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THE LOST FATHER

By Mona Simpson

Alfred A. Knopf

Absence may make the heart obsessive. It can turn the missing person into a myth, or the excuse for our own emptiness, or any number of things their presence would refute.

For 27 year-old medical student Ann Stevenson in Mona Simpson's sequel to the brilliant *Anywhere But Here*, the quest to find the father she hasn't seen since age 12 takes control of her life. Sometimes using her birthname, Mayan Atassi, Ann spends a year and her inheritance combing two continents to find him.

Ann's is a two-part quest. She searches for not only the immigrant father who deserted Ann and her self-absorbed, histrionic mother but for what she believes the lack of his love has cost her. Deprived of the love of *this* man, Ann feels too shamed, too unworthy to love either herself or any other man. He abandoned her, therefore she deserves only abandonment. Finding him, she hopes, will set her free.

Like her mother, Ann is "a child holding an empty glass jar waiting for the sky to fill it, for him to return and restore to us our lives." She concedes "it is a constant and sad thing to love a person whose lifetime only barely intersects your own." Her father's absence has crippled her trust in love: "Sometimes it seemed I only loved people who would be better off without me."

She grows to feel you can love only the absent. Those present suffer the tediousness of mortality. Unlike herself, her childhood friend Emily is lovable because "it seemed her soul hadn't inhabited her body yet. . . . Some man would fall ravishingly in love with her for that, exactly that. It would madden him that he could look and look and never find her."

For a year (and 450 pages) Ann looks and looks, and finally finds him. But now she suspects, "Maybe by the time you find the person, they are beside the point." Can this prodigal father restore Ann her life and capacity to love? Do those things come from someone else? She believed in heaven and that a man would show it to her, but can he?

Or will Ann's success be like this book itself, passionately anticipated but falling short of our extravagant hopes?

Most artists agree that however agonizing early failure may be, it is more difficult to survive early success. In her mid-twenties, Mona Simpson wrote what became, if not the best nor truest, certainly the most powerful story in *Best American Short Stories 1986*. Her 1987 first novel *Anywhere But Here* displayed a breathtaking talent, excelling all

writers of her generation save perhaps only Madison Smartt Bell. That novel built expectations which *The Lost Father* falls short of fulfilling.

The book sorely needs editing. Without her mother Adele's beguiling eccentricity, which propelled *Anywhere But Here*, Ann is this novel's only rounded character. She lacks sufficient flavor to sustain 506 pages. Ann travels endless byways of free association. Her prolonged search leads to Simpson's own groping, casting out abundant lines of tangential narration, often dazzling in their beauty but leading nowhere. While it is possible to tell a compelling tale by means of digressions—it works for *Beowulf*—here too many prove trivial and slow *The Lost Father* to glacial pace. Simpson recently lamented that she seems unable to write shorter books. This time she should have.

For under its puffiness *The Lost Father* is a hauntingly poignant story buoyed by its author's stunning intellect and laced with emotional insight. Simpson cuts to the heart of how we learn to love and how we fail to, of how the American experience can slice off our roots and blur our identity, and of how disappointment does not absolve us of the task of struggling on.

If lacking the perfection of a masterpiece, *The Lost Father* is nevertheless filled with evidence why Mona Simpson is among our most promising masters.