**The Remains**

Patrick Dawson

The letter, its blue envelope creased and stained like the life it named, reached her on a weekend. Norah ran a fingernail along the embossed edges of the return address, a law firm out West she didn’t know. Her father was dead. They had found her address with his papers, a letter she’d written to him months before. Among his possessions, there had been little else to connect him to a life, a family. He would die alone; it was known for a long time.

In a shaky hand, he wrote Norah once a year on her birthday, the writing slumped across the page, always the same signoff—oddly formal: Your loving father and his initials. His life was passed among strangers, driving place to place in battered cars and waiting on front porches, a suitcase of samples to sell, felt hat in his hand.

*A very good morning, ma'am. I’m Earl Boylan. Could I have a minute of your time?*

She could remember postcards from far flung places: the Alamo, a giant peanut smiling by the roadside, the diner shaped like a hot dog.

*Looks like too much hot dog...even for a little girl who loves to eat!! Your loving father.*

 As a little girl she had kept all of them neatly tied in a ribbon, imagined him writing the notes, the crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes on a Formica table, smoke curling from between yellowed fingers, his breakfast pushed to the side of a cracked leather booth in some diner. Her mother’s lie—that the absent father was on an extended trip far away in made-up destinations, New Orleans, New York City—endured for months, but by Christmas, she had to admit he would probably be gone for a long while. After that, alone in the dark, Norah imagined driving the empty roads beside him, the dreamscape of ghostly voices, weary towns, strange cities passing.

She had been sent West to visit him only once, alone. By then, he lived near the water where the Pacific forced itself into coils of jutting rock. They walked in the cold out onto one narrow finger of rock. In the winter sun, their shadows were impossibly long and slender like lonely giants. Turning her face from the wind, she saw his dark outline fade suddenly as a cloud passed, slipping into something insubstantial, as though he might disappear.

She began to hold back, tugging at his hand. The water surrounded them on three sides, foamy seas spilling on the rocks and the vast rushing sound. The wind blew a curtain of salt spray in her face.

“What if there’s a hurricane?” She asked, wiping her eyes.

 “They don’t have hurricanes here, that’s in the Atlantic Ocean.”

Then he lifted Norah onto one of the giant stones, holding her carefully by the legs. “Look out there, see how far it goes? There’s a lot to find—if you’re not afraid.”

He said it simply, in his workingman’s voice, a special maxim of life, as if he had always tried to believe it. He stood silently for a time. At the top of the rocks, two gulls huddled against the gale, watching. Then his voice rose suddenly out of the wind, and he pulled her toward him. “Norah, let’s remember this, when we stood out here together, just us, and looked at all of it.”

He took her to the airport in the long, sad afternoon. She was wearing a pink dress he’d bought her the day before, pale blue ribbons at the waist. When he leaned down to kiss her goodbye, there was the familiar smell of his cologne and cigarette smoke on his breath. It was this Norah remembered vividly—the aroma that filled her senses—and her father’s last smile as she was taken by the hand and led to the plane. When she turned back, he had walked beyond the open door where they parted, his large hand lifted in a wave goodbye. His face seemed very white and fallen somehow, as though overtaken by a vast sadness. Her hand rose and covered her mouth as it trembled. In that last moment, she wanted one thing: that he not see her cry. Norah swallowed a sob, then cried out, “Bye Daddy, bye!”

We think back to innocence, the perfect myth of it. Even as children, we submit ourselves to these moments. Silently, they mark us through all the lost days. Then in scraps of memory, rise like a graze of faraway thunder.

The lawyer’s letter was a formality, her father had left almost nothing. Three shadowy rooms, the pile of Readers Digest magazines on the table near the bed, one window slightly open to an alleyway where the voices of children echoed. His suits lay piled on the bed where he died, his polished leather shoes lined up. Everything would be given away, a purge of personal effects. It was like a death in war, only a rudimentary ceremony to close a life. Silent strangers closed up the small house.

The letter mentioned a small insurance policy, a few hundred dollars. They would take only a modest percentage for their time in retrieving it. Also, an enclosed letter— apparently to her—lying unfinished beside an envelope found with his things. Norah tried to push away the thought that writing it may have been one of the last things he did.

*Dear Norah, There was a little girl playing outside and I thought of you. I wanted to write more often. Haven’t felt too good lately. But I shouldn’t complain, there’s a roof over my head and a sandwich in the fridge, ha ha…*

She could hear the rasping voice. The scribbled words blurred; the thin paper shook gently in her hand. Somehow, in the faint downward slope of his handwriting she could sense the struggle at the end: the ravaged lungs, the exhausted engine of a body running down, the darkness all around. Now the body was cold, lowered into the ground. Norah could picture his large hands--soft hands that had held onto her legs by the endless water—folded across his chest. Death, the cold of it now ran along her flesh, and the silence—the infinite stillness—the thought of eternal dark, consumed her. She wanted to cry out, to speak his name. Just his name. *Daddy, I don’t want to forget you.* It was all she could think of to say.