

*Every Father's
Daughter*



TWENTY-FOUR WOMEN WRITERS
REMEMBER THEIR FATHERS

Selected and Presented by
Margaret McMullan

With an Introduction by
Phillip Lopate



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James M. McMullan (1934-2012)
and for all our fathers

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Foreword

AFTER A PROLONGED illness, my father died on a chilly spring day when the lilacs had just started to bloom. In that last month of his life, when he could no longer talk, we learned to communicate in other ways. I cooked for him, fed him, clipped his nails. He thanked me by putting his hand on my head. What there was to say, we had already said. In those last days, I read essays, poems and stories to him. I read other people's words. What I read to my father and what I wanted to read after he died became the genesis of this anthology.

My father was born the eldest son of four in 1934 in Lake, Mississippi, and raised in Newton, Mississippi. He broke his nose playing high school football and went on to attend the University of Mississippi in Oxford. As an undergraduate, my father once had drinks with William Faulkner at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. They were both waiting to catch a train that would take them back to Oxford. They got to talking about horse trading. Learned either from people or books, my father knew about empathy. He never made fun of people. His narratives about people were underlined with dignity, grace, honor, and humor. I like to think that my father learned about character from the master that night at the Peabody. I often told him if he hadn't gone into finance, he'd have been a writer.

About a year after he graduated from college, he broke up with a girl from the Mississippi Delta, and, to recover, he visited his sister in Washington, D.C. She threw a party, served a vodka punch, and my father met an exotic Ingrid Bergman beauty named Madeleine. That night, after the party, my father told his sister, that woman, Madeleine, was

the woman he wanted to marry. Three days later my father proposed marriage in a car he borrowed from Senator James Eastland, staring at Eastland's cigar stubbed out in the car's ashtray as he did so. He spoke no more than he needed to. When I think of my father in the time before he became my father, he seems marvelously determined and ready to get the hell started with his life. My father always appreciated a straightforward narrative.

It took a certain amount of imagination and courage to marry my mother, Madeleine, a woman who had escaped the Nazis in Vienna, Austria, and who worked for the CIA in Washington. She was nothing like any woman he had ever known. She became the love of his life; he hers, and they stayed married for the next fifty-four years. Once, a man who knew my parents told me, when he heard the way my mother say my father's name—*Shimmy* for *Jimmy*—he knew how difficult it would be to find a woman who would say his own name in that *in-love* way.

After my sister and I were born, and after a short period selling farm equipment at his father's International Harvester tractor store in Newton, my father joined Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith in Jackson, Mississippi, as an account executive in 1961.

One evening, my parents attended an outdoor Joan Baez concert in Jackson. It was about 1964 and my father loved Baez, and that night he laughed when he saw her stick her tongue out at *Look* and *Life* magazine photographers. People parked in a big, open field, and afterwards, a young man from out of state couldn't start his station wagon. My father offered a jump-start. The two spoke briefly. *Where was he headed?* my father asked. *Meridian.* My father told the young man he grew up near there. The station wagon started and the two went their separate ways. Later, my father recognized both the station wagon and the young man in the newspapers. The young man my father recognized was Michael Schwerner, one of the Civil Rights workers murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The FBI found the burned-out station wagon before they found the bodies.

There were other factors beside the nightmarish racial conflicts that led my father away from Mississippi, a place he loved more than any other place. His decision to leave wasn't easy. But in the end, my father was ready to get us away from the violence, the hate, the confines, restric-

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tions, and, some would say, advantages of growing up in a state amongst all his extended family.

My father survived and even thrived away from the South, in Chicago, despite the snowstorms and the impossible Dow-Jones industrial average of the 1970s. He found his footing in that perilous place, nicknamed The Windy City, the city where Binx felt “genie-souls perched on his shoulder” in Walker Percy’s novel *The Moviegoer*. Maybe my father found his own genie-soul there, somewhere within Chicago’s muscular skyline and market fluctuations.

In the 1980s, I moved from Chicago to New York to write the entertainment pages for *Glamour* magazine. One February, my father called to say he was coming to town on business, and I told him to pack his tux. I had special tickets to a CBS Records party. The invitation they sent was printed on a white glove. This was 1984.

Our cab let us out on the street because the road was blocked off to the Museum of Natural History. Behind police barricades, crowds of people stood outside in the sub-zero weather. My father put on the white glove with the invitation printed on the palm. When he held up his gloved hand, the police allowed us through, and the sea of people parted. Once inside, my father shook hands with Michael Jackson and Brooke Shields, who stood together inside a dinosaur skeleton. We were all there to celebrate the historic success of the album “Thriller.” Years later, whenever my father told friends about that evening, what he stressed more than anything was how the NYPD let us through because of that one white glove. He laughed and said he never felt more powerful.

I knew my father in many ways—in the south and in the north, through the stories he told me, the places we visited, the food we ate, and through the music we listened to—anything by Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Emmy Lou Harris, and George Jones, way before they became hip. But I knew my father best when we talked about books. When we talked about a book, any book, he talked easily and about anything. When we talked about a book, we always talked about important things.

My father read more than any other non-writer I’ve known. His favorite authors were William Faulkner, William Shakespeare, James Lee Burke, Eudora Welty, and John Updike. He also loved Alice Munro, Gore

Vidal, Henry Miller, Patti Smith, Bruce Chatwin, among countless others. Because I loved my father and because he introduced me to most of these authors and because they really are great writers, my father's favorite authors became mine; my favorite authors became his. Reading and talking about what we were reading was a way my father and I had of staying close, even when we weren't living nearby. Eventually, probably because of my father's love for the written word and talking about literature, I quit my job at *Glamour* to become a writer and a teacher.

