THE STOLEN FATHER

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When my father returned from the edge of the world, hundreds came to greet him. He had been gone twenty-five years. Behan, my sister, had planned a small welcoming dinner at her house. I helped set a table for seven while my nephew, Linus, assailed me with questions: "What's he like? Does he go to church? What does he do? Why did he go away? Why's he coming back?" That last was easiest to answer: "Because he was invited," I said. I glanced at my mother, who sat waiting in a corner chair, but she had turned her head to a murmuring from outside. Behan's dog started barking, and the cat flattened itself and slunk underneath the couch. Outside, car horns trumpeted and voices whooped with good cheer. My mother stood up, straightened her dress, and flung the door open to a landscape eclipsed by eager faces.

"Who's that?" Behan called from the kitchen. "Is it him?"

My mother stepped out onto the stoop, and I followed, surveying the crowd. Every member of our family had come. Every friend my father had made before his departure was there. All of our childhood friends, Behan's and mine, had arrived with curiosity. "We want to see your *real* father," one of them explained. "We want to understand what you've been missing all these years."

"Who's here?" Behan asked, stepping out behind me.

"*Every* one," I told her.

"Is he here yet?" the multitude wanted to know. "When's he arriving?" they clamored.

I turned to my sister, who stood gaping at the faces. "The word must be out," I said.

"I only bought one bottle of wine," Behan mumbled. "I only have a ham in the oven. And some mashed potatoes."

My mother raised her arms to the crowd for quiet. "He'll be here soon!" she announced. Then, without a glance at Behan, "You're all welcome here!" A breeze caught my mother's hair and spun it into gold, and her eyes brimmed with joy. An elixir smile from a summer night at the dawn of first love rejuvenated her by twenty-five years. I thought I'd never seen her so lovely as in this moment.

“Does she ask me?” Behan complained. “When does she ever ask me?”

The crowd was grateful. They spilled over the yard and onto the street. They trampled the flowerbeds, the garden, the swing set, the pets, and they didn’t realize what they were doing. They were so happy for us. They just didn’t realize.

When my father returned from the edge of the world, he pulled up in a hulking, barnacle-covered truck, the doors rusted paper-thin from twenty-five years of sea salt. Strapped to the top in a tub of melting ice was a gargantuan fish, its mouth gaping at the masses that waited. The truck shuddered to a stop, and a familiar whistled tune drifted out from behind the dusty windows, bringing with it phantom smells: garage mildew, car oil, mechanic’s hand-cleaning solvent, pipe tobacco, old-fashioned shaving cream. The truck door swung open with a creak. My father stepped out, and the waiting crowd engulfed him with delight.

Linus was on my shoulders. We had not been able to penetrate the mob, so we watched from the distance of the side porch. “I can’t see him,” he said. “I can’t see what he looks like.”

I had to admit that I couldn’t quite see him either, but I assured my nephew that we would soon.

For dinner, we cooked the fish strapped to the truck. It took ten of us to pull it down and clean it. We chopped it into pieces and cooked it on ten different grills. When their parents weren’t looking, children climbed within the fish’s bare ribs to play. Linus watched but wouldn’t join them. “The ribs look like a jail,” he said. So they did, and so this was what the children were pretending: that some of them were kings and queens sending the others off to jail. When they felt gracious enough, they would let certain ones come back out from their banishment.

There was enough fish for everyone. My father told Behan to hand out wineglasses. “Okay,” she said. “To which people? I have six glasses.”

“Just hand them out,” my father said, smiling. So Behan handed out the six glasses, and then she looked into the cupboard and saw there were more after all, and so she handed these out as well, and she kept handing the glasses out until everyone had been supplied and the cupboard was finally empty. My father poured the one bottle of wine, and there was enough for everyone. So we toasted a health to my father, all of us at once, seven hundred wineglasses raised to the sky, a sea of wine doled out into glasses. The glasses clinked together all at once, and the sound was of a shattering glass tower, and it could be heard fifteen miles away.

“You can’t tell it that way, ” Behan says. “That’s not how it happened.”

“Stories are never told just how they happened. But it’s my story. I’m the one telling it.”

