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## My Father, Reading

In a photograph from the 1930s my grandfather grins at the camera in a summer-bright outfield. He appears entirely unaware of his son, dawdling in a gray pool of light nearby, unwieldy in the mascot's uniform that he will not grow into for at least another season. I see now that my father never quite stepped out of that shadow. He sensed, I think, that he was in danger of fading out of view.

As an adult, it was to books that my father brought his great unease. At a time when the paperback industry was making book ownership a casual event, my father remained insistently loyal to hardcover editions. Anything softer he suspected of flimsiness, of impulse, of impermanence. He devoted hours to shopping for massive bookshelves made from exotic woods and arranging them in our living room, where they lined every wall. When friends innocently asked to borrow his books, my father would stiffen momentarily before agreeing, and he would fret until each book was returned. For grammar school graduation he gave me a gift edition of *Kon-Tiki*, Thor Heyerdahl's account of crossing the Pacific Ocean on a raft. When I dropped it accidentally in the bathtub, he seemed astonished at my mother's laughter and at the spectacle of the pages bunching and drifting in the soapy water as the book's spine gave way and dropped limply to the bottom.

My father read with ceremonial concentration, nearly always in isolation. His leather chair could be gently adjusted in every direction, but it remained aggressive, immovable in the claims it made to space and to silence. An assortment of gadgets—spring-loaded teak reading trays, the newest halogen bulbs—came and went, but at the end of every day the book he was reading lay closed at a corner of a small table by my father's chair, his place neatly marked with a leather strip.

My father worked hard to ingrain in my sister and me the same elevated commitment to books. Our family trips to Civil War border states and reconstructed historic villages seemed more like rewards for the advance reading we had done at home than like vacations. (Our single attempt to unwind mindlessly in the Florida sun was a disaster, punctuated from the first day on the beach by my father's ceaseless fidgeting.) We never subscribed to the big picture and news magazines that glowed throughout my childhood on other people's coffee tables, to *Life* or to *Look*, whose spectacular photographs I understood from my father to be lazy substitutes for text. I secretly looked forward to dentist appointments, when I could gorge myself in the waiting

room on the glossy magazines in which foot-high images of astronauts and of the Kennedys towered over the print.

I was forever concocting excuses to visit our neighbors, whose father worked for *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Time spent curled up on their living room floor with one of the bulky red volumes felt stolen, for my sister and I were actually forbidden to read encyclopedias: unsigned writing was destined, in my own father's view, to be superficial, untrustworthy. If we wanted to know about *balloons*, we had only to tell him and he would gladly bring home whole books. But what if we only wanted to browse among things starting with "B"—what if "balloons" hadn't yet crossed our minds?—what if we were simply ready to move on past "A," past "abacus," "anthrax," "astronomy," past "Aztecs"?

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My father was a passionate advocate of museums. Most Sunday afternoons we drove along the lake shore toward the classical monoliths that clustered around the Chicago Loop. At the enormous marble staircase just inside the Art Institute's front entrance, he would pause for a portentous moment before taking my sister and me each by the hand, and together we would all climb to Caillebotte's elegant Paris boulevard under a wet crowd of umbrellas. As we walked the galleries with him, my father frequently reminded us that we were lucky to live in the same city as Georges Seurat's enormous canvases of stippled figures: the lovers and the children and the monkey blurred in *La Grande Jatte*'s sunlight and shadows; the parasols and the bulging bustles of bourgeois ladies enjoying their own Sunday afternoon.

Under unsteady light at the Field Museum of Natural History, papier mâché Indians rode bareback toward campfires around which gaping buffalo carcasses had been pointedly strewn. Everything in those diorama cases looked dusty and stale. In the Shedd Aquarium's tanks, though, big, ancient things still lived: tortoises; giant squid; garfish. Even my lecturing father gave in to silence when mystery brushed us there, among the dim, serpentine corridors lined with softly lit glass. As we squinted into the soupy water, a lamprey eel would clamp to the window an open, raw mouthful of sucking teeth—circles upon concentric circles descending deep into a darkening gullet—or an octopus would press a set of gooey suckers right up to our horrified eyes.

