

JESSE GOOLSBY

Stepfather

The first time I met you, stepson, I fought your father in the driveway. He fistfisted a tire iron, so I grabbed a loose piece of flagstone at the base of the porch and we went at each other. That's really where my scar comes from. The afternoon had been nice, your mother made kabobs: venison, tomato, onion, squash, green pepper; the peppers you wouldn't touch, and you wouldn't speak to me, so your mom brought the soccer ball out and we kicked at it in the small backyard and I pretended to know something about Pele, and she made you hug me before I left out the front door, running into your dad who had spied our embrace.

In the photo you're ten, you stand in front of our autumn oak, your white-casted right arm straight as an arrow, Nazi-like, but at your side, saluting the rocky ground that shattered your elbow on your fall from the old tree. I warned you about the dead branches, and still I ran to you when I heard your animal groan, your dangling lower arm, inverted, twisting, and I made you wait for the hospital and belted you first because you never listened to me, a stepfather, and it felt good to whip that leather at your lower back, to hear sharpness in the air, and see your body quiet and stiffen as if lost for the first time.

You tried me three times, and two of the times your mother fell on her own accord, but I still let you get the first jab in, just so you thought you had a chance. I remember the living room: the worn grey carpet, little bay window, my weight on your weight, choosing where to land the next blow, your mother pulling, yelping,

pleading as I took your arms above your head and locked them with one of my hands, feeling your helpless slither, knowing none of it mattered because you weren't mine.

Sometimes you'd crawl into our bed and curl into your mother. You looked just like her, and I'd imagine you seeping back into her womb, breathing her liquid, splitting into cells, into her egg, his sperm, but when I'd slip into half sleep I'd feel your fingers on my anchor and knife tattoos, tracing them, transposing them to your arms, and then you lifted your sleeve, unveiling your mother's name on your bicep after your first tour in Iraq.

When you called before Fallujah, you asked for your mother, and she sobbed and shoved the phone at me, so I took it, and you told me you loved me for the first time. You thanked me for the fishing trips, for sitting in the stands at miserable band performances, for toughening you up for the Marines. And after the battle you told me you'd lied, that you didn't love me, that my belt and fist still filled your closest dreams, and fearing death makes you say things you think God wants to hear.

Your mother and I pulled weeds in the front yard when the chaplain's clean blue sedan edged up to the curb. He asked us to step inside, but your mother wouldn't budge, took the news on the sidewalk with a fist full of crab grass. I drove through a lightning storm to the green bridge we used to fish below. It's where I taught you to smack salmon heads against the large black rocks before slicing the guts out. Once, we tried to catch them with our hands. I told you I'd caught hundreds of salmon this way, and that my scar was from wrestling a twenty pounder on the rocks. For all I could tell you believed me.

Your mother fell apart. She locked herself in our dark bedroom, taking small meals there. She didn't talk to anyone, but on the third day she came to me: *Tell his father*, she said. I waited a couple hours, and after cursing and circling town, I drove to his place by the lumber mill. My hand gripped the car door handle, but I couldn't pull the damn thing, and I sat there for an hour, his dog barking the whole time. Finally, your father emerged and slowly approached my rusting Ford. He carried a baseball bat in his strong hand. I didn't fancy up the news. *Adam's dead*, I said, and drove away. I drove until I ran out of gas on a dirt road out by where we shot clay pigeons and walked the ten miles back to town.

When I arrived home, your father's truck rested in our driveway. I wasn't angry. As I passed the truck I looked inside on the chance that he had just arrived, but it was empty. I walked up the steps you helped me build and stood at the threshold with an overwhelming sensation to knock at my own door.

CAPTAIN JESSE GOOLSBY's work has appeared in numerous literary journals to include *Harpur Palate*, *Our Stories*, *Oak Bend Review*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, *Storyglossia*, *Vestal Review*, *Paradigm*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Breakwater Review*, and various anthologies. He is the recipient of the 2010 Richard Bausch Short Fiction Prize and the 2009 John Gardner Memorial Fiction Award. He teaches War Literature and Far Eastern Literature at the United States Air Force Academy.