

Ten Fictions about My Father

Nathan Robison

1

First he went down to Pappy's pasture. The pasture was a strip of marshy land down the hill from our house, sandwiched by the interstate and train tracks where Pappy kept his cows. My father shot some birds there: a male red-winged blackbird, a female red-winged blackbird, and a starling. Then he stuffed the birds. He didn't stuff them properly with the styrofoam molds Uncle Bart used. He slit the birds open with a pocket knife and took out the guts and packed them with sawdust. He closed them shut with safety pins and put them in Nana's freezer until he needed them for a class at school—you could do things like that for school back then.

He spent a lot of time at the pasture, watching cattails until he knew where one bird's territory ended and another's began. He took those frozen birds back with him and stuck them one at a time on the cattail tips. He stuck the female up. Female blackbirds are brown. A male blackbird perched next to her, singing and beating his wings. Next Dad perched the male. The live bird flew at it and knocked it to the ground and pecked it. The bird dove at the starling too, and my father. It dove at anything that came near.

I know because he caught it on 8 mm. One Monday night, he tacked a sheet to the wall for a screen and brought a projector home from the library. Monday nights were family night. My mother and I arranged the kitchen chairs in the living room like a theater. Dad cut the lights, and the white square on the wall became birds and reeds. Everything was a shade of yellow and silent but the projector pattered. Birds flew across our wall.

2

I bathed for Sunday on Saturday night. Sitting on the toilet seat, wrapped in a towel, I watched my father undress. He stepped into the bathwater my mother had drawn for me. The room was pleasantly hot with steam. The mirror had gone opaque. I stayed

in the bathroom after my bath because it was warm and my father was there. He covered himself with a pink washcloth and leaned back in the hot water.

“At work,” he said, “they showed me a room stacked full of gold bars.” My father worked for Kennecott that summer. It was the world’s largest open-pit mine.

“Was it a big room?” I asked.

“Not very,” he said. “Like the kitchen but taller.”

I bathed only on Saturdays, but my father took a bath every night. He came home black as a chimney sweep, streaked on his face where the sweat had dripped. We didn’t have a shower, and my father didn’t shower with the other men at the mine.

“You have to walk into the mine naked,” he said. “And out. They have locker rooms.”

“Why?”

“They make you take off all your clothes and walk past guards,” he said. “So no one tries to steal the gold.”

I would have liked to see the room full of gold, but I didn’t want anyone to see me naked.

“At the mine they make you strip coming and going,” he said. “They make you wear company jumpsuits.”

His breathing became even and slow. I thought maybe he was sleeping.

“What’s a pinup?” I asked him.

“Where did you hear that?” he said.

I had overheard him tell my mother the night before about the pinups in the locker room. He had told her he pulled them down and flushed them when he was alone. I shrugged.

“It’s a picture of a naked woman,” he said.

“And they have them at the mine?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Why do you take them down?”

“Because they’re dirty,” my father said.

My father was uncircumcised. His body was brown where the sun had touched it: the forearms, the face, the back of the neck. He’d worked only a few months at the mine. Otherwise he was ivory white and spotted by moles like constellations across his back. He scrubbed the dirt off his skin with the pink washcloth. He cleaned himself.

I thought everyone in the world must be cleaning themselves for Sunday. Nana and Pappy. My cousin Lee. And Jamie who wore skirts to class every day. You could see up to her panties when we all sat on the rug. They had little pink flowers on them or sometimes strawberries. I told Lee about it when I stayed over the weekend before.

“Sometimes you can see all the way up,” I had said.

He laughed hysterically, but I hadn’t meant it as a joke. He ran to tell his parents.

“You know what Marcus just said?” I came out to pull him back. “He said you could look at girls’ panties when they sit down in dresses!” My Aunt Samantha’s face reddened. I had taken Lee by the shirt and pulled him back to his room.

My father and I said nothing more. I watched him rub the smut from his arms and face. He scrubbed at his neck and hands. The color of charcoal came off his skin and stained the washcloth black. He wrung the cloth out and the bath water darkened until I could see nothing more of his body beneath the water. When he was finished scrubbing, my father pulled the plug and the tub began to drain. The dark water lapped at the hair stretching up his navel. It lapped his tanned arms and milk-white legs. It lapped at the sides of the tub and left behind a ring of gray scum.