I remember when we both read and talked about Philip Roth's *Patrimony* while my father's own father was not well. It helped my father to read a nonfiction narrative about a father and a son struggling together during a difficult time. Reading Roth's book allowed us to talk about the fact that there was no way my father could care for his father, who still lived in Mississippi. My father paid for caregivers, but he said he could not see moving back down with my mother to do the intimate hands-on work Roth wrote about. I took the opportunity then to tell my father flat out that it would be my honor and privilege to care for him, should he ever need that kind of care. He laughed then and said that certainly would not be necessary.

My father and I became literary groupies together. We often attended The Oxford Conference for the Book in Oxford, Mississippi, where he had the opportunity to meet writers he admired, among them Lee Smith and Bliss Broyard. They were two of the first writers to respond to this project with such enthusiasm so that we could include their wonderful essays in these pages. One night after dinner at the conference, we were outside on the square, and my father got to telling a story about how Barry Hannah's uncle Snow Hannah shot Red Alexander during a card game in Forest, Mississippi. "Shot him," my father said. "But didn't shoot him dead. That took a while." One of the writers there, Mark Richard, turned to me and said, "Have you used this yet?"

Most of the young adult novels I wrote set in Mississippi (*How I Found the Strong*, *When I Crossed No-Bob*, and *Sources of Light*) had everything to do with my father's stories and both of our growing-up years in the south. In so many ways, his memories became my memories.

My father was always deeply involved in my life, especially my writing life. He was the first person I called with every success – a first story

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sold, an award, a first book contract, and that great two-book deal. He always had the best, unquestioning, gleeful responses. It was all so *good*. He didn't know much about my profession, but as a businessman, he understood both failure and success. A friend of his once compared him to a wrestler. Pinned down or felled, my father never stayed down long on the mat. He fairly *bounced* up, ready for more. He wanted me to be that way as a professional writer.

When my father was diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer in June of 2010, he told me he didn't want a lot of weeping and wailing. "Let's just take this as it comes," he said. "Let's not get all emotional. When I was 45 and I had my first heart bypass, I asked myself *Why me?* Well, now, I'm 75. Why NOT me?"

We were careful with words. We didn't use the C word. It was "mass" or "images" and sometimes "spots." We stayed positive. We thought of the next meal. We considered dessert. We talked about what we would read next.

"My balance is off." That was his only complaint and it was hardly a complaint; just a statement of fact. He even said it like, *so what? I'm not 100%, but so what?* For him the days were always "beautiful." I always looked great. My food tasted wonderful. People were so nice. *What should we read today?*

When he fell the third time, and he said in his bed at the hospital, "This room sucks the memory out of me," that was when he made the decision to go home and spend the rest of his time surrounded by family, camellias, good food, music, and the literature he loved.

His particular illness is known to change people. Patients can become mean, angry, even violent. But my father retained his calm, his graciousness, his dignified, gentlemanly manner friends still recall. He thanked every nurse, caregiver, and visitor. He said he hoped he wasn't a bother when I helped him walk. When he could no longer walk, he apologized to my husband, who lifted him into his wheelchair. As debilitating as his illness was, my father never disconnected with who he was, who he had been, and the stories that shaped him.

Time took on a sacred quality. Consequently, stories and good writing played a big part in my father's final days as they had in his life. Every morning we began with the paper, reading from the opinion pages of the

New York Times. By noon we were on to Henry Miller's *Book of Friends*, stories by Mark Richard, Alice Munro, William Faulkner, Willie Morris, or Eudora Welty. Then lunch, a nap, tea, the PBS news hour with a glass of wine through a straw, dinner, a little poetry and an old movie. One night W. H. Auden led to a Marilyn Monroe movie followed by Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Pied Beauty," ending the evening with that wonderful last line: "Praise him."

When my father began to forget, I stopped beginning sentences with, *Remember when...* He often spent a morning sitting up in bed, hand on chin, two fingers on his lips, thinking. Great literature helped my father make sense of his life and his feelings in a way that nothing else could. In this way, I think that my father was a very realized man. He lived his life and he considered it too.

During his last few weeks, my father and I both spoke less and less. Having little use for our own words, we found comfort and solace in the words of others. As he lay dying, all the talk of symptoms, ability and inability, therapists, caregivers, insurance, and healthcare gave way to other, preferable narratives as we read and read and read. I read out loud from all the authors he loved, until his last breath, letting the words and sentences hover in the room for as long as they would stay, like so many invited friends come to say good-bye.

After my father died, I couldn't read or write, perhaps because, in the end, my father was unable to read or write. I didn't know it then, but I was looking for a collection of intensely personal essays, written by great women writers telling me about their fathers and how they came to know their fathers, a collection which might help me make some kind of sense of my own very close relationship with my father. I wanted to know from women, replacement sisters, if they had similar relationships with their fathers as I had with mine. Or, if their relationships were altogether different, I wanted to know how exactly these relationships were different. I wanted to know if the fact that my father was southern had anything to do with anything. I suppose, more than anything, I just wanted to know that I wasn't alone in my love, my loss, my loneliness. I wanted to read this anthology, but it did not exist. Writers write the book they want to read. Editors do the same. This book came out of a need, my own, personal, selfish need.

