

That's My Daughter

By Helen Longstreth

One summer when I was nine, my father disappeared with the car. It was a battered red Volvo that he'd bought weeks earlier from a friend of a friend. The boxy kind with a deep, rectangular boot. Inside it smelt like rotten fruit and the seats were patchy with stains. But he didn't seem to notice. He was very excited.

'Look at this trunk!' he kept saying, and he went on and on about how we were going to get bikes and tents and go camping. His eyes bulged and darted around wildly behind his glasses and he kept patting the back of the car as if it was a dog. He told me to bring out mugs of water to baptise the car's back wheels and even my mother came out, who hated camping, didn't know how to ride a bike. We stood on the road with the water while he told us all the things we already knew. How he loved camping, how much fun he'd had with his own father. Such great memories! The only good memories of his father he had. They'd seen bears, racoons, beavers. Sunrises and sunsets over mountains and the creeks. Wouldn't that be fun?

We didn't say no, that these things didn't exist in England, that neither of us were interested in camping or bikes. We just splashed the water on the car's back wheels and tried to smile along.

'I'm not going camping,' I told my mother later.

'I know, I know. Don't worry, Suzie. It's just one of those phases.'

There were lots of phases. Phases of drinking coffee after coffee and doing impulsive things. Like when he fitted the house with speakers in every room, or when I came home from school to find him attacking a stone wall in the kitchen, smiling

behind a mask and an electric sander. Phases of listening to the same Neil Young song over and over, singing 'Hey! Hey! My! My!' while cleaning the house, his white hair stuck up in spikes. Phases of sleeping on the sofa in his old study, drinking whatever alcohol he could find and making strangling yells all through the night. My mother would get up every few hours to make sure he hadn't burned down the house, or left the front door open. There were phases when he disappeared. Phases when he came back looking sorry and wandered around like a ghost in wrinkled shirts, only eating bananas. Long phases where nothing happened, when he spent all day reading and drinking tea, going to bed at 7pm with a sad shuffle and a croak goodnight.

Once my father had taught at a university, he had written a notable paper that people still quoted sometimes. He still read big boring looking books and cut out articles from newspapers that we weren't allowed to touch. But by then it was only my mother who worked, writing day after day in her office, looking distant and worried when the computer wasn't in front of her. My father was the one at the school gate, the one making dinner every night. He was until he wasn't.

When he didn't pick me up from school one day it wasn't a surprise. The nervy school receptionist called my mother over and over, staring at me over her desk with flitting beady eyes. But I didn't show her anything. I smiled back at her, drummed my fingers on my knees. In the end a neighbour had to pick me up. A man called Jeremy who lived next door and ran a man-bag business from his living room. I waited in his house and he told me to make myself comfortable, moving a pile of bags from the sofa to the floor.

'The best dressed men carry bags,' he told me.

'Oh right,' I said.

I sat on the sofa and listened to Jeremy talk about the business. He had a dog that didn't move from the corner of the room the whole time. After a while, when Jeremy seemed to be running out of things to say, he handed me his latest catalogue. I flipped through the pages, which were filled with pictures of the same leather bags and the occasional smiling man in jeans and a blazer.

'You can keep it if you like,' he said, motioning to the catalogue. 'Show it to your dad.'

'Thanks,' I said. But I put it back on the table.

When my mother finally got to Jeremy's she was red-eyed and frazzled. The dog started barking and we got out of there quickly, saying thank you to Jeremy who seemed relieved to get back to the bags.

It took a while to get back into our house. My mother rummaged through her bag frantically, unable to find her keys until she tipped the whole bag out onto the pavement. Inside, the house was dark and eerily silent but nothing was out of place. My father's slippers by the door, his book on the table, ingredients for dinner ready by the fridge. Just him and the car missing. He might be back, she said dully. But I knew better. We turned on the lights, put on music, inspected the cupboards and the bins for missing bottles of wine.

'Maybe he's gone camping?' I said.

'Camping... imagine.' We both took a moment to imagine it. I'd never seen him with a tent. Maybe my mother had a better idea because she started laughing. A cold mean laugh. Ha! I tried it too. It could be funny. Dad out in the cold trying to put up a tent, shouting and swearing at the sky.

But he was good at driving. He could parallel park in one swing, and never stressed or shouted at other drivers the way my mother did. The year before he had

driven us around for a whole week, from Maine to Philadelphia, stopping in different cities, and staying in motels along the way. We found a spot where you could stand in three states at the same time. 'What a country,' my father said. And I agreed. The trip ended at my grandmother's retirement home, a big redbrick development, with bright green lawns and golf carts gliding along neat curving paths. Inside was a lot of beige furniture and old people in tracksuits. My grandmother wore a green velvet one and shook my hand, even though I hadn't seen her in years.

