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Further Interpretations of Real-Life Events

FROM *McSweeney's*

AFTER MY FATHER RETIRED, he began writing trueish stories about fathers and sons. He had tried scuba diving, had tried being a dreams enthusiast, and now he'd come around to this. I was skeptical. I'd been writing my own trueish stories about fathers and sons for years, stories that weren't perfect, of course, but they were mine. Some were published in literary journals, and I'd even received a fan letter from Helen in Vermont, who liked the part in one of my stories where the father made the boy scratch his stepmom's back. Helen in Vermont said she found the story "enjoyable" but kind of "depressing."

The scene with the stepmom was an interpretation of an actual event. When I was ten years old my mother died. My father and I lived alone for five years, until he married Lara, a kind woman with a big laugh. He met her at a dreams conference. I liked her well enough in real life but not in the story. In the story, "End of Summer," I begrudged Lara (changed to "Laura") for marrying my father so soon after my mother died (changed to five months).

"You used to scratch your ma's back all the time," my father says in the final scene. "Why don't you ever scratch Laura's?"

Laura sits next to me, shucking peas into a bucket. The pressure builds. "If you don't scratch Laura's back," my father says, "you can forget Christmas!"

So I scratch her back. It sounds silly now, but by the end of the

story, Christmas stands in for other things. It isn't just Christmas anymore.

The scene was inspired by the time my father and Lara went to Mexico City (while I was marauded by bullies and black flies at oboe camp) and brought me home a souvenir. A tin handicraft? you guess. A selection of cactus-fruit candy? No. A wooden backscratcher with extended handle for maximum self-gratification. What's worse, *te quiero* was embossed on the handle. Which I translated at the time to mean: *I love me*. (I was off by one word.)

"Try it," my father said. His tan had a yolky tint and he wore a shirt with PROPERTY OF MEXICO on the back. It was the sort of shirt you could find anywhere.

I hiked my arm over my head and raked the backscratcher north and south along my vertebrae. "Works," I said.

"He spent all week searching for something for you," Lara said. "He even tried to haggle at the *mercado*. It was cute."

"There isn't much for a boy like you in Mexico," my father said. "The man who sold me the backscratcher, though, told me a story. All the men who left to fight during the revolution took their wives with them. They wanted to remember more . . ."

I couldn't listen. I tried to, I pretended to, nodding and going *hmm* when he said *Pancho Villa* and *wow* when he said *gunfire* and then *some story* when it was over. I excused myself, sprinted upstairs to my bedroom, slammed my door, and snapped that sorry backscratcher over my knee like kindling.

A boy like me!

You'll never earn a living writing stories, not if you're any good at it. My mentor Harry Hodgett told me that. I must've been doing something right, because I had yet to receive a dime for my work. I day-labored at the community college teaching Prep Writing, a class for students without the necessary skills for Beginning Writing. I also taught Prep Prep Writing, for those without the skills for Prep Writing. Imagine the most abject students on earth, kids who, when you ask them to name a verb, stare like you just asked them to cluck out a polka with armpit farts.

Literary journals paid with contributors' copies and subscriptions, which was nice, because when your story was published you at least knew that everyone else in the issue would read your work. (Though, truth be told, I never did.) This was how I came to re-

ceive the autumn issue of *Vesper*—I'd been published in the spring issue. It sat on my coffee table until a few days after its arrival, when I returned home to find Carrie on my living room sofa, reading it. "Shh," she said.

I'd just come back from teaching, dispirited as usual after Shandra Jones in Prep Prep Writing told a classmate to "eat my drip-pins." A bomb I defused with clumsy silence, comma time!, early dismissal.

"I didn't say anything," I said.

"Shh," she said again.

An aside: I'd like to have kept Carrie out of this because I haven't figured out how to write about her. She's tall with short brown hair and brown eyes and she wears clothes and—see? I could be describing anybody. Carrie's lovely, her face is a nest for my dreams. You need distance from your subject matter. You need to approach it with the icy, lucid eye of a surgeon. I also can't write about my mother. Whenever I try, I feel like I'm attempting kidney transplants with a can opener and a handful of rubber bands.

"Amazing," she said, closing the journal. "Sad and honest and free of easy meanness. It's like the story was unfolding as I read it. That bit in the motel: wow. How come you never showed me this? It's a breakthrough."

She stood and hugged me. She smelled like bath beads. I was jealous of the person, whoever it was, who had effected this reaction in her: Carrie, whom I met in Hodgett's class, usually read my stories with barely concealed impatience.

"Breakthrough, huh?" I said casually (desperately). "Who wrote it?" She leaned in and kissed me. "You did."

I picked up the journal to make sure it wasn't the spring issue, which featured "The Longest Day of the Year," part two of my summer trilogy. It's about a boy and his father (I know, I know) driving home, arguing about the record player the father refuses to buy the boy, even though the boy totally needs it since his current one ruined two of his Yes albums, including the impossible-to-find *Time and a Word*, and—boom—they hit a deer. The stakes suddenly shift.

