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Josh Weil

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JOHN HENRY'S HEADLAMP

Josh Weil

An excerpt from the novel *Swimming Season*

When I try to recall my father in those years before I turned nine, I mainly see him leaving and returning. As far back as I can remember, he went on business trips—Philadelphia, Baltimore, sometimes all the way out to Minneapolis or even Chicago. He wouldn't tell me he was going until he was already at the door holding his carry-on bag and alligator skin briefcase, but I'd know as soon he sat down to breakfast.

From the top of the stairs that led to my bedroom, I'd crouch behind the dieffenbachia plant's broad leaves and watch him. A paper napkin tucked in his collar to protect his tie, he would absently scrape a teaspoon inside the shell of a soft boiled egg while he read the *Eagle*. Mom would sit next to him, her face already made up despite her bathrobe and slippers, tracing her fingers over the veins on the back of his hand. When he finished eating, he would rise, walk behind Mom, and let his hands drift from her shoulders down the whole length of her arms until his fingers had enveloped hers. He'd kiss the nape of her neck. She'd close her eyes. When she stood, Dad would wrap his arms around her waist and rest his chin on the top of her head, and they would gaze together out at the grey slate patio and the red begonias in wet, dark soil, the oriental maple with its burgundy leaves almost still.

Then I'd hear the car moaning up the driveway, and whoever was picking Dad up would honk a couple times. Dad would untouch his chest from Mom's back and walk to the front door, shoes clacking away the quiet. That was my cue. I'd hurl myself down the stairs and land in his hug.

He was never gone for more than a couple days, but he always returned with the fanfare of a homecoming, as if he'd been

caravanning across the Sahara instead of just fighting traffic in Trenton. And he always brought me gifts, old-looking things he claimed had belonged to famous men: Billy the Kid's boots, Al Capone's wristwatch, the nose-ring from Paul Bunyan's ox.

When he left Schipler Architects to make a go of it on his own, it didn't mean much to me except that he took more business trips. But it was worse for Mom. He started going on weekends, and, before long, he was leaving almost every other Friday. I'd come home on the bus, and Mom would be waiting for me by the mailboxes, trying too hard to look happy, talking in a high, excited voice that wasn't quite hers. She'd take my hand as we walked up the driveway, and, if she was already missing him badly enough, she'd swing our arms as if trying to work up enough momentum to skip. Those weekends were the only times she let me taste wine. She'd pour herself a glass at dinner and give me sips. Afterwards, we'd push the coffee table aside in the living room, draw the curtains open over Dad's picture window, turn the floodlights on. She'd put on a folk music record—Serbian, Turkish, Israeli—take my hands, her fingers still damp from the dishwater, and spin me around the room, teaching me the steps.

Everyone must have a fault line in their childhood, a year or summer or moment when fate reaches into a pathless landscape and nudges them in a direction for the first time. For me, it was a Thursday night when I was nine. The last time Dad had come home he'd brought me John Henry's headlamp, and I was outside, creeping around with it strapped to my head, an arrow notched in the string of my bow, trying to find toads so I could shoot them. When I heard my parents yelling, I clicked off the lamp. The light from their bedroom window felt like high beams on me. I crouched down, wishing I hadn't been sneaking around in the woods. I wouldn't have heard them; they wouldn't have been fighting. Their voices were compressed into shards as they came through the window.

"I run a business. Sweetheart. Lilly. What do you want? Me to go back to the—"

"No."

"They wouldn't take me."

"I don't want you to go back to the fucking firm."

"Lil."

"I want you to stop going on those trips."

"I've always had to go on trips. How am I going to run a—"

"Who does business on the weekend? All the time on the weekend, Harold? Who?"

"My clients."

"What do they do that I can't?"

For a moment, Dad didn't answer. Then he said, "Who?"

"Oh, fuck you."

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Fuck you, Harold."

They were quiet. My legs hurt from crouching but I didn't want to move. It seemed like if I broke the silence I might start them again.

