

# Father

My father was showing me how to water. Earlier in the day he and a friend had leveled the backyard with a roller, then with a two-by-four they dragged on a rope to fill in the depressed areas, after which they watered the ground and combed it slowly with a steel rake. They were preparing the ground for a new lawn. They worked shirtless in the late summer heat, and talked only so often, stopping now and then to point and say things I did not understand—how fruit trees would do better near the alley and how the vegetable garden would do well on the east side of the house.

"Put your thumb like this," he said. Standing over me, he took the hose and placed his thumb over the opening so that the water streamed out hissing and showed silver in that dusk. I tried it and the water hissed and went silver as I pointed the hose to a square patch of dirt that I soaked but was careful not to puddle.

Father returned to sit down with an iced tea. His knees were water-stained and his chest was flecked with mud. Mom sat next to him, garden gloves resting on her lap. She was wearing checkered shorts and her hair was tied up in a bandana. He patted his lap, and she jumped into it girlishly, arms around his neck. They raised their heads to watch me—or look through me, as if something were on the other side of me—and talked about our new house—

the neighbors, trees they would plant, the playground down the block. They were tired from the day's work but were happy. When Father pinched her legs, as if to imply they were fat, she punched him gently and played with his hair.

The water streamed, nickel-colored, as I slowly worked from one end to the next. When I raised my face to Father's to ask if I could stop, he pointed to an area that I had missed. Although it was summer I was cold from the water and my thumb hurt from pressing the hose, trigger-like, to reach the far places. But I wanted to please him, to work hard as he had, so I watered the patch until he told me to stop. I turned off the water, coiled the hose as best I could, and sat with them as they talked about the house and stared at where I had been standing.

The next day Father was hurt at work. A neck injury. Two days later he was dead. I remember the hour—two in the afternoon. An uncle slammed open the back door at Grandma's and the three of us—cousin Isaac, Debbie, and I who were playing in the yard—grew stiff because we thought we were in trouble for doing something wrong. He looked at us, face lined with worry and shouting to hurry to the car. At the hospital I recall Mother holding her hand over her eyes as if she was looking into a light. She was leaning into someone's shoulder and was being led away from the room in which Father lay.

I remember looking up but saying nothing, though I sensed what had happened—that Father was dead. I did not feel sorrow nor did I cry, but I felt conspicuous because relatives were pressing me against their legs or holding my hand or touching my head, tenderly. I stood among them, some of whom were crying while others had their heads bowed and mouths moving. The three of us were led away down the hall to a cafeteria where an uncle bought us candies that we ate standing up and looking around, after which we left the hospital and walked into a

harsh afternoon light. We got into a blue car I had never seen before.

At the funeral there was crying. I knelt with my brother and sister, hands folded and trying to be patient, though I was itchy from the tiny coat whose shoulders worked into my armpits and from the heat of a stuffy car on our long and slow drive from the church in town. Prayers were said and a eulogy was given by a man we did not know. We were asked to view the casket, with our mother and the three of us to lead the procession. An uncle helped my mother while we walked shyly to view our father for the last time. When I stood at the casket, I was surprised to see him, eyes closed and moist-looking and wearing a cap the color of skin. (Years later I would realize that it hid the wound from which he had died.) I looked quickly and returned to my seat, head bowed because my relatives were watching me and I felt scared.

We buried our father. Later that day at the house, Grandma could not stop shaking from her nerves, so a doctor was called. I was in the room when he opened his bag and shiny things gleamed from inside it. Scared, I left the room and sat in the living room with my sister, who had a doughnut in her hand, with one bite gone. An aunt whose face was twisted from crying looked at me and, feeling embarrassed, I lowered my head to play with my fingers.

A week later relatives came to help build the fence Father had planned for the new house. A week after that Rick, Debra, and I were playing in an unfurnished bedroom with a can of marbles Mother had given us. Behind the closed door we rolled the marbles so that they banged against the baseboard and jumped into the air. We separated, each to a corner, where we swept them viciously with our arms—the clatter of the marbles hitting the walls so loud I could not hear the things in my heart.

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When I was seven years old I spent most of the summer at Romain playground, a brown stick among other brown kids. The playground was less than a block from where we lived, on a street of retired couples, Okie families, and two or three Mexican families. Just before leaving for work our mother told us—my brother Rick, sister Debra, and me—not to leave the house until after one in the afternoon, at which time I skipped off to the playground, barefoot and smiling my teeth that were uneven and without direction. By that hour the day was yellow with one-hundred-degree heat, the sun blaring high over the houses. I walked the asphalt street with little or no pain toward a mirage of water that disappeared as I approached it.

At the playground I asked for checkers at the game room, unfolded the board under the elm that was cut with initials and, if he was there, I played with Ronnie, an Okie kid who was so poor that he had nothing to wear but a bathing suit. All summer he showed up in his trunks, brown as the rest of us Mexicans, and seemed to enjoy himself playing checkers, Candyland, and Sorry. Once, when I brought him an unwrapped jelly sandwich in my hand, the shapes of my fingers pressed into the bread, he took it and didn't look into my eyes. He ate very slowly, deliberating over each move. When he beat me and had