To My Father

Sarah DeLena  
*SUNY Cortland*

Follow this and additional works at: https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer

Part of the Nonfiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol7/iss1/6

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.
To My Father

I see myself on deck, convinced
his ship’s gone down, while he’s convinced
I’ll see him standing on the dock
and waving, shouting, Welcome back.

—“Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead,”
Andrew Hudgins

The worst part about fishing is putting the worm on the hook. It always spasms out of control and tenses up so hard that I feel myself actually killing something and I start screaming until my dad, who’s laughing so hard that he’s spitting, takes the murder weapon and victim from my hands. With the ease of a seasoned worm-executioner, he methodically punctures the nightcrawler in four different spots, wrapping the body around the hook in loops.

“Now it can’t fall off when you cast,” he explains, handing the rod back to me. I take the pole by the handle and climb back onto my rock, looking across the lake. My dad joins me and we take in the view and the silence together. We are always casting from some kind of shore, since my dad can’t do boats. After a trip on a fishing boat in the Atlantic a few years back, where both he and my sister took turns puking in the same bucket for three hours while I stood at the bow, loving the salt water spray, our fishing has been confined to casting from shores and piers.

Today we are at Canopus Lake in Fahnestock State Park, sitting on crumbling soil and rock on the edge of the woods. The ground is an intense beige, almost an orange hue, and we’re casting into the deep blue of the lake. When I cast, I hook the pole left so the line flies out as far as possible and avoids the
trees just behind us. Dad has already lost two bobbers today thanks to me catching a branch instead of a fish.

“That’s the risk of fishing from shore,” he says with a shrug. I make sure now to lock down my line so it stops spinning and then I sit back, watching the bobber as it drifts. I’m in for the long haul now and I know Dad feels it too because he stops hawking over me and returns to his spot over the little soil mountain behind me. His cast goes farther than mine and he jerks the line with precision, his fake-frog lure jumping over the little waves.

Dad used to tell me he wanted to retire in a house on a lake whenever we visited a nearby state park and saw the few lucky cottages that were hidden in the trees. He said he liked being away from everyone, having a great view, having water to dive into. Despite his tendency for sea sickness, my father is actually a fish disguised as large, hairy Italian man. Every summer since I can remember, our family has gone down to the coast to see my grandparents. The second his feet hit the sand on those overcrowded beaches, he’s running like a little kid into the sea, beating my sister and me by a mile. For hours, he would entertain us in the waves, taking us out deeper and deeper and when I couldn’t stand anymore he would hold me up, grinning as the whitecaps of the waves rumbled in our ears and chests. The water relaxed his tired feet and aching knees and gave him something that made his brown eyes shine.

How badly I want to give him a house on a lake.

“Got something?” my dad asks, sliding down the soil next to me. He’s spotted my line moving before I have. I scramble to reel the line in, but I know there’s no fish at the end of it. When I get it all in, I show him the half-eaten worm still writhing on the hook and he laughs a big warm laugh that he’d say “scares all the fish away.”

In the late afternoon, we pack our tackle box and weave through the woods, back to the car, with no fish to call our own. A few days later and we realize we are itching our arms and legs, and we both recall some funny looking plants we passed that day, breaking out in poison ivy all over our bodies. Dad starts to consider that even the shores are no longer safe. Like my sister at her new job in another state, finally moving away from home at twenty-five, and me when I decided to move two hundred miles away for college. Both shores are unknown to my sister and me, but we chose to dig our heels into the dirt and cast anyway. I wasn’t there to move her into her new apartment, but she and Dad were there to move me into my dorm.

It was so hot that day that sweat was pouring down my face and back, soaking my new college T-shirt and making it stick to my skin. The box in my hands swayed from side to side as I ascended the staircase, packed to the brim with journals and old, worn out Agatha Christie books I had gotten on sale from a used book store.
“Let me get that, sweetie,” my dad said and swiped it from my arms, as if it didn't weigh over thirty pounds and his knees had never hurt him in his life. He adjusted the box and then climbed the stairs like he'd done it ten times before. He moved my sister in and out when she was at college just five years earlier and the movements stuck with him. I struggled to keep up with his pace and I tried to be useful, grabbing a small silver lamp without a light bulb and my metal blue trash can that was holding ratty secondhand band posters. He's always moving quick like that when something needs to get done, always going for maximum efficiency. He's that way at work, too, when he's selling cars, always jumping from customer to customer, working his mouth and feet all day long. Just a few hours earlier, before we had made it to campus, he packed the white minivan rental as if it were a game of Tetris, his eyes darting back and forth over the empty trunk—if this box of shoes fits here, the TV can go there, therefore the stuffed animals can go here, etc. He's a practical guy in almost all situations; it's logic and numbers first, and if those fail, just run the numbers again.

