

YOUR FATHER'S DAUGHTER

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IF YOU ASKED Jack, he would probably tell you I ruined his graduation. I meant to be on my best behavior. I did. But everything went wrong and I wouldn't blame anybody for thinking it was my fault. Jack's graduation was a hard time.

I had never seen Jack anywhere but in Virginia when he visited us on holidays and during the summer. I have always liked Jack. I liked him better than Stel, who is my whole sister. Someday I want to go to boarding school, so I can come home on holidays and be like Jack with everyone glad to see me and interested in my stories.

Jack's graduation was at noon. We had come all the way from Virginia to Connecticut the day before. We were dressed up. I wore a green dress with green buttons, which I liked fine until Mom brought out the same dress for Stel and made her wear it. I was nine and Stel was five; Dad said we looked like peas.

Jack's school was full of leaves. Big leafy oak trees and flowering trees everywhere smelling of rain. There were wide spaces of lawn rolled up to brick buildings. There was a chapel with a white steeple. Men in light suits and ladies in cool, floaty dresses walked under the trees. Underneath a yellow-and-white striped tent, a black man was snapping tablecloths in the breeze. Someone was ringing the chapel bell. I felt like doing cartwheels over that lawn, but I figured my dress would fly over my head.

We followed little cardboard arrows from the parking lot to the library. Behind the library were rows of folding metal chairs and a platform with a microphone. A boy was saying, "Testing one, two, three. Can you hear me?" And Stel shouted that yes, we could. We sat down in a middle row: Dad, Stel, Mom and me on the end. Parents, brothers and sisters were filling up the rows, everyone talking at once.

The folding metal chairs were hot from being in the sun; I kept getting off mine to spy around. I saw ladies in Easter hats and ladies with lace gloves. I saw a man with blond sideburns who had on a kilt skirt and a tassled plaid cap; he was carrying bagpipes. I yelled for Stel to look at the man in the skirt and Mom told me to keep my voice down.

I looked at Mom to see how she came out against the other ladies. Mom looked younger. Her long hair, which she always tried to pin up, was falling down in places and poking out of other places. Mom had taken three hours that morning to do her hair, zip her dress, stare in the motel mirror, put on make up. When Dad told her she looked fine, Mom burst into tears and sat in the bathroom for a while with the faucet running. Stel and I ran down the hall to play in the elevator. A man yelled at us. We ran back to the room. Dad was kissing Mom while she fixed her hair again. By then it was time to go, so we got into the rental car and drove to Jack's school.

Stel was kicking the seat in front of her. An old grandma with blue cat glasses turned and asked if she would mind quitting. Mom slapped Stel's knee and told her to behave. Dad sat up straight, watching everybody go by. All of a sudden, he reached over Stel to grab Mom's hand.

"There she is," he said.

"Where?" said Mom. She half stood to see where Dad was looking.

"Over to the left in the pink. See the white hat? See the man in the tan jacket and the two boys? That's her husband and those are her kids."

"Who?" I asked, climbing onto my seat to see.

"Get down this minute, Caroline. And don't yell," said Mom. She yanked me down by the arm.

"Who?" I whispered.

Mom was looking at a lady who could have been somebody's mother on TV. She had grey-brown hair; she had a white hat and shoes. She had a round face. One of the boys was talking to her; she smiled at him and kept a hand on the other boy's shoulder. Mom put a hand to her hair and tried to pin up the loose parts, which only made it worse.

"Mom," I said.

"Her name is Mrs. Bethany," said Mom. "She is Jack's mother and Dad's first wife."

"Dad's wife!" shrieked Stel.

"First," said Mom. Dad did not say anything. We watched a line of boys come over a hill toward the platform. After a moment or two, Dad said, "Who can find Jack?"

The boys filed into two rows of seats while the man with the bagpipes started to play. I saw Jack's head and waved. Everyone sat down. The bagpipe man marched up to the platform in his kilt and plaid cap, blowing with his cheeks puffed out and his face getting redder and redder. A herd of people in robes stamped onto the platform and sat down behind the bagpipe man. Finally, he stopped playing. He stepped up to the microphone and said, "Welcome, LadiesGentlemenFriends and relations, to the Fifty-third Commencement ceremonies of Highland Academy. I am Angus McDermott, Headmaster."

