

A PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER

Jessie Grearson

"*Please take me with you*" it begins, this note in my own handwriting, tucked deep to the back, left of my father's top drawer. I am standing before his tall dresser; I am supposed to be looking for his reading glasses somewhere along its cluttered top. Deep within me is a physical shift of surprise: What? What's *this*?

I read the note furtively: it is a plea; I have done something wrong, am being punished. I am begging to escape some penalty. They are not going to take me to the lake. They HAVE to take me to the lake.

Why is it in his drawer? I breathe the question in like a sharp new scent. It is my mother, the disciplinarian, who should have received, and surely would have prompted this note; my mother at any rate, who would have had the final say, whether or not to relent, to pardon.

Why does *he* have this letter? I say it aloud, exhaling. And why did he keep it for ten years? And why am I so entirely surprised?

My father doesn't save things. He is not a collector of objects. If he left our house, it wouldn't look much different; I can think of little he would claim or take with him, no corner that would be emptier for having been exclusively his.

My father always . . . wasn't. Was not an intellectual. Not a farmer. Not tidy, not thorough, not punctual. Often not even awake. Not a reader and not really a business man. Not a finisher of things. Did not go to college.

He was a verb, not a noun: bringing home creamsicles and silver ball bearings from work, taking us down to the docks and the bakery, eating four or five donuts in a row while looking at the boats and the sports page of the Sunday newspaper; he always seemed to *know* everyone. And then the siren, the disappearance. My father following the fire trucks, a volunteer fireman, chief of the department in our small New Hampshire town.

His weakness. His passion. It is all mixed up in my mind: his silhouette against the blaze of the Clark's new house, shouting directions to people, going in himself, a hero. His sheepish face

coming in the back hall, late for dinner again, a disgrace, pot lids slammed in disapproval. Taut silence. His secure place at the big table in Dedham for Thanksgiving, at his mother's right hand, served first, firstborn, only son. His puzzlement over my college financial aid forms, how to say he'd never been to college, been to the navy, went to East Coast Aerotechnic school for two years to earn a license as an aircraft engine inspector . . . how do you fit that into such a small space? In the end, I left it blank.

26 School Street. In the old, beautiful part of Dedham, southwest suburb of Boston, is a massive white house built in 1836, in the old tradition—high ceilings, wooden floors, fireplaces in each of the many rooms. My grandmother has lived there all her life. I go each year to visit.

I go back to be with him. I go to the back bedroom, how strange, now storage, and I touch the chest of drawers full of my ancestors' jewelry, silver tipped walking canes, manicure kits, keys, bonnets. On one plaster wall I see a yellowed news clipping—golf, he won some golf tournament. I didn't realize he played; he doesn't anymore. And a wooden plaque engraved with his name, and a pile of empty suitcases.

Here I can imagine him. Can imagine him with a baseball mitt in his hand, or creaking up the narrow staircase late from dates, never really getting into trouble. Can imagine him swaying in and out of doors, teasing his four sisters, trying out an outfit on them, them straightening his tie. Here is his car, his first job at the gas station, as short order cook, his fame as high school hockey star. Here is a photograph of him playing tennis; skinny but wiry, in jeans and a striped T-shirt. He must be eighteen, he is in the air, leaping up and over with the racquet stretched up and left in his left hand. The ball is still an oval blur, it hasn't made contact with the racquet, and yet I know that it will, I can tell from the picture, from his grin, that he is confident—

My great Aunt Patty told me recently how she used to take care of him when he was little, how she'd thought he had a learning disability, for all his brightness could not read. She said no one really listened to her; Nana had four other children and a demanding mother-in-law to care for, my grandfather was determined to make it big as a salesman. No one listened. He made it through high school. And I feel a sharp pang of grief: why didn't he go to college? Why did my grandfather have a room with a fireplace in a Colby fraternity, and my father no college education at all?

When I am without him at 26 School Street, I miss and appreciate my father, and I savor that feeling. Dedham is so—on his side, the whole

town that can remember, remembers him well. Introduced as his daughter, I feel the dream build: *this one's Doug's*, Doug the favorite, who had girls and best friends all around town, who would mow lawns and wash cars just as a favor, a great athlete, your father.

When he is with me in Dedham, this image I have of him expands and contracts. My father in favor, seated at the right of his mother's hand, laughing and boyish. Then—his face—creased with pink lines, his blue eyes sleepy from sitting still, loosened tie, tired. Now getting up to make coffee, now slipping out the back across the lawn, keys jangling as he jogs toward the cry of the siren—we laugh helplessly and I love him most fiercely then, when he is gone. Then his parents tell stories about the time he was two and wandered out across that same back lawn, across busy Washington Street to the fire station. How he's been going there ever since, can't seem to help himself, loves those fire stations. Some myth surrounds him most successfully in his absence, there in that huge old house where his parents wait tolerantly for him to come home; where they let him come and they let him go.

I wonder what it was like. To go from being number one son to being a son-in-law. My father tells this tale: Once I called for your mother. Her father asked, who's calling and I said, Nobody.

