

# 1

My father—my real father, whom I rarely saw throughout my childhood, because my mother divorced him when I was two, and he'd moved to the Midwest to make something of himself—was tall, with a splayed, reclining stance that brought prominence to his round belly. His large, gold-framed glasses gave his eyes a tint of amber. They rested halfway down an unusually shaped nose like a seahorse's snout, with an initial, broad bow rising up between the caruncles, then turning in briefly on itself before flourishing in a soft, almost square bump. His glasses seemed always to be falling off, to have gotten smudged; or one stem would be tucked cleanly behind his ear while the other had wandered up the side of his head; or else the plastic pads on the bridge piece would have bent, so that they sat at an angle on his face, giving him the aspect of a drunkard or the loser in a fight. They caused him a lot of trouble, and were as often in his hands as on his face. His long, flat fingers would polish the lens with a fold of shirttail, or slide a milky-colored nail into the screw; if it pulled away from the cuticle, my father would bellow and put it in his mouth, and the glasses would have to be sent off to the shop.

While away, he finished an advanced degree, the acquisition of which was a source of such pride that on his address labels

and credit cards and even the message that greeted callers when he was away from his phone, the honorific *doctor* always preceded his name. Once or twice, to excuse his long absence, he complained of the poverty of opportunities available in the 1980s in the city of my birth. He had wanted more for himself, he claimed, among other things because he hoped to offer me more of what he called *chances* that he'd never had himself. But my mother always avowed that his disappearance had nothing to do with ambition. When I was a baby, the two of them had gone to a party, she told me several times, at the home of a musician friend of my father's, and she had opened a bathroom door to find my father with his pants around his knees and a woman acquaintance in a similar state of undress. My mother turned and ran off screaming, and my father chased her, holding up his trousers and swearing that it wasn't what it looked like. My mother would laugh at this stage of the story, which was one of her favorites, squeezing her eyelids into jaded slivers and blowing twin tapers of cigarette smoke from her nose.

I have only two memories of him from before he left. Once, getting me ready for day care, he tried to strip me of my favorite red corduroys, which I had been wearing all week, and to force me into another pair that I hated, of a dull moss green that even in the early 1980s had already fallen out of fashion. "Goddamn it, you'll mind me," he said as he held me down. Another time, attracted by its bright, mysterious tip, smoldering under a crust of white ash, I took one of his cigars from the glass ashtray, touched it to my belly button, and began to howl and heave as my skin cooked and welted. My mother yelled at my father for leaving me alone with it, and he protested that he'd been gone only a second.



He seldom returned home, and when he did, I might not see him. There were a few breaks from school when he pulled up in his small red sedan to take me away for a disheartening weekend with his parents. Otherwise I knew him only from the fairly affected-looking photographs, posed with some implement of the holidays—a paper turkey, a gleaming cardboard heart, or a white Santa's beard that hid his face—that arrived every few years with a box of candy or a toy.

I visited him twice out West that I remember. The first time, he was single, and lived in an apartment with a private entrance and stairway on the second story of a family home with wooden siding painted a dull rust brown. He had a claw-foot tub of tarnished copper, and the water flowed into it not from the tap but from a slender plastic tube. Once it had filled to just over my thighs, he left me alone there to tend to his papers. There was something tempting in the sinuosity of that fluted white hose, and when I reached out to touch it, it leapt into the air and twirled in circles like a maddened serpent. I was horrified; I half-hopped, half-scooted backward, slipped and struck my head, and screamed until he ran back in to save me.

The second time he was living with a woman with cropped, curly hair who worked as a nurse in a hospital. We went there late one night to pick her up after she'd been called in, and I saw an insane person in the waiting area, both his hands wrapped in bloody bandages. It was a cold, dry winter then, and we hardly went outside for most of my stay, but one day a neighbor, a friend of my father's, dragged me through the icy streets on a tire tied to the bumper of his truck. Otherwise I stayed by the fireplace reading and drawing pictures in a sketchbook while my father sat studying in an easy chair.