Three ladies clapped in the next row.

“Thank you,” said the headmaster, holding up his hand as though he could not make himself heard over the clapping. “I would first like to introduce Reverend Ian Stuart McKenna, who will read a sermon he has written in honor of today.” A thin, pointy-chinned man got up, coughed, and started going on about who was a sheep and who was a shepherd.

He sat down. The headmaster hopped up again and slapped the Reverend on the back, then gave us a story about three boys locking the music teacher in the bell tower. A horn-rimmed boy stood up and said how he would miss good old Highland Academy when he was drinking beer at Yale. Another boy, about Stel’s size, played the Highland Academy school song on his cello.

Then the headmaster said it was his great pleasure to introduce Miss Mabel Kingsley Smith, the poetess: Won’t you all give her a hand? Mabel Kingsley Smith was a brown lady in a brown dress. She was wrinkled brown all over, like a left-over baked potato. I asked Mom how long this was going to last; she said to pay attention because Mabel Kingsley Smith might be famous for all we knew and we might wish we had listened someday after she was dead.

All along I had been stretching my neck to look at Mrs. Bethany’s hat. She was sitting five or six rows in front of us, listening with her head to one side. I concentrated on Mrs. Bethany’s hat. It was hard to believe she was related to Jack, *my* brother, and was no relation to me. Would she recognize me as Jack’s sister if I walked by? People said Jack and I both had Dad’s nose. How strange it would be to meet a child who was not your child, but who had part of your child in her.

Mabel Kingsley Smith talked on and on, sounding brown. I tried to see where Jack was sitting. I had meant to bring him a present. I had meant to bring him either a pocket knife with seven different blades, a corkscrew and a toothpick, or a watch that was also a whistle and a thermometer. I had meant to at least make a card.

Jack had the best way of describing boys he knew, the tricks they played for fun, how terrible school food was. Sometimes we would sit on the front porch and I would laugh and laugh until Jack tipped me out of the glider. Did he ever wish he could stay with us past a visit? Did he ever wish his Mom and Dad were still married? Did he like those two boys better than Stel and me? He had only halves. I should have brought him something.

I looked at Mrs. Bethany’s hat again. I looked at the side of Dad’s head. I tried to imagine Dad’s head next to Mrs. Bethany’s hat . . . Mrs. Bethany making Dad scrambled eggs for breakfast . . . Dad kissing Mrs. Bethany on the mouth. . . .

“Sit still,” said Mom to me.

“Remember,” Mabel Kingsley Smith was saying, “the sharp pain of leaving cannot exceed the pain of being left behind.”

Did Dad leave Mrs. Bethany? Or did she leave him?

Whenever I had thought about Dad's first wife before, all she seemed was a collection of capital letters: FIRST WIFE, and a pale face with red-lipsticked lips. But here was Mrs. Bethany in a white hat. One day she was making Dad scrambled eggs; the next day she wasn't. Somebody left somebody.

Once Mom and Dad went to Florida for three weeks when I was five. Every morning I stood in front of a map of America in the den, staring at a dot marked, "Boca Raton." Mom and Dad were on that map, but that gave me no comfort. For three weeks I slept with all the lights on in my room.

"Mom," I said, "did Dad leave Mrs. Bethany?"

Mom turned to me, not saying anything. One of her earrings was caught in her hair; her lipstick was smudged at the corners. Finally she said, "This isn't the time to talk, honey."

"But I want to know," I said.

"Shh," hissed the blue cat glasses.

"Shh," hissed Stel.

"I want to know," I said.

Mom looked at Dad. He was listening to Mabel Kingsley Smith talk about ivory towers with rats racing around outside. I looked at Dad, too. I looked at his nose, his mouth, his ear. I wanted to know which parts of him were me and which were not.

"Your father left Mrs. Bethany," said Mom. "Now be quiet."