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Eventually, I contacted the authors I loved and admired—some of them friends, some of them friends of my father's. I never wanted this to feel like an assignment, but I suppose it was. I simply asked these women to tell me about their fathers. They took it from there. For some authors, the idea of writing about a father just clicked, and they wrote their essays, often within days of the request. We all have stories about our fathers, even if it's a bad story or a non-story, it's a story. If you write, you will read these essays and feel the need to write your own.

I kept my father's tastes very much in mind during the difficult but joyful process of selecting essays for this book. This collection reflects my father, and, of course, other fathers as well. These essays are a sort of collage or mosaic of fatherhood and all the ways daughters communicate or don't with their fathers. Of course, there's a long list of wonderful women writers not included here—this anthology really should extend itself into another volume.

How we as daughters come to know our fathers is the organizing principle in these pages. Essentially, these essays are about daughters wanting to know, failing to know, but always, always *trying* to know their fathers. And often, the search to know doesn't end, not even with the father's death. A father's death, in fact, might instigate another search or further investigation, as Jill McCorkle writes about in her moving essay, "My Dad," and we are moved to tears by the big-heartedness of a father who doesn't want to destroy the ramshackle yard barn his now-grown daughter turned into a playhouse.

What does the father represent? For Martin Luther, our fathers are godly to us: how we see our fathers has a lot to do with how we see, or don't see, God; for God manifests himself in the father.

Our culture is rich with images and ideals of what makes good mothering, but our idea of what makes good fathering is more abstract. Is this because we don't expect much from a father? We know what is NOT good fathering. A good father does not drink away all the money or shoot at people. He does not scar his wife or his children for life. But what does a father do right? And is his idea of right our idea of right? Such questions emerge as you read Jane Smiley's "No Regrets" and Jessica Woodruff's "Crossing State Lines."

There are many kinds of fathers represented in this collection—shadowy, attentive, absent, abusive, overpowering, loving, charming, gentle, violent, and cruel. Some fathers are a mixture. There are recurring themes here, too: the fact that a father is often seen as a link to the outside world, to the marketplace, to *out there*, is balanced against a daughter's need to please and be loved. In myth and even in history, women tend not to murder their fathers, literally. They tend to care for them.

This anthology had to include Alice Munro's gorgeous essay "Working for a Living," which I read to my father in that last month of his life. My father loved anything by Alice Munro, and we especially appreciated this stunning essay because of Munro's nuanced writing, but also for the complex dynamics between the father, mother, and daughter as they work to raise, kill, and skin foxes in Canada.

Like many of these writers, I know I'll be writing about my father always. Our stories don't stop, even when lives end. Reading these essays was both painful and uplifting. I am amazed at my own pleasure. Reading these writers recollecting their fathers helps me call up my own father. And I remember him all over again, and in my mind, he lives. These are essays my father would have loved. I still can't believe I won't see him again, standing in a room, straightening his tie, or putting on his hat, the dimpled kind he held by the crown and pinched between his thumb and forefinger when he put it on or when he took it off to put on the hall closet shelf. I still can't believe I won't be able to discuss this book with him.

Living through my father's dying, I realized that his death was not at all the end of him, not in my mind, not in my memory, certainly not in my dreams, where he comes to me often. I still see him cutting his roses and camellias. I still see us planting the vegetable garden. He is forever selecting the suit he will wear to work, the night before. I listen for his voice. I feel him beside me.

On what was to be his last day, I picked gardenias and camellias he had grown and put them in a mint julep glass beside his bed. I found his mother's old Bible, a tiny yellowed one with most of Genesis missing. I scooted a chair up close to his face, laid the book open on his bed, held his hand, and began reading about tender mercies.

Introduction

WHAT IS IT about the relationship between fathers and daughters that provokes so much exquisite tenderness, satisfying communion, longing for more, idealization from both ends, followed often if not inevitably by disappointment, hurt, and the need to understand and forgive, or to finger the guilt of not understanding and loving enough? The bar is set very high from the start: fathers tend to find their young daughters infinitely cute, adorable, incarnating the essence of all that draws these men to the feminine, without the intimidating judgmental scrutiny and moral character of the adult women who are now their partners in parenting. Later, once these daughters reach adolescence and beyond, they may scrutinize their fathers in equally excruciating detail, but that is another story. Then, too, the very fact that sexual release is out of the question between fathers and daughters (except in horrific circumstances) means there is no ceiling, no brake on the romantic fondness that may develop between them. Hence the ache that often accompanies the love.

Our language has a word for being dotingly enamored of one's wife (uxurious) and a word for loving one's father (philopatric), but not, so far as I can tell, one for the love of fathers for their daughters. Speaking as the father of a daughter, I can testify that there may be no comparable affection as intense or all-consuming. That does not mean that I fail to note her flaws, or can rise above irritation in the face of her intermittent panics, tantrums or self-absorptions. It simply means that I adore her.

Do fathers and daughters understand each other? Yes and no. We see from Shakespeare's greatest play, *King Lear*, that even the most lov-

ing filial loyalty tie may be misconstrued. Reading the superbly written, empathic, insightful set of personal essays in this volume by daughters about their fathers, which run the gamut from portraits of successful businessmen and civic-minded heroes to shady con artists and failures, from the most patiently paternal to the most neglectful, I am struck by the persistent note of missed connection. These father figures, even the most loving and devoted, often seem so strangely distant, so abstract and unreachable. Perhaps because I experience myself as perfectly ordinary and transparent, on a day-to-day basis, including those moments when I interact with my daughter, I am flummoxed by the mystery and remoteness with which the fathers here seem to be imbued. As a father, put on the defensive, I am tempted to ask, paraphrasing Freud's famous question, "What do these daughters want?"