For my father, it was the Museum of Science and Industry that remained most charged, most redolent with educational potential. The museum's theme, loudly proclaimed, was order: technology's victorious harnessing of the natural world to human ingenuity. Behind a long curve of Lake Shore Drive, stone steps mounted in breathy succession to the tremendous columns that framed the museum's entrance. Throughout the exhibition halls great machines labored—taken captive whole, transported from far away and displayed alive and intact, for our edification.

At one end of the museum, a small cable railway descended into the shaft of a model coal mine. Deep beneath the surface a booming pulse simulated the vibrations of mining machinery as darkness tightened around us. At the other end of the museum, a low opening gave into the interior of a World War II German submarine. Tight against

the curving walls of the sub were packed rows of bunks, blankets and sheets tucked neatly in place. A table was set with napkins and silverware; panels of instrument gauges still blinked brightly, poised to measure depth and pressure and oxygen levels; and switches stood ready to launch torpedoes. Awe transported my father so completely here that he often forgot to add a lesson on the evils of Nazism: to drop soundlessly off the edge of the earth to where the ocean presses every inch of metal with extraordinary force, and to sustain life there for months—is that not a miracle of human achievement?

Yet I frequently had the sense that unpredictable forces lurked, just barely held in check, at the shadowy limits of the long corridors, where shouts of parents and children kept echoing. In defiance of my father—emcee of the physical world, eager to initiate his daughters into the elaborate logic of science—much of the museum seemed imbued with intricate, mysterious life, tuned to interior rhythms. An electric train looped around an enormous enclosure, its track lined with tiny, stiff shrubs and clumps of miniature houses clustered around platforms and crossings, all obsessively complete down to the doorknobs and hazard warnings. At regular intervals the train would disappear into a tunnel and emerge with a metallic, scraping whistle that seemed aimed in some private direction, hardly meant to reach the eager crowds pressing in. Beyond a long hallway filled with the latest farm equipment lay plastic trays of incubating chicken eggs, perpetually hatching new batches of stumbling birds. As I came around a tractor or a combine in the dull, bumpy fluorescence of the hall, a wave of chirping would suddenly surge at me. There were always a couple of newborn chicks uncoiling at the ragged outer edges of split shells, tufts of down flowering softly against the scaly sticks of their legs as they dried for the first time under the hot lights.

My father had little patience for my favorite exhibit, wedged into a corner of an entry hall. At regular intervals a vat of liquid nitrogen, condensed from gas by extreme cold, was placed on a small dais. An assortment of familiar objects would be lowered into the vat and then drawn out slowly so that their peculiar transformations could be publicly savored. A red rubber ball would break like glass instead of bouncing when it was dropped. A carnation would splinter before us into a thousand wispy shards when its petals were stroked. Within the wondering circle huddled there, the world seemed deliberately askew: steam was cold, soft hard, the elemental fugitive. I always lost interest when the speaker began to list the industrial applications of liquid nitrogen; I loved the uselessness of the broken ball and the shattered flower.

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I was surely the child of hope: of hope's peculiar blindness and cruelties, and of hope's great appetite for lessons and instruction.

My father drafted one of his medical patients, a Holocaust refugee, to teach me piano. Once a week after school my mother drove me into Dr. Korenman's city neighborhood of brick bungalows and two-family houses. The Korenmans lived in a handful of plain rooms, the entryway lined with a rubber runner over worn carpet, the

furniture covered with clear plastic. The salon was filled nearly to the walls by the baby grand piano; Dr. Korenman and I had to edge in sideways in order to reach the piano bench, and my mother had to wait through the hour in another room. Every lesson left me in tears: each time I hit a wrong note Dr. Korenman brought his fist down on my hand, bruising any finger that got caught over the hard hump of a black key. Yet Mrs. Korenman would always appear cheerfully in the dining room, at the end of our session, with a precisely arranged tray of ginger cookies and cocoa, and I always complied with the ritual discussion of interesting events from the past week, followed by earnest goodbye kisses. “Now you can tell all your friends that you can play a Bach minuet,” Dr. Korenman would say to me at the door, oblivious, as he brought his cheek down to my still-wet face.

