

FATHER OF FIELDS

Doug Ramspeck

That was how she thought of him while she was growing up. Her father was the grass and the trees and the river and the open land outside her bedroom window, and maybe the sounds of the mourning doves as she was waking. Or perhaps he was persistence of the river, the sight of its impatience, and the way the current was always brown or gray or silver, depending on its mood, or deep black at night, or dusted, in winter, with the faint skin of moonlight. And then there were the corn fields standing as tall and straight as sentries, and the soybean fields growing yellow with summer or swaying in stray gusts of wind, or the fallow fields of winter, powdered with snow. Often Elisabeth walked out into that Ohio landscape with one or more of the dogs, letting them off their leashes as she studied the turkey buzzards circling in the distance, as she knelt and touched her fingers to the triangular prints of deer in the soft mud, the etchings a kind of cuneiform writing.

This was the landscape where she always felt most fully herself—not like within the sullen confines of the school bus, or the overheated crowdedness of her school classrooms. Back home, Lis enjoyed looking out in all directions and seeing nothing but open land and far horizons, or maybe the train tracks in the distance, or the narrow and empty country roads heading out in a straight line. And it was here where she imagined that her father was the three crows perched in a distant white oak, or a discarded snakeskin clinging to a wire fence, or a wasp nest perched in a fallen log.

That she didn't even know the man's name was of no concern to her, even though she understood she wasn't supposed to feel that way. She was supposed to believe with a frantic fervor that her identity was incomplete, that she was missing one half of that important foundation of her existence. She was supposed to lie awake nights in the throes of some crisis of the self, and to scream at her mother to tell her who her father was and where he lived, insisting that she simply had a right to know. None of that ever happened.

Later, when Lis was in high school, she would compare her own life to the many *Bildungsromane* her English teachers were always assigning them to read, as though these were meant to be blueprints for their lives. Often the protagonists went off in search of lost or unknown parents, which Lis never

understood. Didn't they understand that the unknown was often better than the known? In her case, for example, she could imagine—if the mood struck—that her father was a painter or a sculptor, and that this was where she had inherited her own artistic inclinations. Or maybe her father had a mercurial temper, which was how she had come honestly by her own, or maybe the annoying gaps in her teeth were a cruel gift from him. Or perhaps—and this was one she returned to most often—her father had gone mad and was locked up somewhere in an institution, only sometimes returning long enough to lucidity to remember the daughter he had lost.

There was something nicely romantic in this vision, something Lis could carry with her into the woods that hugged close to the river. Sometimes she saw herons standing like statuary on their long legs in the shallows, and she would think with a certain playfulness, *Look at how patient my daddy seems, how contented.*

And if ever the issue arose in conversation over breakfast or supper or while Lis and her mother were together in the car, her mother would shrug as though to say, *It's not that big a deal . . . don't worry about it.* And Lis accepted this. Truly. She had heard jokes from Aunt Cheri that her mother was a bit wild growing up, so perhaps there was some uncertainty involved. And, in any

case, Lis was happy with her mother. This was another way she seemed out of touch with expectations. They didn't quarrel, didn't yell at each other. They were eerily alike, not only in appearance but also in their voluntary hermitage.

Her mother managed a Cinnabon in the mall forty minutes from their house, but otherwise her interactions with people—except for her sister—were minimal. She liked to say that dating was overrated, and friends were an encumbrance. Always she told Lis that she would, eventually, go through a boy-crazy phase, and surely she didn't have to be anti-social just to please her mother, but Lis preferred the quiet. This didn't mean she didn't have friends at school, but simply that their company seemed less important than the pleasures she derived from lying on her belly on her bed and reading, her ankles lifted and crossed behind her, or throwing Frisbees for the dogs in the backyard. Having a father in her life sounded, to her, like one more entangling complication. And in any case, he was probably off somewhere in that padded room, or maybe married and in California, or perhaps even dead, and her mother figured it was best just to leave it at that.

So it was a shock to Lis when, a few days after her sixteenth birthday, her mother pushed away the supper plate, lit a cigarette, and said, "I told myself

that I would leave it up to you when you reached sixteen. You can meet your father if you want.”

“What?” Lis said, nearly choking on her Mountain Dew.

“Not that I’m recommending it,” her mother said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re old enough to do stupid things if you want. God knows I did my share at your age.”

“He lives around here?”

Her mother laughed. “About fifteen minutes in the car.”

