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Fault Line

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Fault Line

Submitted by: Sheena McKinney

Notes

I feel I should start somewhere concrete, a sort of preface. Maybe this preface is really for me more than you. Either way, it is here and it is what needs to be first. My father is a quiet man. Some people walk with a thrust, speak with a figurative exclamation point hanging in the air beside their words, react to the situation around them with palatable defense and offense. My father, unlike these people, and myself for that matter, has a placidity about him. Perhaps that is why my stepmother fell in love with him, she who was once a Buddhist and now a mystical Christian.

My father is an Atheist. This is not surprising, for two reasons: first, he was raised Catholic, and Catholics make good Catholics and good Atheists; second, he is not the type to put anyone above him. I cannot ever imagine him praying to anything or anyone because he is the kind of man that makes what he needs and wants out of seemingly thin air. Should you give a man a fish or teach him to fish? Neither, make the fish walk right out of the water and onto your plate.

My father has no capacity for religion. It has nothing to do with morals, he's just not passionate enough. Read a conversion story sometime, Julian of Norwich is my personal favorite, and tell me those people weren't passionate. You have to be able to feel the depth and breadth of human emotion to have real religion. My father is a

puddle: small enough to cross unscathed, and always reflecting others faces instead of his own.

Part I

My father is gripping the steering wheel, thumbing the rubber, wearing an invisible hole in it. He has brought me to a parking lot two miles from my apartment to sit in the car and talk. He drove the hour and a half from his home, my original home, to talk.

“This isn't easy for me to say,” he stares straight ahead at the phosphorescent parking lot lights and I look at the same thing and not the same thing. I'd like to say here that I wait with held breath, but I think I am breathing normally.

“Your stepmother isn't doing well...the doctors think she might have some ocular degeneration, which they think is indicative of something bigger. They are worried about whatever it is more so because of her heart disease. If it is serious surgery might not be an option because her going under is a huge strain on her heart. We are trying to be hopeful, but we're scared.”

Diane has been sick for years. The progress of her heart failure and the other problems that have gone with it are not covert assassins; they are pre-trench -warfare soldiers, coming straight at the assailant screaming and wielding. Battlefields, even when viewed from the sidelines, render desensitization. The news is only vaguely shocking, remotely scarring; it makes me feel callous and smarmy to characterize it this way.

"I'm really sorry Dad." I turn to look at him to gauge this, he is teary and smiling through his beard. There is more, I know from his look that there is more. I do hold my breath now, if only for a second.

"Don't be sorry yet, we still don't know if it's anything serious, or anything that can be helped." He is nodding as if someone else is reassuring him with these words.

"There's more...oh wow, I *really* don't know how to say this..." Told you.

Part 2

I saw my father be violent twice in my life. I would learn later that the first time was the beginning of the end with my mother; the second time was the end. Period.

My earliest memories all derive from the little trailer I lived in with my parents when I was three. I wear this trailer like a badge now, "Gosh, we were so poor we lived in a trailer and our first winter there we were so poor we didn't have any heat!" I use this like some kind of inside-out class distinction, setting me apart from those writers who didn't have to starve to get here. Really it doesn't matter how you got here, we're all starving now, even if we have enough to eat.

It was the first home I remember, and that's what counts. I remember the boy next door teaching me how to do a cartwheel, I remember finding a half-starved cat beneath our porch and nursing her back to health, I remember that my bedroom had a window seat where my stuffed animals lived, I remember my father carrying me in from the car when I had the chicken pox. I remember the first of two real fights that I would witness between my parents.

I don't remember what was said, this in fact, seems unimportant anyhow. I only remember that we were at the little Formica table in the kitchen eating spaghetti, and that my parents began to argue. Then I remember that my father picked up his plate of spaghetti and hurled it at the wall. Except that when the plate

hit, it burst apart, and sent chunks of dish and dinner into the fish tank. I remember watching the water turn murky with spaghetti sauce like chum and the spaghetti floating like worms on invisible hooks. I wonder now what those fish thought. Did they think it was the End Days as their world filled with red, or did they think that these rubbery worms were manna from heaven, rained down because they had pleased their gods?