Some of the distance may simply be accounted for by the differences between men and women—what used to be called, euphemistically or not, "the battle of the sexes." Some of that distance may be ascribed to the generation gap: many of the fathers described here belonged more to that generation that fought in World War II or the Korean War and came back home taciturn about their war experiences. It is noteworthy how often the fathers are characterized as movie-star handsome, especially from the looking-up angle of girlhood; and how many of these matinee idols subsequently took to drink. Meanwhile, their daughters were coming to consciousness in a different order.

The world of their fathers is a bygone world, quaint and unquestioningly patriarchal.



We are living in an era when some biologists and feminists speculate whether men will even be necessary in the future. The roles of men and women are mutating from the old rigid patterns, mostly for the good, but we may ask: What then is the role of fathers vis-à-vis daughters in our present culture? First, to be present—or, in the case of divorced parents, present enough to offer another model of beingness to daughters than that of her mother. Of course, a girl can grow up into a confident young woman without a father or male figure present, as we see from many children of

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single mothers and lesbian couples. Still, there is something to be said for the old-fashioned family pattern. The sensitive, alert girl-child will know how to extract life lessons from even the most taciturn of fathers, be he the strong silent or weak silent type. The father may be a purveyor of cultural knowledge, like the Mozart-loving subjects who keep popping up in this anthology. The father often takes on a protective role, which the growing daughter may find comforting and reassuring—until she doesn't. The father may also indulge his daughter more than his spouse might, or give her more freedom to take risks. Many mothers see the world outside the home as filled with predators, and try to imbue their daughters with fine-tuned wariness. A father, himself a member of that dubious male species and therefore less likely to indict his entire sex, may convey a more benign regard for life beyond the domestic sphere. Certainly for previous generations of daughters (less so today, when women are accepted into more professions) the father was a bridge to that bigger world, and part of his glamour derived from access to those stimulating, if potentially more dangerous, environments. How many of the fathers described here, awkward and passive at home, suddenly sprung to life in their occupational milieus!

Some of the essays honestly portray a daughter's competition with her father's workplace, or her rivalry with the other siblings or her mother for the father's undivided love. She may have winced at the easy camaraderie her brothers had with her father. She may have rejoiced, however discreetly, at the sense that she was "getting" her father's inner nature more than her mother had. Not a few of the authors here opted for the role of Daddy's Girl, proudly bonding with the father over the mother.

It is not an easy thing, under any circumstance, to write about loved ones. There are boundaries of privacy to consider. It is so difficult to get the exact distance, the proper perspective: to appreciate a family member without sentimentalizing or idealizing, to be truthful about a parent's defects without indulging in "Daddy Dearest" exposés.

The writers in this collection seem to me scrupulously fair in their attempts to portray their fathers' complexities and their humanity. The hardest thing, perhaps, is to see a parent not just through the scrim of one's filial relationship, but as having an autonomous existence. I am reminded of something the essayist B. K. Loren wrote:

“In your little role as the offspring, you do not get the luxury of watching your parents become their own, oddly whole human beings with quirks and jaggedly adorable imperfections. As soon as you no longer depend on them, you blame them, and as soon as you learn that blaming them for who you are or whatever pain you feel is ridiculous because you are just fine the way you are and pain accompanies every ecstasy of life anyway, just at that moment, you wake up and see that your parents have entered into a whole new territory called old age. You cannot go there. You cannot meet them. You cannot enter.”

Beyond old age is a territory even more inaccessible, which the writer is not permitted to enter. Many of the essayists here write of seeing their fathers disappear into that terra incognita; and their regret becomes suddenly, keenly irreversible that they did not ask enough questions or listen enough to these men when they were alive. The distance between the dead and the living is notoriously unbridgeable, which may explain the ghostly absence-presence of the men portrayed here.

Finally there is a simple but profound division, beyond gender or generation or mortality, which exists between writers and non-writers. The contributors to this collection are professional authors, some highly acclaimed, and their fathers (with but a few exceptions, such as Alexandra Styron and Lily Lopate) were not. The writer is always looking with wonder and bemusement at those who have opted not to render existence in words on the page. Are such unbookish creatures, who go to their graves without written testimony, ever knowable at all, at least from the standpoint of those who spend their lives scribbling away? Did these particular fathers get a chance to read any of their daughters' books? If so, were they proud? Chagrined? Baffled? Are they watching from on high even now, and, if specters can read, perusing and mulling over their daughters' eloquent turns of phrase? We can only hope they will or would be pleased at these (for the most part) loving literary tributes. The rest of us are free to eavesdrop in on the poignant father-daughter exchanges which follow, with pleasure and enlightenment.