But my father was clean.

3

I dreamed my father took me to look at the harpies. We walk down the lane in boots, snow up to my shins. The binoculars Pappy brought back from the army, from his time in Germany, hang around his neck.

“Take a look, son,” he says. “There, roosting in the tops of those cottonwoods there.”

I can see them already, without the glasses, their dark, heavy eagle bodies.

“Those talons would tear you to ribbons,” he says.

I put the glasses to my eyes. The harpies are bare headed and bare breasted and I can see the thick vapor of their breathing. One has the head and hair of my mother’s mother. I see my mother, too, and each of my aunts perched in the top of a line of

naked trees where they follow a brook bed through an empty field. I take a step toward them.

“That’s far enough,” he says. “That’s close enough for now.”

He takes the glasses for one last look, and then we turn for home.

4

I asked for a story to help me sleep, the one with the bear.

“Aren’t you too old for stories?” my father asked.

“No,” I said. I’d been telling myself stories as I fell asleep for years, on the nights he wasn’t home. I continue to tell myself stories.

“On my mission—,” he began. My father had been a Mormon missionary in Arkansas.

“Where were you?”

“You know I was a missionary in Arkansas.”

“I know,” I said. “I just like you to say it all.”

“Okay. When I was on my mission in Arkansas, my companion and I got lost. We were trying to find the home of someone in our records, someone who had been baptized years before but no one had ever seen in church. We wandered into this little town in the Ozark Mountains that was having a fair. There were cows and goats in corrals and food on tables outside the little general store.

“At this fair there was a man with a bear. The bear was chained to a peg pounded into the ground. He wore a muzzle. That’s a cage they put on an animal’s mouth so he can’t bite. They had filed his claws off. The man scratched a circle around the bear and told people they could pay some money to fight it. If they could fight the bear and not fall down by the time the man counted to ten they’d win some money.”

“Did anyone fight the bear?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Lots of people. Big guys, little guys. Almost everyone in the crowd. They’d been drinking a lot of moonshine.”

“What’s that?”

“Homemade whiskey,” he said. “So, the first guy goes in. The bear looks small at first, like a scared cub, but when it stands up on its hind legs you can see he’s bigger and stronger than a man. That old bear swings his paw and almost takes his whole head off. The bear man tugs on the chain so his bear will stop attacking. The next guy, same thing. Walks in, the bear swings his paw and

almost takes off his head. This guy stays awake, spits his teeth into the dust. Everyone who steps into the ring goes down. Bloody noses, bloody mouths, bloody ears. And then, one last guy steps up. He's big as a tree and bald. He takes off his shirt and enters the ring running, punching the bear in the chest. It surprises the bear, and it falls back a bit. And then, through the muzzle comes a low growl. The bear pulls on the muzzle and the straps break. It locks the guy in a bear hug, biting into his shoulder and neck, wrapping its arms around him and squeezing. It wasn't pretty."

"Did you fight the bear, Dad?"

"Of course not, son."

"Why not?"

"It would have killed me."

"Did the guy die?"

"No. I don't think so. Now go to sleep. Good night."

I said good night and closed my eyes. Dad left and closed the door behind him. In the dark I retold the story. I pictured Dad in a tie and a clean white shirt like the photos of missionaries they showed us in Primary every Sunday. He helps the other men pull their dead friends or brothers out of the ring. Some are missing arms. The bear chews a leg like it's a drumstick. There's blood everywhere but it doesn't matter, and Dad doesn't get any on him. He steps up and gives the bear man a coin. He walks over that line in the dust and puts his dukes up, too.

