

Your Father

Your father is an idea. An idea with so many webs can complicate things easily; get tangled in the strings, get lost, and lose where you came from. Following a breadcrumb path to find where he ends, the other characters begin—trying to trail memories to figure out how you got to the now. It's hard to differentiate between the man who let you push the shopping cart and the stranger who made you cry on prom night. Between the man who drove you to school every morning so you could get an extra hour of sleep and the stranger who threatened your mother. Between the man who would pretend to be Santa, sending you a letter every year, and the stranger who left for three days and came back as if nothing happened. Where do these characters separate? How can they be the same body, once loving and kind, now hostile and dangerous? Are they the same mind, aware the other exists right nearby?

It feels like every room he's in has a floor of eggshells. You take cautious steps, overthinking every move. Thinking you're safe in the hallway, you've avoided breaking anything but being wrong.

When you were seven, you got sick the weekend of your birthday and had to cancel your party. You were bummed, having been so excited about the cake. Your father caught your cold and decided to make your birthday memorable anyway. He loaded the car with snacks and blankets, converting it into a sick-vehicle road trip machine. He drove out of the city, sneezing occasionally. You watched the orange leaves rush by in clouds of color, the baseball commentator in the background.

You ate too many Oreos in the back seat, and he let you get away with it since it was your birthday and you had a cold. You both got out at a rest stop, buying a puzzle book, TastyKakes, and the most artificially-flavored gum. He let you sit in the front seat for the rest of the drive, changing the radio stations and pointing out license plates from far away states.

You asked him repeatedly where you were going, but he only asked how long until we arrived. At some point, you fell asleep, your body clearly needing rest after being sick all day. You woke up to the car coming to a stop and the engine switching off.

We're here, he said, somehow knowing you had woken up.

You stretched your legs and rubbed your eyes, still not knowing where you were. The two of you walked out of the gravel parking lot and down a small path that disappeared into the woods. It smelled different here like the air was lighter, cleaner, and colder. You took big gulps of air through your mouth, your nose too congested to truly smell it. The woods opened up, and suddenly an ocean appeared. One that you hadn't been able to see from the parking lot, blocked by the trees.

Do you know where we are, he asked you. You shook your head. This is Lake Michigan. You were confused. You had been to lakes before, but this was no lake. You could see the other side of a lake. You could swim across a lake. "No way," you said. "Yes way," he replied. "It's one of the Great Lakes; there are five of them. They're huge. Let's go put our feet in."

The water sent a chill up your spine and goosebumps down your arms. The wind mixed with your icy feet, and you shivered within a few minutes. You walked to the bottom of the sandy hill, plopping down and looking across the water. He came and sat next to you, watching you watch the horizon.

"You feeling okay?" he asked. "Much better," you replied.

Your sister left last July; she's having a good time in college. It seemed like she was trying to get out of the house and into her new home as fast as possible. You wish she had taken you with her. Hopefully, she didn't forget about you. She sometimes texts, asking how school is and giving little updates about her new life in Minnesota. There's

no one standing between him and you now. No barrier, no line that cannot be crossed, no wall that cannot be climbed. Maybe she'll return for the holidays, but they aren't fun. You can't think of a reason why she would come back. She shouldn't return for something that's supposed to be happy. It would be better to just stay at college; fewer eggshells there. Although it would only be better for her.

The line blurs more every day as you must come to terms with this man and stranger being one. They are whole, coexisting, somehow. Maybe they're like eyes, aware the other exists but cannot see their counterpart.

Your mother

Your mother is a person. She is a soft-spoken soul with more thoughts than words spoken. Your mother loves flowers and horses and cooking shows. She plays with her wedding ring when stressed, which has been much more lately. Her smile lights up the room, and her smile lines show it. She hates that she's getting older but teases you when you say you aren't ready to leave for college. She always has music on the radio in the kitchen, usually on the station with songs from her childhood; which became songs of yours, too.

She knows a single song on the piano; she doesn't remember the name of it or where she picked it up, but she can play it perfectly. She treats herself to a glass of red wine every Thursday evening after dinner; it's her weekly tradition. She dog-ears every book she reads and writes notes in the margins. She would pick strawberry ice cream over anything in this world, except maybe you and your sister.

She smells like the citrus soap and lotion she uses. She smells like home.

She underestimates her own strength, both physical and mental.