*My father and I were both impressed with Bliss Broyard's confidence and talent when we first heard her speak at The Conference for the Book in Oxford, Mississippi. At that time, the campus statue of James Meredith had recently been defaced and boys in pick-up trucks were driving around the square with confederate flags flying. Bliss was remarkably honest and forthright about all the aspects of race. She joked, laughed, and spoke eloquently about her own bi-racial heritage that day at my father's alma mater, the University of Mississippi, still so fraught with racial tensions. A version of Bliss's essay here is also included as a chapter in her memoir *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. Melodie McDaniels took the recent picture of Bliss. The other family pictures are from Bliss's personal collection.*

My Father's Daughter

THERE IS A particular type of older man I like. He must be at least twenty years my senior, preferably thirty years or more. Old enough to be my father, it's fair to say. This man is handsome, stylish, a connoisseur of women, intelligent, cultured and witty, old-fashioned and romantic. He has male friends whom he loves as brothers. He knows how to dance the old dances: the lindy, the cha-cha, the samba, even the tango. He's vain about his appearance and is unabashedly delighted any time I tell him he is looking trim or healthy or particularly handsome. When I compliment his fedora, he tilts it to an even more jaunty angle. He reads the romantic poets and can quote their lines in a way that doesn't sound corny. He has fought in wars, has traveled a good bit of the world and has a reputation of being a ladies' man in his day. He tells me stories about girls he knew overseas: geishas and lonely nurses. He notices what I am wearing; he notices if I have changed my hairstyle or done my makeup in a new way. Each time I see him, he tells me I've never looked better. Our conversation is playful, mischievous, saucy. He sometimes makes pronouncements about women that make me blush and often also make me angry—things I would object to from a man my own age. Many of the traits in my favorite type of older man I would find foolish, affected, or tiresome in a younger man, but with you, old sport, I am always charmed.

Our relationship is not intimate, though our conversations often are. I tell this older man about whom I am dating and make not-so-subtle innuendos about my sex life: this one didn't understand that conversation is a necessary part of seduction, that one had the eagerness of a boy and a boy's lack of self-control; another one clutched his machismo between

the sheets like a security blanket. We both shake our heads and mourn the shortage of decent young men out there these days. We both secretly believe that my charms belong to another era, a better and more refined world, his world. In his day, no doubt, I would have been a smash. At least this is my fantasy of what he is thinking.

Where do I meet these men? Mostly they are my father's friends. And since he died six years ago at the age of seventy, I have been transfigured from being my father's daughter into a young woman friend of these men in my own right.

Vincent, the oldest of my father's friends, lives in Greenwich Village, still carrying on the same sort of life he and my father led when they were young there together. There is Davey, the youngest of my father's friends, who over the years was his summer playmate for touch football and volleyball and beach paddle and who is now a father himself. Mike was the closest to my dad, serving as his primary reader during his long career as a writer and book critic. When Mike and I talk on the phone, he seems to miss my dad as much as I do. Finally there is Ernest, my father's most contentious friend. My dad used to say that he had to befriend Ernest, otherwise Ernest wouldn't have any friends at all, although I think he secretly took pride in being able to tolerate his pal's notorious crankiness.

Though the ages of these men span more than twenty-five years and they come from a variety of backgrounds, I think of them as natives of a singular world, a world belonging to the past and a particular place: Greenwich Village, where my father's friendships with these men—if not actually born there—were consummated. Like any world, it has its own language and culture. There is a hip, playful rhythm to the conversation and an angle of the observations that makes everything appear stylized, either heroically or calamitously. In this world, folks don't walk, they swagger; they don't talk, they declaim. Women are crazy, beautiful, impeccably bred, tragic. They are rarely boring. No one had much money, but happiness, as my father liked to say, could be bought cheaply. A man's status is determined by his wit and intelligence and, most of all, his successes with women. A woman's status is a product of her beauty and her novelty, not a fresh kind of novelty because that would imply innocence—and you couldn't have too much innocence if you were with this crowd—but the

kind of novelty that places you on the cutting edge of things. To be described as modern is a high compliment.

Of course, nostalgia has smoothed out these memories to make them uniform and sweet, and the world that I know from my father's stories is pristinely preserved in my mind as though it were contained in one of those little glass spheres that fills with snow when you shake it. I imagine, though, that by stepping in I can unsettle this scene with my presence and make it come back to life; then I will find a world that is more cozy than the one I live in, a world that is as reassuring and familiar as those winter idylls captured under glass.



Vincent has lived in the same apartment on Perry Street for over forty years, and as I walk up the five flights to visit him, the years slip away behind me. Everyone lived in four- and five-floor walk-ups in the old days, Vincent has told me. All cold-water flats.



“Your father and I once went to a party at Anaïs Nin’s, and I rang the bell and flew up the five flights as fast I could. Your dad had briefed me that Anaïs gauged her lovers’ stamina and virility by how long it took them to reach her floor without puffing”

This is a story I heard from my father, though many of the stories Vincent tells me about the old days I have not. Those are the ones I have come to hear.

Vincent’s apartment is decorated with things collected from his years traveling the world as a cruise director on ships. Geometric Moroccan tiles and bits of Persian carpet and copper-colored patches of stucco cover every inch of the walls. Through a beaded curtain is his bedroom, where tapestried form a canopy over a daybed heaped with Turkish pillows. The tub located in the entrance hall is concealed by day with a sort of shiny green lamina which, when you gaze upon it, is reminiscent of an ancient Roman bath. Also off the entrance hall is the toilet, concealed only with a thin strip of fabric. Once, after I’d used it, Vincent asked me if I noticed how the base was loose. I hadn’t.

“Well, it’s been like that for almost forty years,” he explained. “Once I

loaned the apartment to your dad so he could take a girl he'd met somewhere private. Afterward, the toilet was a little rocky. I asked him what the hell he was doing in there, and he told me they were taking in the view." Vincent took me back into the bathroom and pointed out the Empire State Building, barely visible between two other buildings. "I won't have the toilet fixed," he said, "because I love being reminded of that story." I headed down the stairs with Vincent's laughter trailing behind me.