At home, a white bust of Franz Schubert mounted by the music stand—a birthday gift from the Korenmans—extended my sense of being placed under permanent observation. The browning, shredded Scotch tape that I had hurriedly slapped on the back of Schubert’s crumbling hair after an undignified fall reflected the sloppiness that I knew doomed my technique. Yet I was still flattered when my father stood beside the piano while I practiced or called on me to entertain dinner parties with a Mozart sonata or Beethoven’s *Für Elise*, and I even gave in to my father’s suggestion that I follow my cousin Sarah in taking violin lessons. Not a single sound that came out of that instrument pleased me. Years later I discovered that my mother had pleaded in secret with my violin teacher to make me quit, because she could not endure my playing. But I had long since put a fatal crack in the violin, faking an accident on the basement stairs.

My father urged me as well to learn social dancing—though I cannot remember ever seeing him on a dance floor. In the 1960s Jews were still excluded from membership in the Women’s Club, a porticoed, manicured building with a long interior staircase under a grand chandelier, where the dancing classes were held on Saturday nights. Joining forces with the parents of Bob Salzman and Paul Klein and Liz Samuels, my parents put pressure on the class’s public high school sponsors so that the four of us could join. White gloves were mandated for all the girls, dark suits and ties with white shirts for the boys. I was always struggling one last time with my pantyhose in the powder room when the signal came to join the line in the long foyer. Everything—our fussed-over hair, the flocked wallpaper, the elaborate chandeliers, the pile carpet—seemed translated into a soft blur. We were matched up, two by two, for the dramatic entrance into the ballroom, where girls and boys parted into ragged waves that deposited them on opposite sides of the room. Mr. and Mrs. Strohmer, our instructors, demonstrated each dance together in the spotlight center of the room. First they would glide in, arm in arm, like a movie couple: she in an unlikely yellow skirt that retained an element of the provocative even in a solemn two-step; he in a string tie and heavily styled hair, at once Gene Autry and Maurice Chevalier. They smiled unceasingly at one another. Then they each took a bow, signaling that the boys could cross over to the girls’ side of the room and select partners.

Week after week I wondered in despair about my father in the balcony. What did he see as he watched his daughter, standing alone in the stiff party dress that she’d

settled for at the end of an anxious stream of visits to plus-size shops in the city, waiting to be chosen, dying to disappear?

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Sirens spooked me throughout my childhood years. Ambulances and fire engines and the tornado warnings that punctuated August and September in the gathering Midwestern heat all left me trembling with the dark possibility of air raids. Every Tuesday morning at precisely 10:30, in a test of our municipal defense system, a sinewy thread of sound used to uncoil suddenly from some unknown point, over and over, for a forever-long five minutes. No matter what, when the whining started up I listened and waited for the worst: for the air to become unbreathable, for some blast to pulverize us in its pounding wake. I was mystified by my parents' refusal to build a bomb shelter in our basement storage room even after I had collected sample blueprints at City Hall for their perusal. *Why would we want to be the only living human beings left on the planet?* my father asked me, cutting short the discussion with a dismissive laugh. I only gave up stockpiling toilet paper and cans of tuna fish, filched one by one from kitchen cabinets, after hours of digging a uselessly shallow pit with a friend in the empty lot across the alley.