I turned to the contributors' notes. FREDERICK MOXLEY is a retired statistics professor living in Vero Beach, Florida. In his spare time he is a dreams enthusiast. This is his first published story.

"My dad!" I screamed. "He stole my name and turned me into a dreams enthusiast!"

"Your *dad* wrote this?"

"And turned me into a goddamn dreams enthusiast! Everyone'll think I've gone soft and stupid!"

"I don't think anyone really reads this journal," Carrie said. "No offense. And isn't he Frederick Moxley, too?"

"Fred! He goes by *Fred*. I go by Frederick. Ever since third grade, when there were two Freds in my class." I flipped the pages, found the story, "Mile Zero," and read the first sentence: *As a boy I always dreamed of flight*. That makes two of us, I thought. To the circus, to Tibet, to live with a nice family of Moonies. I felt tendrils of bile beanstalking up my throat. "What's he trying to do?"

"Read it," Carrie said. "I think he makes it clear what he's trying to do."

If the story was awful I could have easily endured it, I realize now. I could've called him and said if he insists on writing elderly squibs, please just use a pseudonym. Let the Moxley interested in truth and beauty, etc., publish under his real name.

But the story wasn't awful. Not by a long shot. Yes, it broke two of Hodgett's six laws of story writing (Never dramatize a dream, Never use more than one exclamation point per story), but he'd managed some genuine insight. Also he fictionalized real-life events in surprising ways. I recognized one particular detail from after Mom died. We moved the following year, because my father never liked our house's floor plan. That's what I'd thought, at least. Too cramped, he always said; wherever you turned, a wall or closet blocked your path. In the story, though, the characters move because the father can't disassociate the house from his wife. Her presence is everywhere: in the bedroom, the bathroom, in the silverware pattern, the flowering jacaranda in the backyard.

She used to trim purple blooms from the tree and scatter them around the house, on bookshelves, on the dining room table, he wrote. It seemed a perfectly attuned response to the natural world, a way of inviting the outside, inside.

I remembered those blooms. I remembered how the house smelled with her in it, though I couldn't name the smell. I recalled her *presence*, vast ineffable thing.

I finished reading in the bath. I was no longer angry. I was a little jealous. Mostly I was sad. The story, which showed father and son

failing to connect again and again, ends in a motel room in Big Pine Key (we used to go there in December), the father watching a cop show on TV while the boy sleeps. He's having a bad dream, the father can tell by the way his face winces and frowns. The father lies down next to him, hesitant to wake him up, and tries to imagine what he's dreaming about.

Don't wake up, the father tells him. *Nothing in your sleep can hurt you.*

The boy was probably dreaming of a helicopter losing altitude. It was a recurring nightmare of mine after Mom died. I'd be cutting through the sky, past my house, past the hospital, when suddenly the control panel starts beeping and the helicopter spins down, down. My body fills with air as I yank the joystick. The noise is the worst. Like a monster oncoming bee. My head buzzes long after I wake up, shower, and sit down to breakfast. My father, who's just begun enthusing about dreams, a hobby that even then I found ridiculous, asks what I dreamed about.

"Well," I say between bites of cereal. "I'm in a blue—no, no, a golden suit. And all of a sudden I'm swimming in an enormous fishbowl in a pet store filled with eager customers. And the thing is, they all look like you. The other thing is, I *love* it. I want to stay in the fishbowl forever. Any idea what that means?"

"Finish your breakfast," he says, eyes downcast.

I'd like to add a part where I say *just kidding*, then tell him my dream. He could decide it's about anxiety, or fear. Even better: he could just backhand me. I could walk around with a handprint on my face. It could go from red to purple to brownish blue, poetic-like. Instead, we sulked. It happened again and again, until mornings grew as joyless and choreographed as the interactions of people who worked among deafening machines.

In the bathroom I dried myself off and wrapped a towel around my waist. I found Carrie in the kitchen eating oyster crackers. "So?" she said.

Her expression was so beseeching, such a lidless empty jug.

I tossed the journal onto the table. "Awful," I said. "Sentimental, boring. I don't know. Maybe I'm just biased against bad writing."

"And maybe," she said, "you're just jealous of good writing." She dusted crumbs from her shirt. "I know it's good, you know it's good. You aren't going anywhere till you admit that."

"And where am I trying to go?"

She regarded me with a look I recalled from Hodgett's class. Bemused amusement. The first day, while Hodgett asked each of us to name our favorite book, then explained why we were wrong, I was daydreaming about this girl in a white V-neck reading my work and timidly approaching me afterward to ask, What did the father's broken watch represent? and me saying *futility*, or *despair*, and then maybe kissing her. She turned out to be the toughest reader in class, far tougher than Hodgett, who was usually content to make vague pronouncements about *patterning* and *the octane of the epiphany*. Carrie was cold and smart and meticulous. She crawled inside your story with a flashlight and blew out all your candles. She said of one of my early pieces, "On what planet do people actually talk to each other like this?" And: "Does this character do anything but shuck peas?"