I remember when I made it to my assigned dorm room and he was already in unpacking mode, squatting over boxes. His jean shorts were stretched to their limit and his white Sketchers squeaked on the cream linoleum floor as I came up behind him.

“Dad, you don't have to do that you know. I can do that all later,” I said. His gray American flag shirt had large dark pit stains and a parabolic sweat line going down his back. He turned and smiled up at me with an all teeth smile (all fake teeth, mind you) and kept going, wordlessly. My mother watched her ex-husband from the hall, leaning on the door frame.

“Don't go too hard. You'll hurt yourself,” she warned. I bent down and start to help organize as he pulled out a hand drill.

“Your desk is wobbling,” he said, putting a screw on the tip. I told him we weren't allowed to mess with any of the furniture. He started drilling into the wood.

When my sister went to college, he seemed pretty okay with it, like he had made peace with it a long time ago. I imagine he thought to himself, well, at least I'll still have one, since now it would just be me visiting him every other weekend for fishing trips and coming Tuesday nights for ravioli dinners. It would just be me and him sitting and watching NASCAR in his one bedroom apartment and commenting on how each driver could possibly make a better left turn each time they circled the track. But now it would be no one. This thought came to me when it was time for him to leave.

We stood on the grass by the side of my building, between the quads of the other dorms and under the light of the dipping orange sun. We had to squint to see one another. Strangely and starkly different from my sister's goodbye, he started by not looking at me. The stoic, hard-eyed, heavyset Ital-
ian rock of a man refused to make eye contact with me. Then he sort of began to ramble and put a hand on my shoulder, telling me that I should have fun, always study hard, and call him if I needed him or, you know, if I just wanted to talk. Then the hand slid to my forearm and he gripped it hard. He has no nails to dig in from years of biting them after smoking, but his hands are huge and powerful still, so the grip shocked me.

“Dad, that hurts——” I began, but he pulled me into a tight hug, my mouth muffled into his shoulder.

“If you ever need anything, and I mean anything, you call me and I will be here. You got that?” he said into my ear, his words fierce. I tried to pull away slightly, but he held me still. I had never felt so safe and scared at the same time.

“Yeah, yeah, Dad. I get it; you can let go,” I said. He did let go and I saw that he was crying. Still not looking at me, he lifted up his wire glasses and wiped his wrinkled eyes, staring at some distant spot above my head.

Usually when my dad is overly emotional, it’s not sadness that breaks through. It’s more of a burning rage that takes time to develop deep down in the pit of his stomach and when it finally surfaces, you have no doubt about what it is and that you’ve got to get out of the way. For as long as I can remember, I’ve had these distinct memories of my father exploding, with the worst being the dreaded coffee incident. I was alone that day, without my sister to help me, so I didn’t see the signs. I was too young to know where to run.

Like any school day, my day began with a checklist.

Yes, I had my lunch box. Yes, I had my notebook. Were my shoes on? Yes, and I had tied them all by myself. I remember my father took one long look around the kitchen, probably making a mental list of that day’s chores. Then he took my hand in his huge one, and we were moving. We went down the basement steps in a staggered line, me jumping with two feet onto each step, him stepping down slowly and watching my every move. When we finally made it through the garage and out of the house, I was the first to make it into the car.

“Are you excited?” he asked as I buckled myself in.

I nodded vigorously, my head bouncing around on my shoulders. We both smiled as our eyes met in the rearview mirror. He turned the key and we backed out of the driveway, a Styx CD already blasting from the speakers.

He always had (and still does have) an onslaught of rock and roll prepared for any trip, whether it’s just a five-minute drive to the grocery store or a four-hour drive down to Toms River to visit the grandparents. His taste ranges from Rush to Lynyrd Skynyrd to Paul McCartney to AC/DC to Queen to Earth, Wind, and Fire. Just one look in my dad’s eyes when the drum or guitar solo comes on and you can tell his soul is alight with the music, his lips running over every lyric without missing a single word. His brain must be
fifty-percent song lyrics, twenty-five percent car models, twenty-percent trip routes (the man never uses GPS), and five-percent his own children’s names. I can’t even begin to count on both my hands and feet the number of times I’ve been called my sister’s name.