* * *

I nearly missed the part of Jack's graduation where he walked up and got his diploma from the headmaster. Mom had to tap me before I remembered to clap and whistle so he would have more noise following him than anybody else. I kept thinking about Dad eating scrambled eggs and packing his suitcase. Would he pack the ballpoint pen set I gave him for Christmas? I had bought it with my own money. I looked at Dad over and over until his face was like someone stamped on a coin.

Then everyone was standing up. Jack's graduation was over before I knew what had happened. Jack came trotting up to us, looking like a movie star in his blazer now his braces were off. Mom kissed his cheek. Dad shook his hand. Stel bit his thumb, while I stood by scratching my elbow.

"Aren't you going to congratulate me?" said Jack. He pulled my hair. So I said congratulations. Then I said I felt a little sick and could we go home. Mom said no, we had to go to the reception for a few minutes for politeness.

Parents, sons, people in robes mobbed over to the yellow-and-white striped tent. Somebody had set up a big glass bowl of red punch. Next to the punch bowl were rows of paper cups. On another table was a two-foot-long cake with white frosting and tiny paper Scottish flags stuck all over. The black man I had seen before had put on a plaid cap and necktie and was cutting up the cake. We each got a piece of cake, a cup of punch and went to stand near one end of the tent. Jack disappeared. The cake was stale; I ate mine anyway. Mom and Dad were not saying much.

Dad decided to go talk to Mabel Kingsley Smith and went off holding his napkin. Mom and Stel went to ask the black man if Stel could have some of the tiny paper Scottish flags. At the other end of the tent, I saw Jack and Mrs. Bethany. His arm was across her shoulders; they were talking to the headmaster by the punch bowl. I made my way through the crush until I was standing behind them. I compared the backs of their heads and saw nothing unusual: Jack's ears stood out. Mrs. Bethany's hat had three cloth violets pinned to the hatband.

"A credit to the school," the headmaster was saying.

"Why thank you, Mr. McDermott," said Mrs. Bethany. She had a warm dinner rolls voice.

The headmaster spotted me bobbing around behind Jack.

"And this must be the little sister!" he said. Jack and Mrs. Bethany turned to look at me. "Strong family resemblance, eh?" The headmaster smiled his teeth and sideburns at us.

I did not look anywhere.

"This is my father's daughter," said Jack.

"Eh?" said the headmaster.

Mrs. Bethany was fingering the patent leather handle of her white purse. She looked at me, looked at her purse, looked at me again. "Hello, Caroline," she said. "Very nice to meet you."

I stood there smashing my paper cup against my chest. Jack began to whistle under his breath. Oh Jack. I thought he had never seemed so tall. Far off, the chapel bell was ringing. For an instant, I was positive the music teacher was still trapped in the tower.

"Well now," said the headmaster. He jiggled the tassel on his plaid cap. "Who, em, would like some punch?"

Mrs. Bethany turned away. Jack looked at me as if I had forgotten to button my dress. He turned away, too. I stood still. I counted backwards from ten. When no one was looking at me, I crawled beneath the cake table. People's feet passed by: ladies' high heels, flats, wedgies, men's loafers and lace-ups. A pair of black basketball sneakers bounced past. I saw Stel's saddle shoes scuttle back and forth.

I could not think of a time when I would feel like crawling out from under that table again.

I was considering how to pass the time, when I heard somebody say, "What do we have here? What is this?" which I did not appreciate. I looked up. Mabel Kingsley Smith was on her hands and knees squinting at me under the tablecloth. She picked up a rhinestone stickpin that had fallen off her dress into the grass.

"What are you doing under this table, little girl?" she said, not whispering. She waved her stickpin.

I squinted back at her.

“Ah,” said Mabel Kingsley Smith. She winked both her eyes at me. She had a mole by her left eyelid. “Forgive me for intruding.” Head, hands and knees vanished. I watched a pair of brown oxfords walk away.

I said to myself: this is how an escaped convict feels. I pictured myself as an escaped convict. Bloodhounds would be after me; I could hear them baying through the woods.