My father had his own plans for the basement. A corner storage area there would make a perfect home laboratory for the two of us, a snug retreat. He began scouring bookstores for biographies of women scientists, especially doctors: Marie Curie, Karen Horney, Elizabeth Blackwell. And he helped me to clear a space and set up the biology set that he gave me for my birthday, lining up the test tubes and beakers and the bunsen burner behind the microscope that I wrapped gently at the end of each day in neatly fitting cotton. My father presented me with a rabbit's liver from the research lab where he was working—my first scientific specimen—and I filled jars of formaldehyde with grasshoppers that I trapped in the backyard.

I was already sneaking into my father's study to read the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and my father's gastroenterology books, even though flashbacks of naked torsos bulging with tumors frequently kept me up at night. And I had long been clandestinely dispensing to neighborhood children medical samples that I had discovered in shoeboxes in my parents' closet. Now my father gave me some of his old medical school lab texts to keep and study in my own room, and he surprised me one night by undraping at my bedside a set of used surgical tools. By myself, under the covers, I touched each one. Even in the dark, bereft of their glitter, they seemed resonant, loaded with drama being passed, somehow, to me. On a rare weekend afternoon when he wasn't on call, my father and I laid out the different scalpels on an old table in the basement and dissected a frog together. After we had sliced through the chest my father parted the rubbery skin dramatically with the tips of his fingers and revealed a complete anatomical world. We painstakingly removed the organs, made English and Latin labels, and collected them in small jars which my father reached over my head to place, one by one, on a high secure shelf.

Once in a while as we worked I could hear my mother, slowed by laundry, making

her heavy, careful way down the unlit basement stairs. A coin that had fallen out of someone's pocket would knock loudly in the machine through a wash cycle; or, later, a thick, hot draft from the dryer would suddenly force its way under the crack in the lab door. But my father never even looked up; our work together felt complete, enclosed, hermetic.

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Upstairs, my father settled alone into his reading chair. In the evenings he rarely roused himself except to search out more of the cherry pipe tobacco that soaked his corner of the living room in a petulant, unnaturally sweet cloud, or to stare in a daze at the tropical fish that he had collected in an extravagant tank by the window. And just a few days after my bat mitzvah he suddenly announced his intention to ask for a divorce and to sell our house. At that moment, my father's silently congealed displeasure lurched upward, in a thick bubble, toward the glassy surface of our household.

Our house had been lived in, earlier, by a cartoonist, and throughout the rooms valuable mementos from his colleagues were stored. In her haste to put the pain and humiliation and loss behind her, my mother hardly paused to look at anything, abandoning the personally inscribed Dick Tracy drawing and the signed first editions of *Little Orphan Annie* and of *The Gumps*. But when we flicked the basement light to begin packing down there, neither of us could help seeing for the first time the wounds that I had restlessly inflicted while life went on, unattending, throughout the rest of the house. Beyond my mother's neat laundry room and the laboratory where my father and I had collected and catalogued, the plaster in the boiler room was pitted from the searches for saltpeter that I'd carried out after reading a book on Revolutionary War military tactics. I had for years been gathering the bound comic strips stored in our attic and then hiding behind the basement wet bar to deface with crayons the outlined figures. And I had enlisted the help of cousins and neighbor kids in gouging rough holes in the life-size Gasoline Alley characters that were stacked against the wall in the playroom and scribbling with magic markers over their eyes and mouths. Near the lab door, the picnic table was stored on its end, and the frog carcass that my father and I had forgotten was still stapled—emptied, dried out, taut—to the splintering wood where we had cut it open.

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Picture us later, at lunch in Manhattan. My father has brought his new bride and his two daughters on his second honeymoon, to show them New York City. This morning my father takes me aside on Fifth Avenue and presses ten dollars into my hand. He and his wife would like to be alone for lunch. "Take good care of your sister," he tells me, "You're the oldest." The two of us reel along the unfamiliar blocks until I find a window menu that includes items that we recognize. Too late I realize—after we have been ushered into the candlelit room, where the unceasing cacophony of the street is stilled by the lush blanket of carpet—after Anita has hoisted herself onto

a banquette, and ordered and devoured a hamburger and fries and a milkshake—that the great store of cash that my father has entrusted to me will barely cover our bill. How could we have used up all that money? By the time we find the street corner where we are supposed to meet my father again, I am dizzy with shame. But he and his wife hardly turn from one another, under the traffic light, when we rush up. To my amazement, my father quickly takes my bewildered account of undeserved luxury as evidence that our time and his money have been well spent, that we have learned a lesson.

