously: You're only fourteen; even if you're correcting eighteen year olds in the bio lab, remember that being smart doesn't mean acting smart.

Only a few more months, and she'll qualify for her learner's permit.

I'm looking forward to teaching her. Stick shift first. That's what the Volkswagen Jetta behind the house has been waiting for—the same Volkswagen my father picked up for my wife and me from a German dealership fifteen years ago, three days before he died from a heart at-

tack; ironically, it was the same week Rita's pregnancy was confirmed—but Aviva's grandfather never knew. We drove the Volkswagen to his funeral in my home village, then shipped it to the States where it carried us from New York to Arizona, with my daughter in her mother's womb—the same Volkswagen that took us home from Phoenix Memorial Hospital when she was three days old. Years ago when I bought a new car, Aviva begged me to keep the Jetta. "It's my car," she said. "It's cute. I want to drive it when I grow up." So I've hung on to it for the past six years, keeping plates and insurance up to date and the battery charged, starting it now and then and racing it down the driveway to the mailbox. Aviva and I are a sentimental bunch.

It's Sunday night, and I'm supposed to finish an essay. Instead I'm writing her a letter. Maybe these Sunday letters will become a habit.

My Sunday service. Ersatz worship. After all, we're not exactly a religious family. In fourth grade Aviva balked at reciting the Pledge of Allegiance because of the religious reference. The teacher made her and the two others who refused (a black girl who was a Jehovah's Witness and Aviva's atheist Dutch friend) leave the classroom during the pledge. When I protested, calling it discriminatory, a singling out of the principled, the teacher reasoned it was fine with her if these three girls, based on their convictions, didn't participate, but that their example was threatening to spread to their schoolmates, who had no convictions but were guided by spite and mischief. That same week I heard Aviva recite the full "one nation under God" pledge during the flag ceremony of her Girl Scout troop. "What's the difference?" I asked, flabbergasted. "Girl Scouts is voluntary," she answered. "School's not."

Well, the school she has entered now is voluntary. Her choice. We supported her in her decision, but we did not nudge her. We were and remain torn—thrilled that she loves college life, slightly depressed because she exhibits no signs of homesickness.

Charlottesville, Sunday, September 21, 1997

Meine liebe Aviva,

It was so much fun last weekend when, home for the first time since going off to Mary Baldwin, you invited us to climb into your high bed for the requisite good-night kiss—just like old times. The three of us

stretched out up there till three in the morning, trading stories and jokes, and the stuffed animals that overpopulated your bed came tumbling down in twos and threes whenever we laughed.

I built her that bed when she turned seven, her first birthday in Charlottesville—custom designed to accommodate her full-size mattress, with integrated desk and shelves. I could have written a television script in the time it took to construct this aerie, but that would have left nothing of lasting value—just something that would have been “conceptualized” and rewritten to death, and its overproduced corpse broadcast into thin air.

To speed things up, I spray-painted the raw bed frame in front of the garage without covering the driveway; naively, I believed the white acrylic would wash off. It didn't, and the raggedy white lines looked ugly on the black asphalt. Outsmarting myself, I sprayed black acrylic over the white lines, which took care of it—the black covered the white nicely, although it was a bit darker than the grayish asphalt.

These traces are still there. The driveway color has faded under the brunt of weather and the wheels of cars, but those black lines and spots, after all the years in heat and cold, sunshine and rain and snow and ice and run over by rubber tires a thousand times, remain visible.

I can see them from the windows in Aviva's room. White on black, black on white. On her first weekend home, Aviva asked me to take her back to Staunton early—“I don't want to miss the BSA picnic.” Most of her second weekend home (one night only) she spent holed up in her room, watching Chief Engineer B'Elanna Torres power the starship *Voyager* through the Delta Quadrant. B'Elanna, who has spent plenty of time lately exploring the Klingon side of her ancestry, might prove to be the main reason for our daughter's coming home on weekends. On Wednesday nights when *Star Trek Voyager* is broadcast, it's “quiet study time” at PEG, with the TV room off limits; so we tape the show for her.

For fourteen years Aviva's identity had been defined by her parents. I don't think that she ever considered us in racial terms; after all, parents are parents, a unique breed who look and sound different to their children than to anybody else. (An example of this special relationship: Aviva is incapable of recognizing my distinct German accent when I

speak English, whereas she has a fine ear otherwise and no trouble identifying the accents of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Henry Kissinger.)

Now, however, she is “out in the world,” and part of letting her go and her letting go is to define herself, her identity, in her own terms—on her own terms. Although race did not matter throughout her elementary school years (except, perhaps, in some Newbery Medal children's novels she read that dealt with slavery or just growing up nonwhite in America), it became more of an issue in middle school.

There were a few casual remarks by both white and black classmates, mostly curious, never really hostile: “Oh, wow, your mom is black?” or “Hey, your dad's a white man?” And there was, quite simply, the element of learning—learning and reading in social science classes about the dreadful underside of The Land of the Free, comprehending the unbroken chain of injustices from the Middle Passage to the civil rights struggle and the inner-city proletariat.

It is impossible to escape society's urge to categorize, even if those categories relate only marginally to the complexities of someone's individual existence. I understand why Aviva joined the Black Student Alliance, why its social life has become important to her; for the first time since kindergarten she can have black friends with an intellectual affinity, and now that she is very aware of race, she can claim that part of her heritage and identity beyond her mother and her mother's family.

By the way, she's also planning to join the German Club.