I knew she was right about my father's story. But I didn't want to talk about it anymore. So I unfastened my towel and let it drop to the floor. "Uh-oh," I said. "What do you think of this plot device?"

She looked at me, down, up, down. "We're not doing anything until you admit your father wrote a good story."

"Good? What's that even mean? Like, can it fetch and speak and sit?"

"Good," Carrie repeated. "It's executed as vigorously as it's conceived. It isn't false or pretentious. It doesn't jerk the reader around to no effect. It lives by its own logic. It's poignant without trying too hard."

I looked down at my naked torso. At some point during her litany, I seemed to have developed an erection. My penis looked all eager, as if it wanted to join the discussion, and unnecessary. "In that case," I said, "I guess he wrote one good story. Do I have to be happy about it?"

"Now I want you to call him and tell him how much you like it."

I picked up the towel, refastened it, and started toward the living room.

"I'm just joking," she said. "You can call him later."

Dejected, I followed Carrie to my room. She won, she always won. I didn't even feel like having sex anymore. My room smelled like the bottom of a pond, like a turtle's moistly rotting cavity. She lay on my bed, still talking about my father's story. "I love that little

boy in the motel room," she said, kissing me, taking off her shirt. "I love how he's still frowning in his sleep."

I never called my father, though I told Carrie I did. I said I called and congratulated him. "What's his next project?" she asked. Project! As if he was a famous architect or something. I said he's considering a number of projects, each project more poignant-without-trying-too-hard than the project before it.

He phoned a week later. I was reading my students' paragraph essays, feeling my soul wither with each word. The paragraphs were in response to a prompt: "Where do you go to be alone?" All the students, except one, went to their room to be alone. The exception was Daryl Ellington, who went to his room.

"You sound busy," my father said.

"Just getting some work done," I said.

We exchanged postcard versions of our last few weeks. I'm fine, Carrie's fine. He's fine, Lara's fine. I'd decided I would let him bring up the journal.

"Been writing," he said.

"Here and there. Some days it comes, some days it doesn't."

"I meant me," he said, then slowly he paddled through a summary of how he'd been writing stories since I sent him one of mine (I'd forgotten this), and of reading dozens of story collections, and then of some dream he had, then, *finally*, of having his story accepted for publication (and two others, forthcoming). He sounded chagrined by the whole thing. "I told them to publish it as Seth Moxley but lines must've gotten crossed," he said. "Anyway, I'll put a copy in the mail today. If you get a chance to read it, I'd love to hear what you think."

"What happened to scuba diving?" I asked.

"I still dive. Lara and I are going down to the Pennekamp next week."

"Right, but—writing's not some hobby you just dabble in, Dad. It's not like scuba diving."

"I didn't say it was. You're the one who brought up diving." He inhaled deeply. "Why do you always do this?"

"Do what?"

"Make everything so damn difficult. I had to drink two glasses of wine before I called, just to relax. You were such an easygoing kid,

you know that? Your mom used to call you Placido. I'd wake up panicked in the middle of the night and run to check on you, because you didn't make any noise."

"Maybe she was talking about the opera singer," I said.

Pause, a silent up-grinding of gears. "You don't remember much about your mother, do you?"

"A few things," I said.

"Her voice?"

"Not really."

"She had a terrific voice."

I didn't listen to much after that. Not because I'd already heard it, though I had—I wanted to collect a few things I remembered about her, instead of listening to his version again. Not facts or adjectives or secondhand details, but . . . qualities. Spliced-together images I could summon without words: her reaching without looking to take my hand in the street, the pockmarks on her wrist from the pins inserted when she broke her arm, her laughing, her crying, her warmth muted, her gone, dissolving room-by-room from our house. I'd never been able to write about her, not expressly. Whenever I tried she emerged all white-robed and beatific, floating around, dispensing wisdom, laying doomed hands on me and everyone. Writing about her was imperfect remembering; it felt like a second death. I was far happier writing about fathers making sons help drag a deer to the roadside, saying, "Look into them fogged-up eyes. Now that's death, boy."

"She always had big plans for you," my father was saying. It was something he often said. I never asked him to be more specific.

It occurs to me that I'm breaking two of Hodgett's laws here. Never write about writing, and Never dramatize phone conversations. Put characters in the same room, he always said. See what they do when they can't hang up. "We'd love to see Carrie again," my father said after a while. "Any chance you'll be home for Christmas?"

Christmas was two months away. "We'll try," I told him.