“It’s *our* story, and you can’t tell it that way.” Behan is insistent.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Answer the questions Linus asked you. And say why we couldn’t see our father when he returned. It wasn’t because of any crowd.”

“The crowd made it difficult. They had their own ideas. It was hard to see around them.”

“But what about the shadows?” Behan asks.

Oh. Right. The shadows.

When my father returned from the edge of the world, shadows clung to him so that we could not see for certain who he was. I saw the shape of a hero, disgraced into wrongful banishment, now returning into the arms of clumsy, embarrassed clemency. Behan, as the shadow figure approached, saw a ball of rage bent on conniving revenge. “It’s a trick,” she said. “He’s only pretending not to hold a grudge.” Our mother had been the one to send our father away; now she had invited him back, simultaneously exiling the impostor who had taken his place. Behan watched our father’s approach with a confused scattershot of trepidation and misgiving.

“We prayed for this to happen,” I reminded her.

“It’s been twenty-five years, Keith.”

“We weren’t specific enough.”

“Don’t you have any feelings for Trent?”

Trent was the impostor, a blank-faced Frankenstein’s monster who pounded on the walls when he wanted something. Behan and I had grown up dreading his return from work every day —not because of any abuse, but because of the way his dour, unforgiving presence permeated the house. My relationship with him had been one of carefully planned distance, and so this was what I knew of father-son relationships: distance. “I never really cared for Trent,” I told Behan.

“What about all the things Mom has said about Dad over the years?”

"Now she says she was wrong."

"Which really means she lied to us. For twenty-five years. To keep us from our own father."

So even now Behan felt the compulsion to choose, where I wanted to accept them both, my mother and father together as a couple again. Behan's struggle—as it had been for us both during the past twenty-five years—was deciding where her sympathies should lie: With our mother, who had sent our father away in the first place and then lied about the reasons? With our father who, after all, had left too easily and then stayed away from us for twenty-five years? Or with the impostor, who in a certain light could be made to seem the true victim in this scenario? The solution lay beneath the shadows that cloaked our father. We would have to carefully peel away the shadows so we could see exactly who he was after all this time.

When our mother told us that our father would be leaving for the edge of the world, it was like this: I remember coming through the kitchen and turning into the living room and seeing my mother and Behan on the couch, Behan crying and my mother's eyes solemn and red. I remember that she called me over and gave me the news, too, but that is where my memory of the moment stops, with the words, *Your father and I* . For twenty-five years after that, our mother told us who our father was, and so he became, in our minds, someone different from the father we thought we had known. He became a man dark and threatening in his mystery. His eyes turned to angry coals, and his black beard became a manifestation of the darkness that seeped from a twisted soul. He was not with us to show us any different.

But before he left for the edge of the world, my father came to school one morning and talked to my teacher in the hallway and then called me out of my class. He drove me to Oak Openings, my favorite park, and he rented bicycles for us so that we could ride the trails through the woods together. Usually we didn't get to ride bicycles here, but this time we did, and it was just my father and me, and I was supposed to be in school but wasn't, and so the forest that day became a magical wild wood that had been hiding here all this time, that my father alone had been able to reveal. We rode silently through the woods, sharing this secret, and deer darted across the trail in front and behind of us, and a horse of air thundered through the trees, racing us, and cardinals exploded like roses from the leaves, and faeries rode the tufts of milkweed seeds that floated through the air as the trees curtsied and opened up for us a path that no one else could follow. At the end of the day, as we sat on swings and ate ice cream cones, my father asked, "Did you have a good day, Keith?" and I told him that I had. He reached over and put his hand on my shoulder, and the strength and hugeness of it was warm and comforting, and he said, "You're my only son, and I'm very proud of you."

I kept this day secret, and my mother's stories of my father were never able to touch it.

In the weeks before I learned that my father would be returning from the edge of the world, I had been anxious in my sleep. Mischievous whispers in my ears had given me unquiet dreams. For instance: A leviathan-sized fish arose from a mist-swirled sea of black ink, yawning with a great intake of breath that sucked into its mouth the sea, the land and mountains, the cities and their crowds of people. Among the people was my father, who seemed merely preoccupied and melancholic. Then—*schloop!* —down the fish's slippery throat he went. In variations of the dream, I was there with my father, and I could feel my feet losing their grip on the earth. Sometimes I could see Linus on a golden beach, building a sandcastle. The sand around him was sifting away toward the gaping mouth, but he did not realize what was happening.