5

I loved Uncle Manny because Uncle Manny was the only Mormon I knew who drank beer;

Because according to family lore Uncle Manny disappeared at fourteen and surfaced three months later at Woodstock;

Because it's a long way from Utah to Woodstock;

Because Uncle Manny lived in a ramshackle Victorian with a screened-in porch beneath the I-15 viaduct;

Because Uncle Manny rigged a system of ropes and pulleys to keep his screen door closed in the wind and weighted it with a porcelain doll's head the size of a fishbowl;

Because Uncle Manny sported a Brigham Young beard but braided his hair like an Indian;

Because Navajo jewelry, dull silver and turquoise, hung at Un-

cle Manny's neck in a bolo noose and wrapped around his wrist like a handcuff;

Because there's a picture on Nana's wall of Uncle Manny in a tiger pit, and because the tigers are tiny with whiskers stiff like little brushes and the pit is in the Amsterdam zoo;

Because Uncle Manny saw tiger kittens in the Amsterdam zoo and dropped into the pit to pet them;

Because Uncle Manny gave me a cousin I could not defeat in Stratego;

Because Uncle Manny called us collect at night and lisped;

Because Uncle Manny nailed a cow pie to his wall;

Because Uncle Manny coined the word "doobie";

Because Manny was short for Helaman;

Because Uncle Manny modeled nude for art students in Salt Lake on the weekends;

Because my mother said Uncle Manny in his prime was better looking than my father in his prime;

Because Robert Redford resembled Uncle Manny and not the other way around;

Because Uncle Manny cut a cat out of carpet and threw it in his living room like a roadkill rug;

Because Uncle Manny could survive for weeks eating nothing but the fringe off his buckskin jacket;

Because Uncle Manny wore a three-inch scar named Henry on the base of his neck;

Because it was rumored that Henry was born in a saloon in Elko, Nevada;

Because Manny told Nana he would rather spend eternity stuffed like one of Bart's coyotes in a moldy old museum than up in heaven with us;

Because my father had all the same reasons to hate him.

6

I found Bobcat drooling in the shed out back. It was the first I'd seen of him all week. He was sprawled in the wagon and lifted his head when I came in, looked up at me, then laid his head back down.

"Dad," I said. "I found Bob. He didn't run away after all. He's out in the shed."

"Show me, son," he said.

I took him out back. Bob didn't look up this time. Viscous ropes of saliva hung from his mouth. They looked like icicles, and his breathing was slow and thick.

"Distemper," Dad said.

"What's that?"

"Stay here," he said.

I petted Bob between the ears as I waited. I traced the stripes on his head and face, stroked his white boots and took up each paw and squeezed to bring out the claws. I played with the end of his tail, found the one crooked bone there. I put my hand on his chest and let him move it up and down slowly. My father stepped back into the shed and picked the cat up by his middle.

"Go inside now," my father said; and I did, though I watched him from the front window as he crossed the street and took the path down the hill. Off the hill was thick with scrub oak and brush. Upstairs I found my mother dusting the room she shared with my father. The contents of each shelf of the bookcase were removed and set on the bed. An old dishrag made from a worn-out blouse hung from her back pocket as she transferred the items: the framed photos of me and my father, the shells she collected, a plaster bust of Beethoven. They all left shadows behind in the dust of the bookcase. She wiped down each shelf with the rag, and the shadows disappeared.

My father entered the room alone. He took a revolver from behind his back, the one Pappy had given him. He wrapped it in an old towel and placed it high on a shelf on his side of the closet.

"What did you need that for?" I asked.

7

Nana kept a shovel in the trunk so she could bury road kill. I had seen her stop once before going into the supermarket and take the shovel to the edge of the parking lot to scoop up a dead muskrat. She buried them if she could. If not she'd place them in a more natural setting, a setting she thought was more dignified, like down in a ditch or covered by tall grass. It was the way things were done. And if things got so bad there was only one way out, if an animal was alive and suffering, if a gull was found with a broken wing for example, you knew what you had to do.

My mother usually told the story. My father saw the red of tail-

lights stopped against the steep canyon wall. He pulled onto the shoulder in front of a crippled Chevy Nova. There was nearly always some calamity traveling through the dark of the canyon on the way home from Grandma's.

"You all right?" my father said. "Everything okay here?"

"No, everything is not okay," a man said. "Take a look around, mister."

The man cradled the head of a doe mule deer in his lap. A woman and two little girls sobbed in the back seat of the Nova. The deer moved only its eyes; blood bubbled in its nose and the blood that came out its mouth was thick and shiny like chocolate pudding.

"What's there to do?" the man said.

My father shook his head.

"I tell you what," the man said. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to put this deer in my trunk and take her into town for a vet. Help me lift her."

My father didn't move. He turned occasionally at the passing of a car.

"That's crazy," he said. "She's gone. And besides, if you do that and get pulled over they'll fine you big time. That's a game animal."