After hanging up, I returned to my students' paragraphs, happy to marinate for a while in their simple insight. *My room is the special place*, Monica Mendez wrote. *Everywhere around me are shelves of my memory things.*

*

Imagine a time for your characters, Hodgett used to say, when things might have turned out differently. Find the moment a choice was made that made other choices impossible. Readers like to see characters making choices.

She died in May. A week after the funeral my father drives me and three friends to a theme park called Boardwalk and Baseball. He probably hopes it'll distract us for a few hours. All day long my friends and I ride roller coasters, take swings in the batting cage, eat hot dogs. I toss a Ping-Pong ball into a milk bottle and win a T-shirt. I can't even remember what kind of T-shirt it was, but I remember my glee after winning it.

My father follows us around and sits on a bench while we wait in line. He must be feeling pretty ruined but his son is doing just fine. His son is running from ride to ride, laughing it up with his friends. In fact, he hasn't thought about his mom once since they passed through the turnstiles.

My father is wearing sunglasses, to help with his allergies, he says. His sleeves are damp. I think he's been crying. "Having fun?" he keeps asking me.

I am, clearly I am. Sure, my mom died a week ago, but I just won a new T-shirt and my father gave each of us twenty dollars and the line to the Viper is really short and the sun is shining and I think we saw the girl from *Who's the Boss*, or someone who looks a lot like her, in line at the popcorn cart.

I cringe when I remember this day. I want to revise everything. I want to come down with food poisoning, or lose a couple of fingers on the Raptor, something to mar the flawless good time I was having. Now I have to mar it in memory, I have to remember it with a black line through it.

"I'm glad you had fun," my father says on the drive home.

Our house is waiting for us when we get back. The failing spider plants on the front porch, the powder-blue envelopes in the mailbox.

November was a smear. Morning after morning I tried writing but instead played Etch-a-Sketch for two hours. I wrote a sentence. I waited. I stood up and walked around, thinking about the sentence. I leaned over the kitchen sink and ate an entire sleeve of graham crackers. I sat at my desk and stared at the sentence. I deleted it and wrote a different sentence. I returned to the kitchen

and ate a handful of baby carrots. I began wondering about the carrots, so I dialed the toll-free number on the bag and spoke to a woman in Bakersfield, California.

"I would like to know where baby carrots come from," I said.

"Would you like the long version or the short version?" the woman asked.

For the first time in days I felt adequately tended to. "Both," I said.

The short version: baby carrots are adult carrots cut into smaller pieces.

I returned to my desk, deleted my last sentence, and typed, "Babies are adults cut into smaller pieces." I liked this. I knew it would make an outstanding story, one that would win trophies and change the way people thought about fathers and sons if only I could find another three hundred or so sentences to follow it. But where were they?

A few weeks after my father sent me his first story, I received the winter issue of the *Longboat Quarterly* with a note: *Your father really wants to hear back from you about his story. He thinks you hated it. You didn't hate it, did you? XO, Lara.* No, Lara, I didn't. And I probably wouldn't hate this one, though I couldn't read past the title, "Blue Angels," without succumbing to the urge to sidearm the journal under my sofa (it took me four tries). I already knew what it was about.

Later, I sat next to Carrie on the sofa while she read it. Have you ever watched someone read a story? Their expression is dim and tentative at the beginning, alternately surprised and bewildered during the middle, and serene at the end. At least Carrie's was then.

"Well," she said when she was done. "How should we proceed?"

"Don't tell me. Just punch me in the abdomen. Hard."

I pulled up my shirt, closed my eyes, and waited. I heard Carrie close the journal, then felt it lightly smack against my stomach.

I read the story in the tub. Suffice it to say, it wasn't what I expected.

As a kid I was obsessed with fighter planes. Tomcats, Super Hornets, anything with wings and missiles. I thought the story was going to be about my father taking me to see the Blue Angels, the U.S. Navy's flight team. It wouldn't have been much of a story: mis-

erable heat, planes doing stunts, me in the autograph line for an hour, getting sunburned, and falling asleep staring at five jets on a poster as we drove home.

The story is about a widowed father drinking too much and deciding he needs to clean the house. He goes from room to room dusting, scrubbing floors, throwing things away. The blue angels are a trio of antique porcelain dolls my mother held on to from childhood. The man throws them away, then regrets it as soon as he hears the garbage truck driving off. The story ends with father and son at the dump, staring across vast hillocks of trash, paralyzed.

I remembered the dump, hot syrup stench, blizzard of birds overhead. He told me it was important to see where our trash ended up.

When I finished, I was sad again, nostalgic, and wanting to call my father. Which I did after drying off. Carrie sat next to me on the sofa with her legs over mine. "What are you doing?" she asked. I dialed the number, waited, listened to his answering machine greeting—*Fred and Lara can't believe we missed your call*—and then hung up.

"Have I ever told you about when I saw the Blue Angels?" I asked Carrie.

"I don't think so."

"Well, get ready," I said.

