

light reading series

featherproof 



Mary Cross

MY FATHER'S  
HANDS

In the casket, they were crossed. At the end of the wake, my older sister Vera told me to kiss his hands, so I did. I was thirteen, and I had never touched a dead body, or seen one, for that matter. I wondered if they could start his heart pounding while he was dead. I thought for sure they could use some clear chemical to keep it going; we did all sorts of things with frogs in my science class. But I didn't want to hear it beat. As I tilted my head closer to his knuckles, I could smell mothballs in the attic; all of Vera's cheerleading sweaters in boxes were in my mind's eye. They put him in this old blue suit. I had hoped to wear a chartreuse sweater of my mother's that I had found in the attic, but it stunk like sulfur and had yellow stains under the arms. Daddy's hands were as cold and slick as the rocks down by the lake. His nails were perfectly manicured. I didn't kiss his hands, I just touched my lips to his wrists and hoped they wouldn't stick like they had to a Kool-Aid ice cube from the freezer. "Be careful," he'd say, "you're gonna pull off your entire lip if you don't wet that cube first." They painted his hands a reddish flesh color; it looked like the crayon "bittersweet" in my 48-Crayola box. His hair was flattened down, not in the usual way, but plastered down. I think they must have dyed it, because I thought it was more gray than black. And he didn't have his stomach anymore. It was completely flat. On weekends he'd wear the same mauve sport shirt, with long sleeves and one chest pocket that he let hang out of his pants, like Jackie Gleason. I always thought he should tuck it in. So did my grandmother and she let me know. "Messy," she'd whisper. If ever he said anything mean to me, I could tell her. And he was her son. She was always on my side, even when I broke the kitchen window with a softball. "It was an accident," she'd say, "who could have known it would happen like that. Not you." My sister Vera blamed my mother for my father's death. She said Mom didn't bring him soon enough to the hospital. They waited up all night in the living room. My grandmother brought him wet towels

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Mary Cross is the author of a collection of poems *Rooms, Which Were People* (Ohio State University Press). Her poems, stories and essays have appeared in various publications, including *Hotel Amerika, Other Voices, Court Green, Southern Poetry Review, The Sun*, as well as aired on WBEZ's Chicago Matters Series and Eight Forty-Eight on public radio. A story of hers was selected as runner-up for the 2006 Guild Prose Series Award. "My Father's Hands" comes from her manuscript of linked fiction, *Do-Sa-Do the Corner Girl*. She teaches in the MFA Writing Program at The School of the Art Institute and Northwestern's School of Continuing Studies.



My kindergarten teacher adored my father. I could tell. When he'd come to pick me up, he'd always be early so he'd sit on a bench in the

"Home, where else?"  
 "Where are you going?" she asked.  
 Our fingertips touched as I handed her my corners of the pink sheet.  
 "I mean it, Molly. Cut it out."  
 my voice like no one else.

Frige. One that would take orders from me. Listen for the sound of  
 "Stop it," Simone said.  
 the sheet.

hair spread across her whole face, and I couldn't stop laughing at  
 "Nothing." We shook the sheet out. Static electricity made her  
 "Shit, Molly. What are you gonna do?"  
 sheet.

"My mom's taking him." I took the other end of a warm bed  
 loaded the dryer. "What's wrong with him?"  
 "Wow." She grabbed a pile of beach towels from the washer and

"My dad is sick. He's going to the hospital."  
 get done faster.  
 finish my chores before I can go out. But you could help me and I'd

the laundry room. "What are you doing here so early? I've got to  
 After dropping the last cob into the pot, Simone pulled me into  
 possible when my father was gone.