“Caroline,” said Jack. “Please get out from under there. You’re embarrassing me.” Jack was holding up a corner of the tablecloth. I crawled out and took a long time standing up.

“What’s the matter with you?” said Jack. I looked at the lapels of his blue blazer. I looked at his white shirt and striped tie. I tried to draw a line down him dividing him into Dad and Mrs. Bethany. “Why don’t you go have another piece of cake,” said Jack. He put his hand on my head. I wanted to hold his sleeve. I wanted him to be glad we had the same nose. Your father’s daughter? Jack took his hand off my head.

“See you in a while,” he said and swung away into the crowd. I watched him join a group of boys. A few feet to my right, Mabel Kingsley Smith was smiling at me. I went to the opposite end of the tent and found a folding chair.

I sat watching ladies with their husbands and their big, graduating sons. Ladies were waving, calling to each other through clumps of tall men. I watched a red-haired lady straighten her son’s tie. A pregnant lady hummed to herself near my chair. All around me, mothers were calling in motherly voices: Hello, hello, they called. So this is Phil? Hello. Lovely to meet you, Bill. Hello, hello. Oh, *hello*. I sat watching all those mothers and pretended I was an orphan. A starving orphan. One piece of graduation cake a day was all I got. I watched the red-haired lady kiss first her son, then her husband.

How did people know for sure if they would ever get married? What if no one ever wanted to marry you? What if all your life you wanted babies? What if you grew up and that was all? You got old with nothing to show for it?

Mabel Kingsley Smith, for instance. Who was she but some old poetess? Where were her sons? I don’t want to be like her, I said to myself. I don’t want to be like Mrs. Bethany who got left. Did I want to be like Mom? I thought of Mom crying in the bathroom that morning.

I shifted and shifted on my folding chair and could not get comfortable. Everyone was laughing and calling hello; everyone was eating graduation cake and drinking red punch. Everyone was breathing too much.

I wanted to say something to Mrs. Bethany. I wanted to apologize for embarrassing her and Jack in front of the headmaster. I’d tell her I was sorry she and Dad couldn’t stay married. I’d tell her I was glad Jack had such a nice mother, that her other boys and her new husband looked nice, too. Don’t feel bad about Dad, I’d say. Everybody’s getting left these days.

The more I thought about things to say to Mrs. Bethany, the more I wanted to go say them. I slid off my chair and pushed past some flowery ladies. I was in a hurry, so I pushed one of them hard.

"Watch where you're going!" she yelled, and swiped at me with her hand. I ducked and cleared that bunch. I ran into Stel next; she had frosting on her face and was waving a fistful of napkins, but I didn't have time to see how much cake she could fit in her mouth.

"Move," I said and shoved her aside.

I passed Reverend McKenna coughing into his punch. I dodged a fat man who tried to ask my age.

"No time," I told him and went on by. I wanted to find Mrs. Bethany that minute. I had the feeling that if I didn't say what I wanted to say right then, I never would.

I ran outside the tent, skirting the crowd. A boy in a checkered jacket stepped in front of me and knocked me down, but I got to my feet and ran away while he was saying pardon me. I hid from the headmaster. I saw Mom's falling-down hair, but she didn't look in my direction. I could not see Mrs. Bethany.

I ran faster. My knee hurt where I had cut it when the checked boy knocked me down. I began to be afraid Mrs. Bethany had left. What would I do with the things I wanted to say? As I ran, green leaves and ladies' dresses got tangled together, so that ladies seemed to be in the trees laughing down at me as I went past.

And then Mrs. Bethany was just there.

"Oh!" I said. I ran right into her. I tried to speak and breathe hard at the same time. Mrs. Bethany looked at me. Without meaning to, I grabbed the front of her pink dress and pulled on it.

"I have to tell you something," I said. "I have to tell you something about how everyone is getting left and about Dad and . . ."

Dad was standing next to Mrs. Bethany.

"Caroline," said Dad. My father, Jack's father, Mrs. Bethany's first husband. "What's all this about?" His voice came from on top the chapel steeple. Who was he that minute?

