

## The Workshop

Mitch is out in his workshop again, our former dilapidated one-car garage, repurposed. I'd like to just get myself and the kids in the Subaru and shove off, but he would complain about that later. He treats every outing like it's a two-year whaling voyage in the 1800's. We must say goodbye. I'm careful not to look through the garage door windows. Some things can't be unseen, I know. Take it from a woman who once had the misfortune of seeing Mr. Nibbles—no shit, Mr. Nibbles—the second-grade class gerbil devouring his littler of six. What would be the equivalent in this situation? Mitch crying? Mitch just sitting there staring at a wall? Mitch with a blowtorch to his head?

“We're off to my mom's,” I say when he answers my knock. He kisses me on the cheek like I'm his sister or have some sort of infectious disease. “Drive safe,” he says. “Text me when you get there.” He waves to Audrey and Ezra, who are already strapped into their seats. They wave back. Hard to tell what they're thinking. Kids can be amazingly difficult to read sometimes.

It's a two hour drive up to Canton but the kids are used to the trip. They've got their snacks, their workbooks and books. Audrey, who has recently turned eight, has her favorite doll—the trashy one who looks like she has more indulgent parents—and Ezra, who will be five next month, has his stick. No video games or movies for this family. Nope. We old-school it. This is mostly just the result of a tight budget, but Mitch and I have adopted it with pride. Audrey chafes a little under the strictures, savvy enough to understand what she's missing out on. For Ezra's part, he couldn't care less. Even if you gave him an iPad, he'd still end up playing with sticks and rocks instead. I know this doesn't bode well for his cognitive prospects, but

Mitch thinks that it might be an indication of his genius. It's not like I'm ready to throw in the towel on the little man, not at all. He's a sweet kid, and sensitive and loving, and in my opinion not half as squirrely as most of the kids in his class. Still, I'm lining up his IEP.

As a parent you can't help but wonder when you look at your kids if they are going to make it in this world. I'm not at all worried about Audrey; she's got the smarts, the independence, the boldness, and the stomach for life. You can't underestimate the importance of stomach. I mean, just last March, when her class took that field trip to the meat-packing plant (Yes, it turns out the teacher, Mrs. Bradley, is a card-carrying member of PETA, and yes, we parents should have been paying better attention to permission slips being shoved under our noses, but it really had been a loooooong winter and those of us who weren't on the verge of nervous collapse due to seasonal affective disorder were just glad to see that the kids would be getting out and doing something. And besides, the place had a benign enough sounding name—Green Valley Foods, or something). At any rate, almost all the kids came back somewhat traumatized and born again vegetarians, but not Audrey. In trying to talk to her about it using the guidelines the school sent out to all the parents along with sincere apologies and stern reminders that permission slips existed for a reason, blah, blah, blah, I didn't read the whole thing, she said to me, "How did they think the chicken nuggets were made?" How indeed?

But Ezra? I don't like to say it, but he might have too much of his daddy in him.



I wish Nora hadn't already strapped the kids into the car when she knocked on the door. It would have been nice to get some hugs before they left. And what's the matter with that? It's not as if anybody ever sat across from a psychotherapist and said, "My father hugged me too

much as a child.” And, sure, we get into our cars and drive off some place almost every day, but that doesn’t mean that we’ll necessarily come back.

The day my father never came back was my fourth birthday. I awoke to the sounds of my parents fighting, which was how I often woke up on the days my father didn’t leave for work at 5 a.m. After a while, I heard the front door slam and I went to my window to look out. I saw my dad climb into the truck of his welder buddy from work. It idled for a few minutes in the driveway, and I thought that maybe they were just talking. It was January and one of those hard, cold, clear mornings that burns your nostrils. But then the truck drove off with my dad still in it. I came downstairs to find Mom smoking in the kitchen, standing in front of the stove as if she were cooking breakfast, but there wasn’t anything on the stove to cook. Where did Dad go with Tim? I asked. Now that I think back on it, I can’t remember if she looked at me when she answered, but she said, Daddy went to go get you a birthday cake, hon. Do you want cloud eggs or sunshine eggs?—which was our way of saying scrambled or fried. I thought that it was odd that Dad had gone with Tim to get my birthday cake. We had a station wagon; why not take that instead? It didn’t seem likely that Tim had wanted to help pick out my cake, since he’d never seemed to like me all that much: he always called me pipsqueak and punched me on the arm so hard that it would be sore the next day. Did I know that I would never see my dad again? I guess not. I had cloud eggs for breakfast.