I quit writing for a few weeks and went out into the world. I visited the airport, the beach, a fish camp, a cemetery, a sinkhole. I collected evidence, listened, tried to see past my impatience to the blood-radiant heart of things. I saw a man towing a woman on the handlebars of a beach cruiser. They were wearing sunglasses. They were poor. They were in love. I heard one woman say to another: *Everyone has a distinct scent, except me. Smell me, I don't have any scent.*

At the cemetery where my mother was buried, I came upon an old man lying very still on the ground in front of a headstone. When I walked by, I read the twin inscription. RUTH GOODINE 1920-1999, CHARLES GOODINE 1923-. "Don't mind me," the man said as I passed.

At my desk, I struggled to make something of this. I imagined what happened before and after. What moment made other moments impossible. He had come to the cemetery to practice for

eternity. I could still picture him lying there in his gray suit, but the before and after were murky. Before, he'd been on a bus, or in a car, or a taxi. Afterward he would definitely go to . . . the supermarket to buy . . . lunch meat?

"Anything worth saying," Hodgett used to declare, "is unsayable. That's why we tell stories."

I returned to the cemetery. I walked from one end to the other, from the granite cenotaphs to the unmarked wooden headstones. Then I walked into the mausoleum and found my mother's placard, second from the bottom. I had to kneel down to see it. Another of Hodgett's six laws: Never dramatize a funeral or a trip to the cemetery. Too melodramatic, too obvious. I sat against something called the Serenity Wall and watched visitors mill in and out. They looked more inconvenienced than sad. My father and I used to come here, but at some point we quit. Afterward we'd go to a diner and he would say, "Order anything you want, anything," and I would order what I always ordered.

A woman with a camera asked if I could take her picture in front of her grandmother's placard. I said, "One, two, three, smile," and snapped her picture.

When the woman left, I said some things to my mom, all melodramatic, all obvious. In the months before she died, she talked about death like it was a long trip she was taking. She would watch over me, she said, if they let her. "I'm going to miss you," she said, which hadn't seemed strange until now. Sometimes I hoped she was watching me, but usually it was too terrible to imagine. "Here I am," I told the placard. I don't know why. It felt good so I said it again.

"Why don't you talk about your mom?" Carrie asked me after I told her about going to the cemetery.

"You mean in general, or right now?"

Carrie didn't say anything. She had remarkable tolerance for waiting.

"What do you want to know?" I asked.

"Anything you tell me."

I forced a laugh. "I thought you were about to say, 'Anything you tell me is strictly confidential.' Like in therapy. Isn't that what they tell you in therapy?"

For some reason I recalled my mother at the beach standing in the knee-deep water with her back to me. Her pants are wet to the waist and any deeper and her shirt will be soaked, too. I wondered why I needed to hoard this memory. Why did this simple static image seem like such a rare coin?

"Still waiting," Carrie said.

My father published two more stories in November, both about a man whose wife is dying of cancer. He had a weakness for depicting dreams, long, overtly symbolic dreams, and I found that the stories themselves read like dreams, I suffered them like dreams, and after a while I forgot I was reading. Like my high school band teacher used to tell us, "Your goal is to stop seeing the notes." This never happened to me, every note was a seed I had to swallow, but now I saw what he meant.

Toward the end of the month, I was sick for a week. I canceled class and lay in bed, frantic with half-dreams. Carrie appeared, disappeared, reappeared. I picked up my father's stories at random and reread paragraphs out of order. I looked for repeated words, recurring details. One particular sentence called to me, from "Under the Light."

That fall the trees stingily held on to their leaves.

In my delirium, this sentence seemed to solve everything. I memorized it. I chanted it. *I was the tree holding on to its leaves*, but I couldn't let them go, because if I did I wouldn't have any more leaves. My father was waiting with a rake because that was his *job* but I was being too stingy and weren't trees a lot like people?

I got better.

The morning I returned to class, Jacob Harvin from Prep Writing set a bag of Cheetos on my desk. "The machine gave me two by accident," he said.

I thanked him and began talking about subject-verb agreement. Out of the corner of my eye, I kept peeking at the orange Cheetos bag and feeling dreadful gratitude. "Someone tell me the subject in this sentence," I said, writing on the board. "*The trees of Florida hold on to their leaves.*"

Terrie Inal raised her hand. "You crying, Mr. Moxley?" she asked.

"No, Terrie," I said. "I'm allergic to things."

"Looks like you're crying," she said. "You need a moment?"

The word *moment* did it. I let go. I wept in front of the class while they looked on horrified, bored, amused, sympathetic. "It's just, that was so *nice*," I explained.

Late in the week, my father called and I told him I was almost done with one of his stories. "Good so far," I said. Carrie suggested I quit writing for a while, unaware that I already had. I got drunk and broke my glasses. Someone wrote *Roach* with indelible marker on the hood of my car.

