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Like Grief to the Aching Side of Love

ALLISON SCHUETTE

Dad lifts his face from the hymnal. The song breaks out of him like God's *Let there be light*. The earth shakes beneath our feet. Stars fly from his mouth. They shoot forward and burst through the stained glass window. I imagine standing there, on the other side, color showering over me, over the cigarette butts and lost mitten, the liquor store on the corner, the bent man shuffling in a coat too big, all of us made holy, made over new.

My father sat apart—behind the newspaper, behind his cross-stitch, behind the ballgame on TV, behind his classical music, behind his silence at the dinner table. Somehow I understood his apartness. I liked being alone, too.

When I tugged the chain, the toy closet would go dark. Thin bands of light would shine around the edge of each door, three of them, each taller than the next. I'd kneel on the floor. The closet smelled like wood—the underside of the stairs leading to the basement, the bench littered with stuffed animals and board game pieces, the shelves by the tallest door climbing all the way to the ceiling. I clasped my hands in front of my chest and bowed my head. *Dear God, make me good. Help me to love everyone.*

Warmth would suffuse my body, as if I had swum from the shadow of a coral reef into the sun-drenched water.

For a short time during my sixth year, I took regular retreats in the toy closet. I snuck in after school or slipped away from my older brother and the neighborhood kids playing in our sandbox. Temptations filled the world, and it wasn't so easy to love everyone. I didn't love Michael Seitz who threw sand in my eyes. I didn't love my brother who refused to let me ride his tricycle. I didn't love my mother who got impatient when her comb encountered a knot in my hair. (It wasn't my fault Dad never "talked" to her.) So I retreated to the closet to renew my vows, to become like my father once more.

*

My father sat on the living room sofa while Mom finished dishes in the kitchen; the water roared as the last of it got sucked down the drain. Light from the end table lamp splayed across my father's cross-stitch work. He tightened the needlework hoop one more turn. The public radio station played classical music. Some names I recognized—Beethoven, Bach, Mozart—others I did not. The speakers faced my father from across the room, one on the left, one on the right, a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. My father traveled by way of the music. He left behind his slavish day and winged his way towards a better world, towards God's promised land.

When I grew old enough, I learned how to cross-stitch, too. But my mother taught me. She showed me how to lick the ends of the thread, how to press them between my thumb and forefinger, how to lay the eye of the needle just so, how to unfurl my fingers, slowly pressing the thread forward until the ends pushed through the eye. She helped me read the chart and taught me how to match the symbols to the correct color thread. When I reached the end of my first row, she showed me how to run my needle through the backside of the stitches to keep the thread from pulling free.

I worked on the opposite end of the sofa, across from my father. Sometimes, if I sat down before he did, he scolded me for not working with enough light. *You'll ruin your eyes.* Then, he would click the lamp on behind me. I relished these opportunities, these small moments in which Dad demonstrated his love.

Like the nights he'd stand backlit in the doorway of my bedroom, one hand on the doorknob, one hand resting by his head on the doorframe. He'd lean forward. *Goodnight sweetheart. Don't let the bedbugs bite.* I'd groan—*Dad*—as he pulled the door closed, leaving me just a crack of light. I'd turn toward his retreating presence, marked by the shuffle of his slippers on the carpet, the music still drifting up the hall. I'd feel the tug as he pulled away from me, like surf.

*

I spied on Dad from the dark safety of the kitchen window. A man had come knocking on our back door, late in the evening. Dad sat with him now on the patio. Cigarette smoke, weighted with menthol, occasionally wafted in through the screen.

Dad had not turned on the patio floodlights, but light from the landing by the backdoor lay diffusely around their feet like fog. I could make out my dad's corduroy slippers and the man's scuffed work boots, but darkness blurred the features of their faces. The man hunkered over his knees and held his head in his hands. The lawn chair creaked under his shifting weight. He cried. My dad faced him, knees almost touching his. He placed a hand on his shoulder. I heard him begin to pray.

I closed my eyes and let the sound of my father's voice reach me. I couldn't hear the words, just his voice, coaxing, yearning. It lapped at my ears, washing up and pulling back. I swam out on that rhythm even though the prayer wasn't for me. In the days to follow, my dad would be more silent than usual, more withdrawn. I swam out now while I could, where in the ocean of God I knew my father lurked.

The people of our congregation admired my father for his worship life and his lay ministering. It drove my mother crazy. *They only see him at church. They don't see who he is at home.*

Home: where Dad sat apart and behind.

I understood, but I was jealous, too.

