

Gaines: On Fleek

ON FLEEK

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WINNER OF THE
HARPUR PALATE PRIZE IN
CREATIVE NONFICTION

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They got his eyebrows wrong. That was the first thing I noticed—the first thought I held onto and tried to use to prove that the body on the table wasn't that of my father.

Dad had caterpillar brows. The kind of eyebrows that could probably have grown up and over his head had he ever developed a need for a combover. The kind of eyebrows where every once in a while, a hair three inches long would shoot straight out from the brow for no reason. The kind of eyebrows that were alive.

The mortician had told us over the phone that he and his clothes had been filthy, but that she had done her best to clean him up. She told us that she didn't want to put him back in those clothes, that he didn't deserve that, and that she'd cremate them with him. She told us that he'd have stitches around his scalp from the autopsy, and asked my mother to bring a hat to cover them. Mom brought the fisherman's hat he'd worn to Australia and clasped it to her chest like she was trying to hold on to her last happy memory of him. The last happy memory before he stopped taking his meds and he started destroying the family.

Viegut Funeral Home in Loveland, Colorado, is tucked behind some trees across from a strip mall. The building is low and run-down—exactly what you'd expect from a funeral home in a throwaway town. When Mom, my older brother Chris, and I arrived, we met my oldest brother Justin and the mortician in the waiting room. Justin stood, imposing—his shaved head and tattoos adding to that impression—light eyes under dark brows appraising everyone and everything. The carpets were dark green, and ugly upholstered furniture aged under fluorescent lights. There were even mints in a crystal tray on top of a doily. It wouldn't have surprised me to learn that they furnished the place with belongings from recent customers; it's what I would have done. I shifted back and forth on my feet, uncomfortable in the seriousness. Chris stood silently, immovable as always. Mom spoke quietly with the mortician. Justin wore his grief like boxing gloves: hands clenched, ready for a fight.

The mortician told us that Dad would be slightly pink from the carbon monoxide poisoning. She also said that we didn't need the hat,

that the stitches they'd done for the autopsy were small enough that it wouldn't be upsetting for us to see him.

I'd kind of hoped he'd look like Frankenstein's creature, but that's not the sort of thing you say out loud to a mortician. She'd probably take offense to that and she'd had to put makeup on my dead dad's body and give him a bath. Dad had been homeless for nearly six months, and he'd been camping or sleeping in his Jeep in his dirty clothes. I wasn't going to insult her. If anything, I was going to try and tip her.

It's kosher to tip a mortician, right?

But she didn't warn us about his eyebrows. The mortician had trimmed them down, and they looked too small and too clean. I tried to picture him alive with brows like that, and couldn't. They were too feminine. I swallowed the nervous giggle that threatened to escape my throat. Dad would've abhorred these eyebrows. They were on fleek, as my students would say, and I would've given anything to be able to say that to his alive face and watch as he struggled with hating AAVE but not wanting to appear self-loathing; his internalized racism was as out of control as his eyebrows normally were.

Dad also had a mustache. I'd only ever seen him with one in pictures from the 1980s, when he and Mom had just gotten together. There's one photo in particular that the mustache made me think of: Christmas 1985, right after Dad had proposed to Mom. He is wearing a baby blue Adidas tracksuit. His hair is a few inches long and untamed, the coils growing unevenly from his head. His eyebrows are glorious and wriggling, and his mustache made his smile look all the whiter. But at that moment, in person, his mustache was a dusty gray.

I'd never been to a wake before. At funerals, I'd only ever seen urns and blown-up photos from years earlier wreathed in an obscene amount of roses, and Dad would've hated to be surrounded by that many flowers. He'd have sneezed his brains out and then complained about how girly everything looked. He'd probably say something like, "What, were there

no manly flowers? No strong flowers to place around my head? You had to use *roses*?"

He would've preferred a bonfire of beetle-eaten pine trees.

It didn't feel real. The last time I saw my father alive had been in a courtroom at an Arizona psychiatric hospital a few years earlier. He was pretentious as ever then, and hadn't yet filed for bankruptcy. At one point, he argued with the judge about why he should be allowed to represent himself. There he was, a six-foot-two black man in a mental institution arguing with a five-foot tall redheaded woman about his mental fitness and his experience with "law."

"Mr. Gaines, what are your qualifications for representing yourself in this trial?"

"I went to Harvard," he said.

"Harvard law school?"

"Harvard business school."

"Do you have any legal experience?"

"I have given a deposition before the FCC."

"Yes, but, do you have any legal training?"

"I went to Harvard."

It went on for a while, until the judge told him that he was quite clearly incapable of being his own representation. He slouched back in his seat, and spent the rest of the day whispering furiously into his counsel's ear.