“Are you serious?”

“Oh, I am. And he’s quite the experience. That much I’ll give him. Just not a good one. So tell me what you want.”

“You can’t just spring this on me,” Lis said.

Smoke curled up one side of her mother’s face, and that eye squinted. “Fair enough. But you’ll have to give me an answer.”

“How would I know? You haven’t said anything about him.”

“Yes, I have. I’m advising against it.”

“Why?”

“Just tell me what you want to do, Lissy.”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, then,” her mother said, rising with the cigarette perched in the corner of her mouth while she cleared away the plates. “Let me know when you come up with something.”

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On the ride to meet her father for the first time, in Warren, Lis sat with her knees up while her mother drove, watching the way the clouds slipped past on their invisible conveyor belt, sometimes opening to admit a syrup of sun to pour so brightly that Lis slipped down the visor, and other times turning the world into a half-dull shadow. She liked to watch how the wind from her mother’s Honda set the grass to trembling at the roadside, as though conjured into being. Lis had long since come to imagine herself as a strange conduit to the natural world, not in some superstitious way but more that she had become attuned over the years to its whispers and its frequencies. She loved the insistent greens of summer, loved the way the heat, in early July, was a living thing, something that gripped you in its arms and held you close. And as her mother drove, Lis was thinking how little information she had been able to pry free, and most of it so cryptic that it added more mystery than revelation.

The affair had been quite brief, apparently, the man not even remotely father material, and her mother hadn't asked anything from him, and he had agreed to give exactly that. Her mother did mention in passing that he had worked as a roofer, and she'd been young and foolish enough to believe that there was something glamorous in a man who spent his days climbing ladders, pounding nails into shingles, and soaking in the sun until his skin was such a deep shade it was mahogany. She also admitted that he had serious reservations about this get-together.

The trailer park was bordered on the eastern side by railroad tracks and also what appeared to be a refuse dump, the mounds piled high, the scent seeping like something fetid through the open car windows. There was also a small golf driving range to the west, though, as near as Lis could see, no one was making use of it at the moment, so that all she saw were the signs lined up on the empty expanse of grass in 50-yard increments. Soon her mother pulled the car to a stop in the gravel and was pointing through the windshield at a white trailer that seemed raised on stilts, with a rickety four-step set of stairs leading to the front door. A "No Trespassing" sign was hung just beside it, and, in front of the trailer on grassless dirt, three plastic lawn chairs were set in a half circle around a black outdoor grill perched on three spindly legs.

“Just knock,” her mother said.

“What?” Lis asked, swiveling.

“He’s expecting you.”

“You’re not coming with?”

“Not a chance.”

“Mom.”

“Phone when you want me to come get you.”

“I’m not going by myself.”

“Your choice.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am.”

Years later Lis would think back to the series of rather unpleasant surprises that greeted her that muggy afternoon after her mother’s car disappeared and she climbed those flimsy steps and knocked on the metallic door. She had imagined sitting with her father inside the tiny confines of the trailer, but instead, when the door fell inward, he pushed past and waved her back down the stairs to those plastic chairs. But the even greater surprise was his age. Surely, she had pictured, he would be close to forty, the same as her mother, but this

man—she even assumed at first that there was some mistake, that she had knocked on the wrong door—appeared in his sixties or maybe even older.

And then there was how he was dressed. Shirtless. Skimpy athletic shorts. Faded sandals. The man had swirls of gray-white hair on his concave chest, and he was several inches shorter than either she herself was or her mother, and, in all honesty, the salt and sour smell of him was powerful in the summer air. On top of that, and despite the general skinniness of his chest and shoulders, there was the little paunch of the belly, a tiny little shelf of flesh, and his eyes were so close together that he appeared nearly cross-eyed. And his stringy, dirty brown hair was far too long and tied back in a little stump of a ponytail. There was the unwelcoming or even hostile expression. She hadn't expected or even wanted an embrace, but she had expected more than that he would simply press by her, plop himself into one of those plastic chairs, sit with horrible posture, and eye her suspiciously.

Lis sat across from him. "You're Mr. Dennison?" she asked.

"My God," he said. "You could be her twin from back then. That same awkward hopeless look. No offense." He lifted the Budweiser bottle he'd carried with him out the door, and added, "You want one?"

"I'm sixteen."

He shrugged. "Just to be upfront about things, I'm not looking for a daughter."

"Okay," Lis said.