She is complicated in a different way than your father. She is a collage of other people, traits, and habits she picked up.

She writes her As a certain way because her best friend in high school did, and she liked how they looked. She records shows that she knows she'll never watch because her mother did the same thing, claiming that there might be a point when she would have time to binge them all. She uses straw wrappers at restaurants to make rings because her older sister learned how to do it at summer camp when they were young.

This complicatedness from your mother isn't something that is mysterious. There are ways to understand why she is the way she is, you just have to accept getting lost in the stories that come along with her. It's frustrating at times, because she doesn't talk about herself unless provoked, which some interpret as secrecy, but is it really a secret if all you have to do to get her to spill is ask?

Your mother was happiest at her childhood home, where her parents still live. Every summer, you, your sister, and your parents would return for a week, spending time with family you rarely saw and exploring the vast lands.

The summer you were 12 was particularly memorable, specifically because her high school best friend made a short visit. This friend, whom your mother played sports with and was supposedly attached to for four years, had recently embraced her gray hair, something your mother had yet to do.

She made your mother spontaneous, carefree even.

"Wake up, you two," she called one early morning to you and your sister. No matter how confused you were, she wasn't someone you questioned; she always had a plan.

She told you to stay in your pajamas but not wear slippers; boots or sneakers were required. You trusted your mother, so you obliged.

The four of you were in the kitchen together within a few moments. Your sister had dug out a granola bar from the snack cabinet, not even asking if you wanted one.

“All right, come on,” your mother said, already one foot out the door.

The grass had no crunch despite the sun's burning during the day; the early morning dew had changed the texture beneath your feet. The only light present was the dim foyer lamp they had left on and the stars. Your sister tripped a few times, cursing, but was shushed by your mother's friend.

At the edge of the woods, the two leaders made a sharp left, walking a few feet from the trees, which were now on their right. You had never gone this way, always finding yourself in the woods, poking mushrooms or setting up a hammock to read.

The four of you walked silently, the sky getting lighter as the sun threatened to peak above the horizon. A building came into view, further away from the woods than your group was walking, so you slowly turned and changed your path to angle towards it.

“How have I never noticed this before?” your sister asked. “I've been around this area so many times.”

“Because it's just been an old barn when you've seen it,” your mother replied.

The barn doors were unlocked, which made sense since no animals or useful tools were inside. Your mother took the lead, looking more determined than you'd ever seen her.

She opened a closet with a wall-attached ladder on the far wall. A few rakes and a metal food bin were leaning against the wall. She didn't check whether it was stable or rotted; she grabbed the ladder and started climbing.

"After you two," your mother's friend waved a hand.

You didn't question her authority; your sister followed you up into the loft, which had some feathers here and there but, aside from that, was empty.

It was dark, really dark. You couldn't see your mother until a square in the wall opened up, and suddenly, there was a window to the sky.

"Come on, it's about to start," she called softly.

The loft door was large enough for the four of you to sit on the edge together and hang your feet out of it.

Your mother had a smile on her face, a genuine smile that you now miss.

And there she was, the sun rising over the line of grass you had just been walking on. The clouds streaking the sky became a mix of orange and pink, vibrant colors you've only seen in nature when looking at the groomed bouquets at the store.

Nobody spoke; the sounds of early morning birds chirping and the light breeze rustling the pine trees surrounded us.

Within moments, the sky shifted into a peach and yellow, the sun's presence obvious. The sunlight glinted off of the dewy grass, reflecting the colors.

And just like that, it was over. A haze covered the area; an early morning cloud that was slowing the bright blue sky from erupting.

We sat in silence for a few more minutes, and then quietly decided to stand up and climb down the ladder.

That is one of your favorite memories of your mother; a peek into an excited, joyful, giddy woman. Maybe motherhood stripped those things away. Maybe the normalcy and consistency of her life dimmed her light. That person is still in there, you saw her that day. Maybe she represses herself, doesn't allow herself to feel the emotions that come along with being truly alive, allowing your sister and yourself to go first.

You wonder what it must feel like to let yourself fall through the cracks, begin to lose who you once were, the gradual change not noticeable until too much time has passed to reverse it.

Maybe we all go through this, maybe it's just a part of being human. Just like the being you are right now doesn't have a single cell that was there when you were born. Maybe that's a good thing, giving us endless possibilities to start over.