I'd like to say here that I was terrified, that this is when my tiny world began to crumble; but when my father came to speak to me later with soft, comforting words, I told him simply and honestly that I had thought the whole thing quite funny. In fact, I had quite a hard time not bursting into laughter. This story is still repeated in my family, how when my father came to console me I said simply "It's okay daddy, I thought it was funny when the 'sgetti went in the fish tank!" I would learn later, many years later, that my parents had been fighting because my father had disappeared for three days and come home to my mother with transparent and flippant excuses.

Part 3

I was sixteen and madly in love, mostly because my parents hated him. In fact, I had only agreed to 'go out' with Jeff out of pity. We had been friends and I knew he was in love with me. He was sweet and misunderstood by the world in general, or what I thought was the world in general. He was my father's antithesis, passionate about every detail of life: a band that someone had told him to check out, the pizza downtown, vodka and coke on Friday nights. When I accepted Jeff's offer to be his girlfriend we were on the phone.

"Oh god, Sheena, I never thought you'd say yes! I've been tortured over how to ask you, I never thought...I'm so happy, you've made me so happy!"

I'm not exaggerating. He really did sound like something straight out of a Victorian novel. I expected at any moment for him to say, "Oh, my yes, I am quite elated my beloved!"

After we had been together for four months he would tattoo my name on his arm. For all I know he is still walking around with my name on his paltry bicep.

I accepted his love but know now I never reciprocated as ardently. Retrospection is devastating to the romantic, but at the time he was the earth in a geocentric universe. Every Saturday my father would drive me to his house. He lived two towns over; I never dated the boys from my own town, perhaps because I had seen them eat boogers when they were four. My parents hated this boy who had been in a reform school of-sorts, but they were not the type of parents to forbid, and so they would drive me to his house every Saturday morning.

When I had snuck out in the middle of Friday night to have a cigarette it had been fairly warm for wintertime, well above freezing. The snow had mostly melted, slush clogged the cracks in the sidewalks. At some point between my midnight smoke and the time I awoke mid-morning the next day, however, the temperature had dropped obscenely. The slush had become a dangerously slick and uneven ice, and a thick, unrelenting snow had been falling steadily while I slept. My father gave me the disappointing news that we would not be able to make the twenty minute drive to Jeff's. I can tell you from this distance, when sixteen was so long ago that sins are (almost) forgotten, that I pitched a fit. I didn't understand that the roads were actually dangerous, I thought that was just another of the many things my parents deemed "dangerous" that in my infinite wisdom of sixteen, I knew were not.

"You are just doing this because you hate Jeff! Don't you care about my happiness?!" Melodrama is too paltry a word.

"Sheena, for Chrissakes! This has nothing to do with that friggin' boy!" My father's whole face was turning red. His eyes were wide like he had been holding his breath for too long.

"See! You called him that 'frigging boy!' Case in point!" I wanted to be a lawyer

at this time, mostly because every time I fought with my grandmother she would mutter about me being a lawyer, which I took as a compliment.

Then this: "Sheena you drive me crazy sometimes!" he was actually grabbing his head, as if it were something that might explode if he let go. By how red it was, maybe it would have. "Sometimes you make me want to kill myself the way you act!"

The room vibrated with his words, radiating outwards like a heat vision. The bed caught me behind the knees and I slumped down onto it, deflating. My grandmother up until this point had been standing behind my father, listening quietly with stern reprove for my behavior on her face. But at this she turned to him with a shock that was almost comical, her mouth making a little "o" of surprise and her eyes wide, perhaps taking in this new and virulent creature beside her. She turned slowly toward me, her mouth and eyes still stretched exaggeratedly. I stared beyond my father at the wall. I didn't speak.

My father's other outbursts had been maudlin in retrospect; a quick and over-dramatic gesture that eased the tension more than it had created it. My mother had been unflinching, not much had ever fazed her. It had rendered the action moot because there was no reaction to sustain it. That day though, there was no one to deflect it for me. I caught it full in the chest, like a branch snapping back after being bent the other way.