That day, he had refused to make eye contact with me or say anything directly to me, though at one point he stood a foot away chatting amiably with an orderly. I was there to testify against him—or at least that's what he thought. Really, I was there to try and save his life. To try and prevent myself from having to stand in the room that I was in, staring at the body that belonged to the most important man in my life. But that's a different story, a longer, scarier, sadder, darker one, and this is about his dead body, not his alive one.

Mom, Justin, Chris and I stood a healthy distance from Dad's

body, like we thought he'd jump up and scare us. Or because they, too, didn't want it to be real. The room was narrow but long, with deep red wood paneling and light green wallpaper. At one end Dad was on a bed covered by a sheet, and at the other sat two high-back velvet chairs, in case we wanted to sit down and appraise him while drinking tea and speaking in terrible British accents.

Silence filled the length of the room, and I couldn't hold it. The quiet was heavy, uncomfortable, and forced. Justin wanted us to be quiet out of respect for Dad, and I tried my best, but I wasn't having it. I was starting to feel trapped under the weight of all the anger I held towards my brothers for not telling me that Dad was homeless, their lack of effort to help him, how they had used him for his money, and how they had failed him—but before I could say those things out loud, I stared at the end of the table where Dad's feet jutted into the sheets and said instead:

"At the very least, the world doesn't have to suffer his feet anymore."

Justin rolled his eyes and let long-suffering sigh escape his lips in a gesture that so closely mirrored our father that my breath caught in my chest.

"Did you have to say that?"

I did. Dad's feet were the most disgusting thing I have ever seen in my life, and one time my mom popped a live maggot out of a bump on one of our dogs, so that's really saying something. Dad's feet were like a rainforest of fungi and rotting wood. His toenails alternated between green and brown and regularly fell off in large chunks. He wasn't too ashamed to not stick them in your face to gross you out, either.

Even though Justin claimed he hated our father, and even though Chris claimed he wanted nothing to do with him, and even though he and Mom had been divorced for eleven years, we all cried. Justin pulled both Chris and me into hugs where he crushed the air out of our lungs like he wanted to smother the pain we felt. It was one of the only times Justin's hugs weren't comforting. He gave the best hugs, but this hug was violent and desperate and it made me want to crawl up the walls.

I couldn't stare at this body forever. This man on this table covered by this sheet, with the stitches on his scalp from the autopsy—this couldn't be my dad. My dad wasn't a weird burnt orange color with feminine eyebrows and an impeccable mustache. My dad wasn't missing a front tooth from "biting into a cherry," as Justin had said.

My dad always had five o'clock shadow. My dad generally only wore biking shorts and shirts that said *I Run with The Big Dogs*, or Tommy Bahamas shirts and khakis. My dad was a deep brown with a seasonal burst of freckles across his nose. Who was this stranger?

I couldn't be in the room anymore. Everything was too sterile for a man who had been so wild. It felt to me more like Dad was sitting in one of the chairs behind us than on the table in front of us. It felt like he was judging this freak show and weighing how each of us responded. It felt like he had something to say about the jokes I made, or the outfit I had worn, or Justin's boast that he had hugged him last, or that even his ex-wife was crying, too.

I stepped up to the body and touched his arm. He was cold and damp, like a frog or like the sea-cucumbers he was always trying to make me touch on vacations in Hawaii, creatures he always referred to as *penises-of-the-sea*. The thought made me almost laugh, then cry again. I placed my hand on his scalp, far away from the stitches, and kissed his forehead.

"Sorry," I said.

What did I apologize for? I hadn't failed him, at least not in the way he would've thought. I spent the ten years previous to his death trying desperately to keep him alive and to try and find the father that I had so admired. I had been offered the opportunity to make his medical decisions when I was seventeen and a senior in high school and his paranoia led him to commit himself for three weeks. I had spent a weekend with him in Arizona when I was eighteen trying to help him sort through his delusions so he could really see me. I had emailed him regularly over the years in attempts to reestablish a relationship. I had called the police to do welfare checks on him when I was twenty-four and he was having a psychotic break. I had flown two thousand miles

that same year to keep him from hurting himself or someone else. I had, at twenty-five, consulted with the head of psychiatry at a local hospital—a man Dad had worked with for a decade—on Ketamine psychoses and best practices in communicating with him. I had gotten an attorney when I was almost twenty-six because he tried to sue me, a teacher, for \$100 million—and I had even forgiven him that. I had forgiven him when he told me to die and urged him to get help. None of it was enough to keep him from buying a portable generator and ending his life in the K-Mart parking lot in Loveland, Colorado.

I left the room, not quite sure who or what I had said goodbye to, but it didn't feel like Dad. It was a facsimile of him, made to be beautiful and peaceful in death when he was nothing of the sort in life.