downstairs on the pullout couch. The plans multiplied. Anything was  
 to stay in the hospital, I could have Simone sleep over. Maybe even  
 French. I'm sure. An ordinary day, I thought. And if my dad had

counter, canned corn. They may have been singing, too. Something  
 could, to Simone's house, where her family lined up along the kitchen  
 In the morning I snuck out the cellar door and ran, as fast as I

licking his feet.  
 for his forehead. Our cat Babysray sat on the arm of the couch

hall, with a whole row of hands turned into colorful turkeys hanging above his head, and my teacher would put down the glue or scissors or sponge or apron and go out to greet him. I hope she never told him about the time I sat in one of those miniature chairs, with my Sears braided rug on my lap, and let pee run down my leg, onto the shiny linoleum floor of Lincoln school. Too bad I wasn't one of those goldfish in our aquarium, because then I could pee without anyone paying one bit of attention. We had to name all the fish. I called one Daddy. I wanted to name one Babystray after our cat, but Mrs. Sweet said it would bring bad luck because it was a black cat. Daddy said she was superstitious and to do what I wanted. So I named another fish Molly, after me.

Whenever I'd get sad, I'd watch a fish and call it Molly and think If only I didn't have to breathe, I'd like to swim. But you have to breathe and that's why I quit swimming. When Simone and I broke up, after she told me she was in love with Jesse, the square dance caller, I stopped going to the beach altogether. From eighth grade on, I'd ride my bike no-handed along the rocks at Hunter Beach and smoke Winston cigarettes, the ones I'd stolen from my father's dresser. I remember I had to wait until after he'd had his three Hawaiian Punch-and-whiskeys, before it would be safe to sift through his change and crunched up cigarette packs. Since Lake Michigan had eaten away lots of the shoreline, some workers, inmates from the jail, put up an iron breaker and huge rocks to stop the erosion. When I was little my mother used to say that we lived in a state shaped like a mitten, and our house sat along the west side of my left hand. "There it is," she'd point, "right above your wrist. And all along the edge, up to the tip of your pinkie, is water."

During her senior year Vera started sleeping in the guest room, so I got her room, which was above the front porch. Because the roof was flat outside my window, sometimes I would climb out there to watch the pigeons. They'd come right up to me and twitch their necks

want to swim, I thought, you have to breathe.  
 pigeon floating in the neighbor's gutter like a log on the river. If you

in the morning. And with my grandmother's flashlight I could see the  
 bear the windowsill. "The size of golf balls," someone would remark  
 window and helped him in. It started to rain hard, and balls of hail

Then he began to cry, for no reason at all. My mother came to the  
 "Please go in, Daddy."  
 "Let it go. Just let it go." He lunged forward.

"You're drunk," I shouted.  
 "Let it go," he raged. "Let it fly."  
 roof with my fishing pole.

I had managed to push the pigeon up onto the gutter of the other  
 What are you doing out there? It's raining. Where's your cover?"  
 onto the roof. "Here, let me see that thing. Come here little fella.

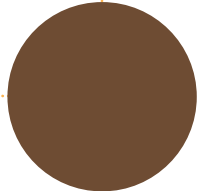
The confusion was pitiful. My father struck one leg out and fell  
 "What are you talking about? Who's dying? What?"  
 He's dying."

realizing it wasn't a bat, but a pigeon. "Get me some scissors. Hurry.  
 I didn't want to lose sight of the animal, so I lit another match,  
 get in here!"

window with one hand. "If you know what's good for you, you better  
 as a soldier holding a flag. In a determined shove, he hiked up the  
 knew he was mad. His right hand held the yellow tumbler as carefully

Within moments his face fattened up like Mr. Potato Head, and I  
 "Daddy, I can't get it from here."  
 "What do you mean? Don't be fresh with me."

"I can't. You closed the window. It's locked."  
 Get in here," he yelled.



When we got closer to Sears, my dad asked to be let out by the river. "Get what you like," he said to my mom. And there he was just sitting on a bench, watching the fishermen pull up carp. My mom and I chose a red plaid chair and had it delivered. I knew my grandmother would probably put newspaper down before sitting in the new chair.

It was dark by the time we got home, and I could hear the crickets in the backyard. Sometimes after my dad would mow the lawn, he would stand out there and admire what he had done, how he had changed something. He'd wipe the sweat off his forehead and sit on the glider. I think that's why he liked to wallpaper and paint. Our dining room was covered with Parisian sights, with windmills and cafés and couples sitting at tables with glasses of wine. I wondered why it wasn't flowers or leaves or vines. Simone's house had polka dots in their dining room. He said you should put something on your walls that makes you feel different than you are. I had a butterfly border in my room.