"I mean, I'm sure you're a fine person and all, but I'm just not interested. It's not something I ever wanted."

"That's okay."

"I told your mother over the phone. I don't really get why you are here. I'm not really good at the Hallmark kind of thing . . . if that's what you're expecting. How great it is to finally meet you and that kind of b.s."

"Okay."

"God, you really are awkward. Look at you. And you don't say much. I'm getting the feeling you must not be very good in school. Not that I was either. But I am a talker, at least. Not you. That's clear enough."

"I just wanted to meet you. That's all."

"I've never understood the parent stuff. My dad was a horse's ass. I wish I'd never met him. I probably take after him. I've been told that. So count yourself lucky. Don't walk through the minefield if you don't want to get blown up. That was what my dad would say. Usually while he was whacking me."

Her father was grinning while he was saying this, like it was some hilarious joke, so Lis said, "How did you meet her?"

"What?" he said, the grin dissolving.

"My mom."

"Oh, God. That's what you're after? You can get the sordid story from your mommy. There was a lot of drinking involved. Okay? That's all I really remember. And later your mother phoned to say she got knocked up. It's a romantic story. A fairy tale. All right?"

"You didn't love her?"

He snorted through his nose. "I'm going to need more beer if this is what you'll be asking. Hold on a minute. Sure you don't want one? I might even have some weed, if that's more your thing. It's not really mine, though. The smoke makes my throat scratch."

"I'm fine."

He stood. "You really are a homely little thing, you have to admit it. Not that it matters to me. I'm just saying."

"Thanks."

"You're just the type I went for when I was younger. Figured beggars can't be choosers. That's how I had your mother pegged, at least. Show someone like

that the least bit of interest and you're home free. I hope you're not like that, too."

He winked then disappeared inside, and when he appeared back at the door and came down the steps, Lis was finishing up the text to her mother: *come get me, please.*

Her father sat again and said, "I need to be honest about something. If this is about money, you're barking up the wrong tree. You're not getting any. Not from me. I'm retired on disability. If it's some college fund or something, tough shit. I'm not some money tree. All right?"

"Okay."

"You really don't say anything. Quite the conversationalist. It's been a treat getting to know you. So did your mother tell you she and I were star-crossed lovers?"

"No."

"Good. She always did shoot straight. I'll give her that. I assume she's coming back to get you."

"Yes."

"All right then. I figured you phoned Mommy when I went inside. Like calling the cavalry. I've been told I have that effect. So be it."

“Are you always this rude?”

He laughed. “Absolutely. But it’s helped me get this far in life.” He spread his arms to indicate his kingdom.

“What’s your disability?” Lis asked.

He laughed again, this time snorting through his nose. “I’m an asshole. And, given that’s the case, I think a little honesty is called for. I have nothing for you. No money, no emotional support. So you’ll just have to deal with your daddy issues on your own. I want no part of it. Okay?”

And it was only when her mother finally arrived, when Lis stood to flee toward the car, and when her father stood as well, lifting his beer bottle in greeting to her mother while giving her the finger with the other hand, that Lis realized from how unsteady he seemed on his feet—a sailor stumbling his way across a listing deck—just how hopelessly drunk he was.

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Whenever, as an adult, Lis would tell the story about meeting her father when she was sixteen, she would always describe her dismay and shock, but would mostly focus on how, afterwards, on the ride home in the car with her mother, she had felt furious. It was directed at him, to be sure, but also at her mother and herself, and perhaps, at that moment, at the entire universe. And

she would describe how, upon arriving home, she had gone for a long walk, refusing to bring the dogs—for fear they would sense her foul mood and be upset by it—carrying her anger out into the woods and along the river, out into the summer fields, and all the way to a train trestle that passed above the river and where she sometimes liked to sit with her legs dangling.

On this day, though, she arrived just in time to see a train roaring across the raised tracks and out across the brown waters of the river, trembling the land, and Lis felt angry even at that train, shouting as it went past, cursing into the wall of sound rising around her, actually shaking her fist. When the train was gone, though, she climbed up onto the trestle and studied the shallow waters near shore for the mysterious shadows of fish, and listened to the symphony of birds calling out to the infinite, and watched two squirrels chasing each other round and round a fat tree's belly. And only then did she feel that she could breathe again, and she walked down to the river and into a swale of tiny insects, some little miracle levitating from the mud of the earth.