I look at the pile of scrap metal in front of me and let my eyes go soft trying to see something in it. What would Ezra see? A secret world, a map of the universe, answers to life’s greatest riddles? I’m not sure what he sees when he stares at a rock or a tree so intently, but I’m sure he sees something. Nora thinks he’s delayed, but I think he’s just special. In this day and

age, isn't being content with the simple, as opposed to always wanting more, bigger, better somewhat akin to a magical power? The rest of us live off discontentment like it's food.

I hate to think of him spending the whole day with Nora's step father, Larry. Larry says that the problem with my generation is that we never had a buddy die in our arms. *You've never had warm blood on your hands or looked death in the face and walked away*, he says. *When you've seen the kind of shit I saw over in Nam, then you know what it's like to live, and you know what it's like to die, and you know that everything in between is just bullshit.*

Here's the thing: I'm a believer in Karma, and I try not to think bad about people, but Larry is the sort of person whom it's hard to not think bad about. It's almost as if he wants you to dislike him. Maybe he just reminds me a little of Tim. Maybe he just reminds me a little of my father.



Christ. Larry's Mustang is in the driveway. Usually when we come up for these visits he's off golfing or bowling or shooting. Here's the thing: Yes, Larry makes my mother—for whatever completely unidentifiable reason—happy, and yes, he is almost solely responsible for pulling her out of her depression after Dad passed away, for which I will always owe him a sincere debt of gratitude, but Jesus, what a stuff-shirted prick. I can almost hear Audrey's eyes rolling in her head when we pull up next to his car, which I make sure to park at least five feet away from, but Ezra, bless his tiny heart, actually says, "Pop-pop!" with a naked excitement in his voice. To be fair, Larry does seem to have an affinity for Ezra as well. He thinks we molly-coddle him and sees all of Ezra's sticks and rocks not as indicators of cognitive deficiencies or beacons of shining genius, but as a sign of Ezra's deep inner manliness, which he, Larry William

Cockburn, Jr., as the most masculine person in Ezra's life, is thereby tasked with nurturing and bringing forth.

My mother still lives in the same house where I grew up—a 1950's ranch that hasn't seen a new coat of paint or stick of furniture since 1975. The walls that aren't orange are paneled in wood, except the one in the living room that is completely mirrored. All of the fixtures are shiny brass and the carpets are mustard yellow shag. Despite myself, walking into this house still feels like coming home. The one room that's different from how it was when I lived here is the downstairs den, which Larry has undertaken to outfit like the inside of a taxidermist's showroom. Deer heads, wild turkeys, ducks, angry-looking raccoons, a couple of pheasants, and one armadillo—bagged on a trip to Florida—line the walls and stand in the place of furniture. The coffee table is actually made out of two raccoons holding up a glass table top. Everyone but Larry avoids this room, except Ezra, who imagines it as a forest teeming with his wild animal friends. It is to this room that Ezra immediately runs when we enter the house. The Morgue, Audrey calls it. To Ezra, it's Eden.

Mom is in the kitchen, as usual, chopping onions and wiping her tears on a well-used pink tissue. I imagine her as a giant sequoia, at once indomitable and fragile, with an inner core of rings that would tell the story of her life—which years were rainy, which years were sunny, which years were dry, and which years were ravaged by fire and earthquake.

“What's for lunch?” I ask.

“Chili. Do the kids eat chili?”

Do the kids eat chili. Of course the kids don't eat chili. The kids eat chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese and treat all other food like it might be contaminated with Anthrax. “That's

fine,” I say. Thankfully, Audrey is already out of earshot in the living room, setting up her basket weaving loom or whatever it is.

