

# FICTION

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BROOKE BIAZ

## The Disappearing Father

MY FATHER HAS BEGUN DISAPPEARING. I noticed it last night. He was sitting in the kitchen, at what since my childhood we've called 'The Nook,' leisurely reading an old, back-copy of *Popular Mechanics* or *Omni* or *The Restaurant Guide* or something, and, alarmingly, his ears were missing. Both the right and the left. It's weird how a head looks without ears. Round and certainly quite alien. Given he hasn't the volume of hair he once had, his new condition appeared even worse.

I said: "Dad, what's happened?"

Naturally, without his ears, he simply sat there staring at his magazine—an article about human cloning or nouvelle Californian cuisine or something—and said nothing.

When, eventually, he noticed me, he smiled in an embarrassed fashion and immediately began asking all these weird, alien-like questions about what I had been doing and where had I been and did I intend going on holidays with him and Mom this Christmas break or was I planning to do something else, something with my friends perhaps.

I merely grunted out answers, of course; there was no point in going into great detail when he obviously was not going to listen anyway.

Yes, strange as it seems, last night my father began disappearing—his ears first. I wonder if this might have something to do with events around here this week.

For example, my sister left home last Monday to study biochemistry at Monkville College, down east. You can take the sister out of Port Heron, but you can't take Port Heron out of the sister.

A girl who spends half her time at the beach staring suspiciously into rock pools is not to be trusted, in my view. She always did have a thing about the great outdoors.

My father drove her down to Monkville, stayed overnight, and came back this morning—that is, Tuesday. It makes me wonder now if, down there among all those co-eds—his plaid cap on, his orange and skunk grey beard all brushed smooth, and my sister on his arm—that something untoward happened; that, stomping up the college steps, he maybe tripped over some debutante's suitcase or something and, banging his head on the ol' alma marble, chipped that deeply hidden portion of the brain that sets the parameters of personal space and, in this way, started a chain reaction.

Such a thesis is certainly sustainable. After all, he hasn't stopped talking about my sister and her damn college degree for a good 48 hours—despite my protests. Thankfully the barrage is subsiding; but the damage, perhaps, has already been done.

“If the ears go, what goes next?” was my first thought. I've taken to watching him with a kind of eager, unbridled perversion.

It's one thing to see your father disappearing, but quite another to bear such curious witness to it that the event becomes a spectacle, some kind of dark familial circus treat. I feel like a correspondent in a war zone, looking down from my cozy hotel on the fighting below; or the guy who first listens to the crackling awful voices on a crashed aircraft's black box.

All around the house, cooking, tweaking Mom's cascading sides (made even more rolling by the new black gym shirt she's taken to wearing this week), my earless dad seeds like a man on a mission—a mission, that is, to unload himself of whatever dignity he has remaining. I wonder what horrible manifestations of the thing I will have to confront when I wake.

Our family, let me make clear, is not known for disappearing. We are solid and overtly, materially, plain in disposition. Our history includes several scientists, three at least in the purely 'physical sciences' (as they're known) and one whose field of expertise was cognitive neurology, an area of study perhaps most akin to that of

a radar operator aboard a cautious deep-sea submarine. We are pillars of the community in Port Heron. For several years now Mom has chaired the Port Heron High School PTA with a determination that has seen her staying on even after Susan reached her final school year, making me the only remaining Montgomery to tie Mom to those endless summer fund-raisers.

My dad, of course, has been scout leader and soccer coach, working bee supervisor of the 'Brighten Up Blue Ridge Park' campaign, and lifeguard at almost every Heron Bay District Swim Championships in which I have taken part. He has made himself, through these things, a real name in our street. He greets Jim Partridge's dad with a hearty "How's it goin', Bill?" and never passes Katy Weston's father without a studied "Having any more problems with those lawn-crapping dogs, John?" He's a firm figure, a reliable source, a matter-of-fact ....

Which is why, not surprisingly, his disappearing comes as a shock.

I woke this morning, Wednesday, with some trepidation. Though I am off to school, I have no idea what Dad is doing. Then I see it.

He is out in the garden. The risen sun is on the pond and he is dipping his hands into it as if to catch the golden koi that laze deep down there, perhaps to bring them to the surface, and then inside for some bizarre breakfast feast. I think perhaps I should do something.

When he sees me, he laughs and shakes the water from his hands with the rigour of a flamenco dancer.

"They're so old, you know," he says; in fact, he cries it out down the garden path, toward me.

"How old?" I reply, confused and, so, just bubbling along with the moment, heading toward him.

"O," he says, and he looks up toward the sky as if someone is writing an answer there. "O, I don't know," he says, finally, as I reach him. "You know, I did know, but I forget."

For a second I think he might cry, but then his wildly bearded face strikes out as wide and as jolly as a striped beach awning. He lets out a chortle:

"O well!"

"So how's work?" I say, pushing the button of conversation in hope that the door of normality might open.

"I'm not going," he says, rising awkwardly to his feet, stumbling a little on the uneven stone path, the knees of his striped baby blue pajamas black now with mud. "Tom and I have a golf date. We've been planning it for weeks, and I'm darned if a minor problem with some darn account is going to get in our way."

He comes home unusually late. I can see straight away that his right arm is missing.

