

2020

Life Writing Prize

MAXINE DAVIES



LIFE WRITING PRIZE SHORTLIST 2020

Dad's Home

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I am a feather for each wind that blows:
Shall I live on to see this bastard kneel
And call me father? better burn it now
Than curse it then. But be it; let it live.

- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Winter's Tale*

HAPPY MEAL

My dad leaves when I am the size of a raspberry. He announces my mam's pregnancy on a local radio station, buys her a bunch of petrol station flowers and then does off a few weeks later.

I meet him three times before I turn thirteen, which is when he moves into our house.

The first time I am preoccupied in a game of "pretending that the laundry basket is a small boat". I don't remember that one.

The second time is after I start school. Most of the other children in my class talk about an additional person living in their house: a dad. I ask my mam if I have one and she tells me that I do and asks if I would like to meet him. I agree, only to change my mind on the way there, but it's 1996 and mobile phones haven't really taken off yet and my mam doesn't want to stand him up so she tells me that we won't meet him anymore, but that we'll go to McDonalds anyway. I get a Happy Meal. We run into a man wearing a fleece the rusty colour of dried up blood; my mam talks to him in hushed tones as we eat, and then we go home. "That was Trevor's cousin," she says. Something feels off. I don't find out why for over a decade.

The third time, we walk past him on the street and he nods in our direction and then speeds off. "That was your dad," my mam says. I turn around to look but he's already gone.

I SING MYSELF TO SLEEP

My mam occasionally feeds me little scraps of information. I know that he likes the song *Sit Down* by James, I know that he doesn't like flying, I know I look like him when I'm annoyed. I know his name and I know that he lives near the sea. I have no deep longing to hold him in my mind as anything more than an eternal maybe.

NIGHTMARE

There's a knock at the door. I lie on my stomach and press an ear to the

carpet, listening to the low murmuring coming from downstairs. I hear the sofa groan and know that this means I'm about to be summoned. I jump up onto the futon. My mam opens my bedroom door. "He's just outside," she says. "Look." Out of my bedroom window I see him smoking in the back garden under the floodlight. "I hate smokers," I say. A short while after this he gives up, replaces cigarettes with blister packs of nicotine gum which he buys in bulk with shiny red boxes of Nurofen and leaves at the bottom of the stairs.

I've taken up writing a diary after reading Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* and even though I'm achingly shy and despise being the centre of attention, I deeply wish that someone was coming to tell me that I'm the heir to the throne of a small European principality rather than being forced into meeting my dad. In spite of its magnitude, I pay this event very little mind in my diary: *I have to meet my dad later and then I'm going to Sophie's.*

We go downstairs. I sit in my mam's chair, feet tucked underneath me, and bury my face in an issue of *Kerrang!* magazine. I answer his sporadic questions with a series of clipped affirmations and negations. I hope that this comes across as a bold display of complete and utter apathy; combined with the magazine I must seem like a true punk, I think.

Afterwards, I get dropped off at Sophie's house. "That was so weird," I tell her. She doesn't know how to respond, and this isn't a situation where I would expect anyone to know what to say. She has a wall-mounted TV in her room and we squash up in her single bed to watch *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

MATRIARCH

I treat my friends' fathers with a degree of scepticism. They seem tall and aloof and uninteresting compared to their tender, industrious mothers. My own mother is a shining light and I never contemplate the idea that my life would be improved in any way by the addition of a patriarch.

SMUDGE AND SNOWY

It's Christmas Eve and my mam comes into my room, climbs onto the first step of my bunk bed ladder and hands me a small box containing a filigree cameo brooch with a portrait photograph of a cat on it. "From your dad," she says. "Thought we'd better not let Nana see it. Too many questions." My mam doesn't tell anyone about her and my dad getting back together for what feels like a reasonably long time. When my Grandad finds out he's furious, tells her it's a bad decision, tells her that she must be desperate. I'm angry and hurt by the fact that I have no command over my relationship with my own formerly-absent father, but I still feel a bit like someone has snapped a rubber band around my heart when he says that.

The cats are supposed to sweeten the deal when he moves in, but I'm an alien to them and they won't come into my bedroom. The white one keeps hiding behind the sofa and refuses to be coaxed out. I keep thinking about all of the countless Christmases and birthdays where I begged for a cat of my own, pleaded with my mam and wrapped myself around her ankles in desperation. I had my wishes continually denied. Now I have two cats, but only because I also now have a dad, and I never asked for that.

They move out a few weeks later, back to his ex's house, and he moves back with them. The next time he comes back to us he leaves the cats with her.

