

Headstall

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My father is the healthiest I have ever seen him. He is brown again. His liver is healing. His eyes are glistening because they are happy to see me not because he is too intoxicated to talk. His beard is shaven, white stubble sitting quietly on his skin. His hair is shaven with a no.2 blade. He is spick 'n span.

The last time he was sober he was attending my book launch with my mother (legally blind), aunt, uncle (who is blind now). My father was agitated in the bookshop and found every utterance and the fidgeting of my mother a disturbance to his church. My mother was the same. They argued like crumpled up paper. I hugged him sort of reluctantly since he always reeked of alcohol. It would sweat out of his pores. He was shaking and smoking, leaning against the bookshelf, completely out of place in his funeral best.

He usually looked sloppy. I was the one that suggested he wear that suit, but the man of my childhood that read the newspaper on a Sunday, smelled like Old Spice and Aquafresh, was gone. This man had lost his broad shoulders and was drowning in the suit. I hugged him, and he smelled medicinal, like Betadine, cigarettes, and LUX soap. I saw my dad had axed off the tree he planted when I was born. Now there was only a stump in its place, and he painted on top of it, to keep it

from growing. He had filled the front of our yard with bricks. He said there was heavy rain and the house looked like a submarine. My father hated being laughed at.

I waved at my mother, but she didn't wave back. I walked up to her. The walk from the gate to the front door of the house seemed far because my mind was stretching it with reproach: why was she so blatant about not welcoming me home. I greeted her and she grabbed the sound. She was crying so much her glasses looked like buckets catching leaks.

When you are an only surviving child, you are also the only next of kin when filling out forms for your parents at the doctor, the municipality, funeral insurance. However when you fill out forms for yourself, you have to ask other people for permission to put their name there as an emergency contact.

You have no one to ask for blood. You will never be an aunt. You choose never to have children. You have no one to inherit from.

You have worked for the house that your parents couldn't pay off. You have paid for your own inheritance.

There is no one to live up to and you are the only one that belongs to your parents. When you are your parents' keeper you cannot make them orphans.