One day, I visited Harry Hodgett in his office. I walked to campus with a bagged bottle of Chivas Regal, his favorite, practicing what I'd say. Hodgett was an intimidating figure. He enjoyed playing games with you.

His door was open, but the only sign of him was an empty mug next to a student story. I leaned over to see *S.B.N.I.* written in the margin in Hodgett's telltale blue pen—it stood for *Sad But Not Interesting*—then I sat down. The office had the warm, stale smell of old books. Framed pictures of Hodgett and various well-known degenerates hung on the wall.

"This ain't the petting zoo," Hodgett said on his way in. He was wearing sweatpants and an Everlast T-shirt with frayed cut-off sleeves. "Who are you?"

Hodgett was playing one of his games. He knew exactly who I was. "It's me," I said, playing along. "Moxley."

He sat down with a grunt. He looked beat-up, baffled, winded, which meant he was in the early days of one of his sober sprees. "Oh yeah, Moxley, sure. Didn't recognize you without the . . . you know."

"Hat," I tried.

He coughed for a while, then lifted his trash can and expectorated into it. "So what are you pretending to be today?" he asked, which was Hodgett code for "So how are you doing?"

I hesitated, then answered, "Bamboo," a nice inscrutable thing to pretend to be. He closed his eyes, leaned his head back to reveal the livid scar under his chin, which was Hodgett code for "Please proceed." I told him all about my father. Knowing Hodgett's predilections, I exaggerated some things, made my father sound more abusive. Hodgett's eyes were shut, but I could tell he was listen-

ing by the way his face ticced and scowled. "He sends the stories out under my name," I said. "I haven't written a word in over a month."

To my surprise, Hodgett opened his eyes, looked at me as if he'd just awoken, and said, "My old man once tried to staple-gun a dead songbird to my scrotum." He folded his arms across his chest. "Just facts, not looking for pity."

I remembered reading this exact sentence—*staple-gun, songbird, scrotum*—then I realized where. "That happened to Moser," I said, "at the end of your novel *The Hard Road*. His dad wants to teach him a lesson about deprivation."

"That wasn't a novel, Chief. That was first-person *life*." He huffed hoarsely. "All this business about literary journals and phone calls and hurt feelings, it's just not compelling. A story needs to sing like a wound. I mean, put your father and son in the same room together. Leave some weapons lying around."

"It isn't a story," I said. "I'm living it."

"I'm paid to teach students like you how to spoil paper. Look at me, man—I can barely put my head together." His face went through a series of contortions, like a ghoul in a mirror. "You want my advice," he said. "Go talk to the old man. Life ain't an opera. It's more like a series of commercials for things we have no intention of buying."

He narrowed his eyes, studying me. His eyes drooped; his mouth had white film at the corners. His nose was netted with burst capillaries.

"What happened to the young woman, anyway?" Hodgett asked. "The one with the nasty allure."

"You mean Carrie? My girlfriend?"

"Carrie, yeah. I used to have girlfriends like Carrie. They're fun." He closed his eyes and with his right hand began casually kneading his crotch. "She did that story about the burn ward."

"Carrie doesn't write anymore," I said, trying to break the spell.

"Shame," Hodgett said. "Well, I guess that's how it goes. Talent realizes its limitations and gives up while incompetence keeps plugging away until it has a book. I'd take incompetence over talent in a street fight any day of the week."

I picked up the Chivas Regal bottle and stood to leave. I studied the old man's big noisy battered redneck face. He was still fondling himself. I wanted to say something ruthless to him. I wanted my

words to clatter around in his head all day, like his words did in mine. "Thanks," I said.

He nodded, pointed to the bottle. "You can leave that anywhere," he said.

Another memory: my mother, father, and me in our living room. I am eight years old. In the corner is the Christmas tree, on the wall are three stockings, on the kitchen table is a Styrofoam-ball snowman. We're about to open presents. My father likes to systematically inspect his to figure out what's inside. He picks up a flat parcel wrapped in silver paper, shakes it, turns it over, holds it to his ear, and says, "A book." He sets it on his lap and closes his eyes. "A . . . autobiography."

He's right every time.

My mother wears a yellow bathrobe and sits under a blanket. She's cold again. She's sick but I don't know this yet. She opens her presents distractedly, saying *wow* and *how nice* and neatly folding the wrapping paper in half, then in quarters, while I tear into my gifts one after another. I say thanks without looking up.

That year, she and I picked out a new diver's watch for my father, which we wait until all the presents have been opened to give him. We've wrapped it in a small box and then wrapped that box inside a much larger one.

I set it in front of him. He looks at me, then her. He lifts the box. "Awfully light." He shakes it, knocks on each of the box's six sides. "Things are not what they seem."

My mother begins coughing, softly at first—my father pauses, sets his hands flat atop the box—then uncontrollably, in big hacking gusts. I bring her water, which she drinks, still coughing. My father helps her to the bathroom and I can hear her in there, gagging and hacking. For some reason I'm holding the remote control to the television.