My mother’s ancient gray cat, whom she calls Prissy but the rest of the family has dubbed Hissy, is busy preening herself on the only kitchen stool not occupied by knitting projects or hunting magazines. When I walk over to the chair, the cat gives me a look that a witch might use to curse one’s family for generations, then hisses loudly and bolts off the chair and through the cat flap on the patio door. She disappears into the clump of trees that separates my parents’ house from the nearby trailer park, which everyone refers to as The Woods, like it might be the incarnation of some fairytale forest of ancient oaks and majestic evergreens instead of the scrubby collection of honeysuckle and dying ash trees that it actually is. I see Ezra and Larry out there, too, vanishing into the underbrush as well. I try not to think about the kind of conversation they might be having. Ezra probably won’t be listening anyway. He loves The Woods—so many sticks and rocks.

I sit down in the newly vacated chair and rest my elbows on the island counter. “Anything I can do to help?” I ask. I know what my mother’s response to this question will be, which is why I am willing to ask it. She never wants help. Any attempts at help are treated almost as insults, God bless her. If someone were to walk into my kitchen and ask me that question, I would hand them a list.

“No thanks, honey,” she says. “What is Mitch up to today?”



I’m thinking a birdfeeder. Or maybe a birdhouse. One of those elaborate ones that look like a New England church or Victorian mansion. No, something more rustic. I have some

soldering rods and rusty aluminum. I could make something manly out of metal with my propane blowtorch and some ingenuity. Okay, so it isn't the next great thing, but it's a start, a jumping off point. I have just fired up the blowtorch when I hear a pounding at the door. Fox doesn't wait for an answer, but just walks in. In his right hand he has a six pack of Miller High Life and in his left an oxy-acetylene torch. "I saw that the Subu was gone, man, so I thought you would be in here needing this." He says.

"The beer or the torch?" I say.

"Yeah, man. Exactly."

Fox's real name is Fergus (a family name handed down from father to son for generations) but the only person other than his mother to call him that got a split lip and a bloody nose before the "s" was out of his mouth. Even the teachers in school used to avoid the name by calling him Mr. MacPherson. In addition to the name Fergus, Fox also inherited from his Scottish ancestors a bright orange shock of hair, which was now thinning at the top but showing no signs of fading in color. We were best friends growing up—getting in fights on the playground in third grade, smoking doobies out my bedroom window in high school, always talking about girls neither of us would ever date—and even though we have next to nothing in common now, we know each other so well that it doesn't even matter.

"I'm not a certified welder, Fox. I don't know how to use that thing."

"What's to know? You turn this knob here, this knob here, light it with a flint striker, and you're off and running." Fox performs each of these actions as he's talking and then leans over with the lit torch to the nearest sheet of scrap metal and burns a smiley face into it. Then he

smiles himself, turns off the torch, reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a baggie with two roaches in it. “I also brought a couple of these.”

It is maybe three hours later, but I have lost all sense of time. The six pack is long gone and Fox and I sit comfortably amid a warm haze that only seeps out a little beneath the cracked garage door. The scrap metal has transmigrated from a birdhouse to a hulking, six-foot, abstract structure that Fox calls The Knight. It does somewhat resemble a suit of armor that has been thrown from a horse, trampled by a dragon, tossed into a burning volcano, and then left to sit out in the rain for twenty years.

Our discussion has transmigrated as well—from the definition of Art to more personal matters.

“Here’s the thing,” Fox is saying, “Do you know where my dad is right now? Right now, he’s sitting on his smelly, old ass on his smelly, old recliner watching reruns of *Magnum, P.I.* and except for brief stints to the bathroom or the bedroom that is more or less where he’s been since he retired five years ago. And I’m not going to say that he was a bad dad, but growing up, my brother and I saw him mostly on weekends and were made to feel like pests that he did his best to keep at arm’s length. And I think he loves us, sure, and there were camping trips and fishing trips from time to time, but these were largely opportunities for him to point out our flaws and to yell at us. And where am I today? I’m an odd-job man who makes a little dough doing handy work for neighbors and acquaintances who don’t want to shell out the kind of money it would take to hire a real professional. I live over my folks’ garage, have two kids—different mothers—who I only see a few times a year, was married for about 16 seconds ten years back, and I think the only reason Steph agreed to marry me was because she thought I was dying of



cancer. Shit, that's probably the only reason I married her, too. And those were the happiest six months of my life, when I thought that that brain tumor would finish me off. No pressure to be something I clearly wasn't going to be, no having to think of the future, everybody feeling sorry for me and shit. But then the fucking Chemo actually worked despite all the odds being against it, and the joy that brought only lasted about two months, then, as they say, the party was over."

