

Father's Day

Marcus didn't know his father's favorite color, and Katie thought that was crazy. He's your father, she said, how can you not know that?

I know other stuff about him, Marcus said. He wore briefs, not boxers. He loved vintage jazz music and kept adding to his collection of seventy-eights at flea markets. He always bought American cars, even when he knew they would fall apart in a few years.

Katie posed a question: is your father right-handed or left-handed?

Marcus had no idea.

Katie was born on Father's Day. The way her mom tells it, Katie's dad was there for every second of labor and delivery, and wouldn't leave the room to urinate so he nearly peed his pants. When the baby was born he cried so hard, and for so long, that the doctor said he should take a lesson from his baby girl and calm down. He moved out a year later, which Katie's mom said was for the best.

Every year on Father's Day, Katie and her dad exchanged

B R E N D A N H O W A R D

presents. He wouldn't be a father without her, so she got a little kickback along with her birthday present. Every year since she had moved out, she would have lunch with her mother in the city and then get on a train to the west suburbs where she could meet her father for dinner. This is the way Katie told it.

I know that every family isn't like mine, she said, but he lives right here in town. Why can't you make plans to see him tomorrow? It's Father's Day, for heaven's sake.

Marcus leaned over to kiss her, hoping that the conversation would end there. It did.

Katie had to work that night, so Marcus took the opportunity to shop for her birthday card. They had been together for several months now, and this was their first birthday together. He was worried that he would screw it up. Christmas and Valentine's Day went smoothly, but those were reciprocal holidays. This time he was on his own and he didn't know how elaborately he should plan. He didn't know what kind of card to buy, or how many flowers.

The card shop in the marketplace didn't offer any answers, only possibilities: sincere declarations of ardor, witty innuendos, furry caricatures of lovey-dovey animals. Marcus picked them out, one after the other, and tried to imagine Katie's reactions. After a while, he got tired of thinking and gave up. He still had a few days to worry about it, anyway.

On his way out of the card shop, he passed a rack of

R U B B E R N E C K E R S

Father's Day cards. Marcus surprised himself when he stopped to look at them.

Later, after shopping for groceries and picking out three bottles of wine, Marcus made his way back to his apartment complex. He always thought the place looked like prefab housing on a larger scale: six identical buildings with sixteen units each, all lined up along a self-consciously winding road. He bitched about the place all the time but appreciated its proximity to the train station. A five-minute walk through the park and he could be on his way to anywhere in the city: Katie's place, the grocery store, the office, wherever he wanted to go. That was the best part.

He struggled with the door lock at first, wedging the grocery bag between the wall and his hip while clumsily fishing the keys out of his pocket. Then he conceded that placing groceries on the floor before opening the door would not be a display of weakness. What's the point of juggling if no one is there to see your act?

He enjoyed putting groceries away with Katie but found it tedious when he was alone. When she helped him, the task became a social event. She made laundry day feel like New Year's Eve. That's the kind of woman she was.

After emptying the grocery bag, he put two bottles of wine in the refrigerator and opened the third for a drink. He poured a glass and took the bottle with him for a seat on the couch. While he knew that Saturday night TV shows were