My mother sought, if not frantically, then with admirable persistence amid adversity, a replacement for him—I hesitate here to use the word *suitable*, in light of these men’s often-lavish imperfections. It was never clear which among these was a suitor and which a mere *friend*, and nothing remains of them to me but casual traits that have turned caricaturesque beneath the soot of memory: the man with the mustache whose image, when I call it to mind, I cannot think of separately from those novelty glasses with the attached bushy eyebrows and plastic nose that people pretended to find funny in the seventies and eighties; the one who drove the van covered in spray-painted squiggles denouncing fluoridated water or perhaps the IRS; the balloon artist with an unspecified cerebronervous affliction that caused him great difficulty pronouncing certain words; the radio repairman who lived with his father and had shot himself in the stomach as a teenager. This last had a cluster of sunken scars on his abdomen and couldn’t eat foods containing milk or butter. My mother was unlucky in love. It can’t have helped that her only avocation was throwing darts in a taproom within walking distance of our home that did not cater to what is known as an exclusive clientele. Her good fortune, if it was that, in meeting the man I would later take to calling the Weirdo lay in her decision to take me there at lunchtime on a holiday, to satisfy my craving for one of the flat, greasy, overdone cheeseburgers the place produced between the hours of eleven in the morning and four in the afternoon. The Weirdo was a teetotaler, and he was there only because he was laying tile in a tanning salon in the U-shaped shopping center with the mystifying name “Arcadian Village” that shared a parking lot with the bar.

The Weirdo was a surly-faced man, short and stubby, with a beard, twenty years or so my mother's junior (I never knew his real age, which he concealed with reference to a hatred for birthdays, a hand-me-down from his Jehovah's Witness parents; and unlike most adults, he had no box or file folder containing birth certificate, tax returns, or any other documents bearing indications of his past or provenance). Due to their difference in age, my mother called him her *sweat puppy* among the friends she would cease to see once their relationship began in earnest, and this term, which I had never heard another person use before and have never heard since, seemed to me, judging by the pursed lips of these women as they sipped their Sea Breezes and Harvey Wallbangers through straws, indicative of his sexual potency or endurance. Then again, he boasted of the same on one of their early nights together, when I was in my bedroom and presumed to be asleep, and he spent hours trying to cajole my mother into bed while he played the martial arts video game *Karateka* on the computer she had purchased for me on a whim ten years before computers could do anything useful: "I may not look like much, but I swear to God, in the sack I'm a stallion," he told her. I don't know why my mother was reluctant just then, but within days, he overcame her resistance. I remember my mother's panting through the wall separating our bedrooms, like the heaves of a person on the verge of vomiting. The rhythm of it I didn't understand, because, though my mother had answered me plainly when I asked her at age five where babies came from, she had used the unfortunate verb *place*—*the man places his penis inside the woman*—and for many years, I assumed the two lovers remained stationary after insertion.

The Weirdo had an incomprehensible surname, the sound of which, as he uttered it, must have little resembled its pronunciation in the land of his ancestors. "I'm Irish enough to get mad fast and Russian enough to stay that way," he liked to say with unfathomable swagger. But judging from the profusion of consonants in his patronymic, I think he must actually have been Georgian. His father, a mechanic, had pulled his own teeth with a pair of pliers to avoid paying for a trip to the dentist; his mother, a white-haired, fine-toothed woman, had a horrible collection of paint-by-numbers clowns. I met his parents when he and my mother had been together for less than a year and were aping an ordinary courtship; the pretense was soon enough abandoned, and when they purchased their land—they were already talking about it during their first days together, and were soon gripped by the notion of the freedom it would supposedly bring them—their few social contacts withered to none.

The move to this land prompted the only serious consideration of living with my father I ever entertained as a minor. At first, the idea of a new home was hardly less invigorating to me than to my mother and the Weirdo. Their cow-eyed mentions of the property's "fully stocked pond" never persuaded me of the charms of killing fish as a hobby; and the pride the two of them seemed to take in "having something we can call our own" struck me even then as a mere abstraction; but, since the Weirdo had moved in, seven months after they started dating, my room had been repurposed to house what we loosely called his tools—which ranged from dismantled televisions to heat lamps for the raising of serpents—and I was made to use the couch as my bed. I could not sleep there, because in the evening, the Weirdo liked to engage me in what he called "philosophical discussions," most