Julia, my wife, shook me awake, again and again, each time the dream came. "*Who* is whispering to you?" she wanted to know. "What are they whispering?"

The words perpetually escaped me. But one morning the dream was cut short by a brief, suffocating catch in my chest that forced me awake—and the whispered words were fresh enough for me to recall. I refused to tell Julia. I took comfort only in her insistence that she had not heard the words, she had not heard anything at all.

The whispers were these: *Come away, come away, come away.*

I had heard them before.

When we were preparing for my father's return from the edge of the world, I visited Behan's house. She met me at the door and asked if I might be so kind as to climb the sugar maple in the backyard to retrieve her son, who had been up there for an hour with no inclination of coming back down. "What's he doing up there?" I asked.

"He says he's trying to see the edge of the world," Behan told me. "Please go get him, Keith. Uncles are good for that sort of thing."

Linus had climbed close to the top of the tree, and it took me awhile to scale my way up to where he sat straddling a branch, his back to the trunk. A pair of binoculars hung around his neck. He looked dejected. "Any luck?" I asked, trying to catch my breath and not look down.

"Nope," Linus said.

"Not even with the binoculars?"

He shook his head. "When Grandma Evey sent Grandpa Addison to the edge of the world, did you look for

him?"

"Yeah, I looked pretty hard."

"Did you think that if you found a tree that was high enough you might be able to climb all the way to the top and look for him?"

I had thought exactly that, and I'd tried it many times. Climbed all the way to the top, up beyond the trunk to where it was all limbs and twigs and air. Peered through a plastic telescope from a cereal box until I could see the curve of the world disappearing into haze, but that was all. I'd cupped my ears and listened for my father's whistle, but there was not even an echo carried back by the lonesome wind.

"It's never high enough," I told Linus. "There's never a tree high enough for that."

"That's what I thought," he sighed.

"My father—Grandpa Addison—he'll be here soon. You'll be able to see him then."

"What about Grandpa Trent? Where's he going?"

It wasn't a question I wanted to try to invent an answer for. I didn't really care where Trent the impostor wound up. The *other* edge of the world would be just fine. I didn't want to try to assure Linus that his Step-Grandpa Trent would still be around, because I didn't *want* the impostor to still be around when my father returned from the edge of the world.

"Your mom's worried about you," I said instead. "She sent me up to bring you back."

A gust shook the tree and my guts teetered around each other for an instant. I started down, hoping Linus would take the hint. When I looked up I saw he hadn't moved except to turn his head, brow furrowed in thought. I followed his gaze to the window of his parents' bedroom.

"Sometimes I can hear them calling to my dad," Linus revealed. "At night. And I can hear them whispering to my mom, too."

I gritted my teeth. "What do they say?"

"To my dad they say, 'Come away.' And then they tell my mom, 'Send him away.'"

Linus took the binoculars from around his neck and handed them down to me. He pointed at the window, so

I put the lenses to my eyes and looked. There were tiny handprints on the pane, and the paint was scratched and the wood slightly indented where, perhaps, the window had been pried open. A dead limb of the maple formed a crooked bridge between tree and house. The handprints were smaller than a child's. When I took the binoculars away, Linus was watching with resignation. "Stay there a minute," I said, "and hold on." I tightened my grip on two strong branches and kicked at the dead bridge limb until it finally cracked loose and clattered against healthy branches on its way down to where it thudded on the ground. Linus's eyes were on me, wide and amazed. "Maybe you won't hear any whispering tonight," I said and shrugged. Uncles were good for that sort of thing.