The box sits unopened in the living room for the rest of the day. At night, with Mom in bed and me brushing my teeth, he picks it up, says "Diver's watch, waterproof up to a hundred meters," then opens it.

Carrie and I drove to Vero Beach the day before Christmas Eve. There seemed to be a surplus of abandoned cars and dead animals

on the side of the road and, between this and the gray sky and the homemade signs marking off the fallow farms—PREPARE FOR THE RAPTURE; PRAISE HIM—I began to daydream about the apocalypse. I was hoping it would arrive just like this, quietly, without much warning or fanfare.

"I know it's fiction," Carrie was saying, referring to my father's most recent story, "but it's hard not to read it as fact. Did you actually tape pictures of your mom to the front door when Lara came over the first time?"

"Maybe," I said. "Probably. I don't really remember."

I taped the pictures in a circle, like the face of a clock. I waited at the top of the stairs for the doorbell to ring.

Carrie pointed to a billboard featuring the likeness of a recently killed NASCAR driver's car, flanked by white angel wings. "I hope they haven't started letting race cars into heaven," she said.

I finally talked to my father about his writing while we were in the garage looking for the Styrofoam-ball snowman. We were searching through boxes, coming across yearbooks, macramé owls, clothes, and my oboe, snug in purple velvet. I always forgot how fit and reasonable-looking my father was until I saw him in person. His hair was now fully gray and his silver-rimmed reading glasses sat low on his nose.

"I didn't know we went to the dump to hunt for those dolls," I said. It sounded more reproachful than I meant it to.

He looked up from the box, still squinting, as if he'd been searching dark, cramped quarters. "You mean the story?"

"Blue Angels," I said. "I read it. I read all of them, actually."

"That's surprising," he said, folding the flaps of the box in front of him. "Best not to make too much out of what happens in stories, right?"

"But you were looking for those dolls."

"I didn't expect to find them. I wanted to see where they ended up." He shook his head. "It's hard to explain. After your mom died—I'd be making breakfast and my mind would wander to Annie and I'd start to lose it. The only time I relaxed was when I slept. That's why I started studying dreams. I found that if I did a few exercises before falling asleep, I could dictate what I dreamed about.

I could remember. I could pause and fast-forward and rewind. You're giving me a 'how pitiful' look."

"It's just strange," I said. "The dreams, the stories, it feels like I haven't been paying attention. I had no idea you were being all quietly desperate while I was waiting for my toast."

"It wasn't all the time." He pushed his glasses up on his nose and looked at me. "You should try writing about her, if you haven't already. You find yourself unearthing all sorts of things. Stories are just like dreams."

Something about his advice irritated me. It brought to mind his casually boastful author's note, *This is his first published story*. "Stories aren't dreams," I said.

"They're not? What are they, then?"

I didn't know. All I knew was that if he thought they were dreams, then they had to be something else. "They're jars," I said. "Full of bees. You unscrew the lid and out come the bees."

"All right," he said, moving the box out of his way. "But I still think you should try writing about her. Even if it means the bees coming out."

We searched until I found the snowman resting face-down in a box of embroidered tablecloths. A rat or weasel had eaten half of his head, but he still smiled his black-beaded smile.

"I remember when you made that," my father said.

I did, too. That is, I remembered *when* I made it, without remembering the actual making of it. I made it with my mom when I was three. Every year it appeared in the center of the kitchen table and every year she would say, "You and I made that. It was raining outside and you kept saying, 'Let's go stand in the soup.'" Maybe she thought that if she reminded me enough, I'd never forget the day we made it, and maybe I didn't, for a while.

I brought the snowman into the house and showed it to Carrie, who was sitting in the living room with Lara. "Monstrous," Carrie said.

Lara was looking at me significantly. An unfinished popcorn string dangled from her lap. "Carrie was sharing her thoughts on your dad's stories," she said. "Do you want to add anything?"

My father walked into the living room holding two mismatched candlesticks.

"They," I said slowly, looking at Carrie, waiting for her to mouth

the words, "were," she really was lovely, not just lovely looking, but lovely, "good." I breathed and said, "They were good."

Carrie applauded. "He means it, too," she said. "That slightly nauseous look on his face, that's sincerity." Then to me: "Now that wasn't so hard. Don't you feel light now, the weight lifted?"

I felt as if I'd swallowed a stone. I felt it settling and the moss starting to cover it.

"Frederick here's the real writer," my father said. "I'm just dabbling."

How humble, right? How wise and fatherly and kind. But I know what he meant: Frederick here's the fraud. He's the hack ventriloquist. I'm just dabbling at his wounds.

What more should be said about our visit? I want to come to my father's Mexico story without too much flourish. I hear Hodgett's voice: Never end your story with a character realizing something. Characters shouldn't realize things: readers should. But what if the character is also a reader?