The assignment told me to write a report on my favorite animal. I didn't have one. I barely remembered our pet cats, Samson and Delilah. I liked Cisco, the mutt my dad had brought home from work, well enough. But anyone could write about cats and dogs. I wanted not a favorite animal, but a unique one. *The female seahorse injects her eggs into the male's brood pouch. There, his sperm fertilize the eggs, and he carries them ten days to six weeks, depending on the species. He gives birth in the dark waters of night. The young are left to fend for themselves.*

I paused to look up the word, "brood." *A number of young produced or hatched at one time.* And further down: *to think or worry persistently or moodily about; ponder.* I conjured my father in his silence, the kind that descended after praying with someone. Or the thicker silence that fell upon him after a holiday with the Schuette clan. During the holiday, he was fine. He laughed with his brother and sisters around the card table reminiscing about the old days. He played golf with his mom and dad, berating himself when he later reported his score until Uncle Ron, the oldest and a pastor, reminded him with a firm hand to the shoulder, "Now Chuck, God calls us to suffer in silence," and my dad would reply, "This score could tempt even Christ to complain," and everyone laughed. He teased my cousins, tousled Kristin's and Esther's hair, used his Donald Duck voice—the one I had to beg for—till the youngest giggled uncontrollably.

Then the car ride home: my father's hand searched the radio dial for a baseball or football game and, when the station crackled into static, he took to sucking on hard candies to help him

stay awake, his mouth closed tightly around each sour ball or minty disc.

Then the week after: my dad deflated, as if he had given birth, his body shocked and in recovery, the bag of hard candy going stale in his dresser drawer.

I had a fondness for riffling through my dad's dresser, especially the top drawer. I opened it for the scent of cinnamon, to swipe a piece of Dad's Big Red. The initial bite burned my tongue until the sharpness of cinnamon melted into the sweetness of sugar. No one else in my family liked Big Red. I grew to crave it and turned to cinnamon every chance I got: Red Hots, Hot Tamales, Boston Baked Beans.

The top drawer also contained my dad's neatly folded handkerchiefs, each one ironed smooth, awaiting their turn in his back pocket. They kept a semblance of order in their corner of the drawer, pinning down what was otherwise haphazard chaos—loose change,

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an unused money clip, Dad's shoehorn, savings books for us kids, an occasional nut and bolt, keys to locks long forgotten.

Once, I found a chain of red foil squares. I tore one off and turned it over. "Trojan" stood out in bold black letters, and next to it, a small image of an ancient soldier's head. A helmet covered his ears and a mohawk ran down its middle. I could feel a hard ring inside. It slid when I pressed at it. "Latex condom," the wrapper read.

I stretched across my parents' bed and tore open the square. I slipped the condom out, moist and slick, tipped with what looked like the nipple of a doll's bottle. I tried unrolling the ring of latex, but it kept slipping from my grasp and rolling back up. Finally, I realized I could put several fingers in the tip and roll the condom down over the fingers with my other hand. Once I got it started, I removed my fingers and stretched the condom to its full length. It laid on the bed before me, long and collapsed, a wasted possibility.

*

Dad worked for Grandpa Kohn who owned his own scale company. They sold and serviced the large scales used by the corn and soybean processing plants in the area. My dad was the business manager. Every night he came home at 5:30 to a table set and dinner ready or nearly so. He carried a briefcase with a combination lock that he never bothered to use. As a child, I loved the pop of pushing the clasps open and the click of closing them, a world circumscribed, contained. Or so it seemed. My father's entrance indicated otherwise: the sad creak of the gate by the backdoor, the whine of the screen, the huff of the storm door, the way he favored just slightly his right foot as he shuffled through the kitchen and into the living room. He moved as if against a strong current, as if something back there didn't want to let him go. Even when he shook himself out of his coat and removed his hat, placing them where they belonged in the closet, he still didn't seem to be home.

Then, after dinner, tea. Mom would clear the table once the kids had scattered. Sometimes, I would stay and drink tea, too. My mother's steamed in front of her, rich and brown; my dad's milky white, sweetened with sugar. Mom's chair creaked as she pushed it away from the table to stand. She didn't interrupt herself but continued telling Dad about her day as she moved to the stove, tested the side of the tea kettle with her palm, reached over the sink into the cupboard for a tea cup, and poured hot water for me. I lifted the lid of the tea canister and reached in for a bag. At the table, I sat in my usual seat on the end. My parents sat on either side at the other end. We made a triangle.

Just beyond the kitchen, my cross-stitch lay half-buried on the dining room table under days' worth of junk mail, magazines Mom still intended to read, homework assignments either graded or yet to be done. The sampler, which I never would finish, peered up through the mess, each tight stitch bound to the fabric like grief to the aching side of love.

I laid the tea bag on the water. It floated on the surface until the tea began to steep, descending in wavy lines like seaweed. I dunked the bag and muddied the water. Mom, still talking, passed the milk and sugar. She took the spoon Dad had used and handed it to me. But tonight, I laid the spoon down next to the Tupperware sugar dispenser, blew across the hot surface so I wouldn't burn my tongue, and decided to drink my tea black.

My father lifts his face from the hymnal. He closes his eyes and rocks forward on his toes, riding the swell of the organ. He does not need to see the words to know what to sing. I stand next to him, looking back to my own hymnal, singing the alto line. Dad's rich male voice surges below me, but in singing the melody it also crests above me. Music floods the church, but nobody drowns.

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