

WHAT  
CHILDREN  
NEED

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Nicholas Gordon

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## WHAT CHILDREN NEED

On the morning of Mother's Day, Grace ran out to the Rite Aid and bought her mother a cheap, heart-shaped box of chocolates and a 99-cent card.

That was all she could afford, having blown the rest of her week's paycheck and tips on booze the night before.

Naturally, Grace's mother was delighted to be remembered. She gave her daughter a big hug and kiss and told her how proud and happy she was to have her as a daughter.

As usual, Grace smiled and crawled into a little hole somewhere inside her heart.

The rest of Mother's Day was, as far as Grace was concerned, just as much a charade. Grace's father got her mother the perennial perfume and roses, at which her mother pretended to be delighted, and then they went out with about 500 other people to a packed Mother's Day buffet at the Hilton, with long lines and lukewarm, overcooked food in a crowded dining room that sounded like a Boeing 747 landing in a tunnel.

Then it was lunch at Grandma's about an hour after finishing breakfast and dinner at Nana's a couple of hours after that. While Grace ate little and said less, her mother chatted on happily the whole time, eating everything and ooohing and aaaahing about how delicious everything was. Of course she had cooked half the dishes herself, and then helped serve, clear,

and clean up while the others pitched in on only one or two of those chores.

And while the other adults all bragged about their children, one-upping each other as if they had never outgrown their sibling rivalries, her mother complimented all of her nieces and nephews extravagantly, expressed her pleasure at their achievements, and said simply that she was very proud about how Grace was waitressing fifteen hours a week while she was still in high school. "She's very independent," her mother said, as always turning a negative into a positive.

Grace and her cousins smirked at one another across the table, well aware of the difference between their parents' words and reality. This was for all of them a ritual ordeal. Why grownups had to be such hypocrites was a mystery to them, since they were certain that even after they were adults they would never act that way.

When the charade was over, and they were finally released back into their separate cages, Grace's mother took Grace in her arms and told her how much she had enjoyed her Mother's Day and how proud she was of Grace and her independent spirit, how glad she was to have her as a daughter, and how much she loved her.

Grace endured it as usual, mumbling an almost inaudible "I love you, too" at the end and then turning away. But then, perhaps because she was finally old enough, perhaps because she had simply

reached the limit of what she could stand, she said, "Maybe you should try telling the truth sometimes."

Her mother turned red and quivered as though Grace had just slapped her face.

"I try to tell the truth," she said softly. "Always."

Grace felt like she had just crossed some sort of boundary line into Hell, but she perversely kept on going.

"You can't always be so nice," she said. "Not really. It's all an act, isn't it?"

"It's a decision," her mother said simply. "One that I hope someday you'll make."

"A decision? You can decide what to feel?"

The idea struck Grace like a sunbeam.

"Of course. You can decide what kind of person you want to be, and you can be it."

Her mother's eyes were full of the kind of love that had always made Grace squirm.

"Don't you ever get angry? Disappointed? Pissed off? Like telling someone to go shove it?"

"Of course I do! But it's like ..." Her mother, as often happened, took some time to search for the right words. "It's like those feelings are a kind of fog that will burn off later in the day, once the sun gets strong enough. So the truer feelings aren't the fog, which hangs around for only an hour or two, but the sun, that shines for most of the day."

"Sometimes fog can hang around for days," Grace said.

"You can always fly above it," her mother answered, smiling through tears. "Look down on it. It looks white and fluffy from above."

"If you're an angel."

"If you have imagination. Look at what just happened, Grace. You accused me of being a hypocrite. My first feeling was shock, hurt, anger. But then I realized how much courage and trust it must have taken to say that, and I admired you for it. It really was the most wonderful Mother's Day gift you could have given me. So I let those bad feelings go, like little fingers of blackness in a very large and pure lake. Then I tried just to speak the truth. And see what came of it! How beautiful!"

She was crying now, and she took Grace back into her arms. And Grace, too, began to cry, not knowing exactly why, but knowing that something important was happening.

"Say it!" her mother urged her. "Say it!"

"I love you," Grace said, the real words just bobbing up to breathe, as though she had held them under water long enough.

"Thank you!" her mother said. "Never let the anger and pain overwhelm the love. The anger and pain are real. The love is more real."

Grace nodded.

"You make every day beautiful for me," her mother said. "Do you understand that?"

Grace nodded again, hearing it for the umpteenth time, but this time without the urge to burrow into that hiding place inside her heart.

"Happy Mother's Day!" she said brightly.

"Oh, it has been a very happy day, my darling!"  
her mother answered, kissing her on the cheek. "The  
happiest Mother's Day!"

And this time, Grace believed her.