She began borrowing her mother's car that summer to visit her father perhaps once each week, learning that the trick was to arrive at just the perfect moment of his drunkenness. If he hadn't had enough to drink he might not answer her knock at all, or, if he did, he would tell her he was in no mood for

visitors, that she should take a closer look at the sign beside his door, that being a fucking loner meant that he didn't appreciate people showing up without warning, and especially for a reason as fucked-up as the fact that so many years ago he had spurted a little semen into her mother.

And if he was too drunk, Lis learned, his verbal abuse might descend into physical threats of violence, though fortunately, she learned, he was generally too inebriated to act on them, though conversation was nearly impossible at that point anyway, for he would slur his words into shapes and contortions beyond human understanding. If he was middle drunk, though, they might sit around that grill and he would explain all the reasons why he wished she would stop visiting. More than once he handed her a beer, which she sipped slowly, and one night he actually cooked her a hamburger, though it was so raw and cold in the middle that she refused to eat it, and he refused to cook it any farther.

And one evening while they were sitting there, swatting at mosquitoes that kept trying to anoint them in blood, he said, "I get what's going on. You have this idea that I'm the drunk daddy with the heart of gold. And one of these days I will tell you I love you and am going to stop drinking. Then we'll go to fucking church together."

“No,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “It’s not ever going to happen. I don’t really like you, but don’t feel too badly about it. I don’t much like anyone. I didn’t like your mother much either when I knew her. She was actually kind of annoying. You take after her. You’re worse, though. At least I got something out of it with her. With you, I get nothing.”

“That’s sweet.”

“You think so?”

“She doesn’t get why I keep coming over.”

“Me neither.”

“That makes three of us.”

“Then do us all a favor and stop. I’m never going to walk you down the aisle just so some pimply kid can marry you. No offense, but I’m suggesting that’s probably the best you can do, if you find anyone at all.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s the other thing that worries me. What if you think we’re friends? Like the kid who’s bullied but still thinks the bully is his best pal in the world.”

“Gee, Dad, I like the way you always encourage me. How you tell me I can grow up to be anything. Maybe even a ballerina.”

Lis knew which lines would make him smile or even laugh.

He said, “Yep, you’ve got the gracefulness of a swan when it climbs out of the water and starts waddling on the land. Or have you seen them with their asses in the air while looking for food? That’s how ridiculous you would look in a tutu.”

“So have you always been a drunk?”

“Sure thing. Since fourteen, I would guess. Are you a hooker yet? Blowjob for a couple bucks?”

“Not yet.”

“Give it time. And make sure it’s dark so they can’t see you very well. Will add to the romance.”

“Thanks, Daddy. I learn so much when we talk.”

“How long are you staying tonight? You’re getting on my nerves.”

Another evening he told her he wanted to show her something, so she followed him out from the trailer park and through a gaping hole in the wire fence that led into the mounded expanse of the garbage dump. The smell was so intense that she had to make sure to breathe through her nose, but even so she felt the weight of it closing in, a malodorous presence that refused to relent, even when the wind kicked up. He warned her to start running if they

saw someone, that they weren't really allowed in there, then he lifted his stained T-shirt to show her, tucked into the pants of his jeans, a silver-throated revolver with a dark black grip. He drew it out then began firing at tin cans and even a little baby carriage protruding from the heaps of refuse. He didn't ask if she wanted to shoot—which she didn't—and at one point he aimed at a cat slinking on the hill across from them, so Lis knocked at his wrist, which started him yelling at how dangerous that was, cursing her. Then he reached out with his free hand and slapped her. It stung at the side of her mouth and along the line of her jaw, and at once she was running, and it took her forever to find the gap in the fence, but finally she was in her mother's car and driving free of the trailer park, vowing never to return.

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By fall, once school resumed, she was driving over maybe once every few weeks, though rarely staying for very long, and in truth she never enjoyed the visits, even a little, and imagined she was headed there out of some sense of obligation, but to whom she couldn't have said. Her father? Herself? None of it made sense to Lis, especially since, for the first time in her life, there was a growing sense of friction between her and her mother, who was becoming increasingly intrusive about wanting to know what she was up to with her

father, why she was always over there, and if she hadn't learned by now what a jackass he was.

"I have," Lis said.

"But you go anyway."

"Yep."

"That sounds like masochism. What's wrong with you?"