Come away, come away, come away, the whispers went, *to where waves of moonlight gloss the dim gray sands*. My bedroom, twenty-five years ago, was the upstairs family room at the head of the stairs and outside my parents' bedroom. I lay awake and heard the temptations that slithered into my parents' ears as they slept. A fluttering of black wings for an instant against the ceiling. The creak of a window, tapping on the pane. Smoke-like mist seeping from underneath the door. *Send him away, send him away, send him away with us* , the whispers went. An evil titter, a beetle-like scuttling on the stairs. A tiny visage leering from the foot of my bed, disappearing when I sat up with a horrified gasp.

Behan doesn't have these memories. What she remembers is when our parents' voices supplanted the whispers. Angry words, bitterness, weeping, frustration. A heavy boot stomping once on the floor to cut off a spiraling argument—I remember that, and how all the glasses and plates in the cupboards and all the pictures on the walls shook. I remember thinking of Rumpelstiltskin stomping his foot through the floor and ripping himself in two in his fury. Tears next—lots of those. At one point, a violent scuffle and then a scream from our mother upstairs, screaming for Behan to run across the street and bring back our fireman neighbor. This moment would define Behan's life. This decision: help our mother or protect our father. Behan ran across the street, and in her mind she was still running across the street for the next twenty-five years, and every time she ran, it was in search of a father figure that could replace the one she had betrayed. Every time she ran it was to reinforce her belief in the horrible things our mother said about our father that could justify such a betrayal

I had not been called on to run across the street. I had been spared that decision.

When my father went away through the water and the wild, I chased after him on my bicycle. I rode out into the country, out among windswept fields of corn. I rode into my teenage years, fast and hard, accustomed to the salt of sweat drenching my face. I rode past silos and mills, through small towns, past crumbling schools and useless churches, across bridges, along rivers. I couldn't reach the edge of the world.

I rode into adulthood, trading the bike for a motorcycle, and I extended the sweep of my search. Rolling hills, hairpin curves, a white-walled mosque incongruous with its surrounding wheat fields, mountains of jagged granite, a city where lightning etched the sky and set tall buildings aglow. I couldn't find the edge of the world. I couldn't travel in one direction long enough to reach it. My signals got crossed, my fancies waxed and waned, I took roadside rests that became extended stays.

My father became a memory, and the memory became clouded with my mother's stories.

"Am I telling it all right now?" I ask Behan.

She doesn't answer immediately. "I didn't know he took you to Oak Openings," she says. "I didn't know you remembered when I had to run across the street."

"Did he take you anywhere before he left?" I ask.

Behan shakes her head slowly, as if searching her memory for some hidden, forgotten event. "No," she says. "He just left. Mom took us away to live with Trent, and Dad sold the house. The next time we saw it another family was living there, and they'd taken out the front porch and paved the driveway and cut down the tree out back. And Dad was gone."

I remember this, too, seeing the house and the stump out back, and how I wanted to throw rocks through the window and, like a wrathful ghost, chase out this usurping family. But then it was off to a church and a wedding, and then our mother was holding Trent's hand and telling us, *You can call him Dad now* , and everything in our world became a kind of unreality.

"Do you think," I ask, "that I'm being too hard on Mom?"

"Mom lied to us," Behan says. "But."

"But. If you were going to tell this story."

"It would start like this: 'When our father left for the edge of the world, he didn't *have* to go so far away. He didn't *have* to go so far out of reach that our mother's stories could reconstruct him so completely in our minds.'" Behan tilts her head, looking at me. "You're not going to skip to the end now, are you?"
"Isn't that pretty much all that's left?" I ask.

"Not quite. You have to tell about that morning first. You can't leave that out."

She's right, of course. Again, she's right.

The morning of my father's return from the edge of the world, I walked into Behan's house to find her dining room table covered with wrinkled-up scraps of paper. She was laying each one out and pressing it smooth. I didn't have to read the words to know what notes these were. After she sent him to the edge of the world, our mother sometimes hurled stones after my father. She had a good arm, my mother, and the stones seemed to know where to fly. Sometimes she wrapped words around the stones she threw. The words might be: *Remember, this was your own doing!* Or: *Because I wouldn't want you to "worry," we're getting along just fine without you*. Once in awhile my father would return a volley of stones, but the effort always seemed half-hearted. Out of a blue sky, a pebble would *plink* against the windowpane, or a stone would bang harmlessly on the roof and roll down to drop into the hedges. Once in a while my father's stones would also be wrapped in words. These stone-notes of my mother's and father's were the scraps that Behan was laying out across her table.