Susan and I, frankly, are very different people. She rarely goes out and, when she does, it's always with those weird grad science friends of hers. Those friends of hers, they're like personality experiments. The freckle-faced guy with the great big chip on his shoulder—some kind of particle physics major, apparently. Two girls, Bobbi and Bett (I'm guessing; I've never actually heard their names), who spend most of their time talking about what Jon did to Tammy and what Trevor did to Karen and what ... whoever, or whatever, these people are!

You call that living?

"No arm, I'm telling you, Susan," I say again, down the phone. "None."

She laughs—sort of nervously, actually. "You're being silly."

"No," I say, "I'm not." And maybe something in my voice cracks and she gets more of my drift.

"Then you're imagining it," she says. "That's all."

"Maybe," I say, wanting her to say something. Wanting, against the spectre of all that past we two naturally share, to have her there at that moment, whining about how being a girl in this family is no great shakes and how this thing happening to Dad is just another example of him bonding with me, a guy thing, and how unfairly typical that is.

"Look," she says, the sound of the college dorm rising somewhere near her, "I gotta go. There's people waiting."

"Well, what am I going to do?" I say, too shakily by far.

She sighs deeply. Appears to cup her hand over the mouth-piece. Barks something to someone hassling her for the phone. Then:

"Talk to Mom," she says, the voice of a whiney fresher bursting in over her own.

"Huh? Huh?" I hear her say, to who knows whom. "Just one second, okay?"

"Talk to Mom, Todd," she repeats.

And then the line goes completely dead.

Without his arm Dad looks lopsidedly inhuman, and seems to be suffering too. For starters, though his other, left arm is visible and intact, he's become suddenly incapable of picking up his own knife and fork, or of lifting his own glass of juice to his lips. So Mom is taking on a new role.

She's racing into the lounge room with one steaming morsel or another, stuff she's cooking for breakfast, and putting these into his mouth with the juggling delicacy of a zookeeper feeding a sedentary sea lion. Or sharing her own glass of juice with him in a slow giggling trip between her lips and his now quivering ones. Or doing both, in fact, her arms draped loosely around his shoulders, her plopped in his lap, juice in one hand, food passing between them from the other (a circus act that is vaguely nauseating).

How, then, Susan, can I talk to her about what's going on? If anything, she seems to be in on it.

For most of the day, a school holiday (something to do with teacher training or whatnot), I watch them do this new thing, all kinds of food and drink passing between them, feeling strangely as if I am intruding on a peculiar new private ritual though, in essence, it may simply be no more than Mom's usual stoic coping with Dad's usual lightly inadequate domestic style.

My father after all, though a city engineer all his working life, has always displayed a mismatch between the structures of Port Heron he obviously deals with day-to-day and the lack of structure in his home life. It's Dad who's been the parent suggesting strange Saturday excursions to remote tourist attractions, Dinosaur World or Frontier World for example, or meandering drives along the coast road, with Susan and me arguing constantly in the back seat and the bright blue sea line tripping along beside us, or great family board games, those impossibly tense Saturday evenings where Susan and Mom form a competitive beachhead against Dad and me, and seem in this to pass something unfathomably female between.

No surprise, really, that as evening approaches, it is my fun-loving, now one-armed dad who tells me that he and Mom are going dancing.

They leave just after 7:00 p.m. They have not returned when I finally go to bed at midnight.

My father is disappearing.

He has no arms, no ears, no eyes, no hips, no lips. When he kissed me good morning I felt the cold wet slap of absence on my cheek. He seems distant and unco-operative. When I wanted to talk about my own college plans, my going to college next year, he smiled (or at least I thought he did) through invisible lips and said:

“That Monkville looks good.”

“Not for a history major!” I cried, so obviously.

But all he did was smile back, a weird, absent, distant smile, and left for work with Mom, who usually goes later to a job she has in Records and Accounts, and always takes the bus.

Pretty soon, I figure, there'll be none of Dad left. Each moment something else slips away. When he phones Susan she thankfully doesn't let on that I have spoken to her and they rabbit on for maybe an hour with Mom hanging over Dad's shoulders throwing in her two cents' worth now and then and the whole thing leaving both Dad and Mom strangely illuminated, Dad's absent eyes like spotlights and his invisible cheeks the orange lamps of a passing big rig.

He sleeps long, and wakes late. He has what appears to be a counterattack occurring in the rampant growth of his hair and his beard—the wispy flights over his pink scalp and the tails of orange sprung from his jaw something like the picture taken of him when he was graduating BEng (1974) from the University of Nelson, with Mom by his side.

Last night, when they returned from their dancing at who knows what hour, I swear I heard the distinctive roll of giggling coming from their bedroom and their voices, shrill and deep in turn, were still going strong when I fell back to sleep, wondering if there would be anything left of Dad to talk to tomorrow.

Susan says I should just observe, and not panic. She maintains that much of this is my imagination and, though I can hear some genuine concern in her voice, gently suggests that it's all me

trying to get some attention. She says it's all connected, if anything, with her. Says Dad's proud and relieved that she's got into a good college. Says he's just letting off steam, calming down, the disappearing if anything is some manifestation of this. So typical of her to think that.

As always, it looks to me that if anyone is going to keep Dad intact it's going to be me.