Should a daughter know such things about her father? Should she have an image of him that she must rush past, one that is a little too vivid and too private to be promptly forgotten? It is easy to become embarrassed by such stories, to let my own paternal memories sweep them under some psychic rug, but my father's past is like a magnet I can't pull myself away from. This is my history too, I argue to myself. I've had my own sexual adventures, my own versions of making love on a shaky toilet, an aspect of my life that I have been sure to share with my father's friends. I have paraded a host of boyfriends past them, have brought along young men to their apartments, or out to dinner, or for an evening of dancing. When the fellow gets up to fetch another round of drinks, I might lean back in my chair and watch him walk off.

"So," I'll say offhandedly, "I'm not sure I'm going to keep this one. He's bright and successful too, but maybe not quite sexy enough."

"You are your father's daughter," the man answers, laughing, which is just what I'd hoped to hear.

Of course, with my own contemporaries I am never so cavalier. I have argued on behalf of honesty and respect in relationships. I have claimed to believe in true love. I will even admit that I am looking for my own version of a soulmate (although I can confess to this only in an ironic tone of voice, all too aware of its sentimental implications). Nevertheless, this desire runs in me alongside a desire for a successful writing career, children, and a house in the country with dogs and flower beds and weekend guests visiting from the city—a lot like the kind of life my father left New York to build with my mother, a move that shocked many of his friends.

All of my father's friends share a boyish quality, one that is often delightful with its playfulness and vitality but that contains an underside too: a sort of adolescent distrust of any threat to the gang. A silent pact

was made never to grow up. And though I wouldn't be here if my father, at the age of forty, hadn't managed finally to break free of this hold to marry my mother, I carry on this pact with his friends in spite of myself.

Some of these men eventually did marry and have children now themselves, have daughters who one day, no doubt, they hope to see married. If I would let them, they would probably wish for me a similar simple and happy fate. But I don't want to be seen in the same light as their daughters. Just as they knew my father as a friend first, rather than a dad or husband, I want them to view me as their friend rather than my father's daughter. Otherwise, I would never learn anything about him at all. I search out these men to discover the man behind my father, that is who I've come to meet.

Besides all this, these men are exceptional, and to be accepted by them my aspirations must be sophisticated, more rarefied and imaginative than my dreams of a husband and house in the country.

Once out for dinner with the contentious friend, Ernest, we argued about the value of monogamy in relationships. Over the years, Ernest has taken me to some of New York's finest restaurants. Everywhere the *maitre d's* know him by name, probably because he is the worst kind of customer: he demands special dishes which he then complains about, is rude to the waiters, and usually leaves a shabby tip. I put up with his behavior for the same reason a parent puts up with a misbehaving child in a restaurant—to challenge Ernest would only egg him on. What I had forgotten was that in conversation he is the same way.

His expression grew increasingly pitying and snide while he listened to my argument for monogamy, which—best as I can recall—went something like this: monogamy in a relationship engendered trust and trust was the only means to a profound intimacy, not the kind of combustible sexual intimacy that Ernest favored (I added pointedly), but the kind that requires a continual commitment of faith, not unlike the effort to believe in God. And the rewards of this type of intimacy—the compassion, the connection—were infinitely greater. Trust was the only route to a person's soul!

I was only about twenty-five at the time, and while my line of reasoning was hardly original and smacked somewhat of piteous posturing, I remember being pleased that I was able to unfold my rationale in a composed, yet passionate manner. Sometimes when I was talking with

my father or his friends, I would grab panic-struck for a word only to find it out of my reach. By the end of my speech, Ernest looked amused. He dabbed at his mouth with his linen napkin and sat back in his chair. "I had no idea you were so bourgeois," he said. "How in the world did your father manage to raise such a bourgeois daughter?"

"Bourgeois" was one of those words that floated through the air of my childhood, occasionally landing on a dinner guest or neighbor or the parent of one of my friends. I wasn't sure when I was young what it meant, but I didn't miss how efficiently the term dismissed the person as though he or she had been made to vanish into thin air.

For weeks after that dinner with Ernest, I carried on an internal debate with myself about the value of monogamy and, more fundamentally, wondered from what source I had formed my opinions on it: Was this something that my father believed, if perhaps not in practice, then in theory? Was I falling into a conventional, clichéd way of thinking? Or did I actually believe the stance I'd taken with Ernest for the very reason that it was not my father's position. This was not the first time I had tried to locate myself behind his shadow.

Although my father was a critic of books by profession, he could be counted on to have an opinion on just about anything. At a gathering back at my house following his cremation, I sat around the dining room table, reminiscing with a group of family friends. We began listing all the things my father liked, and after one trip around the table, we ran out of things to say. Then someone offered up "thick arms on a woman," and someone else jumped in with "kung fu movies and cream sauces," starting us on a long and lively conversation about all the things my father disliked. What surprised me during this discussion (besides the welcome relief it provided to that bleak day) was how many of my own opinions were either my father's—or the exact opposite. I remember thinking that rather than having a unique personality, I was merely an assemblage of reactions, a mosaic of agreements and disagreements with my dad—a feeling that has reoccurred intermittently since. I keep hoping to find the line where he stops and I begin.