The lightning bugs were monstrous that night. It wasn't until the fourth grade that I stopped trying to capture them and wear them as rings. My science teacher said I had learned the meaning of compassion. I thought about the rabbit in the second grade classroom that bit its cage. I wondered if he could smell the rain coming in, how the trees get quiet and don't seem to notice the weight of their branches. Even the pigeons know it, know when a storm's coming; and my dad said they're the dumbest animals around.

I was enjoying a smoke before the rain, when I caught sight of something dangling between the roofs. As I got closer to the edge, I could see something hanging by its wing, trying to pull itself free. I couldn't reach the thin, almost invisible line it was tangled up in, so I tried to pull it closer with my pole, when I heard someone pounding on the window. I lit a match to try to see the thing. I thought it might be a bat, as dark as it looked.

"Get in here. What the hell are you doing out there? God dammit.

The night before he died we went to Sears to get a new chair. I didn't want to go, but he kept asking me to ride along with him and my mom. "I'll let you park the car," he said. I had been feeding the pigeons on the roof, when I heard him yell up the stairs, "Hurry up. Sears closes at eight." We had a station wagon with a seat in the way back that faced looking out to the road. Often, I had the whole seat to myself. I used to compose songs back there; I'd just change the lyrics to whatever song was playing on the radio. "Raindrops and roses and whiskers on kittens" became "Snowflakes on sidewalks and blisters on roses. You've got your eye out on pavement and foliage." Sometimes I liked to watch the telephone poles going by or study the little "x" on my index finger and wonder how I got that scar. I imagined everything from scraping it on Tom Arnetti's zipper to accidentally falling on a thorn bush when I'd kiss Simone in the cemetery. And then I thought about Simone and wondered if she ever thought about me. She rarely spent the night before we broke up because I didn't want her to ask me about my dad's eyes, how when he watched TV he'd take on this glossy stare and shut one eye. So I never got to tell her about the pigeons and how I was training them to eat out of a spoon. She said my dad looked like Omar Sharif and that he was funny when he teased her about being grounded. "On probation yet, Simone?" They both liked to laugh. And then Simone would say, "Your dad is a crackup."

Chicago Daily News headlines: Armstrongs walks on the moon; U.S. population 205 million with 85 people per square mile; Voting age lowered to 18; Half a bird's brain awake while other half sleeps so it can fly longer. I covered the front pages with blue cellophane from the dime store and taped them up in a collage on the wall. Even to this day, those walls show residue from all the Scotch tape I used. He even let me put a yellow light bulb in the overhead fixture. But he was the kind of person who liked to go to restaurants for the atmosphere, not the food.

## 3

When I was four years old, my grandmother took me out to lunch every day for the entire year. Only once that I can remember did she yell at me, and that was when I took the last sip of my milkshake and it made that sound she hated, like a suction hose at the dentist's. "Stop that. Don't do that." Vera said I did things like that to get attention.

Most nights after dinner I could hear ice clinking into my father's yellow plastic tumbler. I thought about how he always tucked his little finger under the bottom of the glass as he picked it up.

"Honey," my mother yelled from the living room, "what part of the paper did you want?"

After supper he either read or planted himself in front of the TV. He loved to sing along with All in the Family's "Those Were the Days." But it wouldn't take too many yellow plastic tumblers before his gaze, like a statue in the park, fixed into the sky of our family room. He'd shut one eye, like a canary blinking. I could say anything I wanted then, because he couldn't fight back. So if he'd tease me about being fat, I'd just tell him he was an alcoholic and my mother would say, "Don't speak to your father like that." Next day we'd be watching a basketball game on TV and he'd tell me what a great hook shot I had. He liked to watch me play basketball with the boys at Ottawa Court. He never called me a hot dog like everybody else. So what if I could dribble through my legs. I tried to discourage him from coming after dinner, but I'd developed a keen ability to spot him no matter where he was—make sure both eyes were open.