Eventually, the four of us sat down with the funeral home director in another room to finalize his death certificate and pick out keepsake urns. Justin sat at the head of the table, with me to his right and Chris to his left. I kept staring at both of them, seeing flashes of Dad in their expressions: in Chris' neutral face, the way he tucked his chin down into his neck; in Justin's arrogance on display in the set of his brow and the roll of his eyes; in both of their eyebrows, just as alive and bushy as his. I let a hint of a smile peek through on my face: I have those eyebrows, too. I often joke that I wish I could be as tenacious as my unibrow, and I know that Dad would've thought that hilarious.

Mom stood behind Justin against the wall. The director sat across from him and started asking us questions.

"What is his birthday?"

We gave the date, but only Mom knew the year.

"Social security number?"

My brothers and I stared at each other for a few seconds, until Mom said it.

"What?" she said, when we all looked at her. "We were married for twenty years. That's not something you just *forget*."

"Occupation?"

"Entrepreneur," Justin said. He wanted to memorialize Dad's legacy for helping create Sprint and then launching two failed endeavors after

that. He wanted to smooth Dad's life over, to make it shinier than it was. He was acting like the mortician; he was trimming our father's life down to something unrecognizable, something presentable.

I wanted to point out that Sprint was successful because it sprang from an existing framework, and that Dad didn't actually have any experience starting or running a company, but that probably wasn't the time or place to have the conversation about idolizing our dead father.

"Address?"

"He was homeless," I said. "He was living out of his car."

The mortician looked up at us, and I swallowed the confrontation. I knew I was never going to say anything to Justin or Chris about it, but, *lord*, did I want to. But what good would it do? My brothers are as prideful as Dad was. They would never admit to wrongdoing, and all that would happen would be a yelling match where they terrified me and I ended up crying. It wasn't worth it, even though I knew I was right.

Soon, the funeral home director made some joke about being the oldest, and Justin looked at her and said, "You don't know me," like he was about to throw this woman across the room.

Justin must have thought the funeral director's attempt at relating to him was disrespectful. From there on out, all of his responses were clipped. He was *so* angry; he looked like he wanted to break the table we were sitting at. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd broken a table, either—one time, after the divorce, he broke the granite table we had eaten family dinners at with Chris' body. Chris has a nasty keloid scar on his arm from the encounter.

Dad's death gave Justin an excuse to break six months of sobriety, and when Justin wasn't sober, he was a nightmare—that table incident happened during a night of drinking. We were all trying to keep him as calm as possible while we settled Dad's estate. Mom spoke in hushed tones, Chris stayed silent, and I cracked jokes. We were back to the same family dynamic we'd had when we were children and our parents were still married.

After the funeral director ran us through the bill for Dad's

cremation, we picked our keepsake urns—a gold heart for me, a small box for Chris, and Justin had chosen to order a goddamned *skull ring* that he could put the ashes in. It wasn't the first hideous skull ring Justin had bought, either. Years earlier, he had a brief engagement to a much younger woman. He paid for a custom ring: black gold, amethysts, and black diamonds in the shape of a skull. It was not classy, nor was it cheap. That describes Justin's taste pretty well.

Once Mom paid for everything—something Dad would've hated and Justin was resentful of—we ended up at a Mexican restaurant, where Justin and Chris both ordered a shot, a beer, and a margarita.

"What?" Justin said, when Mom stared at him. "My dad just died. Give me a break."

Mom didn't want *her* confrontation, either. The one she'd been having with Justin regularly over the years: that he needed to be sober and that he was terrifying when he was drinking. She couldn't have that conversation again, today, in person, as Justin drank to bury his hurt deep and let his anger rise.

I ordered a margarita, too, but I sipped it slowly.

We ate and dodged around all the sticky topics that would cause us more hurt. Justin regaled us with stories of his grandeur—his new bosses wanted him to "burn all of his clothes" and buy new designer digs! He was going to be richer than Dad was at his age! All without a college education and any long-term work experience!—while Chris and I waggled our eyebrows at each other when he wasn't looking. Each of us spun stories and stared into the distance and tried to find common ground.

It was exhausting, and when Justin and Chris left for Chris' house, Mom and I got into my car and looked at each other. I raised one caterpillar brow at her.

"What a day," one, or both of us, said.

"What a fucking day, indeed."

The dissonance between my father then—wearing makeup, looking calm and at peace and *dead*—and the man whose mental illness helped

him justify the emotional and physical abuse directed at his family struck me dumb for the rest of the day. I did not fully understand how Justin and Chris did not want to talk about all the ways in which our father failed us and hurt us. I could not grasp why they wanted to remake his last ten years into something coiffed, something poised. They wanted to see him as he was briefly during our childhoods: brilliant, kind, mesmerizing, generous, and charismatic. I just wanted us all to see him for who he truly was: all of those things, but also gnarled, sick, complicated, broken, cruel, and sad. He was messy, scary, and untamable; not unlike his eyebrows.

The only thing trimmed neatly about our father's life was how careful he was in ending it.