of them touching the morality of waging nuclear war against impoverished populations he deemed “useless.” A room of my own, in a house rather than an apartment, offered the promise of relief. What they did not tell me, minimizing the length of the drive as people do in places where a car is a necessity, was that the land lay an hour from town, from my school, and from my friends; nor did they reveal, before taking me to see it the first time, that the house there was only approximately a house. The roof was sunken in one place, and soil was visible between cracks in the floorboards, which had been set directly over the joists with no plywood or insulation in between. My room-to-be was in an unfinished A-frame garret on the second floor of the garage, where the previous owners had stored their children’s old toys and outgrown clothes. “This is cool, isn’t it?” my mother said. “We’ll clear this out and put in the Sheetrock and carpet and it’ll be like your own little castle.” I thought then of the small plot surrounding the trailer the Weirdo was sharing with his sister when my mother met him, with its scattering of projects in various stages of incompleteness: the wreck of an apple-green sports coupe, its engine rusting alongside it; tires amassed for some obscure purpose; a basketball backboard without a hoop; a spike set in concrete with attached collar and chain for a dog that must have run away or died—and I doubted whether sufficient initiative existed to make this space adequate for me, and envisioned endless days of walking around the property, bored and alone.

That night, impulsively, I told my mother I wanted to leave, that I would ask my father to let me go live with him. For a moment, she said nothing. The smoker’s wrinkles tautened around her lips. Hunched over in the blue wing chair with the

brown cigarette burn on the armrest, the Weirdo folded his hands and stared down into his palms. On TV, a man in black robes was adjudicating a dispute between neighbors, one of whom had borrowed the other's lawnmower and was suing for damages after cutting off half of his own foot. For viewers—and my mother was a devoted one—the judge's charisma lay in his inexhaustible store of outrage at the contending parties' allegations, often phrased in folky chestnuts like "That dog won't hunt" or "Boy, you're dumber than a mud fence." It made me want to scream.

She next asked me simply, "Have you really thought about this?"

"The house is in the middle of nowhere," I said.

"That's the point, some peace and quiet. A place where we can do whatever we like. Plus, it's a real house, with space. We can't just buy something like that anywhere."

"Nobody's parents are going to drive them an hour to come see me."

"It's not an hour."

"Yes, it is."

Here the Weirdo intervened, reaching his crooked index finger as close to my face as he could, calling me "Boy," and telling me to respect my mother. I objected that I did respect her, that this had nothing to do with respect, and that I had to wonder if they respected me. Neither of them had asked my thoughts about the move until the decision was taken. "Be careful," the Weirdo said, cutting me off. "You're soon to get out of pocket."

I walked to the kitchen, where the phone hung on the far wall, stretched the cord into the pantry closet, and shut the

door to call my grandmother. My father's number I didn't know, hadn't known for years; I'd had no cause to speak with him; and from what I knew, he moved often, in and out of student housing and between smaller and larger apartments depending on the receipt or denial of grants and loans. My grandmother didn't pick up, and I burst into tears. I was silent at first, then I sank down, pressed my feet into the back wall, and started stomping and lamenting—in words, I think, but I only recall making incoherent groans—until the Weirdo came in, jerked me in the air by my biceps, carried me down the hall, kicked me twice in the backside, and threw me onto the bed. My mother told me afterward he had cried through the night, but hadn't known what else to do.

## 2

When my father graduated, he returned to his home state, but to a city a hundred miles from ours, and later, to a small town equally far away, but to the east. I have no impression of his person at the time, only of the spaces he inhabited: spare, always scrupulously clean, everything wiped down several times a day with glass cleaner; more human than a furniture showroom but less so than a home, with no evidence of the peculiarity a life almost inevitably gathers around itself but his pile of *Playboy* magazines and his king-size waterbed with brown vinyl railings. For years, he went from job to job, hovering in the same geography, now an hour away, now two, whether in a roundabout attempt to get closer to me or from reluctance to definitively return I am not sure.