Vincent keeps scrapbooks. He has scrapbooks from his travels, scrapbooks from his days in Cuba where he first encountered the Afro-Cuban music that became his and my father's passion, scrapbooks from his youth with my dad in New York City. Sometimes before heading out to dinner or to a club to hear some salsa band, Vincent and I will have a drink in his apartment—we always drink champagne or sherry—and flip through these books. One evening I pointed out the pictures of people I didn't recognize. Vincent became irritated when I didn't know their names. Machito. Milton. Willie.

You must know who these people are! How can you have not heard these stories? You should have paid more attention to your father when he was alive, he scolded. Are you listening to what I am telling you? Your father was a beautiful man! He lived a beautiful life!

Nostalgia made us quiet when we were out on the street. Vincent was nostalgic for a past that seemed in danger of being forgotten, and me—I was nostalgic for a history that both was and wasn't mine.

Vincent had worked as a tour guide on and off for most of his life and he walks very fast. That evening, I let him lead me around by my elbow. He rushed me across the intersections, hurrying me along in a variety of foreign languages: vite, rapido, quick-quick-quick. He began to talk as we twisted and turned through the labyrinth of streets, pointing out various buildings and explaining their significance: there was an illegal nightclub here where we went to hear Machito drum, you had to know the code word to be let inside; this was where your dad had his bookstore and Milton and Willie hung out talking, talking, talking about books. We turned a corner to arrive on a quiet, tree-lined street. He pointed out the top floor of a brownstone. Your dad lived there for a while.

He had a girlfriend in the next house over, and rather than walk down the five flights to the street and then up another five flights to her apartment, he would climb across the roof to her window like a cat burglar.

I pointed out the steep pitch of the roofs and said that my dad must have really liked the girl to put himself at such risk. "Oh, he wasn't afraid of risks," Vincent answered knowingly, and I had no idea at that moment whether this assessment was true or not, a realization that brought tears to my eyes. After a moment, I remarked quietly that men

didn't do that anymore—climb over rooftops for a woman—at least none that I'd ever met.



Only when a parent dies does it seem that a child gains a right to know that parent's life. While my father was alive, his life, as it should have, belonged to him. Besides, we were too involved with each other for me to step back and gain some objective view. But now that his life contains both a beginning and an end, it seems possible to shape some complete picture. I can't help regretting, though, that so much of my information must come secondhand. Perhaps Vincent is right. I should have paid more attention to my father when he was alive. Perhaps if I had asked him more questions about his past, I could have learned these things from him myself. Perhaps if he had lived longer, if we had moved on from being father and daughter to being friends, we would have arrived at some understanding of each other, or rather I would have arrived at some understanding of him that would allow me to incorporate such anecdotes like a splash of color into the portrait I held of him rather than their changing the portrait completely.

But when my father was alive, I was too busy trying to figure out what he thought of me—another question that I now lay at the feet of his friends, as though he had handed off his judgment like a baton in a relay race.

At another, earlier dinner with Ernest, I watched him as he studied my face. I hadn't seen him in a few years, and I knew that since our last encounter I had evolved from looking like a girl to looking like a woman.

"You've grown up to be attractive," he finally decided. "For a while there it seemed that you wouldn't. Your features were so sharp and you were always frowning. You should keep your hair long, though. It softens your face."



I wish I could say that if my father had been present he would have reprimanded Ernest for this cold comment, but I know that he wouldn't have. Over the years I came to learn that being my father didn't limit his ability to assess me critically. He had opinions about my hairstyle, he picked out the clothes that he thought best brought out what he referred

to as my “subtle appeal”; he noticed anytime I gained a few pounds. And while I realize now that in his world a woman was as powerful as her beauty, that doesn’t lessen the hurt caused by such impartial opinions.

At times with these friends I have felt like an impostor or a spy, trying to lure them into a conversation where they will unwittingly reveal some assessment of me my father had shared with them, or that, since they knew him and his tastes and were able to observe us with the clarity of a spectator’s view, they will reveal some insight about our relationship that remained hidden from me. On occasion, I have just asked point-blank what it is I want to know.

Recently I had a wedding to go to in the Long Island town where my dad’s youngest friend, Davey, now lives with his wife, Kate, and their three teenage children. Davey has been in my life for as long as I can remember. And my father was in Davey’s life as long as Davey can remember. They first met in the summer of 1950 on Fire Island. Davey was a chubby, cheerful boy of four, and my father was a trim, athletic bachelor of thirty. It’s hard for me to picture the start of this friendship; nevertheless, during the ensuing summers on Fire Island, the man and boy became friends. They would remain close friends until my father’s death. Davey spoke at my father’s memorial service, recalling how when he was sixteen he helped move my parents from one five-story walk-up in Greenwich Village to another a few blocks away. Theirs was a friendship sealed by carrying books, he said. Throughout my childhood, Davey visited us each summer on Martha’s Vineyard, and he and my father would write in the mornings (Davey eventually became a successful playwright) and then the two men would head to the beach for an afternoon of touch football or beach paddle, or they would just stroll and talk.

During this recent visit, Davey and I strolled on the beach ourselves and talked about our writing. He had been feeling discouraged recently about the unsteady progress of his career. I had just finished a graduate school degree in creative writing and was nervous about reentering the world with this new label of writer. We had walked a short distance when Davey mentioned that his back was bothering him and asked if we could sit down. We lay on the sand, a bit damp from the previous night’s rain, and looked out over the choppy ocean.