When Dad spoke, he sounded as if he were going to cry. "Jesus," he said. "Jesus, you're the most perfect woman I've ever known."

I don't know what passed between them above my head and behind that wall, but when Mom finally said, "Tell me," she sounded almost sick with fear. "Tell me this once the whole goddamn truth."

"Lilly," Dad's voice was just breath. "I'm not."

"We'll get through it," she said.

"Lilly..."

"Tell me the—"

"I am not cheating on you, Lilly. I am doing business. Making a go of this. On my own. You know I'm...you know I've never been the little guy. But I am now. And I have to go to the clients. They won't come to me. I have to. Do you see that? Lilly? The one thing I can do that the Schipler Brothers won't do is go there and meet them whenever and wherever they want. And sometimes—sometimes that means weekends. Okay? Lil?"

In the silence that followed, I tried not to breathe.

"What do I have to say here?" Dad's voice was so low I could hardly hear it. "What do you want me to do?"

Mom's voice wasn't frantic; it wasn't even angry; it was strong. "I want you to take Seth with you," she said.



Dad's Cadillac was cream-colored, sparked with glinting chrome. The seats were real leather and the steering wheel was wrapped in the stuff; the whole car smelled of it. When we'd get in, Dad would slip on his driving gloves and ease his sunglasses over his eyes as if they were an F-16 pilot's helmet. He'd start flicking imaginary switches on the sun-visor. "Firing engine number one," he'd say. I'd make the engine firing noise. We'd hold our hands to our mouths and say "Cleared for take-off" or "Let's rip" or "Roger that" before giving Mom the thumbs-up signal through the windshield and rocketing off down the driveway.

On that first trip out, Dad pulled into an auto store's lot before we had gone even twenty minutes. He parked by a wall of stacked tires, left me sitting in the car, and ran into the store. When he came back out, he was grinning. He tossed me a paper bag and pulled out onto the road again. He'd bought me a pair of leather driving gloves.

"Seth-o," he said, "How about you take the wheel?"

I climbed on his lap. He told me to grab just below his hands, and I gripped the wheel tight, staring straight ahead, my eyes strained with concentration. Every time a car zipped by, my whole body clenched. Dad eased off the gas a little. I could feel the muscle in his thigh move under me. He spoke like a racecar announcer, his breath on my cheek, his cologne strong. Gradually, I relaxed, sank against his chest, and just drove. Everything that had seemed terrifyingly fast—signs blurring by, oncoming cars, sudden curves—slowed. We drifted by, almost seemed to glide.

The next morning, Dad dropped me off at what he called "the daycare center" but was really just an old Asian lady's house. I still remember the smell of that place: day-old fish cooked in oil, a greasiness to the air so strong it seemed to bog down the

old lady's sentences as much as her accent did. As soon as Dad left, she put her fish-smelling hands on my shoulders and told me I'd have to help her watch the other kids. There were four of them, not one over six years old. After five hours squeezed on a plastic-covered couch watching TV shows meant for kids half my age and sucking in greasy fish smell (even the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were steeped in it) while the old lady whirled away on a sewing machine, I hated that place and I hated her.

That afternoon, Dad seemed tired when he picked me up. We went swimming in the hotel's indoor pool but he just sat on the side with his legs dangling, checking his watch when he thought I wasn't looking. Back in the room, he asked if I'd be okay if he went out for a couple hours, just to see some friends. I threw a fit. Eventually, he gave in and left me in the room while he went down to the lobby to make a phone call. I remember wondering why he couldn't use the phone by the bed.

It was pretty much the same on Sunday, but that evening when he picked me up from the Asian lady's he was humming. I asked him how work had gone. "Great," he said, "Superbo, great." He was grinning around at everything and I didn't want to ruin that, so I told him that my day had been great too. On the way home from Pittsburgh, he let me drive again, but it was night and scarier with the lights coming at us, and I didn't like it so much. Plus, he smelled strange up close. His hands smelled kind of rotten. When we stopped at a diner, I told him we'd better wash our hands. He looked at me quizzically, but he followed me into the bathroom. While we were drying our fingers under the hot air I leaned over and sniffed his and told him they didn't stink anymore. He jerked his hands away and wiped them hard on his pants. "Don't you ever do that again," he said. "Ever."



