

The Proposal Surprise

I sat in my son Skylar's lovely condo, far too nice for his stage in life, which we all agreed was a stroke of luck. His childhood friend Will purchased the condo, drawing from his savings, an inheritance from his grandmother and support from his parents, to avoid 7 years of renting while he pursued his PhD in neuroscience. The spacious two-bedroom unit all on one floor boasted a generous kitchen island allowing friends to gather, large windows enabling the daylight to stream in, and gleaming hardwood floors. The only drawback was the three flights of stairs to the entrance.

I heard the key in the lock; Skylar came up the stairs and greeted me warmly when he reached the top step where a floorcloth I painted of a vividly-colored sunrise lay. After settling in, we had a simple dinner of chicken and French fries. After dinner, we moved to the beloved gray sectional that had once lived in our family room.

We chatted about Skylar's friends, young men who I first met as young boys who loved to run around and play games of the board, computer, and outdoor variety. There was Derek who was an engineer spending most of his weekends working with his girlfriend on their house. There was Gideon, in graduate school on the west coast, working on his dissertation as was his girlfriend who was a classmate. And there was Skylar's close friend and housemate Will, busy with school and his girlfriend with whom he spent most of his time outside of his studies.

When Skylar moved in 3 1/2 years ago, he had imagined he and Will spending lots of time together playing complicated board games - something that captured both their imaginations - exploring Boston, and enjoying being young adults. Skylar once confided in me he felt a little sad that Will met his girlfriend so soon after they moved in together because there seemed to be far less time for their friendship.

At one point our conversation turned to discussing modern-day dating and how it was similar to, and different from, when I was his age. I thoroughly enjoyed these conversations with Skylar. At 28, a young adult, he and I were more than parent-child, we were two adults comparing perspectives, discussing, and debating, sharing our lives.

I asked, "Why do you think young people now date for such a long time today before getting married?" I continued, "I would never want anyone to rush into something this

important but usually by a year or two, maybe three, you have a pretty good sense of if this is your person or not.”

I was remembering talking several months prior with one of Skylar’s friends, asking if he and his girlfriend (then dating for several years), ever talked about what was next. He responded, “It never really came up.” I observed several of Skylar’s friends – from high school and college - had been in long-term serious relationships but only one, who met his wife during their early college days, was married.

In response to my question, “Why do you think young couples today date for so long?” Skylar replied simply, “I don’t know. That’s just the way it is.”

“Did you know that dad and I were engaged 9 months after we met?” I asked. I was surprised when he said that he did not because I was quite sure he had heard the getting-engaged story before.

What I didn’t know was that when Skylar and I were having this discussion, serendipitously, he and his girlfriend Kate had been together for precisely 9 months. I noticed Skylar looked away, seemingly deep in thought. I saw a glint in his eye.

“You know mom, Kate would be totally surprised if I proposed on our one-year anniversary. She would never expect it in a million years!”

“Wow! I didn’t know it was that serious. It seems like the two of you are terrific together; you really complement one another but I didn’t know you felt quite sure Kate was your person.”

Inside I was doing the happy dance because I adored Kate and their relationship. But I was also incredibly surprised. While it was clear Skylar emanated happiness in the relationship, I did not suspect he was thinking longer term. It felt crazy and joyful that somehow this conversation – organic with no agenda, simply an interesting discussion – had opened a window in Skylar’s mind.

We moved on to other topics that night, my not wanting to take it all too seriously quite yet. After all, kids, even adult ones, get excited sometimes and then something changes. I chuckled remembering an incident when Skylar was in college and Bryan and I realized our parental influence was in the rearview mirror. Skylar knew he wanted to go abroad in his junior year. As a computer science major, that could be difficult. While on a 25th

anniversary river cruise ending in Budapest, Bryan and I crossed paths with a group of young American men studying *computer science* at an engineering university nearby. They raved about the program. We excitedly shared this intel with Skylar when we returned from the trip; he never even looked at the website. He learned the next year while researching programs that his first-choice school, St. Andrews in Scotland, did not offer the classes he needed during the term he would be abroad. I called Skylar to share that I was sorry about this disappointment. I will never forget his response. “Mom, that was so yesterday. I talked to my classmate who loved the program she attended last year in – drumroll please – Budapest. I am going there for my semester abroad.” Parenting, a humbling job indeed!

Fast forward to early March with no further talk – not a single word – about engagements since the January visit. Bryan and I were staying with Skylar for the night before flying to Florida in the morning. While making dinner that evening, Skylar mentioned, “There’s something I want to ask you guys about.” Bryan and I shared an inquisitive glance. Just then, the door downstairs opened and Skylar said softly, “Let’s talk after Will and Sophie go into his room.” Eventually the question came, “Dad, how does this whole ring thing work?”

I clarified, “Skylar, you are serious about this?” “Yes, mom,” he said indignantly, like our single conversation where he floated the possible idea of proposing had become fact. My wordless internal happy dance, from two months prior, continued.

Bryan questioned, “Do you know what kind of ring Kate might like? Do you have a budget in mind?” Skylar was clear; Simple elegance was her style, nothing too big or fussy. He painted a picture of how he might propose, walking around the pond where they had their first date, pretending to drop something, then getting down on his knee before turning and popping the question. It was clear Skylar was taken with the idea of surprising Kate.

Bryan and I joked privately, “He better be sure she’s likely to say yes.” Not that we doubted the outcome but we knew Skylar could be a bit overconfident at times (like his great surprise when he did not get into Brown University with an acceptance rate of 5% or in middle school when he told us after a season of ski lessons at a small Massachusetts mountain that he did not need further instruction because he could ski the black diamond trails there).

Post the March visit, I continued to let Skylar take the lead regarding the engagement discussion. It didn't surface again until May in a comedy-of-errors conversation.

I returned a call from Skylar while walking one of the dogs from the shelter where I volunteered. I began, "I saw you called and wondered if you had a question about the cottage?" Just then the pup pulled on the leash causing my ear to pull away from the phone. All I heard was the end of his response, something about a proposal. Our family had been talking about redesigning a part of the cottage; I assumed he was referring to building proposals.

He continued, "I have some ideas about that."

"Great," I responded, "I would love to hear them."

He began, "My original plan was to propose when we were walking around the pond..."

Ding, ding, ding! I laughed, "We're not talking about the same kind of proposals here, are we?" He continued, sharing that he had a finalist for the ring and ideas for when and where to propose. Now he just had to pin down the specifics.

I hung up the phone bursting with happiness. Game on! While I had just received confirmation about one of the most exciting moments in my parenting life, the person I desperately wanted to tell, needed to tell, my husband Bryan, happened to be rafting down the Colorado River for 14 days, completely out of touch.