



LINDA SMOGOR

Readers Write

PRETENDING

FROM FIRST TO SIXTH GRADE I WENT to a small private school in Charlotte, North Carolina. The other children all had rich parents: businessmen dads and stay-at-home moms who were involved in the PTA. They were Southerners and went to Christian churches and lived in big, two-story houses.

My family was different. We were not Southern. We were not Christian. We

weren't even Jewish. My parents took my sister and me to a Unitarian Universalist church so we could explore many faiths. My mother and father weren't married. They had different last names, and my sister and I were stuck with a hyphenated combination of the two. My dad did not put on a suit every day and go to an office and earn big bucks. He had a full beard and an earring and long, unkempt hair,

and he stayed home to care for my sister and me and write country songs in his spare time. My mother was the one who got dressed up and went to work in an office.

In first grade I informed some of my classmates that you did not have to be married to have children: my parents weren't married, and I'd still been born. One of the girls went home and told her parents what I'd said, and my mother received a phone call from my teacher asking that I keep to myself the fact that "you can have the honeymoon without the wedding."

In second grade I began to realize that my dad didn't look like the other dads when he came to pick me up from school. In fact, most dads didn't even come to school unless it was a special occasion. When the teachers called my name to go home, I would run into the parking lot ahead of my dad, so no one could tell I was with him.

One day I asked my mother why my dad couldn't just go to work and cut his hair and shave and wear normal clothes.

"Because he doesn't want to," she replied.

"But he embarrasses me!" I said.

"You're lucky," she said. "You have a father who has time to get to know you."

I rolled my eyes and continued to pretend that he wasn't my father.

These days my father does put on a suit every day and go to an office. His hair is short, and his earring hole has almost closed up. He writes a new song only every few years. Like my seven-year-old self, my dad's employer wants him to look the same and act the same as everyone else, even if that means he has to be someone he's not; even if he has to pretend.

*Hannah Ely-Mooney
Charlotte, North Carolina*

ON A WARM SUMMER DAY BEFORE MY sophomore year of high school I found out that one of my closest friends had received her first kiss before I had. I was disappointed: We were both awkward outcasts, but I considered myself better-looking. And she went to an all-girls private school, whereas I was free to mingle

with boys in public school.

Not long after school began, my friend told me that she had met a boy and they were dating. That winter she confided that she'd lost her virginity. I suddenly felt juvenile and boring. To keep up with her, I conjured a phony boyfriend.

His name was Matt, I said, and I'd met him on the school bus. He lived with his father in a neighborhood not far from mine and went to another public high school on my bus route. He was sweet, funny, and very good-looking. When it came to intimacy, we were taking it slow. (I didn't want to slip up and describe something incorrectly. Fortunately there was enough sex on TV and the Internet that I had no trouble finding convincing details for foreplay.)

After a month or two I became nervous that my lie would spin out of control. So Matt and I began to have arguments. The last straw was when he started sneaking beer from his father's stash and calling me when he was drunk. I have no idea why I chose that ending, but it seemed to make sense at the time.

Strangely enough, inventing Matt had made me feel powerful: I had created a character others believed to be a living, breathing person. And, if only for a short time, I'd been able to pretend that I was just like everyone else.

*Andrea Kebalo
Jamaica, New York*

OVER THE YEARS OUR DAUGHTER Julia has lived in many parts of the world, and she's developed a ritual to let us know that she's OK: she often leaves messages on our answering machine. "Hi, parents. It's Julia," she might say in a sleepy voice. The sound quality is often poor, the messages brief.

A few weeks ago we got a strange message from our daughter: "Hi, it's Amelia," she began. We didn't think much about it at first, but then she did it again: "Hi, it's Amelia." It was downright odd. The therapist in me was on full alert. Did our daughter have two identities? Was she living a double life and forgetting which name to use? I wondered how to ask her about this new name without putting her on the defensive. I thought about it whenever we talked by phone, but I said

nothing. How long would I be able to pretend I hadn't noticed?

When her two brothers came home for winter break, we played the messages for them. The first agreed that it was strange. The second listened with great attention, his head bent over the answering machine. Then he turned to us and translated: "Hi, familia."

*Anjelina Citron
Bellingham, Washington*

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