Snapshot

BY LISA M. PHIPPS

"It will never come off."

"Yeah it will."

"It's Magic Marker, it sticks to skin forever. Lookit, it's not even straight."

"I'm only doing a thin line. There. How'zat?"

"It looks stupid. You look like Ricky Ricardo."

"G'wan. I look like Kojak."

"Kojak never had a moustache."

"Did too ... didn't he?"

"Jesus, Dad."

"What?"

My father's friends were weird, too. Fellow taxi drivers would come around, skulking in their cars after pulling double shifts; a cigarette permanently stuffed in the corner of a mouth, one eye slammed shut against the rising yellow smoke. *Puff-squint, puff-squint.* It was remarkable to watch them inhale and exhale without ever raising a hand. Fake black leather car-coats, seasonal fedoras from Sammy Taft's, bow ties, pen-filled shirt pockets, clip-on sunglasses and, stuck to the back of the drivers' seats, their cracked, laminated head-shots, yellow from nicotine.

"Phippsie!" they'd holler at my dad from their cabs, motors purring, meter flags up. I always thought they were sore at him. Then he'd yell back. They were just talking. From where I often stood upstairs, I'd see only checkered shirtsleeves on tanned left arms, resting on rolled-down windows; clutched copies of *Racing Form*, and glimpses of brimmed hats. Sometimes they got out of their cars, and I would venture outside. Chiclets put in the palm of my hand came out of the pant-pockets of guys with names like Moe and Mucky, Dougie and Blackie; men who drowned me in their wake of Aqua Velva and Old Spice. A 50-cent piece spun like a top for my guaranteed delight; a nickel was removed from behind my ear. They'd almost always give me money—and call me honey. They spoke a foreign, cab-driver language. Sometimes I would hide when they came around so I could listen to them talk and breathe in their aroma of percolated coffee, and the smoke that always lingered around them.

"Don't put your head in there, Dad."

"I'm just looking. Damn pilot light's not working."

"But it could go on suddenly. Get your head *outta* there!"

"Can't figure it out. Should work."

"Dad, I can hear something. It's gonna blow."

"Blow, my foot."

WHHOOOOSH!

"There's sparks on your head! *Get up!*"

"Am I on fire? I *am* on fire!! Put me out!"

"You are *not* on fire. You *are* a lunatic, though."

"Nevah mind, let's see *you* try it. Didn't erase my moustache, did it?"

Everything was all drama or nothing to him, and he was no fix-it man. I used to pray that other fathers were like him; then he'd be normal. He was illustrated best by what he owned, what he ingested, what he wore. His room was off limits and his closet forbidden. I was permitted to touch nothing, so everything in his room lived aloud in my imagination.

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Peeking past the doorjamb, I would submit to the allure of false teeth chattering in a water glass: *whenwillhecome? whenwillhecome?* He didn't wear them much, but if he did they made him whistle whenever he said s-words. I'd beg him, just once, to say "Mississippi." A know-it-all green suit, with a hint of a pinstripe, always hung haughtily in wait; pants creased sharp as blades. Sometimes a starched shirt lay alert on his bed like a headless soldier. All his shoes squeaked like brand new. Smug with habitual polishing, the chosen pair would shine with the lustre of hubris. A fedora—summer straw or pastel felt for winter—did battle with other accessories to be the first picked. Daily my dad patted each into shape. Every item extracted from the dark closet was like a birth; from a feast platter assembled for a king. *He was going out.* Freshly shaved and lacquered in drugstore cologne, he'd present himself to us. The jacket always went on last, crinkling as he swung it around and down over his arms with the sound of a paycheque just cashed. As usual, he had asked the teller to give him only "small, new bills."

Craning its neck to catch my eye, a *Racing Form* would unfurl slightly from his suit pocket. I knew the drill. Practically out the door, my father would stop at the hall mirror and cut his eyes at me playfully, while making a final adjustment to the angle of his hat. Then he'd ask me to pick him a winner. He knew I liked the horses' names, and he thought my delight at being asked to choose would

somehow bring him luck. It didn't. But being dressed-up-and-going-out made him come alive; perhaps it gave him the foggiest sense of purpose or, even, community. It also made him affectionate. Sometimes he said it was my fault if his horse lost, but, until the money was all spent, he would be transformed.

