

## Cracked Spines

Miriam Horsley

My father sounds like a dictionary. The *t*'s in butter never slide into *d*'s; his *goings* are never *goins*. His dialogue is peppered with words found on standardized tests. In response most people smile, ignore the word, resume the conversation; his children are not so lucky.

"Do you know what quixotic means?" he asks. I press my lips into a line, hoping the question goes away.

"Look it up. The dictionary is in the living room; the encyclopedia is in the computer room." He is already reimmersed into *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. My father knows the answer; I understand it is my job to figure it out.

Years later, it is still my job. "Dad, can I get the new *Pokémon* game?"

He puts down his pipe. "What did the critics say?"

I unfold my report for him: reviewers on two trusted gaming sites rate the game highly for originality; players give it a similar score. Overall response is positive, and the price has decreased since the game is a few months old.

"Consider getting it after school is out for the summer."

When I get the game, I share the exciting parts with him.

My father loves to share. He shares stories, wryly remembering his electrocution on a cow fence and admitting how often he questioned the sanity of his peers in drama school. He shares emotions, voice rising and falling in narration, and he knows how to make people laugh. His years of performing *Hamlet* and *Don Giovanni* turn regular tales into fairy tales.

"Where did we leave off?" he asks, grabbing *The Chamber of Secrets* even though, at age ten, I'm old enough to read it myself. I jab a finger at chapter three.

"Didn't we read about the flying car already?" He knows we did, but I am unyielding. "Well then, we'll read chapter three..."

Nothing about books escapes my father, even if he lets his young daughter think he never notices her stealing *The Princess Bride* from his bookshelf. He knows every smooth Easton Press spine of the classics as well as each fractured spine of ten-cent novels bought in college; the pages wrinkled with water are no less loved than those edged with gold. Each time my father closes a cover, he has an opinion about what lies beneath. The books leave their scent on him, decomposing cellulose and vanilla, mingling with pipe tobacco.

Before he smelled of pipes and pages he smelled of theater makeup and metal scissors: a combination of practical hairstyling and hopeful acting that led him to the pinnacle of the American Dream and then shoved him back into the American Reality of square offices and the type of government badges that James Bond doesn't use.

"Do you want to go to work for me?" he asks on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. "We can switch jobs."

"I don't think I could handle banks, and I doubt you could handle trigonometry."

"I once used trigonometry as a witness in court to find out how fast a car was going."

"I don't think you did that."

“I did. I used math outside of school.”

I glance at him over my cereal. “No one uses math outside school except math people.”

“I did.”

He leaves for work in self-buffed shoes and self-pleated pants; his bow ties and braided leather braces would not be out of place on Winston Churchill, though perhaps his trifocals would be.

In performance he looks much the same, just with a more festive bow tie.

Holiday season 2012 finds my father on the stage of the Wildey Theatre; he sings at the request of his former classmates. I have never seen him on stage before but I am familiar with his posture: shoulders square, spine straight as it can be at fifty-eight years old, tongue poised for enunciation, chest inflated with the anticipation of sound—“O Holy Night” moves the audience to tears.

“Can you believe this guy works in *banking*?” his friend asks after the applause quiets. My father offers a chuckle, nods to the pianist, exits stage right.

Were he to defend his actions, he might talk about how he lived in New York for many years—“Off of carrots,” he interjects, “and celery”—or how New York barely provided for him; it wouldn’t and couldn’t and didn’t provide for a family. He moved out of New York.

“I won’t make you do a job you hate, but you have to be pragmatic.” He doesn’t mention himself. “Do you know what pragmatic means?”