Part 4

We were living in our second home, we had upgraded from the tiny, single-wide trailer to a brand new double-wide with spacious rooms, skylights, walk-in closets, a whirlpool tub, and a sliding glass door that led onto a deck. It was still a trailer and it was still home. I remember the big vegetable garden in the back yard, I remember playing in the creek that ran next to my swing set, I remember how my parents watched cartoons with me in the middle of the night once when I had a nightmare.

The second big fight plays in my mind much like the first. I don't remember where it began or what was said. I do remember that that time I was also at the table. My parents were in the kitchen across from me and they were arguing. I don't remember being upset or scared. I just remember being a little thrilled at this scene, like watching a horror movie you know isn't real. All of the sudden my father punched the pantry door. Maybe he used more force than he wanted. Maybe he didn't. But the measly little thing just split right down the middle with a puny little cracking noise. I wish I could say here what my mother's face looked like, or my father's for that matter. But I can't. I only remember that the rest of the time we lived there, which was another seven years after my father left, we had a curtain hanging on that pantry. I would learn later, long after we left the house with the curtained pantry, that my mother was confronting my father about his mistress, the woman who would become my stepmother. The woman who did not yet know that her heart was failing her.

Part 5

"There's more...oh wow, I *really* don't know how to say this..." We both stare straight ahead, and wait. I wait for this thing that he doesn't know how to say, and he waits for, I don't know, courage? The right words? To finish saying an internal prayer? It all rushes out at once, like water out of a hose that has just been un-kinked.

"Diane has been sick for a long time, you know this, and, well, and I don't know how to put this delicately, we haven't had a physical relationship since she's been sick, and she's encouraged me to go outside the marriage for this, and I never have, I swear I never have!" He turns to me and his hands go up in a little flutter, as if this gesture is a sign that he is telling the truth. I nod as if I know what the hell is going on. The streetlights are haloed in a dirty orange, only illuminating the small radius that surrounds them.

"So I met this woman, her name is Leeann, and well, we've been seeing each other.

But I swear that this is okay with Diane, there are no secrets. You can call her up and ask her if you want!" Yeah, that's what I want to do right now. I want to call my stepmother and say, "Hey, are you really cool with the idea of dad fucking some lady because your ticker is on the fritz?" Let me get right on that.

Instead I say, "Well, I have a secret too." I reach into my purse and light a cigarette, right there in my dad's car, who never smoked and hates smoking and doesn't know I smoke. He watches me out of the corner of his eye but does not react. My hands shake while I light it.

We try so hard to extricate ourselves from our parents, stealing ourselves quietly away until we are standing on the opposite side of the bank. Once we are over there we can never get back, we are too heavy with understanding. Our parents from this distance become people, not just an appendage of ourselves. This distance brings their faults into sharper relief.

My father grips the steering wheel and watches the cars go by. I smoke and sip from my coffee. This has been going on for decades in different rooms.

Part 6

My phone rings, I am at the barn cleaning my horse's stall.

"Hello, Sheena, it's your father." He always announces himself this way, as if I don't know his voice after nearly thirty years.

"Hi dad, what's up?" I lean on the pitchfork to talk. My horse is chews on the back of my coat, reminding me perhaps that she has not yet had dinner.

"Well, I was thinking about coming by tonight, would that be okay?"

"Yeah, sure...is everything okay?" My father has only come to my apartment once in the three years I have lived there.

“Well, yes and no. There’s some things I need to talk to you about, that’s all. But don’t worry.” This last part is hasty, as if I’m still a little child who might be afraid that there is indeed a bogey-man.

My father shows up two hours later. He walks in with his usual fake self-confidence, like he is looking to buy the place. He stands in front of my fiancé’s guitar, strumming the strings like it’s what he came here to do.

“Have a seat dad, I’ll go get your grandson to come down and say goodnight, he’s got chorus before school tomorrow so he’s got to get to bed early.”

