

## A plumber comes of age

*Did you see that national news-magazine's Civil War centennial issue the other year? It had all those pictorial interviews with descendants of famous folks from back then. One was a married gay man. I forget his name or ancestor....*

The day after I returned home from four months in west Africa, my husband once again took our nine-year-old son to school without me. I slept late, dreaming of my husband and his plumbing routines. Our son Thomas's principal awakened me by phone, saying I needed to fetch Thomas immediately. I did, brought the boy home, then promptly collapsed back in bed for a late-morning snooze. Horrible parent.

"What a tan!" the boy greeted me when I came back into the kitchen, the opened news-magazine lying on the counter.

"*Merci*," I replied, awakening.

"Why do you say always say that, Mom?"

"*Mon fils*, remember, they speak French in west Africa."

"Oh, yeeeeeah, that's right," he recalled. "*Merci*, it is." He walked out.

"Hey, T, what was goin' on with you at school today?" No answer.

He'd aged. Almost done with fourth grade now. They grow so fast. Physically, intellectually, socially.

"Mom?" his voice calling from the den.

"Yeah?"

"I need to tell you what happened at school."

Another boy had called him gay. My son responded by saying, typical for their age (despite all the good change to the homo-contrary in recent years), "no, *you're* gay. YOU!" His teacher, he said, only heard my son's use of the g-word, so only my son got in trouble.

"... Well ... are ... you ...?" I asked. I think we trained our kids to be direct. I think I said it lovingly. I think I said it calmly. I think I said it. With as much love as I could mommie-munster, given that my prior forty hours had been spent in transit, up and across three continents, remember, I'm not a perfect parent.

Silent. He looked away from my question. I was now bushy-wide-awake. I searched for something else to fuss over, finding nothing. He sat down at the kitchen table with me, rested his hands on the place mat of crumbs. I softened my glance, bringing my hands up on the table, palms exposed, revealing all my maternal cards.

"What happened?" He stared at the burn on my right index index.

"Oh, just a simple cooking burn. It's healing."

"I don't know," he finally answered.

My travel fatigue came and went. I'd almost forgotten the question.

"Could you pour your ol' Mama a cup of coffee?"

"Thought you'd quit!"

"Oh, just one more cup won't ruin nothin'."

He poured cream and spooned cinnamon into my favorite cup. He knew the way I liked it.

"It's OK if you are," I said. "It's more than OK."

Thomas jumped, spilling spice on the counter, but trying his best to hide his nerves.

“It really makes no difference,” I added.

He twitched, an odd movement for steady Thomas, but he'd grown a lot while I was away, his center-of-gravity shifting fast with all his growth spurts. I still can't exactly describe the movement, but it made me feel I'd said the wrong thing, so I added, “Everything is OK. *Anything* is OK. You know that, *right*? Those words--” I cut myself short, tearful.

He sat my coffee cup on my place mat. I hid my tear. He took his seat across from me. I felt like I was about to get a tongue-lashing from a parent.

“Ye-ah,” he slowly answered after a breathy pause. “I know,” followed by a more relaxed breath. “It's just that I don't, um, like, know.”

I sipped my coffee and rubbed the cup's rim.

“Did you mention any of this to your father?” I asked, knowing already the answer as mothers always do for questions of nature.

“Um, no,” he said, taking a deeper breath this time. “Ma'am,” he added. “No, ma'am. It's just that I got in trouble, and I didn't do anything wrong, and I know that's not right.”

I nodded.

“I'll call your teacher on her noon break. I'm off the next few days. Let's see what we can do, but there's no rush on any of this, you know. You're right, and there's no need to prove anything here--”

The back kitchen door opened and slammed shut.

“*I'm home!*” my husband shouted, eyeing our son. “Dang, what a house call that was—two men livin' together, said been a couple over fifty years, *niciest guys ever!* Thomas, what you doin' home from school, somethin' wrong, son?”

The boy sat speechless.

“Doll, you think we'll make it to fifty?” my husband winked.

“Dad,” Thomas interrupted, “I need to talk to you about--”

“Shoot!”

“Well, we have this take-ya-kid-to-work day coming up and um, like I was just thinking like I could like tag along maybe?”

“Never knew you're into plumbing? That's great.”

I sipped my hot drink, waiting for Thomas' face to unfold.

“Well, your work sounds kinda interesting, and like, I'm trying to keep an open mind about my future....”