"Now, where are you at today? You went to college, got a good gig with the insurance company, got a smokin' hot wife who might be a bit of a hard ass, but at least she has a *hard ass*, two gorgeous kids, a nice house. I mean, there it is, man, the American fucking dream, and you're sitting out here in your garage with your looser pal from high school feeling bad about yourself and missing your daddy, who, if we're being honest here, was an asshole, and who you are probably much better off without, right? Right?"

A comfortable silence opens up between us: it's a silence of agreement, of harmony, of finally being able to see the world for how it is. I cough a little and squint at the heap of metal before us.

"It shouldn't be called The Knight," I say, "It should be called Father Figure."

Later, when asked about this moment, I will think that I recall a hissing, popping sound, but I can't be sure. I will remember nothing of the explosion, or of being blown fifty feet through the air to land in the Albrecht's front yard. I won't remember the gawking neighbors, or how the Keene's basset hound licks my forehead, or the arrival of the ambulances and fire trucks, and I will have been whisked away to the nearest hospital before the remains of Fox are zipped up in a body bag and taken to the morgue.

The onions Mom has started dicing for chili toppings are making my eyes sting, so I turn my head and look out the back patio door and see Ezra and Larry making their way toward the house. It takes me a moment to understand what it is I am seeing. You know how sometimes when you wake up from a deep sleep and you think your alarm clock is a tornado siren or your spouse is a home invader and it takes a minute to get your bearings? It's kind of like that. My eyes are watery from the onions and the window is slightly fogged from the warmth of the kitchen, and I can see that Ezra is carrying something, but I can't tell what, and Larry is holding what I assume—what bloody well better just be—a BB gun, and I think, sonofabitch took my kid out to kill squirrels without asking my permission. But something is not reading right with the scene. Ezra is holding the “squirrel” oddly—reverently, with his hands outstretched before him—and Larry has a droopy, hangdog look about him, which is not a posture I have ever seen him wear. And then it hits me that it is not a squirrel that Ezra is carrying. It's Prissy.

When they enter the house, it is apparent to all that Prissy is dead. Among the list of childhood tragedies for which I have mentally prepared myself—broken bones, the loss or destruction of a favorite toy, a parental divorce, the realization that there is no Tooth Fairy, or Santa Clause, or God—the accidental slaughter by your own hand of your grandmother's cat is not among them, and I am at a loss for words. The silence that envelops the kitchen is thick enough to cut with the knife that Mom is still holding frozen in midair over a half-diced onion. It is she who is the first to move, the first to break the silence, and even then, her words are mere whispers: *Oh, Prissy. Oh, dear. Oh, no. Oh, my. Goodness sake. Oh, my goodness sake. Oh, my heavens.* She moves on the wave of these whispers to advance toward Ezra and the cat, reaching out her hands to take his burden from him only to pull back at the last moment and clutch her hands to her chest. The tears standing in her eyes, I am certain, are not from the Vidalia.

“Nana, I’m so sorry,” Ezra finally says. We thought she was a squirrel. We saw the gray fur and the tail, and just thought she was a squirrel.”

My Mom looks to Larry, but if she is hoping that he will add something, she is disappointed. He just looks at his muddy shoes and breathes loudly through his nose. By now, Audrey is standing in the doorway to the kitchen, the hush having been loud enough to draw her attention. “Holy, shit, Ez, you killed Hissy!” she says, and my mother is quick with an, “Audrey, language!” But now that the reality has been spoken we all breathe a little easier. There are words for our issue and now we just need to find a solution.

And then Ezra says, “I know you are sad right now, Nana, and might not be able to say yes or no yet, but I would like to be able to keep her. Have her mounted and keep her, I mean. I would take good care of her, and it would almost be like she was still alive.”

Even Larry’s eyes are dragged away from his shoes at this, and we all look at Ezra. Is this a different problem? Or is this a solution?



It has been almost a month since The Accident, and I think Nora is on the verge of forgiveness. It helps that the rubble of our former garage has been cleared away and the melted siding on the back of the house replaced. I don’t know whether we will build a new garage or not, but if we do, it will be where we park the cars. I don’t need a workshop any more. It was the workshop that worked in me, not the other way around.