I couldn't imagine where he'd be driving too now though. My mother's eyes welled up. She put her head in her hands. 'I'm sorry honey,' she said. I was scared of the way she looked when she cried. I didn't know what to say.

'It's ok, mum,' I said after a while.

'Oh, it's just not fair on you,' she said through her hands.

But I didn't mind. I liked it when he wasn't there. Liked having my mother all to myself. I liked her frizzy blonde hair, her warm hands, her soft skin.

For a week she didn't work and we ate dinner at 10pm, hot dogs and pasta, hot dogs and potatoes. I followed her everywhere. While she read or spoke on the phone I brushed her hair and put it in little plaits. Whenever she tried to stand up I sat on her feet. Sometimes she'd get annoyed and tell me to get off. Sometimes it made her laugh. Other times she'd wear this blank expression and just sit there glued to the floor.

At night she took long baths and would emerge foggy eyed with only half her hair wet. I was allowed to sleep in her bed and I would hold her as tight as I could, pretending I was a limpet. Sometimes we'd stay up so late watching TV that in the morning we'd just keep sleeping through the alarm.

‘Whoops!’ she’d say when we realised what time it was. But she didn’t care if I was late for school. She’d sing, ‘Wake Up Little Suzie,’ even if I was being slow. We’d throw my dirty clothes around looking for tights and pants and then eat donuts for breakfast. One time I wet myself on purpose.

‘Suzie!’ she said when she found me in her room with a wet patch around me on the carpet. She looked horrified and I started crying.

‘I’m sorry, mummy.’

‘Oh my little Suzie,’ she said holding me tight.

It was like a holiday.

The holiday ended on a Saturday. I was lying on the floor by my mother’s feet and I heard the sound of a car engine outside the house. The engine stopped and soon I could hear my father’s voice booming through the letterbox.

‘Papa’s got a brand new bag!’ he shouted. My mother looked at me wide-eyed and then got up to open the door. From the floor all I could see were crumpled clothes and a brand new lump on his forehead. The lump was very round, like a tomato.

‘Jesus Christ,’ my mother said.

‘Oh shut up, Nora,’ he said, smiling madly.

‘What the hell happened to your head?’ my mother said. He looked surprised.

‘C’mon, aren’t you gonna say hi to your old dad?’ I stared back but said nothing. Outside the house the red car glinted behind him. The front was bashed in, had crumpled like an old crisp packet. There were scratches all down the side.

‘What have you done?’ my mother said. Her voice sounded stern.

‘Its fine!’ he said ‘See?’ He pointed to the car. ‘So how about we all go for a ride eh? How about a road trip?’ He was shouting and sprays of spit came out as he spoke.

‘Are you crazy?’ my mother said. Her mouth hung open in a mean kind of smile.

‘Let’s go! Let’s just go,’ he was saying. ‘How about it Suzie?’

I didn’t know what to say, just stared back at him, at the bulbous bump, his wide glassy eyes, the bashed in car.

‘You need to sort yourself out,’ my mother said.

‘We’re going.’ He took a step inside and looked at me expectantly. My mother stood in his way. ‘Don’t test me, Nora,’ he said. His face quickly became tense and pained, like he had just stood on something sharp. He tried to step inside the house again and my mother told him that if he took another step she was calling the police. It was daylight outside. A man and a dog walked past behind my father on the path. It was Jeremy, he was wearing one of his bags. He looked at my parents and then at me behind them still sat on the floor.

‘Is everything ...’ Jeremy said, letting the ‘ing’ hang in the air.

‘We’re fine!’ my father yelled waving his hands. Jeremy looked strange stood next to my father. He was about a head smaller than him. With his combed hair and tartan scarf he looked like he belonged in a nice park somewhere. Not here talking to my father, with his brown leather jacket, his cut head, his loud American voice.

‘I think it would be best...’ he was saying to my father. I didn’t want to listen anymore. I slipped upstairs. Sat on my bed. Tuned out the rest. Eventually the door slammed. I watched the car drive off from my bedroom window.

My mother was sitting at the kitchen table staring at the wall across from her.

‘God I’m sorry, Suzie,’ she said when I came over. I stroked her hair and made a joke about camping but I don’t think she was listening.

Later, a man came around to change the locks.

‘It’s just for the time being,’ my mother said. ‘Just until he fixes himself up.’ But I hoped that he wouldn’t. That he and the car would just break down somewhere and not come back.