Mrs. Bethany was saying something to me as I backed away from her. Dad and Mrs. Bethany got farther and farther away until they stood at the edge of a wide distance. Jack's parents. I backed into a tree.

I felt Mom take hold of my hand. She led me across the lawn to the chapel, where we sat on the steps. Stel wandered up and sat with us. Mom patted my head. She told Stel not to tie my shoelaces together. I put my head on Mom's shoulder. I rubbed my nose on the strap of her cotton sundress. I asked her, "Do you think I'm a coward?"

Mom put her arms around me and rocked me. She smelled of soap and cinnamon. "I don't want to be like Jack," I said.

Mom turned to swat Stel who was prying a loose brick out of the chapel steps. "No," said Mom.

I closed my eyes. Dad and Mrs. Bethany stood side-by-side, waving from a pinpoint marked "Boca Raton." What had they been talking about? Old times? When they were only Jack's parents? When did they know? When did he know?

"How do you ever know for sure?" I cried.

Mom looked like she didn't understand. Then she looked like she did, but wasn't going to answer. Then she simply shook her head.

Stel threw her brick over the railing.

Mom took Stel to the car and sent me to go find Dad. I was circling the tent when I heard breathing behind me and felt someone snatch at my arm. I turned to face Mabel Kingsley Smith, winking and panting.

"Excuse me," she said. "You might think this is odd, but I've been writing a poem about you during the last half hour." She grabbed my arm. "I thought you should know," she said. "It's the kind of thing people like to know."

I didn't say anything.

"My poem is titled, 'Questing Youth,' " said Mabel Kingsley Smith. Her hands were dry and felt like old leaves. "Would you like to hear the first lines?"

"I'm in a hurry," I said.

Mabel Kingsley Smith pretended not to hear me. She stared over my head. Her mouth got round.

"O Youth," she said.

Do not cross the River Styx!

Hide thee beneath cake tables,

Throw thou bricks. . . ."

"That was Stel, not me," I said, trying to shake her off.

"I plan on composing an epic," she said, still staring over my head. "I often write epics."

"Well, I think I've got to be going," I said. I turned toward the tent. I could see Dad standing by himself drinking punch by the punch bowl. I turned halfway around.

"How do you know if you're going to be a poetess?" I said.

But Mabel Kingsley Smith had started her poem again and was not listening. So I turned back around and walked away. She called after me to ask if I wanted to know how her poem ended. I had gone too far by then.

"Thanks anyway," I yelled over my shoulder. Dad watched me come up to him. He told me Jack was saying good-bye to a friend. I didn't ask where Mrs. Bethany had gone.

Dad continued to stand by the punch bowl drinking punch. Mr. Father drinking punch. Nice to meet you, Mr. Father. How many children are you in? I watched Dad swallow punch. I looked at his jaw, the side of his nose. He could be a banker or a pirate, I said to myself. He could be someone who murdered children and left their bodies in garbage cans.

I walked a couple of steps away. Dad didn't look up. I sat down on a folding chair.

People were beginning to leave the tent, gathering together in packs of threes and fours. I watched everyone go by me, expecting each person who passed to spit, or take out a glass eye or show me a hand with three fingers. I didn't know anybody and nobody knew me. I examined all the flowery ladies, pale under their shady hats. I examined their husbands, their sons. Not a single one appeared trustworthy.

I stared at the cut on my knee.

Dad cleared his throat. "Go wait in the car with your mother, Caroline," he said. "I'll be along with Jack in a minute."

"Oh sure," I said, not looking up.

"What?" said Dad.

"Why don't you go on and leave now?" There was dirt in my cut; it had started to bleed again. "Go on," I said, looking at him this time.

Dad put down his paper cup. He put up a hand and felt his bald spot. Sunlight caught the lens of his glasses; for an instant the lens was like a flashlight trained on me.

"Go ahead," I said. "Nobody cares if you leave."

"Dear me," said a lady in a lead-colored dress who had stopped to listen.

"Why don't you go marry somebody else?" I said to Dad. "Why don't you have a hundred wives and kids and leave them all?"