Fox. I wish I had been conscious after the explosion, that I could have held his hand and thanked him for all that he had done for me before he died, but from the accounts that I have read

in the paper, it doesn't sound as if there would have been a hand to hold, or a life to thank. I was just barely able to make it to his funeral—heavily bandaged and medicated up to my eyeballs. I wanted to shake his dad's hand, but Nora thought that wasn't a good idea, for either his dad or my hand. Neither of Fox's parents seemed to pay me much attention, even though it had to have been obvious who I was from the bandages alone. Of course, I'm sure their minds were preoccupied with thoughts of their dear departed son; although his dad in particular seemed like he had someplace else he would rather be. Well, who wouldn't rather be someplace other than their own son's funeral?

Had Fox's dad been in Vietnam? I thought maybe he had. So maybe he understood me more on some level than most of the other people there could have. More so even than Nora, perhaps especially Nora, because as it turns out, Larry was right all along. Who would have guessed it?

Why did I get blown clear and Fox didn't? I admit that that is a thought that has kept me awake on more than one night since The Accident. I can only guess it means his work was done and mine isn't. And what is my work? I watch Ezra brush his teeth and climb into his pee-jays and know that that is where my work lies. It has been a crazy month for Ezra, what with shooting his grandmother's cat and having his father practically blow himself to kingdom come, but he seems to be taking it in stride. He likes the bandages that I still wear on my arms and to peek at the fresh pink skin that is growing underneath. The new Daddy, I tell him. They say that I will always have scars, but that's okay with me, and with Ezra, too. "Now, if anyone ever tries to pretend they are you and steal me away, I will always be able to know the real you from your scars," He says. "Nobody else would have scars like yours."

Some of The Knight/Father Figure survived the accident—lodged in the big, old oak tree in the side yard. It might kill the tree, but it might not. I think it looks great there, like it’s emerging from the trunk to set out on its quest. Ezra calls it The Whacka-Boom.



“He’s actually really good,” I tell my mom. “He’s upstairs right now putting Ezra to bed. Been a lot more hands-on with the kids—especially Ezra because Audrey’s, you know, going through one of her J.D. Salinger phases. He seems at peace now, happy almost. It’s amazing. We spent six thousand dollars on psychotherapy that made next to no difference and then his oldest friend blows himself up in our back yard and suddenly everything is coming up roses.”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

“Of course I have. I mean, I’ve tried. He always says that it is something that I would have a hard time understanding, that his pre-Accident self wouldn’t have been capable of understanding it. He says that only someone like Larry—of all people—would be able to understand, having been in Vietnam and everything.”

“Larry wasn’t in Vietnam.”

“What are you talking about? Of course he was.”

“No. Nope. His mother was a Canadian. Kept her citizenship. Larry had a dual citizenship. When it looked like we were going to get into Vietnam, she made him hoof it up to Ottawa with her. I never met Millicent, but from all accounts she wasn’t a woman to brook arguments. Does he say that he was in Vietnam?”

“All the time, Mom! Are you kidding me?”

“Well, the whole affair is very embarrassing for him, poor thing. He’s a vulnerable man. One of the reasons I fell in love with him. I hope you won’t let on that I told you the truth. I would hate to think what it would do his self-esteem.”

“*Larry’s* self-esteem? Shit, Mom, what about Mitch? He thinks he’s entered the hallowed halls of true manhood or something. He must think Ezra has, too, since he shot Prissy. Damn it, fucking Larry!”

“Language, Nora!”

“I have to go, Mom.”

“Well, okay. I’ll talk to you next week, then. Give the kids kisses for me.”



Upstairs in his room, Ezra is getting settled in for the night. *Goodnight Moon* had been his favorite bedtime story since he was two, and even though he is five now, there are residual effects. It is his habit to say goodnight to all of the objects in his room before going to sleep. “Goodnight, door. Goodnight, clock. Goodnight, books. Goodnight, rocks. Goodnight, Big Teddy. Goodnight, little teddy. Goodnight, bed. Goodnight, blanket. Goodnight, pillow. Goodnight, sippy cup. Goodnight, moon. Goodnight, stars.” He reaches over and turns off his bedside lamp, “Goodnight, Prissy” and the base of the lamp—the eternally discontented Prissy—is cast into darkness.