A few days before, TWA flight 800 had crashed not far from where we lay, and earlier that day bits of fuselage and an airline drinking cup were found on a neighboring beach. Groups of people searched along the shoreline—airline officials, family members, curiosity seekers. Davey talked about his own kids, how well they were all doing, how different they were from one another and from him and Kate. It was clear in listening to him how much he respected and loved them, but I was surprised at how objectively he was able to assess their talents and weaknesses. I asked him what my father thought of me.

“Well, of course he loved you,” he said, and then looked away toward the beachcombers. I could see that my question had upset him. Perhaps he was wondering if his children would ever ask such a thing. I was searching too, there on that beach, but my debris was not the result of some tragic, sudden accident; rather, my father had died slowly from the common illness of cancer when I was twenty-three, an age when most children are letting go of their parents in order to establish their own independence. I was lost somewhere between missing my father and trying to move past him. Davey looked back at me and said again with a surprising urgency in his voice that I must believe my father loved me. And I do, but in an abstract way, believing in my father's love the same way that I believe that all parents must love their children. What I am searching for is the shape of that love. These men are bright men, observant and persuasive. They are my father's friends, after all. I want them to make elegant arguments, peppered with indisputable examples and specific instances of the how and why and where of that love.

When all this searching makes me too weary, I call Mike. He is a psychologist and a writer too. Besides his interest and insight into human nature, he has most of Western literature for reference at his fingertips, which makes him wonderful to talk with. Over the years, even when he and my father lived in separate states, my dad would read to him the first drafts of almost everything he wrote. I can remember my father stretched out on his bed for an hour at a time, laying in the dark room, telephone in hand, chatting with his pal. Their talk was filled with elegant phrasing, animated starts and stops, black humor, and the sort of conversational shorthand one develops with an old, close friend. When signing off, my

father would say, "All right, man, work hard and I will too."

I called Mike up recently with some gossip about the size of an advance for a book written by one of his colleagues. Mike is working on a new book and with one kid about to enter college and another following closely behind, he's hoping for a sizable advance himself. Before long we have moved on to the subject of his new book: how difficult and necessary it is to console yourself to the disappointment of life and the world. Doesn't scream best-seller, I joked, since no one likes to admit to this truth. I talked about how this disappointment often feels like a large white elephant in the corner of the room that no one will acknowledge, and how that denial makes you feel like you're crazy. Given the choice between feeling crazy and feeling disappointed, I don't understand why more people don't opt for the latter.

"You're exactly right, Blissie," Mike agreed. "That's just what I am trying to get at."

I was stretched out on my own bed now, watching the afternoon shadows lengthen down my wall. Talking with Mike was like walking down a familiar path that leads toward home. Here is the oak tree; around the bend is the stone wall. Talking with Mike was almost like talking with my father.

Both men shared a predilection for cutting through hypocrisy and looking past denial. They viewed the world with a bittersweet affection, appreciating the shadows of life's events as much as the events themselves. I once asked my dad why all the great stories were sad ones. Most good stories are mysteries, he said. The author is like a detective trying to get to the bottom of some truth, and happiness is a mystery that can come apart in your hands when you try to unravel it. Sadness, on the other hand, is infinitely more resilient. Scrutiny only adds to its depth and weight.

I don't ask Mike what my father thought of me. Mike's a shrink, after all, and he knows that I'm the only one who could answer that question.

What I realize when I am with the older men in my life is that the older man I want most is my father, and no amount of colorful anecdotes, no amount of recreating the kind of outings he might have had with his pals, can conjure him up in a satisfying way. Grief, like sadness, is too resilient for such casual stand-ins.

After I finished talking with Mike, I remained lying on my bed. Outside my window it was dark, and I hadn't bothered to turn on the light. I was thinking about how it is an odd time to get to know your father, after he has died. And it is odd to get to know him through his friends. I wondered why I should assume that they knew him any better than I did. If some aspects of his life before I knew him were mysterious to me, certainly the reverse was true as well: there are parts that only I know about. Would his friends be surprised to learn that when I was a baby, after my bath, my father would carry me around the house seated naked in the palm of his hand, holding me high up over his head like a waiter with a tray? Or that he would spend afternoons tossing my brother and me, torpedo-like, from the corner of the bedroom onto my parents' bed, the far wall piled high with pillows? Before each toss, he would inspect our teeth to make sure they were clenched so we wouldn't bit our tongues. Would his friends be surprised to know that when I was in college he would sometimes call me up in the middle of the day because he was feeling lonely in the empty house? Or when standing over him in his hospital bed, my throat chocked with all the questions I realized there wasn't time to ask and his mouth filled with a pain beyond articulation, he suddenly seized my hand and raised it to his lips? "You're my daughter," he assured me. "You're my daughter."

When my father and I went out dancing together, we didn't dance the old dances, as Vincent and I tried to do when we went to hear a salsa band. Vincent had great hopes for my talent as a dancer, since my father was a good one, but as he attempted to lead me across the floor, I kept over-anticipating his moves. The slightest pressure of his hand would send me off in a new direction.

My dad relied on me to introduce him to the new music, the new dances. Competitive as always, he wanted to be sure that he could keep up with the times. In our living room, the rug pulled back and the coffee table pushed aside, I blasted "Word Up" by Cameo. I led the way across the smooth wooden floor, shouting out the lyrics, my hands waving in the air, my hips bumping left and right. I can still hear his encouragement as he followed along behind me. With my eyes closed, in the quiet of my dark bedroom, his hoots rise out of the silence.