"Listen to me," said Dad. He moved his head; the flashlight was gone. "Just listen to me."

"Nobody cares," I said. I looked at his face and his mouth saying, "listen." He was my father, *my* father. I screamed. "Nobody cares!" I screamed and I screamed again.

Everything hushed. I had deafened the whole world. I had blown the tent over.

I had knocked myself out of my folding chair. I lay on the ground with crumpled paper napkins, tiny paper Scottish flags and bits of graduation cake. I watched a brown spider crawl across a leaf. I watched Dad's shoes come at me. I pretended to be already dead.

Dad did not pick me up or touch me. I opened my eyes to see how close the spider had come. I smelled the fresh dirt and the broken blades of grass. I did not move.

“Caroline,” said Dad. I didn’t answer. “Caroline,” he said. “I’m talking to you.” Grains of dirt were pressing into my cheek. The spider advanced: I could see flecks of red and gold on its body; I could see where its legs met its body; two hooded points were where its eyes should be. The spider got closer; it was nearly the size of a dog. Poisonous fangs. Tiny bloody heart.

“I think you’re distorting things,” said Dad. He bent down next to me—I heard his knees crack—and touched my neck. “Has your mother said something?”

The spider jumped.

I shrieked and threw myself at Dad. The top of my head hit his nose. He fell over and his glasses skidded under the punch table. Dad’s nose began to bleed. He shook his head, spraying blood down the front of his white shirt and onto my green dress. He felt his face. I hunted under the punch table until I found his glasses for him. We sat on the ground and stared at each other.

“Please! Please!” the headmaster shouted from the other end of the tent.

“What is *wrong* with those people?” said the lady in the lead-colored dress.

Dad was blotting his nose with a white pocket handkerchief. He looked at me over the handkerchief. He was small and old sitting on the ground without his glasses, and young, too. But mostly old: an old baby man. I touched his leg with my foot. Dad put on his glasses. He looked and looked at me.

I looked back at him. In the National Zoo, I’d once watched a monkey swinging and leaping through his cage, paying no mind to anyone. Then suddenly he stopped swinging and threw himself against the bars of the cage. Three times he threw himself against the bars. After the third time, the monkey picked himself up and looked at me.

I was sorry for everyone. I was sorry for the monkey.

The headmaster stood over us. “Really, sir,” he said. “I must ask you and this little girl to leave.” He waggled the tassel on his cap. From where I sat, I could see the blond hairs on his bare leg.

“I’m in a poem,” I told the headmaster’s leg.

“Excuse me?” said Dad. He had mud and cake crumbs on his jacket. One of the wire earpieces of his glasses was bent, so that the earpiece stuck out from his head.

I was suddenly glad about my poem.

“You have to leave,” said the headmaster, speaking each word slowly and loudly. “You are disrupting the reception.” His kilt flapped in the breeze while he glared down at us.

“It’s not finished yet,” I said.

“Oh,” said Dad. He got first to his knees, then to his feet. He brushed himself off, pulled me up and brushed me off. “I beg your pardon,” he said. He tried to figure out what was wrong with his glasses. He put his bloody handkerchief into his breast pocket, then took it out again and stared at it.

He walked a couple of steps. He stooped to brush more crumbs off his pants leg. His glasses fell off.

"I'll be damned," he said.

"It's called 'Questing Youth'," I said.

I picked up Dad's glasses for him and took hold of his sleeve. He held his glasses in his other hand while I led him out from under the yellow-and-white striped tent. I led him across a stretch of lawn toward the parking lot. We passed the black man gathering cardboard arrows. We passed Mabel Kingsley Smith standing by a stone bench wearing a hat with a bird on it. She waved. I dropped Dad's sleeve and took his hand instead. We passed under flowering trees, which I recognized as dogwoods from home. Behind us, I could hear Jack calling our names.

"Well, I'll be damned," Dad said again.

I held Dad's hand all the way to the car where Mom and Stel sat waiting. Jack caught up with us as we reached the parking lot. We all got into the car and drove away.