When I got home from school on Monday, Mom was waiting for me at the bottom of the driveway. The kids I was sitting with laughed at me and shouted that I had to have my Mom walk me

home and one of them asked if she was going to hold my hand too. I told him, "Screw you, penis breath." But when I got off the bus I walked right past Mom and growled, "You always have to do that."

She said she just wanted to walk with me a little, that she'd missed me all weekend. Red and yellow and brown leaves had fallen over the driveway, wet and shiny from the rain. I kicked at them as we walked.

"How was the trip?" Mom asked after a while.

"Good," I said.

"You had fun?"

"Sure."

She seemed to want to talk and not to want to talk at the same time. Finally, she said, "Well, aren't you going to tell me what you did?"

"We went to Pittsburgh and stayed at a hotel and watched this movie. . ."

"What movie?"

"You wouldn't have liked it."

"Oh. What else?"

"I don't know. We had Chinese food."

"Well that's one night," she said. She seemed relieved.

"The next day I had to stay at this crappy lady's crappy house while Dad went to his meeting."

She didn't seem to hear about the crappy lady's place. "Did he look nice?" she asked. "Did he have his briefcase?"

I looked at her like she was crazy. "Course he had his briefcase."

She was quiet the rest of the way until we were almost at the house and then she stopped walking. I kept going. After a few seconds, she called to me. I stopped and turned and said, "What now, Mom?" but, as soon as I said it, I was sorry. She looked scared. She walked quickly up to me and squatted down so she could look me right in the face. She put her hands on my shoulders. They were shaking.

"I have to ask you something, Seth," she said. "Okay? It doesn't mean anything."

I nodded, as if I knew what that was supposed to mean.

She took a deep breath. "Did you see anything strange, I mean, did Dad do anything strange, act strange in any way that you noticed, I mean did it seem like he was really going to those meetings?"

All I knew was that nothing had seemed very normal about the whole trip at all. I didn't know if he was going to those meetings; I hadn't even considered until then that maybe he wasn't. Standing there on the driveway with her, I almost told Mom about the night he'd gotten mad because he couldn't be with his friends, and the way he'd gone to the lobby to use the phone, and how Dad had smelled weird in the car after he'd picked me up, but I could tell that if I said any of that she was going to cry.

"Dad wasn't strange," I said. "He was just Dad."

"He didn't go out at night without you?"

"No. We got Chinese food."

"You didn't see any women with him?"

"No," I said and I was so glad to be able to tell the truth that I said, "I didn't see him with anybody at all the whole time. He just went to work and picked me up and he was tired from work and said it was a good meeting and we went out to dinner and then came home."

She was smiling at me and she didn't look like she was going to cry anymore. She took my hands. "Didn't you have any fun at all?"

I felt weird standing there holding Mom's hands. "Well, Dad let me sit on his lap and drive." As soon as I'd said it, I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. But she just laughed and said, "That idiot." She stood up. "Your father's an idiot, Seth, but I love him."

Later that night, Dad took my driving gloves away. He said he and Mom had decided I shouldn't drive. He smiled. "Not for another seven years." I learned right then and there what happened when I told Mom about our trips.

That's about how it went for the next three months—maybe five trips in all. Dad would find somebody to take care of me during the day while he went off to meetings and then we'd eat

dinner and come home and watch a movie on the TV at night. We never went anywhere fun. We never went to Denver or New Orleans or even Detroit. We just went to Philadelphia and Baltimore and Trenton—places a couple hours away. But on the fifth trip, when Dad told me we were going back to Pittsburgh, I thought of the crappy Asian lady and the babies and told him no way.

"What do you mean, no way?" he said. We were a half-hour outside of Reading. "We're going to Pittsburgh. I've got meetings in Pittsburgh."