THE OTHER PERSON HAS CLEARED

I am born on a Sunday in September. Bryan Adams's (*Everything I Do*) *I Do It for You* is number one in the charts. My mam asks the nurse to use the phone and it's carried around the corner onto the ward, the spiral cord trapped between the swing doors. He picks up.

"It's a girl," she tells him.

"Right."

There's a smack of plastic as his phone's handset hits the housing.

At least that's how I imagine it happened.

IBIZA

We're on holiday, the three of us, in a small resort to the north of Ibiza that none of us can pronounce the name of. The resort is marketed as a good destination for families, but I'm thirteen and I wish I was hanging out with my friends back in Newcastle and I haven't really decided whether we're going to be a real family yet, so I spend a lot of my time at an Internet Cafe overlooking the beach, messaging my friends on MSN. On mornings, me and my mam get up early and go for breakfast together. My dad stays in bed and meets us later in the day.

One day I get my hair braided by a woman on the beach for a couple of Euros. It is an incredibly painful process, and when I take the plaits out a few days later I lose quite a lot of hair. That afternoon, my dad doesn't call to ask where to meet us. He turns up five hours later with a stranger who has escorted him back to the resort because he's had too much to drink. I stay on a sofa bed in the apartment's kitchen. I set up my clunky laptop on a dining chair and fall asleep every night watching *50 First Dates*. On the way home, he gets into an argument with a teenage girl on the shuttle bus. We don't go on holiday as a trio again.

ANCESTRY

The FATHER box on my birth certificate is a blank space. If my great-great-great-ancestors want to research their family tree they will hit a snag when they reach me.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

It's Christmas Day, the only one we spend together. Me, my mam and my Nana, who has been sleeping on the futon in my room, get out of bed at 7.30am, take it in turns to open our presents and then have bacon sandwiches for breakfast. Our own little tradition.

My dad eventually gets up at 11am, comes downstairs and tousles my hair on his way to the kitchen. "Merry Christmas kid," he says.

FLOCK

I'm fifteen and obsessed with the model Agyness Deyn to the extent that I consider getting a job in a fish and chip shop in the hope that it will kickstart a similar career trajectory. I buy silver winklepickers on *eBay* because I see her wearing a pair in a magazine, and I get my hair cut into a choppy pixie cut with a messy brushed-forward fringe. A short while later we're coming up to Harehills Roundabout on a family day out when my dad makes a joke, not for the first time, that I look like Mike Score from the 1980s new wave band *A Flock of Seagulls*. "You don't know me enough to tease me," I think. "It hasn't been that long." An argument erupts. He tells me that all I do is sit on MSN Messenger, mimicking the notification sound: three notes on a xylophone and the single beat of a timpani. "At least I have friends to message," I say. He practically skis around the roundabout, takes a U-turn and drives home.

HIM

I begin only referring to him using the masculine singular third person pronoun. First names seem weird and dad feels inaccurate. Our relationship is delicate like the wing of a small bird; even an informal noun might fracture it.

PERFORMANCE

I meet my grandparents on my dad's side only once.

In the car on the way there, my mam tells me that I shouldn't talk about Jesus.

"Why on earth would I talk about Jesus?" I say.

"I don't know," she says, "but they're Jehovah's Witnesses, so just don't bring him up, okay?"

"I'll try not to."

When we arrive my grandparents spend the entire visit begging me to play the keyboard in their living room. I politely decline.

I don't think I gave in, but perhaps I blocked that bit out as well.

My dad tells me that he used to read *Tin Tin* under the duvet cover with a torch when he was supposed to be reading the bible. I tell him that I used to stay up all night reading *Girls in Love*. He tells me that his favourite bit of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* is the bit where Toad is served hot buttered toast and fragrant tea; that's my favourite bit, too. He tells me his favourite song is *The Spirit of Radio* by Rush. I tell him my favourite band is *Good Charlotte*. This is our only currency: trading favourites.

I wonder if my grandparents would give me a blood transfusion if I needed one.

V IS VERY VERY EXTRAORDINARY

Sometimes you hear about children who fantasise that their separated parents will get back together so that they can go back to "the way things were", but I don't have a "were". When Lorelai and Christopher get married in season 7 of *Gilmore Girls*, Rory says, "It's every kid's dream, right, parents back together?" But Rory is only really angry because she wasn't invited to the wedding. I am angry because my dad pretended that I didn't exist for thirteen years and then moved into my house three days a week and stole my mam away from me.