"Hon, the paper's not here," she shouted again.

"It's right in front of your eyes," my father barked.

I watched my mother wait on him daily. I used to say she was his slave and that I would never be a slave to anyone. When I was a slave to Vera I knew why my mother was. It was nice to be a part of someone's life, to be included. Like when my father framed my kindergarten cutout of a snowflake and hung it in the guest room. It stayed there for years until I took it down to put up my collection of

Having a long history of watching Wild Kingdom with Marlon Perkins, I loved to pretend I was Stan. Poor Stan the assistant. It was always Stan with the rattlesnake or Stan with a herd of cattle or fighting hippos. I remember once they showed an Egyptian vulture, with its bald head and neck that looked just like the principal of our school. On TV we'd see Stan covered in mud, hanging on to the back legs of a giant armadillo or some other wild animal, while Marlon held the capture sack. "Now keep a close eye on how Stan . . ."; then my dad would laugh, and I'd never get to hear the end of what Marlon said. "On that Marly?" my dad protested. "How Stan died?" My dad hated animals to cry so he fed every living thing that our cat looked like my mother's rabbit fur muff—one big roll of fur. All Babysray had to do was meow twice and Daddy gave her tuna from a can. Sometimes when he had only one Hawaiian-Punch-and-whiskey he'd cook up liver for Babysray. "Poor Babysray," he'd say, "lost all your brothers and sisters to that German shepherd. It's a good thing you hid your little self, isn't it?" Then he'd scratch her real hard under the chin. She seemed to like hearing the story of her early life. My dad never mentioned that Babysray hid for four days behind the glider in the backyard before she'd let him pick her up. She had green goo coming out of her eyes, and I think she was only about five weeks old. She had one green eye and the other brown. Her mama was an alley cat. I don't think you're supposed to take a kitten from its mama at five weeks old, but my dad did. He had already had three martinis before dinner when he drove to the vet, and I thought we'd never get to keep the cat. But we did. Daddy's and the one who named her Babysray. I wanted to name her April, but Daddy said that was a human's name.

like one of those toy tiger heads on a spring people put in the back windows of their cars; its head just agreeably bouncing all over the place. Usually I hid a pack of smokes in the gutter next door, so I'd take my fishing pole and hook the cellophane pack and reel it in.

My dad switched from drinking martinis to Manhattans, all in one summer. Then my mother had to go to the drugstore for a green bottle of vermouth and a clear one with whiskey in it, instead of the frosted gin fifth. In sixth grade I used one of those bottles for a time capsule. The teacher told us to bury it in the backyard, and "one day a stranger will know something about another generation. This information will help them in their own lives." I couldn't think of a thing to put in it, except a tiny Bible my mother carried in her apron pocket. I wanted to get rid of that Bible somehow, because whenever she'd start carrying it around she'd end up in the hospital in South Bend. Once she thought I was pregnant. I wasn't, but I had messed around with Tom Arnetti in an abandoned barn. I just touched his thing. Nothing else. It was as soft as the purple skin of an eggplant. Vera told me to cut some of my hair and braid it, and then they'll know the kind of hairstyles girls wore in the '60s. I knew every single generation since the beginning of time knew how to braid, so I didn't do that. My dad gave me a nail clipper. My grandmother wrote down the names of movie stars and their birth dates on slips of paper. She had been using the almanac for the last year, since she started to forget things. I found Simone's name on a slip of paper once. Next to her name, my grandmother had written: Molly's best friend. Then my dad's name and his occupation were scrawled beneath: Engineer. I buried the bottle with a picture of my gerbil shimmying through a cardboard toilet paper tube. I wanted to put in a picture of myself, but my dad said that they might think we were all plump in the family and lived on milkshakes. I ripped up that picture and stomped out of the room where the cherry from his first Manhattan lay on a coaster. After that I tried not to eat Spearmint Leaves candy when I watched Bonanza on Sunday nights. I think my dad put the bowl on top of the TV to test me. I liked the gummy leaves; you could suck on the sugar from one leaf for a good ten minutes before you had to chew. I was always looking for treats that lasted long.