

A Writer's Story

Steve Edwards

In this story there is a mother and a father. Though they are not your mother and father—and neither, really, are they mine (with the exception of a few inconspicuous similarities I hope you can overlook)—they will suffice as this story's mother and father. In another story, a less ambiguous story, well, who knows? I can't say that this mother and father would serve very well as the mother and father in an unambiguous story, a story whose moral is clear as the nose on your face. Which is a cliché my mother used from time to time. "The answer's clear as the nose on your face," she would say, late at night, at the kitchen table, as I sat sweating over a series of incomprehensible math problems. But that was my mother, not the mother in this story. The mother in this story doesn't have a son. She has a daughter. The daughter is good at math and never has to sit at that big kitchen table, late at night, hot tears ready to explode because the numbers in the math book won't hold still—numbers like little swarming gnats that buzz about her head. The daughter's problem is her father. He was killed in a helicopter crash in California when she was just five years old. She has one very clear memory of him, one shining crystal memory, and for the last two days she has not been able to remember it. Which for her is terrifying. Which makes her feel as though she is the one—not the helicopter crash six years ago—that killed him. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose the last memory of my own father, who is still very much alive, and who is so, well, for lack of a better word, memorable. The way he once dreamed a rabbit hopped into a trap we'd built and rubbed with apple, and the way it was there—the rabbit—when we checked the trap that next morning.

You get the idea. For the daughter, though, it's already happened. She's killed her father by forgetting her one and only memory of him (her one and only memory that is a story and not just a blur of sensations: his smell, his touch, some inner emotional memory latent in her blood). So she asks her mother at dinner that night: "Tell me something about daddy." She is eleven. Did I mention that? She is eleven and plays the violin. There are other details: she has a dog, a best friend, a pen-pal in Honduras named Consuelo. Now it's the summertime, and she and her mother are eating dinner on the patio, where no one ever does math homework, and she says, "Tell me something about daddy." And the mother says, "What do you want to know, sweetie?" And the one thing the daughter wants to know is something her mother can't tell her, because that's the thing about memory—no one else can hold it for you. Not really. Not in the way the daughter wishes at this moment. "I don't know," she says, frowning into her spaghetti (dinner is pretty casual at their house). "Just tell me something about him." And the mother thinks it over, takes a sip of wine, looks off somewhere, out across their leafy backyard, not really focusing on any one object. She tells her daughter a story about the father, how the first time he went up in an airplane and saw the low-hanging clouds over St. Louis—or maybe it was some other city—he thought there was a fire. He thought the clouds were smoke, that the city was burning. Just for a second. Then he realized it was clouds, just clouds, and laughed at himself. "Your father loved to laugh," her mother says, nodding, her gaze returning from wherever it had gone, leveling on her daughter. And just like that, the daughter remembers: she'd fallen off her bike and scraped her elbow, and her father had rushed in and picked her up and threw her into the air, again and again, until she'd laughed herself silly in his arms. And remembering, she excuses herself from the table and dashes off to her bedroom where she finds paper and pencil and writes it down, every last word, so that she will never again forget.

A Writer's Story

Which makes me very glad—you, too, I'm sure. Because if I were that daughter, and if the mother and father of the story were my mother and father, well, things might have turned out differently. Maybe I'd have had that one shining memory, and maybe I'd have forgotten for a week and grown anxious and felt as though I were the one who killed him—I can imagine that. But with my mother, good woman though she is, I can also imagine silence growing up like weeds around the source of any and all pain in our lives. And so I won't say anything. Ever. I won't ask the first thing about my father and his death, because I'd have learned over time that the sound of my own puny voice against all her silence would only magnify the suffering and emptiness I felt. But like the daughter—how very like the daughter—I would write it all down, every word, not to remember but to imagine how it might have been different if words could have helped us. Perhaps this is why in all the stories I write—and maybe in all of yours—there is a mother and a father, and pain, silence, and yet also a word or two that makes a difference, an unlikely tenderness of heart, because despite every hurt you or I endure, some part of us holds out hope. Maybe these stories we tell are just clouds after all. Maybe the city is not on fire.