And the truth was that Lis didn't know, though it seemed to her a perfectly reasonable question. Did she feel she deserved the abuse tossed so casually her way? Was it simply some morbid kind of curiosity, the way most people can't turn their eyes away in horror films? Or perhaps she was forever looking for traces of herself, sources of her own misanthropy? But she didn't really believe any of this. She went because she went. And the strange part was how certain she was that, if she'd never met him at all, she would have been fine with that, and better off.

The first snow of the season arrived early in November, far sooner than usual, and by December it seemed that it was snowing once or twice every week, the confetti dropping from the sky and into the backyard and the river, where the flakes were swallowed and disappeared. That same month Lis started dating a boy from school, with the unfortunate first name of Jerry,

which she didn't really like, but the boy himself was sweet enough, and kind to her, and soft spoken, and they kissed for the first time at an outdoor skating rink.

A few days after Christmas she brought her father a small present of beef jerky wrapped in a box—she did it mostly because she figured that getting a gift from her would piss him off, which it did—but after that she became so busy with Jerry after school and on weekends that she had little time for her father and stopped visiting without quite realizing that she had. In the middle of February, she slept with Jerry for the first time while her mother was at work, and they rose afterward from her bed and stood at her window and gazed out at the falling snow, which drifted to the earth like otherworldly moths. It had been the first time for both of them, and it had been more painful than pleasurable, but she liked Jerry a good deal and enjoyed the way he slipped his arms around her at the window. They had dressed quickly after finishing—too embarrassed to leave themselves on display—but both of them were still in bare feet, and later they put on their boots and walked out into the snow, which seemed a kind of benediction coming down.

It wasn't until early in March that the notion suddenly came to her that she should take Jerry to meet her Dad, that she wanted him to know that part

of her life, even though she figured he would say the most insulting and denigrating things about them both, and would almost certainly ask crude questions of Jerry about whether he'd "tapped that yet," and maybe even say how wise he was to pick an ugly girl, that desperation made them far easier to hustle into the sack, but to make certain to use protection or he'd end up being hounded sixteen years down the line by some insane teenager.

She warned Jerry what to expect, but he was game anyway and drove her to Warren one early Sunday afternoon. Jerry had an Adam's apple far too large for the rest of him, some creature stuck in his throat like a snake swallowing a mouse, and often it seemed to convulse as he talked. They were both gazing at the road as he was telling her about his own father, and suddenly it began to rain—the last of the snow having finally ended—the windshield wipers soon thwacking in some private and melodic rhythm. And when they arrived, the rain had slowed to a mist or a drizzle, more the ghost of rain than rain itself, and they walked through it, and she climbed the steps to the trailer while Jerry waited at the bottom, his hands tucked awkwardly in his jean pockets, his glasses faintly askew on his nose. It occurred to her in that instant that her father was going to brutalize Jerry, but then the door came swinging open and Lis realized two things in the same instant.

First, the “no trespassing” sign was gone from the side of the door. Second, the woman who stood there was a complete stranger. She was a black woman with gray hair and a friendly-if-suspicious smile.

Lis said, “Is my dad here? I’m here to see Mr. Dennison.”

The woman squinted, tilted her head to the side. It turned out—or so the woman told them—that her father had been evicted for non-payment of rent, and this woman and her husband had moved in at the start of the month, and, no, she was sorry, but she didn’t have a forwarding address, though the landlord might, and she was sad they’d made the trip for nothing. The rain was gusting a little more by then, carrying scents from the refuse dump across the land while Lis and Jerry raced back to the car and closed themselves inside. And then, despite herself, the tears started leaking free, the spigot opened to full, and Jerry reached out to try to comfort her.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” Jerry said. “We’ll find out where he went. You’ll see him again.”

“Oh, shut up,” Lis said. “I don’t want to see him again. I didn’t want to see him in the first place.”

Then suddenly the rain gathered with such force that it pounded against the roof of the car and on the hood and on the windshield, the sound of the pummeling drowning out everything else in the world, and suddenly Jerry had her in his arms and she was letting him whisper soothing things in her ear, even though she was as furious again as that summer day when she'd first come to the trailer park, furious at Jerry and at herself and at her mother and at her father and even at that imaginary father of fields.

Doug Ramspeck is the author of seven poetry collections and one collection of short stories. His fiction has appeared in journals that include *The Georgia Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *The Southern Review*. His short story "Balloon" was listed as a Distinguished Story for 2018 in *The Best American Short Stories*. He is a three-time recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award. His author website can be found at dougramspeck.com.