July was damp and grey. School broke up and whenever my mother had to go away for work, I went to her friend’s house down the road. A woman called Linda, who was an artist so my mother said she ‘understood.’ Linda didn’t have a TV and since it was raining all the time, we spent a lot of time cooped up in her kitchen, cutting up newspapers, fabric and cardboard and sticking them together in ugly ways. ‘Children need to make things with their hands!’ Linda would say and whatever I made, even if it was newspaper scrunched into balls, Linda looked at me with watery eyes and said it was wonderful.

If my mother was late to collect me, I sat by the door listening out for the clip clop of her shoes on the path. I was good at imagining all the bad things that could happen. That the train had crashed or that she’d fallen down the steps and cracked her head open. I told Linda once, and I guess she must have said something because soon after that we started hearing from my father again.

At first there were phone calls. Sometimes I would shake my head and whisper *no no no*, but my mother would make me take the phone.

‘How about a rabbit?’ he asked one time as soon as I said hello.

‘What?’ I said.

‘Would you like a rabbit for your birthday?’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘Well would you rather have a boyfriend or a rabbit?’ I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to talk to him, didn’t want to hear his strange strained voice, to have to answer stupid questions.

‘A rabbit it is!’ he said. I passed the phone back to my mother. She took it into her bedroom and they spoke quietly for a long time.

One morning she told me that he was taking me to the cinema.

‘You can see whatever film you want,’ my mother said. ‘He’s really looking forward to seeing you. He’s really been pulling himself together.’

‘Ok,’ I said.

‘And he’s going to bring you back later, and then later we’ll see...’

‘Ok,’ I said again.

This time he knocked on the door quietly. The bump had shrunk and his face looked thin. His chin and cheeks were grey with stubble.

‘Oh, Frank,’ my mother said.

He came in and hugged me tightly. His jumper smelt of smoke and other people’s houses. I stared at the floor where his shoes were. They were the same as ever. Lace ups made of sturdy brown leather. The same ones he bought every few years when his old ones had worn out. I wondered how he could keep his shoes so clean. I didn’t want to look at his big red eyes, my mother’s strange expression. In the car I sat in the backseat and answered all his questions with ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘fine.’

We saw a film called Cats and Dogs. The cats spoke like Russian spies and had ugly fat faces and cackling laughs. The dogs were serious and American. They won in the end. My father slept through most of it though. He started snoring in the middle,

all through the quiet part when one of the dogs looked liked it was going to die. He kept snoring even when I nudged him.

‘Sorry, Suzie,’ he said when we were walking out of the dark at the end. ‘I’m just tired. I’m just not feeling well.’ And he did look tired. In the light his eyes were still half closed. The skin around them was yellow and veiny, like an old bruise.

‘It’s ok,’ I said. He pulled me towards him limply.

‘Do you want to get a chocolate bar? How about a chocolate bar for my favourite girl?’

In the supermarket he said he had to get a few things and when I found him again he had a basket. Poking through the blanket of bread, pasta and salad leaves I could see the glinting red top and clean narrow neck of a bottle of vodka. I stared at the basket, wondering where he would be cooking and eating and drinking. Where he was sleeping. What he did with all his time? I saw him how he would look later, the way he sometimes looked at the school gates, swaying with white all around the edges of his mouth and his white hair uncombed like he’d just got out of bed.

He saw me looking at the basket and jerked it to his other side.

‘I’m just going to buy this. Wait here,’ he said and disappeared again.

He drove me home and I sat in the back seat, staring out the window. We didn’t try to make conversation. He parked the car down the road from our house and handed me a piece of paper with song lyrics typed on. The paper was crumpled like he’d been carrying it around in his pocket for too long.

‘Remember the song?’ he asked. I nodded. It was a song called ‘That’s My Daughter in the Water’, that we had on CD. He played it whenever he was feeling soft or sorry or sad. On the piece of paper the title was underlined and above the title ‘To Suzie’ was written in bold.

He turned around to face me in the back seat and started singing it shakily. *That's my daughter in the water, every time she fell, I caught her, every time she fell...*' It was horrible. I willed him to stop. All day his voice had been dull and low. But now as he sang it squeaked. *That's my daughter in the water, I lost every time I fought her, I lost every time...*'

He smiled at me desperately and it didn't look right. Like his cheeks were being pulled up by somebody else's hands. I fixed my eyes on the back of his seat. When he finished singing he turned back around and started speaking to the windscreen in a low, quivering voice about how he was sorry, how he loved us so so much, but he was getting better, things would be better soon. While he spoke I folded the sheet of paper until it couldn't be folded any more and let it fall to the floor.

'We can see another film next week,' he was saying. 'Would you like that? It would mean a lot to me...'

I got out of the car while he was speaking. 'Suzie!' he called after me. 'The song!' I didn't look back at him. I knew he'd be watching, making sure I got to the door, waiting to see my mother. So I skipped. Down the street, across the road, up to my front door. I skipped the whole way.