In the evening my sister and I agree to try something else new: ordering in Chinese food by ourselves in our own hotel room high above the incandescent city. On the king-size bed Anita lines up the cardboard cartons, still loaded with the egg foo young and sweet-and-sour chicken and egg rolls that my father has lavishly called for—more than the two of us could ever eat—and settles down in the dark with the television’s remote control unit, a novelty we have never had to ourselves before. I retreat to the bright bathroom with *Moby-Dick*, my final college reading assignment, and fall asleep on the floor with the impossibly thick paperback under my head.

And picture us at dinner in Chicago: the determined father opening the menu; making an inviting sweep across both pages; encouraging his young daughters to choose boldly, not to hold back, to order à la carte. Avocado salad, squid, ossobucco. Try it, taste it, leave it if you don’t like it, order something else. My father’s mood rises, inflates, envelops our little table, pronounces us in the midst of a good time. “Like when we all went to New York, when we stayed in that beautiful hotel and you girls splurged on lunch and watched color TV with remote control.”

The steadily diminishing liquid in the bottle next to my father and the thickness of his speech make me afraid to look directly at my sister. Soon my father might knock the wineglass a little too hard with his spoon, repeating a point that we may have missed because we do not seem to be giving him our full attention. Soon our waiter will hear that noise, just a little loud in this elegant restaurant, and return to inquire solicitously if there is anything else we need. Soon the glass will break, bleeding burgundy across the white tablecloth, and we will be leaving with barely controlled speed. And soon my father will be riding traffic to the taunting rhythm of red and green lights, silently cutting across lanes without signaling, breathing close on the bumper of the car in front of us, holding down the gap between cars to scary inches.

Who were we to you? Your dinner guests, fumbling with heavy menus. Teacher’s pets, your perfect dolls, your always audience; your dream girls, your protégés; your notes in bottles, left to drift back to shore. What you imagined, what you hoped for, what you did not know how to love.

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I was barely six years old when my father sat me down with his copy of *A Baby Is Born*, to lay out the facts of human reproduction. As he earnestly read to me the story of the long, determined journey of the sperm toward its destined egg, my eye drifted

warily across the pages of pictures of mothers and, especially, fathers who had been undressed there, at the breasts and the casually suspended penises which line drawings sketched out with unsatisfying tact. My father pressed me for questions: the human body is beautiful, he insisted, there is no reason for shame. Not long afterwards the daughter of the local Methodist minister and I amused ourselves one day after school by exploring the contents of my mother's dresser, while my father mowed the lawn. We ran out to him, eagerly displaying the mysterious rubber disk that had popped out of its flying saucer case at the far corner of one drawer, but he waved us off with brusque embarrassment. I do not think, after all, that he could manage to say it to us: *pleasure*.

In the bright light that sang over our block in summer, soft lawns coasted, cosseted beneath elms and oaks and lindens that reached, nearly touching, across the quiet street. It was more than a vision to my father, though, more than upward mobility; a claim rather, a great grasping for place and possession driven by edgy desire. He pored over gardening and home decorating manuals, generating plans. From the backyard, all summer long and into the early months of autumn, I could see my father clinging to the roof, clearing the matted leaves that accumulated endlessly in the gutters. On the most luminous of weekend days, when neighbors passed unconsciously between one another's yards, half-eaten fruit or sloshing drink or bat and ball in hand, my father was always alone up there with another volume that he had picked up in the home improvement section of Krochs & Brentano's, struggling to decipher the best way to fix a leak or to insulate against the coming winter. Every so often a dark hunk of rotted leaves would break suddenly free and slide down the roof and the bricks below in a scratchy rush; and sometimes I would hear my father's cordovans skid to a nervous stop at a gutter, and a muttered oath. But he never gave up working until the end of the day, when he would descend to the back of the house without a word, dump on the steps whatever notebook or binder he had been consulting, slam the screen door behind him, and head heavily upstairs for a long shower.

