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China

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Abstract

Dad used to sing almost constantly. Not that he was a particularly good singer—his voice was ragged from cigarettes and whisky, and no matter the song he affected a sort of brogue, despite the fact that Fort Wayne was the closest he'd ever gotten to Ireland. After a long day of work at the hospital, he'd go downstairs to his workbench, mess around with these model planes he was always building, singing all the while. I could feel the vibrations through the kitchen floor.

Keywords

dishes, cleaning, plates, cups, saucers



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A Story by Matthew Batt

Dad used to sing almost constantly. Not that he was a particularly good singer—his voice was ragged from cigarettes and whisky, and no matter the song he affected a sort of brogue, despite the fact that Fort Wayne was the closest he'd ever gotten to Ireland. After a long day of work at the hospital, he'd go downstairs to his workbench, mess around with these model planes he was always building, singing all the while. I could feel the vibrations through the kitchen floor.

The night before his surgery, Mom washed the dishes and I dried. Dad sat at the kitchen table, chain smoking his Pall Malls. Dr. Fitzsimmons had called earlier and told me to make sure Dad didn't eat anything after three—they had been in the same foursome for years and Fitz knew what a knucklehead my father could be, on or off the golf course.

Even though we had one less setting to wash, I thought we'd never finish with the dishes. Mom kept washing, so I kept drying, and none of us talked about anything.

Dad was a physician too but he had a near total disregard for his own health. There were things you had to treat, and there were things you let heal, go away, or fall off. A broken femur, for example, had to be cast; a busted metacarpal, not so. Weight-bearing bones and non-weight-bearing bones. He had told no one about the polyp until one day—it must have been a Wednesday because we were having the usual humpday beef stroganoff—when he said, "I've got a thing on my throat. I'll have Fitz lop it off in the morning." A month later, after two biopsies and three MRIs, here we were.

In the kitchen, none of us said a word until Dad pushed his chair away from the table and proclaimed in his usual way, “God damn it all. God damn it. Fitz didn’t say a word about a man not having a drink.”

He coughed, and then held his breath. Mom turned around from the sink, water sluicing in and out of a bowl. She stared at him, her eyes full of worried questions, but he just exhaled tightly, waved his hand at mom to move.

Dad opened the cabinet and took out two short glasses. I was paying too much attention to him and failed to grab the bowl Mom was handing to me.

“Thomas!” she said. Thankfully the broken china gave her something to cry about. Her set didn’t look like much, but it had belonged to Gram—her mother—and Mom made sure we knew that each plate, cup, bowl and saucer was as unique as it was priceless. It was Portmeirion and each piece had a different flower on it. I always thought it was weird that they included the root system too. No two were alike and so, no matter how expensive they were, I never thought they really could be counted as a matching set. I kept that thought to myself.

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Mom jerked the towel from my hand, then turned her back on me. She folded the towel and wrung it into the sink, and then she did it again, even though it was dry. “Hey now,” said Dad softly. “Hey. It’s gone. Just let it go.” He put his hand on her hip, moved her to the side, and got the dustpan out from under the sink.

Dad winked at me and started sweeping. “One of those glasses is for you, Tommy. We’re going to have us a little drink, aren’t we?”

“Sure,” I told him.

“One drink,” he said.

We all knew what tomorrow meant. He’d be in the hospital for a few days so long as things went well. When he’d come out, he’d have no larynx. No vocal chords. No voice box. No voice. Instead, he’d have a battery-operated metal cylinder the size of a toilet paper tube, and when he held it up against the side of his neck it would approximate a voice. He’d feel the words more in his fingers than in his throat, because his finger, not his diaphragm, controlled the volume. And if he practiced and figured out how to shape his lips the right way, and if his listener was patient and more or less already knew what he was trying to say, he just might make himself understood.

Dad lit another cigarette and half-filled one glass with water.

“Listen to me,” he said. In the one glass he added whisky to the water, then poured a full glass of whisky for himself. It was so beautiful, I thought, the whisky. A glass of amber, somehow full of light.

“Are you listening to me?” he said. He slid me my drink. “Listen,” he said. He laughed. He ran his thumb along his jaw. “You won’t be hearing that much again, will you?”

I didn’t know what he wanted, but I could hardly bear to hear his voice. The pressure of the next day was palpable, every word he spoke from now until tomorrow was countable and catalogued, the way mom’s Portmeirion was, or Dad’s little planes on his bookcase. I knew he wouldn’t die, though of course he could. But no matter how well things went, the operation would still be a defeat—a part of him, gone. The part that could make the china rattle in the hutch, the part that could make my feet tingle while he sang some God-awful tune from the basement, the part that, at my basketball games, I could pick out of a gymnasium packed with otherwise identical dads.

“I want to make a tape,” he said. He drew on his cigarette. “Of myself. You know how bad I am with that damned hi-fi. Is it a big deal? To make a tape?”

“No,” I said. I felt my voice in my fingertips against the glass. “No big deal.”

“Frank,” my mother said.

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Dad rolled his eyes and mouthed to me, *Oh Christ*.

The next day, Mom would stand on one side of Dad, holding his hand, and I'd be on the other side, clinging to the rail of the gurney. He'd be dressed in a blue gown, a patient in his own hospital, and he'd stare straight up at the buzzing fluorescent lights as if they ran on his attention. As if when he looked away, everything would go dark and silent.

We'd be waiting there, the three of us plus Fitz, and my mom would be nauseous from trying to choke down her sobbing, and it would be my job to keep things light, to make fun of her crying, to remind Dad of what a great time we had the night before, of what a singing fool he was, a regular Irish Sammy Davis Junior, tapping his foot out of time, singing his heart out into the little microphone.

"Let's don't worry now," Dad would say, as if he were standing beside the gurney, as if we were the ones about to have an iodine box drawn on our throats. "No last words, okay?" he'd say, and then answer himself. "Okay." And with that, he'd give a thumbs up, and they would roll him away.

And right then I'd give anything to be back at the table the night before, when he pinched and rolled his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, snuffing it out. Mom kept sobbing into the towel, and I kept lusting for the first sip of my beautiful drink, and Dad kept stubbing out his last cigarette. I thought it would never end, until finally it did.

“Okay,” Dad said. “Enough of that.” He leaned back on the legs of his chair and tugged Mom’s apron. She took a breath, removed the towel from her face and kissed him on the lips.

“Good,” he said. “We’ll still have that.” Then he raised his glass and nodded towards mine. I picked up my drink, and we toasted, without touching glasses, without words.

Matthew Batt is the author of a memoir, *Sugarhouse*, published in 2012 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. His fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *Mid-American Review*, *The Huffington Post* and elsewhere. He is a 2010 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and he is an assistant professor at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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