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Something would hammer relentlessly at the back of my mind. However, I always managed to ignore the familiar internal warning. The repetitive bark of a neighbourhood dog triggered it anew. I knew that just beyond our second-floor façade, my father napped, and recognition came together at that precise moment of consciousness. The moment when friends should have been whisked away, our balcony door exploded with a kick of my father's foot.

"Who's *that?*"

"Who?"

"The guy in his underwear on your balcony."

"That's not my balcony."

"Yes it is. Right *there*—that guy throwing stuff. He looks mad."

"Dunno. Never seen him before."

Now in full view of my school friends—and every house on the street—he stood, unashamed, in nothing but his Stanfield underwear, baggy legholes sprouting alabaster stick legs. Arrowing straight up on one side, his skullcap of hair had only just been lifted from the pillow's caress. The mouth that roared had no teeth.

Diana Dean, "The Card Player," 79" x 30", Oil on Canvas, 1997.

Like a professional pitcher on his mound, my father, in his *underwear*, took the time to pose his bony body, draw back and fire an ashtray as far as he could. *CRACK!* Shattering down the middle of our street on the pavement, the glass tinkled and hissed under the tires of parked cars. Luckily he was incapable of hitting anything, but he got the barking to stop in a hurry. I felt the silence closing in around me thick as a steak.

It might as well have been an alien in the doorway of his flying saucer, the way my friends looked from my father to me with embarrassed pity. And in that look, they labelled me equally alien. I took a stab at making like it was funny. *Ah-heh.* But there was nothing to say. No explanation could make sense to any teenager struggling to conform gracefully.

"That guy's *calling* you. Is that your father? That *is* your father."

"Nope. Uh-uh. Not callin' me."

"LISA! GET IN THE HOUSE!"

"How'd he know your name then?"

"Lucky guess. Shit."

Sure, I could have not answered, feigned deafness or insisted on a different surname, but it never occurred to me. He was my crazy dad; he just was. Without warning, his victorious demons would cause wildly inappropriate things to careen from his hands and mouth onto meddlesome intruders: a noisy lawnmower, cats yowling in the night, excited kids playing tag in the back alley. And in the darkening process, more demons would be awakened.

Leave It to Beaver's dad never threw things in his underwear.

Like a storm watch in effect, his presence could actually make a room feel heavy. Arriving home from school at four o'clock, I would find him pacing from room to room, intermittently absorbed in his beloved "People's Court." My young eyes would watch his anger leave a sediment behind him, lifting up in tiny eddies around his ankles, rendering me frozen in pools of dread. Festering in his rages, money was the only lure that pulled him into his hat and coat and out the door to somewhere else. Forever angry about all the chances missed and leaps not taken, he was unable to forgive the ones who had cheated him.

Now and then, with a bow and a sweep of his hand, he would allow melancholy to take the stage, and spoke of things he wanted to remember: a child alone on a trans-Atlantic crossing, stacked crates of Prohibition alcohol under a boy's bed. He would brandish his work-farm profiles, once tapped out on a fading Underwood; yellowed and austere accounts of a boy waiting for reunion. He always told the story as though he were still waiting. My Sunday mashed potatoes were tainted with tales of his epileptic siblings who took fits at a dinner table, far across the Atlantic Ocean.

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I realize this is the first time we have sat together alone since I was a small girl. "There, there; she misses her mother," he once said, defending my misery to others. It was the only really heartfelt thing I ever heard him say.

Now comatose, his mouth is open to accommodate the labour of breathing. A hospital gown bunched up around him makes him appear to be floating on a life preserver. Nothing can preserve this life, I think. I try to make it look as though I really am reading my book as I steal looks at him. Sweat gathers in my palms no matter how many times I dry them off on my pants.