“Well...yeah okay, go get him, I want to say hello. But then I thought you and I could take a drive.” He turns back to the guitar and there is look between Nate and I. My father likes this man that I am going to marry, they are even as comfortable around each other as can be expected, seeing as they are both devoid of social grace; but I shrug and acquiesce.

Half an hour later his secret sits between us in the car. I would like to say that it is a barrier, but it isn’t. I’m too used to the world; I’m not shocked by this twist in the plot. I light another cigarette off the first. I’m not a chain smoker.

“I don’t really care what you do with your life, if it makes you happy, so be it.”

“Oh, wow...thank you honey. You don’t know how much that means to me, and how much I dreaded coming up here to tell you this.” His eyes are a little teary still, but his hands slip from the steering wheel to clasp loosely together, as if in prayer.

“But listen, this isn’t just about me meeting my needs...it’s more than that. Somehow through this woman I have opened up emotionally. My relationship with Diane is stronger and I’ve realized a lot about myself too.” He is looking at me now, and I am looking at the orange tip of my cigarette.

Later I will go home and have a beer with Nate and we will try and puzzle out when our parents became ambiguous. We will wonder at how every mirror in our childhood homes was warped and cracked, so that we could only see a part of each room.

Part 7

I moved out six months after the fight with my father about Jeff, three months before my seventeenth birthday. I’d like to say that there had been another big fight when I moved out, but there was not. My cousin, who lived an hour away, had called to ask if I wanted to move in with her. She needed a live-in babysitter and I needed something. I packed my things and she picked me up that day; within a week I had a job and was enrolled in the local high school. My father and I didn’t speak for months.

My cousin wasn’t as strict as my parents; instead of running with this, I put my freedom in a lock to guard. I smoked less, I didn’t date, the extant of my ‘partying’ was a couple of wine coolers while playing cards with my only friend in town. I focused on school and work and babysitting my three-year-old niece, who called me ‘Mommy-Sheena.’ I didn’t have peace, but I had complacency.

On my seventeenth birthday my friend bought me a bottle of wine and we drank half of it, passing it back and forth. I sat on her kitchen counter and she leaned against the dishwasher. We smoked too many cigarettes and laughed to loud.

“Here’s to another year!” She slurred. I drank to that.

My dad sent me a birthday card that said simply: “I miss you. Have a happy birthday.”

Part 8

“The thing is, I realized that I’m not the best guy in the world to deal with. I’ve always thought I was the best friend, the best husband, the best dad that I was capable of. That’s not to say that I thought that I was the best overall, just the best I was capable of.” He trails off, looking

out the window and cupping his beard in his hand.

I inhale the smoke from my cigarette deeply. I take a sip from my Styrofoam cup of coffee. In other words, I wait impatiently.

“I see now that I wasn’t such a great guy, and that I wasn’t such a great dad in particular. We were so close when you were little, and by the time you started slipping away I hadn’t even realized what happened.” He turns to look at me again.

“Dad, really, it’s okay. I wasn’t exactly an easy teenager anyways. It really doesn’t matter.” It’s my turn to trail off, to return to my cigarette and my coffee.

“It’s not okay. I’m sorry that I made you feel so shitty about yourself. That wasn’t fair because I was the adult, and I should have known better.” He is imploring, really needing my forgiveness. My father the atheist needs forgiveness.

“It’s okay dad, I forgive you.”

Part 9

In my box of memories, filled with grainy snapshots and short silent films, my mother gains ground with quantity. It is my mother I remember making homemade pudding, painting my nails and crimping my hair, taking me to soccer practice, piano lessons, and to the barn to ride the horse we shared. My mother is a constant, always there with her dyed burgundy hair and trendy clothes. My father is not excluded from my memories, but they are scarcer, harder to conjure, often buried at the bottom of the box underneath insignificance. These memories are of big moments. He is in the movie about my stitches, he is in the photo of kindergarten registration. His memories are bulky, conspicuous; so I try not to let them sink.