NON-PATERNITY EVENT

My daughter cries out in the night.

—I'm awake, I say. I'll go.

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When he told me, it felt like the confirmation of something that I'd always known but must now remember. I'd felt something similar when, at school, we were taught that the square on the hypotenuse was equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. I seemed to know this already but was pleased that Pythagoras had provided the proof. Or, later, when I learnt that light bends; or, later still, when I learnt that time bends, too. It didn't surprise me. It seemed right. It's my belief that we frequently know more than we think we do. The corollary is that sometimes we know less. To put it another way, when Dad told me that he wasn't my father, I didn't think it would change anything.

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My first term at university. I used to call Dad from a telephone box every Friday evening at six o'clock before he went down the road to buy cod and chips and a pickled egg. This is what Dad and I always did on Friday evenings while I still lived at home.

As time went on, I telephoned him less regularly. But Dad was always there when I called.

—I'm sorry I haven't been in touch, Dad. You know how life is.

—I understand, son, he'd say. I'm sure you'll call when you can.

But Dad didn't know how life was. Not the life I led as an undergraduate. Nor, later, my life as a postgraduate student. Nor the life I lead today, as a senior researcher in the pharmaceutical industry. He's pleased for me and proud but mine is a different world from his. A world — I see now — he may have felt he didn't have a right to share.

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Dad always waits for me to call him. He never telephones me. That's not Dad's way.

—I might be interrupting, he says.

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Dad's life is steady, ordered. He has rules and routines which hold it all in place. I've tried to imitate him but his traits aren't ones I've inherited. In my work I am scrupulous, methodical, meticulous; but my personal life can be disorganised, at times chaotic. An expired subscription, an unpaid bill, a missed dinner date. With a jolt of guilt I realise I haven't spoken to Dad for six weeks. Or maybe eight?

—I'm so sorry, Dad.

—I know, son, he says. But it's good you called. You see I'm selling the house. It's the right time to move. You don't mind, do you?

—No, Dad. I don't mind.

—I thought you'd like to come down. Take a last look. Check if there's anything here you'd like to keep.

I tell him I will. I haven't been home for two years.

—The weekend after next?

—Good, says Dad. There's something I need to tell you.

—What's that?

—We'll speak when you're here, he says.

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—It must be a bit of a shock for you, says Dad.

—No, Dad. Not really. I think ...

I try to explain how I feel. I talk about Pythagoras and light and time. I could have chosen my words more carefully but I didn't think it would matter.

Dad leaves the room and returns with a manila envelope.

—You won't feel badly about her, will you, Stephen? Promise me that.

Dad never uses my mother's name. Neither do I. She died when I was three years old. Leukaemia. I didn't know her.

—Your mother was very young and your father didn't want a child. I was happy to marry your mother. Honoured.

Dad passes me the envelope.

—You'll want to find your father, he says.

—Yes, Dad, I say. I suppose I will.

—She was a wonderful woman, Stephen. You know that, don't you?

There was never anyone else for Dad. Only my mother and me.

*

Mine was a happy childhood. And normal. Most of us would say the same, wouldn't we? After all, ours is the only childhood we know. It was true that other children had mothers but I was never conscious of missing anything. Together Dad and I were fine. I had what I needed: friends, football, a bicycle and summer holidays with my mother's cousins in Devon.

I enjoyed school. But it was here Dad felt least comfortable. He was humble in the presence of teachers; uneasy that he couldn't help me with homework. He decided he should leave school to me.

—You know what to do, son, he'd say. Much better than me.

*

I take a last look round. We have been happy in this house, Dad and I.

—I'm moving next week, he says.

—As soon as that? I say.

—Yes.

Dad walks with me to the station.

I hug him and he shakes my hand.

—Goodbye, Stephen, he says.

*

With the information in the manila envelope, it isn't difficult to trace my biological father. I telephone him to suggest a meeting. I hear the hesitation in his voice but discount it.

The family lives in a solid house in Chobham with half an acre of garden. Two young children are playing on the lawn with the au pair. Their mother is at the health club.

—My second family, he says.

He corrects himself.

—I should say my third.

My father, I learn, is a retired stockbroker. A shapeless man about my height. Indistinguishable, I would guess, from the other members of his golf club. I search his features but I see nothing there that I recognise. It is not, I find, a disappointment.

We agree that it was right to have met. We imply that we will meet again but we know we won't. At the front door my father says goodbye. He is relieved that I'm leaving before his wife returns.

*

I telephone Dad but he doesn't answer. The next morning I call again and find his line has been disconnected. I have been too preoccupied to remember his move. I'll have to wait for him to telephone or to write to me.

A week goes by. A fortnight. A month. Two months. I hear nothing from him. I take the train home and knock at the door. The new occupants are very happy to talk to me but Dad has left nothing behind. No forwarding address.

A neighbour tells me he came to say goodbye. But he didn't — as people generally do — promise to keep in touch.

Dad has gone away. Neat. Complete. That's Dad.

*

—You'll want to find your father.

I look for him. Naturally, I do. I continue to look for him. Would it surprise you, Dad, that I do?

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I read it in the literature. When the biological father and the father on the birth certificate are not the same, the correct term is a ‘non-paternity event’. So hollow. So cold.

*

My daughter’s nightmare has subsided. Her eyes have closed. I stay and watch her sleeping. And, as I find I sometimes do, I say out loud:

—Where are you, Dad?