Well, he said, nobody better not call HERE again.

I called back. I said, This is Douglas Clifton Grearson Junior, and I would like to speak to your daughter, please, thank you, SIR.

But I forget the point—this told to illustrate what proper identification on the phone? Sturdy self-esteem, knowing who you are? Respect? Self-respect?

STUPID! I shouted once at him in anger. We were driving home from the prep school that turned me overnight from a highly conscientious student to a nervous wreck. He has quietly asked me to help him with the animals, I have told him, tensely, no, I can't, I have too much homework, he has said, you have to 'make' time, and I: you can't 'make' time; he, you can, me: explosion: YOU ARE STUPID! The silence that followed. That we never again leaned toward each other and kissed goodbye in the morning after that, never, not once for the four years he dropped me off at that school.

To go from being a son-in-law to being a father.

There are drawings my mother made of this time, and one in particular that I like, done in felt tip pen. So old it has soaked through to the other side of the thick cotton sheet, such strong lines, the arm curving around his son, the relaxed curve of his cheek. The dark widow's peak above slightly surprised eyebrows.

My father did what was expected of him, what was necessary. He

got a job at Sikorsky inspecting airline engines, and then another in New Hampshire as a “quality assurance engineer,” when the first job took him away from home too often.

Firefighting, and families don’t mix, he explained to me once. We were watching television, a factory on fire in Connecticut. That’s the Eagle Hose company, he said. Look at that ladder truck.

Professional firemen don’t make good family men; that’s a fact. Look at that burn, he said with wonder. That one went right to the ground.

I don’t really know what it means to be a quality assurance engineer, though I asked him once, when I wondered what it was he *did*. Did he enjoy his job.

He shifted uncomfortably. I got the sense that I wasn’t supposed to ask that question, and that it went against some code of his to stop and consider it. Not really, he said. I just push a lot of paper around.

I looked in his briefcase once, but I don’t remember what was there—charts, graph paper, pens? I remember what it smelled like though, and what *he* smelled like when he came home, his cotton shirts and dark suits full of that scent from his work world: smoke and oil and machines.

“You gotta let some things just roll off your back,” my father would tell me. “You’re supersensitive. Like your mother.” And he would shake his head over our most recent dispute.

I would imagine ducks, the way water rolls off their bright feathers, their unperturbability, despite the squawking. And I would shake *my* head, feeling the impossibility of it, the bright gunpowder of wanting to be RIGHT when talking to my mother, the despair, the shifting grounds of the argument. The eventual, inevitable explosion before my eyes, can’t see, can only react, argue, escalate, take things *personally*. Like her, it seemed I had a thin skin.

It must have seemed to him that we had no skin at all. He would try to buffer our collisions, or, after I’d fled from the dinner table in tears, he would sneak up the back stairs to console, to advise. To lure me back.

Or he would try to lure me away from such fights. I remember one of our conversations in the back hall, how I had complained to him: “You can’t have another OPINION in this house?”

“Oh, yes you can,” he told me. “But you keep it to yourself. Then you don’t have an argument.”

He’s missing, I say. More and more. All my memories are through someone else’s eyes, or else they’re just from before.

I know why he isn't here, Ruth says. I know why it's hard for you to 're-member' him in Iowa City—this isn't his world at all.

Not here, I wonder, seeing him this spring in my ten dollar yard-sale chair, patiently reading some book he'd brought along for the trip, one my mother had gotten him from the public library. Yes, he had seemed somewhat out of place in the halls of EPB. And yet he'd managed to get around, he had left his white business card taped to my desk and made friends with my office mate. He'd been to visit his brothers at the station. He'd found the best ice-cream in town, the best coffee; he'd fixed my dangerous outlet and gotten batteries for the camera and started the charcoal grill. He'd gotten my mother there safely, and would get her home safely. And for weeks after, there would be signs that he'd been around: *I talked to your father . . . hey, I met your dad . . . enjoyed meeting your father . . .*

He has always gotten us places: to the art museum in any city, to any city, to college. My father enables us. He is the map maker, the giver of directions and practical advice; he will draw me a map on a paper plate so I can look at it clutched on the wheel if I ask him to. He will give me one extra set of directions, *just in case*:

We'll stake you to a taxi ride to Doug's apartment if you don't take the T. The T may be faster, you take the shuttle bus from the airport terminal and go one stop into Boston—couple of blocks walk to Temple and Cambridge Street—either way you can handle it.

You kids are so smart. You could always out talk me. I can't keep up with you kids.

My father, standing in his son's first office, twice as big as his own. My father, seeing us off to Europe, to college, loading our cars for us—I see him standing and waving goodbye over that gulf; goodbye, I want you to be happy. . . .

My father of few requests:

I put stickers on your mother's car and I realized we are missing (2) both yours, WILLIAMS & Iowa. I put Dartmouth and MIT on this week, Meroy had put Bowdoin on during fall trip—

We're so proud of you, he writes. You have no idea.