We decorated the tree. We strung lights around the sago palms in the front yard. We ate breakfast in an old sugar mill and, from the pier, saw a pod of dolphins rising and rolling at dawn. I watched my father, tried to resist the urge to catalog him. His default expression was benign curiosity. He and Lara still held hands. They finished each other's sentences. They seemed happy. Watching my father watch the dolphins, I felt like we were at an auction, bidding on the same item. It was an ugly, miserly feeling.

I couldn't sleep on Christmas Eve. Carrie and I shared my old bedroom, which now held a pair of single beds separated by my old tricolor nightstand. All the old anxieties were coming back, the deadness of a dark room, the stone-on-stone sound of a crypt top sliding closed as soon as I began drifting to sleep.

I heard Carrie stir during the night. "I can't sleep," I said.

"Keep practicing," she said groggily. "Practice makes practice."

"I was wondering why you quit writing. You had more talent than all of us. You always made it look so easy."

She exhaled through her nose and moved to face me. I could just barely see her eyes in the dark. "Let's pretend," she said.

I waited for her to finish. When she didn't I said, "Let's pretend what?"

"Let's pretend two people are lying next to each other in a room. Let's pretend they're talking about one thing and then another. It got too hard to put words in their mouths. They stopped cooperating." She rolled over, knocked her knee against the wall. "They started saying things like, I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I need air. I'm tired of being depicted. I want to live."

I thought about her burn ward story, the way boys were on one side of the room and girls were on the other. Before lights-out the nurse came in and made everyone sing and then closed a curtain to separate the boys from the girls. After a while I said, "You sleeping?" She didn't answer so I went downstairs.

I poured a glass of water, and looked around my father's office for something to read. On his desk were a dictionary, a thesaurus, and something called *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, which I flipped through. *When a man grows old his bones become dry and brittle like straw and his eyes bulge and sag.* I opened the top drawer of his filing cabinet and searched through a stack of photocopied stories until I found a stapled manuscript titled "Mexico Story." I sat down on his loveseat and read it.

In Mexico, it began, some men still remember Pancho Villa. I prepared for a thinly veiled account of my father's and Lara's vacation, but the story, it turned out, followed a man, his wife, and their son on vacation in Mexico City. They've traveled there because the mother is sick and their last hope is a healer rumored to help even the most hopeless cases. The family waits in the healer's sitting room for their appointment. The son, hiding under the headphones of his new Walkman, just wants to go home. The mother tries to talk to him but he just keeps saying *Huh? Huh?*

The three of us go into a dim room, where the healer asks my mother what's wrong, what her doctors said, why has she come. Then he shakes his head and apologizes. "Very bad," he says. He tells a rambling story about Pancho Villa, which none of us listens to, then reaches into a drawer and pulls out a wooden back-scratcher. He runs it up and down along my mother's spine.

"How's that feel?" he asks.

"Okay," the mother says. "Is it doing anything?"

"Not a thing. But it feels good, yes? It's yours to keep, no charge." I must have fallen asleep while reading, because at some point the threads came loose in the story and mother, father, and son leave

Mexico for a beach that looks a lot like the one near our house. Hotels looming over the sea oats. The inlet lighthouse just visible in the distance. I sit on a blanket next to my father while my mother stands in knee-deep water with her back to us.

"She's sick," my father says. "She doesn't want me to say anything, but you're old enough to know. She's really . . . sick."

If she's sick she shouldn't be in the water, I think. Her pants are wet to the waist and if she wades in any deeper her shirt will be soaked, too. I pick up a handful of sand and let it fall through my fingers.

"So it's like a battle," he's saying. "Good versus bad. As long as we stick together, we'll get through it okay."

My mother walks out of the water. She is bathed in light and already I can barely see her. She sits next to us, puts her hand on my head, and, in the dream, I realize this is one of those moments I need to prolong. I put my hand over hers and hold it there. I push down on her hand until it hurts and I keep pushing.

"You can let go," she says. "I'm not going anywhere."

The next morning I found my father in checked pajamas near the Christmas tree. He carefully stepped over a stack of presents onto the tree skirt and picked up a gift from Carrie and me. He shook it and listened. He tapped on it with his finger.

"It's not a watch," I said.

He turned to me and smiled. "I've narrowed it down to two possibilities," he said. "Here." He waved me over. "Sit down, I've got something for you."

I sat on the couch and he handed me a long, flat package wrapped in red and white paper. "Wait, wait," he said when I started to unwrap it. "Guess what it is first."

I looked at it. All that came to mind was a pair of chopsticks.

"Listen," he said, taking it from me. He held it up to my ear and shook it. "Don't think, just listen. What's that sound like to you?"

I didn't hear anything. "I don't hear anything," I said.

He continued shaking the gift. "It's trying to tell you what it is. Hear it?"

I waited for it, I listened. "No."

He tapped the package against my head. "Listen harder," he said.