



NOËLLE GABERMAN

CALL YOUR DEADBEAT DAD

WAYNE SCOTT

Dead fathers make for stubborn ghosts.

— Eric Leigh

There is a bike path that zigzags from the east side of Portland, Oregon, down to the Willamette River, then along the austere black geometry of the Steel Bridge and onto the grassy esplanade that borders the west side. Several times a week, as I pedal along the path on my way to work, I glimpse a message spray-painted in purple block letters on the white pavement:

CALL YOUR DEADBEAT DAD
HE STILL LOVES YOU

I wonder who painted this graffiti and why. Sometimes

I imagine a father coming to this deserted path at midnight and scrawling a message to his estranged son. Other times I imagine a mother — one like mine, perhaps — writing this plea because she wants peace in the family and knows that her husband wants it too, even though he's too proud to admit it.

This stretch of sidewalk isn't visible from the highway. It's not seen by many commuters, like a huge billboard or a sign by a busy train stop would be. This is a very particular path, traveled by a small cadre of bikers. Is there one rider who sees this message day after day and stubbornly refuses to call home? Or is this message for all of us who have suffered in the wake of a father's disappearance?

I'm not sure whether my own father would qualify for that drum thump of a word: *deadbeat*. During my childhood he was a successful executive, working long hours and making good money for our family. He was handsome — blue eyes, square forehead, brown pompadour, dimples — and generous with his friends, who called him "Scottie." He loved to go into a bar, my mother told me, and buy drinks for the house. But over time his alcoholism and gambling eroded his success. He began embezzling from his company to pay off his debts to bookies and spent more and more time away from home. Sometimes late at night, when he was too drunk to drive, my mother would have to fetch him from a bar.

When I was fourteen, my father left us. He simply didn't come home one night. Instead of the discomfort of his drunken presence, we experienced the numb awareness of his absence: one less coffee cup in the sink each morning.

For two weeks no one knew where he had gone. Then he called to check on his three sons.

"Where are you?" I said, furious. I am the oldest.

"I can't tell you," he insisted. "But I'm all right. Don't worry."

After the call ended, my mother, my brothers, and I sat at the kitchen table without speaking. The clock on the wall ticked. How could he just leave us like this? My mother's brow furrowed; she absently sipped her coffee.

When my father surfaced to get a divorce, we found out he had been having an affair with another woman. In spite of stern orders from various judges, my father refused to pay alimony or child support. Anytime my mother had his wages attached, he simply changed jobs. She spent most of my teenage years in and out of court, trying to compel my father to take responsibility for his children, but he was lost in his vices. I have few memories of him sober.

As a matter of principle, no matter what my father did, my mother never spoke ill of him to my brothers and me. We had regular visits with him as part of the divorce settlement. Once a week he took us to dinner at a restaurant, and we talked about television or movies but said nothing of the lives we were living in the aftermath of his disappearance. My brothers and I had taken part-time jobs to help pay the rent on our three-bedroom apartment in Baltimore; we were determined to keep up with the lifestyle of our more affluent peers. Our father didn't talk about the life he was leading in a nearby city,

in a sparsely furnished apartment we had been to only once. Often our dinner conversation drifted into silence, bound up in lies and secrets and the longing, in spite of everything, to be just three sons talking to their father.

Once, when I was sixteen, after we had climbed into the car for him to return us to our mother, I asked my father, "Can we get groceries on the way home?"

His jaw tightened, and he looked away. "That's your mother's job."

I stared hard at the dashboard. My brothers, fourteen and eleven, were horsing around in the back. "There's no milk or bread at home," I said. I was lying, testing him. "You don't want us to be hungry, do you?"

"Of course I don't want that. Why are you talking this way? Did your mother make you say this?"

"No, it was my idea," I said. My brothers were wrestling, their feet kicking the back of my seat. They didn't want to hear this conversation. "If you really care about your kids, you'll stop at the grocery store."

"Jesus," my father muttered.

We stopped at the store.

In my late teens and early twenties I put all my energy into trying to change my relationship with my father: I tried to change myself. I tried to change him. I went to meetings of Alateen, Al-Anon, and Adult Children of Alcoholics. I talked with alcohol and drug specialists, psychotherapists, even tarot readers and mystics. One counselor told me that my expectations were too high, that I had no one to blame for my anger but myself. "You need to meet your father on his territory and try to accept him for who he is," she said. "Who are you to judge?"

That winter, when I returned home from graduate school for the holidays, I visited my father and offered to go with him to his favorite neighborhood bar.

"Really?" he said, smiling. He was gray haired now and heavier, with deep crow's-feet.

The bar was called the "Corner Stable," and it was smoky and narrow and dark, with two pool tables in the back. The bartender greeted my father by name. "This is my son," my father said, patting me on the shoulder. "He goes to graduate school in Chicago."

"What'll you have?" the bartender asked me, wiping the counter. The shelves behind him were filled with colored bottles, sparkling under amber light.

"A Coke."

"Aw, come on!" my father urged. "What about a beer?"

I hardly ever drank alcohol, but I recalled the therapist's words: *You need to meet your father on his territory*. "I don't like the taste of beer," I said. "Can I get a white Russian?" It was my mother's favorite drink.

The bartender raised his eyebrows.

"He wants a white Russian," my father said.

(end of excerpt)