"What difference does that make?" the man said. Spittle came out when he spoke; he couldn't disguise a shuddering sob. "Then what do you suggest?" He put a hand on the deer's belly. It looked bigger than normal. He felt it move. Or perhaps I'm confusing my father's story with another one. According to my mother, my father turned and opened the trunk of his car and returned with a tire iron. He let it hang at his side as he walked back to the man, like it weighed as much as the deer.

"Well?" the man said. "Well?"

8

9

His car was discovered on a pullout of the dirt road that ran along the top of the dike, out on the shore of the lake.

"Come and pick it up," the voice on the line said. "We have all the cars we want down here."

"How long can you give me?" I asked.

"If it's still here in two weeks," the voice said, "we scrap it."

"Okay," I said, and two weeks later I was pedaling my ten-speed up the viaduct that made a hump over the train tracks. The impound yard was bound by chain link and razor wire. I read the hand-painted sign on the gate. *Beware of dog*, it said, but it was noon and I didn't believe it. So I entered.

In the office, I said, "I'm here for that Caravan you have." The office was paneled with that cheap, dark-stained wood you see in basements of my neighborhood. It smelled of motor oil and smoky men.

"About time," the man said. He was balding in a way that made me think he'd lose everything. "Here are the keys. You old enough to drive?"

"Of course I am," I said.

"It's out there somewhere in back."

In the yard, a repository of lost souls the shape and color of cars, I walked the bike, glancing down the rows for the light gray minivan. I found it in a corner, unlocked the sliding door, and sat.

These are the contents of my father's abandoned car:

A scatter of library books on the back seat. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Pale Fire*, *The Garden of Forking Paths*. They were my books, and overdue. My father read only the scriptures. There was also a book of poems by Stafford. It was splayed open on the passenger seat. I didn't know my father liked poetry.

On the dash, a pressure gauge.

Behind the last seat, the flat-end scoop shovel.

There was a tire iron in back, too; and I found an empty fountain pen beneath the driver's seat.

Also beneath the seat, the .22 revolver in the leather gun belt, coiled like a snake. I took it out, popped open the cylinder. One hollow-point cartridge.

One hollow-point cartridge but no empty shells.

The ashtray was missing, usually filled with spare change.

Candy wrappers.

His wingtip shoes, stuffed with argyle socks.

A pair of slacks.

His blazer.

A blue oxford.

In the console cup-holder rested a paper cup with a lid, the

kind you get from a drive-through restaurant. Someone had pushed the *diet* tab in.

In the glove box, the final item: a note written in my father's clumsy hand. I will not tell you what it said. But if I ever left a note, it would say *We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins*. It's from *Pale Fire*. Had he read it, I'm sure my father would have agreed.

The laughing call of a bird made me look up from the note-card in my hands. Through the windshield, perched in the reeds of the marsh beyond the yard, a red-winged blackbird sang a rusty dirge.

I put the books in a plastic sack and hung them from the tine of the ram's-horn handlebars. I slung the six gun over my shoulder like a *bandito*. I shut and locked the van. I threw the keys over the razor wire, into a slow green ditch on the edge of the reeds. The blackbird flew up. And then I flew, running alongside the ten-speed, a foot on the pedal, a bounce onto the seat, out the gate and over the viaduct into town. I looked back once on the way to the library.

10

I would like to say that my father is Odysseus, barefoot on Ogygia in his linen suit and a bronze sword slung over his shoulder.

I would write that he rounded Cape Bojador in a rickety caravel, traversed the Mountains of the Moon, and dipped himself seven times in the source of the Nile.

I would tell you my father keeps ground unicorn horn; he possesses a vial of ivory beach sand from the isle of Hy-Brasil. My father has seen the Mysterious or Inconstant Island, and he is building a summer home in Ultima Thule.

And so this is how I choose to remember him. He puts the pistol away and undresses on the pullout of the dike road and scrambles down the rough concrete sides of the dike and into the reeds. When he gets to the water, he is so graceful he doesn't startle the egrets. He enters the water high-stepping like a heron, barely rippling the water. In the arms of the dying lake, he swims. I watch until I can no longer see his body. I know he has crossed safely.

Not gone, but exploring.