"You collected all these," I said, amazed.

"I have these and I have their wedding photos," Behan replied.

"What are you going to do with these?"

"Sort through them for awhile."

I surveyed the words spread across the table, concentrating on handwriting instead of content. But then I saw that some of the handwriting was Behan's, and looking closer I saw that some of the handwriting was my own, and I felt my face redden.

Behan watched me carefully. "We have to sort through all of this," she emphasized.

"We didn't throw any stones on our own," I said. "We had to be taught how. We had to be forced to do it at first."

"All of it has to be sorted through, Keith."

"Can't we just take these out back and burn them all?"

"No." My sister held my gaze, wads of yet more words in her fists. "Mom and Dad have to show us that these don't mean anything anymore. I won't get rid of these notes until they've proven that."

"Then let me take mine out, at least."

Behan considered this, then swept her hand over the table, over all the words, inviting me to take mine

back.

I couldn't do it.

When my father returned from the edge of the world, there were six of us waiting at Behan's house to greet him. Behan had planned a small welcoming dinner. She cooked a ham and made mashed potatoes. Julia helped me clear the stone-notes from the table, and we placed them back in the trunk where Behan had kept them all this time. Julia wanted to read the notes out of curiosity, but I said it was probably best if she didn't. Behan's husband, Rick, helped me carry the trunk to the basement. "We used to keep this in the attic," he told me as we plodded down the stairs, "but the box got too heavy and I was worried the ceiling wouldn't hold."

Back upstairs, Behan complained that Linus had climbed the sugar maple again. I offered to bring him down, but Rick said that Linus could come down on his own when he was ready.

"He doesn't want to meet Dad," Behan confided to me a bit later.

"Who—Linus or your husband?"

"Both. All they know is all I've told them. They're both attached to Trent. To them, our dad is the impostor coming to replace Trent. Linus has been asking me why Grandpa Addison has to come back if he's been gone all that time anyway."

"Because he was invited," I said, shrugging. I glanced at my mother, who paced in the living room, chewing her fingernails. Julia tried to engage her in conversation. She complimented my mother on the pies she had made for this occasion, and my mother became animated in her concern that her pies wouldn't be good enough, that they wouldn't be as good as my father remembered them, that maybe he had found someone at the edge of the world who could make even better pies than my mother's and maybe he would miss that person's pies, and maybe he would want to go back to the edge of the world. Maybe he wouldn't want to stay here after all. Julia was trying to assure my mother of her singularity in the field of pie-making when we all heard the rumble of the truck from down the street.

When my father returned from the edge of the world, he pulled up in a barnacle-covered truck, the doors rusted paper-thin from twenty-five years of sea salt. Strapped to the top was the gargantuan skeleton of a fish. He would tell me later about that fish, how it had emerged from the gray soup at the edge of the world and scooped him up from the mist-threaded shore, and how it had carried him around in its belly for a length of time he didn't know—it could have been three months or three days; it sometimes felt like three

years. Finally the fish spit him back up on shore. It haunted him for a long time after that, as if constantly warning him that he was in a place where he shouldn't be. What finally killed the fish, my father would tell me, was a rock that fell from the sky. When the fish washed ashore, my father found the rock embedded in its skull. When he pulled the rock out, he found it wrapped in a note in my mother's handwriting: a plea for forgiveness, a promise of clemency, an invitation.

The truck in Behan's driveway shuddered to a stop. Julia squeezed my hand, excited for us all. Behan and our mother stood together, also holding hands, wide eyes already glistening with tears. Nearby stood Rick, squinting at the truck, putting on a welcoming face in spite of all the words he'd been storing in the basement of his house. I glanced to see Linus high up in the tree, straddling a branch and watching the truck through his binoculars. He was, I thought, in a better position to see than any of the rest of us, who were too close to know just what we were seeing. The truck door swung open with a creak, and my father stepped out of myth, out of memory, out of absence, out from the water and the wild, out of twenty-five years and into our lives again.

Behan car horns car oil For Us All Julia paint Rick