"I hate that place."

"What's to hate about Pittsburgh?"

"I hate that Asian lady and her shitty place and all the babies I have to stay with. I'm way too old for that."

We were passing a section of fast food joints and shopping malls, and I watched the signs zip by against the grey sky. Dad still didn't say anything, so I said, "And she's mean."

"She is?" Dad said.

"She yells all the time. She has to finish her sewing."

"Okay," Dad said. "Alright, then." He turned a sharp right, and we pulled into a Roy Rogers parking lot. "Let's get something to eat."

I wasn't hungry but I got a strawberry milkshake and a large fries because Dad usually doesn't like fast food and I knew this was going to be my only chance for a while. The place was mostly empty, and we sat at a table by the window. Dad brushed the crumbs off with a napkin. He looked at me while I ate my fries. Then he reached into his and ate one. We watched the traffic go by on the highway.

"Tell you what," he said suddenly, "maybe we can work this whole thing out a little better than we've been doing. What do you think?"

I thought there were a lot of ways it could be better. "Sure," I said. The fries were good.

"You remember how you told Mom about driving on my lap?"

"Yeah," I said.

"And she—and we couldn't do it anymore?"

"She's afraid I'll get hurt," I said.

"Sure," Dad said. "Of course she is. But it's safe, we know that, right?"

I was starting to think he was going to let me drive again. "Totally," I said.

"Right," he said. "So, the point is, there are some things, like driving the Caddy, that are perfectly okay if Mom doesn't know about them but aren't okay if she does. See?"

"Can I drive the Caddy again?" I said.

Dad unwrapped his fish sandwich and took a bite. "Maybe," he said.

"Now?"

"Maybe."

"Cool."

"And maybe you don't have to stay with Mrs. Tong."

I just ate my fries and watched Dad and didn't say anything. I didn't want to screw this up.

"This is the thing," Dad said. "I know you're not a baby. I know you're a mature kid. Heck, you're more mature than I am sometimes." He was excited about something, I could tell, and I was glad because that meant there was a better chance that this plan, whatever he was thinking, was going to stick. "Do you think," he said, "that when I have to go to my meetings I could give you some money, and let you out at the mall, or downtown for the day—or maybe even some evenings—and we'd arrange a meeting place and time and I could just pick you up?"

"Definitely," I said.

"You could play at the arcade, see a movie, get something to eat, hang out."

"Sure," I said. "Yeah." I could not believe how lucky I was. My parents never let me hang out at the mall or go to the movies alone. I'd gone from being baby-sat by that crappy Asian lady to this.

"Okay," Dad said. "Okay, then. We'll do that."

"Okay," I said.

"But Mom can't know about it."

"Sure." I had already figured that part out.

"I mean it."

"I know, Dad."

"About any of it." I stopped sucking on the straw of my milkshake because Dad's tone had shifted and he had put down his fish sandwich. He was looking right at me in the eyes now. "Seth," he said, "I'm very serious about this. She has to think that things are just like they've been up until now. Do you understand? Because if not, this isn't going to work and we'll just have to stick with things the way they are."

"I won't tell her anything."

"I'm very serious about this," Dad said. He watched me for a second. Then he nodded as if he had made his mind up. He unwrapped his straw and stabbed it through the lid on his milkshake.

"You can tell her about the meetings and the daycare and stuff," he said.

"I know," I said. "Just nothing different."

Dad looked at me for a while, then reached across the table and ruffled my hair. "You're a good kid, Seth," he said. "I wish to God you didn't have to deal with this. Someday you'll understand. You're one hell of a good kid."

I patted my hair back into place.

"You're a good Dad," I said, because it seemed wrong not to say anything.

We sat there, me in my parachute pants and green Philadelphia Eagles sweatshirt and Dad in his grey suit, sipping our milkshakes and watching all the different kinds of people who came into Roy Rogers, and it was strange to me, all of a sudden, that there they were buying food and sitting down and eating it all around me, and I didn't know one thing about any of them.