On the weekends that I spent at my cousins' house, knowledge was miraculously relieved of such an insistent sense of mission and such isolation. A train set sprawled across the concrete expanse of their basement, where my uncle could usually be found with one or another of my cousins, testing out a homemade bridge or adding a more complicated switchback. My uncle actually seemed intrigued by the messy hybrids—half metal, half wood—that emerged from our Erector Sets and Lincoln Logs; and he even seemed to enjoy the acrid aroma of fizzled science experiments, and of airplane cement lingering around the delicate balsa gliders that we spent long afternoons cutting and gluing and then tried out in the yard in the thinning light after dinner. Our curiosity was hardly innocent: the telegraph system with which my cousin Danny and I connected every room in my aunt and uncle's house (following instructions gleaned from library books) consisted entirely of materials that we had stolen from the local hardware store. Yet our mischief remained, nonetheless, a form of play, rooted in delight. And delight fed Danny's father, too, a mechanical engineer who could explain anything: when it turned suddenly dark all around us on the way to the Dairy Queen, Uncle Arnold taught us to count the seconds between flashes of lightning and booms of thunder so



that we could pinpoint how far away the storm was.

But my father could not unburden reading from his great weight of need, his aching fear of being ordinary. Long after we were grown, when my sister and I visited he would lay his new books across the handmade coffee table that he had just bought, his shining acquisitions. He would speak of new magazine subscriptions—of his discovery of *The New York Review of Books* and of *Antaeus*—with an enthusiasm that projected feverishly his faith in fresh commitments, as though the world's promises to him might yet, somehow, be made good. And on one throbbing, bright Sunday when his wife admitted at the dinner table her fondness for the novels of Leon Uris, my father's sense of betrayal brought him to his feet in rage, and he hurled his chair across the room at her.

Tragically, for most of his last years my father could not read at all: in one eye, surgery after surgery failed to repair a detached retina; in the other, an inoperable cataract completed his virtual blindness. He clearly saw himself in the classic American writers whose work he hoarded—Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau—restless, iconoclastic seekers rather than failures; and he had loved the compact Modern Library editions that settled them snugly into the palm of his hand. But now they hovered, nearly invisible, out of reach, their print blurry and smudged. He strained to sift from behind his clouded eye glimpses of a large print edition of the kind of popular novel that he had once dismissed with contempt.

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When I left my father for the last time, after his cancer diagnosis, he lay curled alone in bed against a pillow; his body already looked too empty for death to make a difference. No one had come to see him in the hospital except doctors and daughters; he no longer had friends or colleagues, and it had been years since he had spoken to his sister or his cousins. Yet another marriage was breaking up, and he had just rented a new apartment. His bookcase and reading chair had, as always, been unpacked first. Mounted on the shelves were the same books: the fat biographies of Churchill and Hitler and Cather; the complete sets of Emerson and of Proust; the histories of World War I, of the Jews, of Western intellectual life. They seemed as loaded as ever with expectation, yet they barely anchored the room. Around the hastily stacked cardboard boxes the smell of disappointment was still fresh.

On a rosewood bookshelf my father had already lined up the matching volumes of Will and Ariel Durant's *Story of Civilization*, a long row of softly colored dust jackets fading into one another; on another shelf he had begun to lay out his Venetian glassware, souvenirs from vacations with his last wife. Beneath a magnifying glass on his reading table a book was jammed open; when I stepped closer, a few swollen words shivered in the yawning ring of light. My father had warned us never to leave books like that, and I was surprised that he did not rise, vigilant and fragile, to smooth the bent spine and close the pages.