I don't *know* this man lying here, not really, other than as some thief who frequently robbed our house of joy. I am struck most by all the time invested in trying to understand it. It is January and even though the sun beats into it, the room is cold. I feel afraid and undeserving to be present at someone's death who I don't actually know. I never made any secret of not knowing him. Looking at his withered body underneath the bed-sheet, I am convinced he will wake at any moment and take offence at my being here. He also made no secret of not knowing me.

I force myself to remember his smell—his once warm-sweater, after-shave smell. And the hints of stale tobacco from stolen cigarettes; a cough badly disguised behind a rush of running bath water. The insides of his hands were soft and large, and black hair covered the knuckles of long fingers. *"There, there."* I close my eyes and feel the stir of him turning towards me, both hands lifting me off the couch, placing me on top of his shoes. My baby feet barely cover his laces. The surge of his steps are under me and, singing along breathily, he circles us round and round the living room.

He pressed trousers and plied scissors with his left hand, but wrote with his right. That spoke to me as distinct. Being the first British person I had ever met, I lumped his roots together with being left-handed, and promptly concluded that all people from Britain were as well. I remember that when he allowed himself to, he could do unique things—even kind things. But most came off clumsily, and then became brash and impolite things. Scheming endlessly to someday hit "the Big One," he'd interrupt himself to shout at the television. Then he'd talk for hours about getting his taxi license renewed, fully knowing his hands shook too much to drive and that he'd already lost his nerve.

"Six months for talkin' to myself."

"I'm *listening* to you."

"You take the crocheted bathtub, you do."

"Where do you *get* this stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"Those sayings. They're so weird."

"They're just sayings. Old sayings. Before your time."

"Thank God for that."

"You've got some mouth on you, you know that?"

"Gee, wonder where I got it from."

"Upstairs in the basement behind the axe?"

"Gawd, *Dad.*"

I remove a snapshot from my coat pocket. A palm-sized image of a father so peculiar and assorted. Hurling backwards, shards of family imprints recall for me all his fixations and impetuousness; his hot flashes of volcanic eccentricity. Over hurdles of alienation I leap, gleaning moments that may only be recollected with emotions requiring a hefty amount of energy: rage, exasperation, hilarity. His leftover pieces float around me, craving reassembly. As I sit here looking at him almost gone, I am stunned to think that I'd like the chance to talk to him now, even after all the time spent in battle. True, he was typically bungling, scheming, often downright mean. He caused me to hide the fact that I even had a father. Still, something rings familiar and warms the room.

Madness did exist in my father, I think. It's a trait I now sometimes welcome in the people near me—and even strive to have some of myself. While it would have been nice if he'd saved some of his looniness for later in my life, I decide that I still would have preferred him the way he was. I find others like him fascinating: those with the courage to rage aloud, to offend even. Those who paint on a moustache with a felt-tipped pen.

It was being the way he was and being my father that was the problem.

If he could hear me now, I think I'd tell him that owning a little madness is essential to being alive. I'd chastise him less about who might overhear or disapprove. The adult who needs him less now as a father can say this. It has been a long and crooked road to making a connection, I tell him out loud. Maybe we're only supposed to know so much at certain times. Maybe I do know him after all. It seems I have met him again in my self.

I once declared that my father would have absolutely nothing to leave behind for anybody. Yet, however slight his flicker on the planet's surface, a spark is still a spark. I've come to believe that each one of our sparks leaves a marker for the ones yet to come, kind of like saving a seat for a friend. Something cannot help be left behind my those before us.

My father reverberates within me still; his impression lasts, and runs deep. When he was alive, he often seemed dead to me. In death, he seems only more alive. I am a lot like him, and also not like him. We were kin, and also strangers. There is something to be said for the sense of peace gained in coming to this tangled conclusion.

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A newly wed man in a snapshot stands, with his arm about my smiling mother's waist, on a bridge in front of Niagara Falls. With his collar up against the May wind, he salutes the camera with a cockeyed smile and tips his sunglasses at a playful angle. He looks cosmopolitan and ever so slightly mad.

Of all the photographs taken of my father, this one's my favourite.

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