I watch Lindsay Lohan pierce her fictional twin's ears with a sewing needle and an apple slice in *The Parent Trap* as part of a grand ploy to reunite their parents, who separated when they were babies. "History's filled with stories of lovers parted by some silly misunderstanding," she says. This, apparently, is the stuff of dreams. Away from the movies, it's more of an ordeal. I'm expected to have some sort of reasonable parental relationship with a man who is, ostensibly, a stranger.

I joke about it with my friends at school. "It's like the plot of a Jacqueline Wilson book," I say. One afternoon I'm pulled out of a lesson and taken to the school nurse. "We hear you've been having a difficult time," she says. "I'm fine," I say.

YOU JUST GOTTA BELIEVE ME

Somewhat embarrassingly, I only realise that the song *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* is actually about the narrator's father wearing a Santa costume when I am in my twenties. The notion of a portly man who runs a toy factory staffed by elves in the North Pole is a more concrete one than the concept of a dad who dresses up and shares a loving moment under the mistletoe with his spouse.

2008

I start a new Moleskine and fill the first few pages with magazine clippings: a model in knee-high socks getting a piggy back from a handsome guy in a knitted jumper, girls with long legs drinking hot cocoa, elegantly decorated apartments with parquet floors. I'm sixteen and figuring out what I want my life to look like.

The first thing that I write is a set of resolutions:

Lose weight

Do well in my GCSEs

Get on better with my dad

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

My dad has been back and forth countless times at this point, but right now he's reading the newspaper next to me on the sofa.

"That would be right," he smirks.

He's pointing to a short column at the bottom right of the paper: "The Top 20 Grumpiest Names". He's singled out my boyfriend's name.

"Fuck off," I say.

He looks from me to my mam, then stands up, grabs his keys and leaves.

(This was the last time I saw him.)

(NO SUBJECT)

I'm seventeen, and I send the following email: "not that you would consider it but please don't associate with me any further."

CLIPPY RUG

I find out that my dad is married via Facebook. His new wife works at a visitor attraction where she dresses up as an Edwardian.

Sometime later, I am in my room when my mam shouts up for me to come downstairs. I step into the living room where she has paused an episode of a TV show where people bring their antiques to be viewed and valued by experts. The show is paused at the point where they visit somewhere nearby the auction rooms to discuss the history of the area. When she presses play my dad's new wife is there in my living room talking about proggymats. We stare open-mouthed at the screen. Later in the same episode, a lady brings in a Beswick mask belonging to her daughter. Her daughter wants to use the money from the sale to set up a home with her boyfriend, who, after seventeen years apart, she has recently reunited with. "That's funny," I say.

I DON'T FEEL SO BAD

My most-listened to song of 2010 is *The Spirit of Radio*. It's been over two years since I last saw him.

BA (HONS) OR... ROUND TWO

I graduate. The next day I check my "Other" inbox folder on Facebook and see the following message: "Hope you are well; good luck with the exams - didn't stop thinking about you and hope you are happy."

This is where the bit of the story that we're still in begins. I keep in touch with my dad through a screen until I feel equipped to deal with the next bit, whatever that might be.

This time around I'm taking the reins.

MAMABEAR

My mam is my mam, and my dad. My best friend, my sister and my worst enemy. She is sweet peanuts in crinkly paper bags. Listening to Eternal Flame on long car journeys. Tea and cake at the pick-your-own farm.

Dancing around the living room rug to the *That Thing You Do!* soundtrack on a Friday night. Watching *Dirty Dancing* sitting on the floor in my bedroom. Coach trips and boat trips and swimming costumes and jam sandwiches. An ear to bend and a shoulder to cry on. Eating spaghetti on floor cushions, on holiday. Picnics and board games, and you doing the voices of all the characters in my storybooks. Billy and Betty buying everything at the sweet shop. Plastic Barbie plates and turkey twizzlers. Soft hands too big to fit in any gloves. A hand to hold.

We hack through the wilderness alone, together.

'Dad's Home' by Maxine Davies uses a quote from 'The Winter's Tale' by William Shakespeare (from *The Arden Shakespeare Third Series*), p. 216. Edited by John Pitcher, printed by Bloomsbury. (2010)

BIOGRAPHY

MAXINE DAVIES is a writer born and bred in Newcastle upon Tyne. She has an MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature from Newcastle University. Her writing has been featured in *Visual Verse* and *Msllexia*. She came third in the Autumn 2019 Reflex Fiction competition, and in 2017 she was awarded funding from the Young Writers' Talent Fund to set up her small press, Maybe Later.