Just a couple of turns and we were almost halfway there. Our town is pretty small to begin with, so making it to the school wasn’t a journey. It was more of a peaceful, scenic drive. We passed the sunflower field and my dad said all the heads of the flowers were turned to face us to say hello. I pressed my face up against the glass, straining from my seat, admiring the yellow shine of them, and slammed my head against the ceiling as my dad hit the brakes.

“Get the fuck outta my lane!” He banged his fist on the dashboard. His whole body was hunched over the wheel as the car sped up, his head leaning to the right to see the driver of the black car that had swerved back into its lane. Our car lurched forward and we became parallel with the black car, us in the left lane and them in the right lane of the winding road. The woman in the driver’s seat was looking straight ahead, not even glancing at us. She didn’t even look at us during the red light as we sat together or when we began to follow her, my dad never breaking his eyes away from her, even when the road narrowed into one lane.

I knew about the bat that sometimes rolled around in the trunk.

As we followed her, our front bumper and her back bumper were almost touching the entire way and my stomach jumped from being slightly upset to completely nauseous as she pulled into the school parking lot with us.

My dad sped into a spot, put the car in park, and jumped out. The car was still idling as I unbuckled my seat belt and peered out the back window on my knees. He stalked to the black car in three large strides and grabbed the handle of the woman’s car door. I swear I could see the whites of her eyes and the terror there as she stared up at the man trying to get into her car. It was almost an out of body experience—a moment that most children don’t feel until they’re much older—the fact that your father is just a man to other people, that they don’t know what you know about him, how nice he can be, and how he doesn’t really mean to be this way. At six years old, I wanted to explain this to someone in case my dad got in trouble so they could understand him the way I did.

“Open the door!” he screamed. His face was getting redder, veins popping in his neck and on his forehead. She shook her head at him, yelling something back, but it came out muffled. When he couldn’t get the door open, he came back to our car and retrieved his Dunkin’ Donuts coffee mug. Three more strides and he dumped the entirety of the container on her windshield. In that moment, the principal and a security guard burst through the school entrance, rushing to the scene. But that wasn’t what got me out of the car. It was only when I saw the woman’s back door slowly start to open that I got
out and ran over. The little boy that emerged, tears streaming down his face, took my hand when I offered it and together we retreated into the school. I don’t remember his name or what he looked like, except that he was not much taller than me. But what I do remember is how he looked at my dad, and how I began to notice the way a lot of people looked at my dad when he did things I was accustomed to.

My grandma tells me that he wasn’t always so angry, as if showing me childhood pictures of him sleeping soundly while swaddled in a blanket wordlessly proved her point. It’s always hard to connect your parents to the black and white images of them in photos; how is the man in front of me supposed to have been this punk-looking kid from the Bronx who had his teeth smashed in in a wrestling match? I can barely picture him rolling around on the floor with a friend, blood and teeth splattered across the cement in the basement of some colonial. My grandma tells me how he got into wrestling matches and fights a lot back then, and that he even stole Grandpa’s car once or twice for a drive. I can see the anger in those old pictures, the ones where he’s just a teenager standing next to Grandpa, my grandpa but not his real father. My real grandfather passed away when my dad was ten, in what I’ve recently learned was a fatal car crash.

This past summer my dad and I took the Circle Line boat tour around Manhattan to see the entirety of the island, and as we sat baking in the heat, with not a drop of water or sunscreen to our names, he pointed at a tunnel.

“That’s where my father died,” he said. I looked from the choppy waves of the Hudson up to his face, which was completely stoic. His eyes met mine and he nodded his head toward the city, where he was still pointing. I followed his arm and finger to the tunnel, and we stared at it together.

It was later that my grandma told me that he had been driving a dump truck and the dump was still up just slightly, but the light on the dash wasn’t on to say that it was. He drove into the tunnel and the dump buckled and he broke his neck. After that, he lived for about a month on tubes until he passed in his sleep. My mom says he must’ve been holding on for his three little ones, my dad and his two brothers.

As much as I try, I can’t put myself in my dad’s shoes. I’ve never been that close to death before. That’s why I can’t seem to picture the little brown-haired ten-year-old boy from the worn, yellowed photos standing by his father’s hospital bed. I can’t see him staring at the breathing tubes and beeping machines, waiting patiently for his father to wake up. I can’t look at my dad and see the little boy, even though I know he must still be there.