I would not say his proximity brought us together. Now and then, he retrieved me to spend the night with him, but we never knew what to talk about, living in ignorance of each other's daily lives, and would sit in near silence until the tension grew insufferable, and he would put two Hungry Man dinners in the oven and turn on *Miami Vice* or *Mike Hammer*. When he finally got hired in the city I lived in, he took up with a horrible, pug-nosed woman from Massachusetts or New Hampshire who resented my occasional visits and rarely

allowed me to leave my room—the guest room, rather, with its foldout couch, rolltop desk, and black-and-white TV. For a while, then, my father made a spirited attempt to convince me to live with him. The impetus was not so much love or a sense of paternal duty as jealousy and fear of usurpation. He had hoped, it seems, with a mannish firm handshake, to establish some rapport with the Weirdo, but after their initial meeting, when the latter had turned around without a word after my father's overture—"Maybe we can get a beer sometime"—the Weirdo would hide away in the garage no sooner than he saw my father's car turn down our road.

Reasons abounded for holding the Weirdo in suspicion—he was racist, he beat the dogs, and though he never raised his hands against me after the night I threatened to move away, he made it known that he felt recourse to violence against me was his right as an adult—but my father had no notion of any of this. His distaste for the Weirdo was rather aesthetic: a stubby, short-fingered man who rarely washed, and then only badly, the Weirdo had grease streaks on his T-shirts and tears in his jeans, spoke in a laconic, woodsy patois, and used the word "ideal" when he meant "idea." He smoked marijuana, as my father discovered apparently by digging through our trash, and for a year or two, there was the threat of a custody battle hinging on this supposed infamy; but whether because the pug-nosed wife decided in the end that she didn't want me living with them or because my father himself reconsidered the financial burden I might represent—"If he doesn't like paying his child support, he damn sure won't like keeping you in food and clothes," my mother said at the time—the threat subsided. It was arranged that my father could "have" me every

weekend, but after a few months the drive became tiresome to him. Every weekend ebbed into every other, and when I got a job at sixteen, I started spending Friday and Saturday nights with a friend who lived near work, and eventually stopped seeing him at all.

I didn't say goodbye to him when I left for college. I didn't call him when I dropped out and moved home after just two quarters. My intention was to stay at home and work as much overtime as possible, save money, and go away to New York or Paris, two cities I'd never visited but that seemed to represent the fulfillment of a series of long-nurtured though elusive dreams; but my mother impressed upon me the necessity of getting my degree at all costs. Her urgings were buttressed by the Weirdo, who told me flatly: "Boy, you need to learn something you can do with your brain. You ain't me, I can make a living with my hands, I can do masonry, I can plumb. You don't got the damnedest idea of all that."

"I've worked in restaurants since I was sixteen. I can do that wherever," I replied.

"Sure. Some ambition," the Weirdo said.

"Is what you do better?"

The Weirdo's eyes bulged, the blood rose to his face from beneath his ring-neck T-shirt, and he sucked in a rasping breath. My mother, seeing the blue cable of vein squiggle in the center of his forehead, butted in to bring the conversation to a close: "Just get the damned degree and you can figure out what you want to do with your life later." When the summer ended, I found a room in an apartment downtown through an ad in the newspaper and enrolled at a small branch college attached to the state university system.

And so I hardly knew my father when I received a mawkish letter in my mailbox, around Thanksgiving of that second freshman year, in which he expressed his regret that we had “drifted so far apart.” He recounted a series of tender moments from my infancy that I didn’t remember. “Knowing what I know now,” he wrote, “I can’t believe your mother and I couldn’t have worked things out.” He told me of a recurring dream of his, in which I was once more a little boy, and I’d slipped into a pond and he was trying to save me, but he couldn’t see me, because the green water was opaque. He thrust his hand through the ripples on the surface, but pulled up only silt and milfoil. “Every time that happens, I wake up in a sweat,” he wrote. He apologized for the time he’d spent with the woman from Massachusetts or New Hampshire, whom he had left some time ago. It hadn’t been easy, but it was for the best. “You think after you get your PhD, everything’s going to be cake and roses”—he used this odd turn of phrase instead of the more typical *sunshine and roses*—“but the truth is you’re still starting from nothing.” Lamenting that he had missed a good deal of my life, he acknowledged that it was unlikely we could “pick up where we left off.” But he wanted me to know he was *there*, and that we might embark on a new relationship. He concluded with the words, “Hoping to get reacquainted,” then “Love,” then “Your father.”

I called him the next night. After ten minutes’ conversation, during which the two of us avoided his written affirmations in favor of small talk about sports and politics, matters of intermediate importance that touched only slightly on one another’s lives, we set a lunch date at a chain restaurant in a shopping center for the following week.